

## Contextual Analysis

Artists are just like you and me. They are born into a family that lives in a community. They learn from their parents and their neighbors what is the proper way to act and dress. Religion shapes their beliefs about their place in the world. The community has rules that organize its life and provides services to its people. Trade and the exchange of ideas and technology affect the materials and techniques available to artists. The people who buy their artworks and how they are used affect the subject and style of art. Local artistic traditions and international trends shape their work.

As you study the art of a particular culture or the life of an artist, look at the community for the forces that influence them. Our six areas for researching cultural context are:

- I. Politics – How does politics affect the artist and the subject matter of the artwork?
  - a. Does the ruler or government hire artists and/or fund workshops? Why? How does politics dictate the subject matter or style of the work?
  - b. How do government activities affect artists and their freedom to create artwork? Does the government provide services (schools, roads, courts, etc) and encourage or discourage certain activities, such as trade, travel or education? Why? How does that affect the artist’s ability to create?
- II. Religion - How does religion affect the artist and the subject matter of an artwork?
  - a. What religious beliefs affect religious images? How? How are the visual arts part of religious observances?
  - b. What religious beliefs affect religious architecture? How? Does the religion require people to worship in a certain place, at certain times or follow certain rituals?
  - c. Do religious leaders and/or religious institutions buy art, fund workshops and/or influence subject matter? How? Why?
- III. Economics – How do patrons affect the artist and the market for artworks?
  - a. Who buys artworks: government, religious institutions, businesses, social organizations and/or individuals – wealthy, middle-class or poor? Who has the money or connections to collect artworks or to attend performances?

- b. How much do artists depend on the support of a patron to buy their artworks? Does the patron dictate the subject and style?
  - c. How many artists create their art for buyers in a competitive market? Where are those markets? Who are the buyers?
  - d. What is the level of technology? How skilled are the artists and craftspeople? How easy is it to exchange technology between individuals and groups?
- IV. Social Organization – What organizations or social class structures limit or expand the artist’s horizons?
- a. What is the status of the artist in the community – slave, servant, lower-class craftspeople, middle class entrepreneur, upper class aristocrat, honored and famous person?
  - b. How are artists involved in providing artwork for secular entertainment?
  - c. How do people get their information about art and artists? How much information is available (orally, printed, electronically; local, national, international)?
- V. Artistic Influences – Who influences artists and how they create art?
- a. Where can artists meet for training and exchange of ideas: their community, guilds, art associations, universities, clubs or business associations?
  - b. Where is art displayed – publicly and privately? Where are artists able to see the work of other artists?
  - c. Does the artist work collaboratively? Do they work with others as a master or an apprentice? Do they follow established artistic traditions?
  - d. Does the artist work independently? Do they experiment with new ideas, themes or styles? Do they teach and encourage others to experiment?
- VI. International Influences – How expansive is the artist’s worldview?
- a. How easy is it for artists to see artworks or meet artists from other cultures?
  - b. How easy is it for artists to travel to other cultures to study diverse artistic techniques and traditions?