

# Analyzing the Subject of a Picture : Guidelines\*

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## Differences between print and image collections:

Analyzing the subject of a picture is completely different from the way we approach subject analysis for published materials using Library of Congress subject headings. When we catalog a book, we provide subject access to what the book tells us it is about – what it purports to be. With images, we seldom have words that tell us what it is – we just have the image itself. With images, we have to describe what we think the image is.

## Principles and issues to keep in mind:

**Generic and specific.** Pictures are simultaneously generic and specific. A picture of a bridge could have the subject term **Bridge** assigned to it, as well as a heading for the name of the specific bridge depicted. When we apply LC subject headings to a book or serial, we have been trained to supply the subject terms that are as specific as possible. With our approach to images, we tend to provide terms for specific things we see, as well as for the categories that those terms are part of. In essence, we supply both specific terms and broader terms. For instance, an image of a person from the Cayuse Indian tribe would be assigned the term **Indians of North America** as well as the term **Cayuse Indians**.

**Of and About.** Images are both Of and About something. Who or what is it Of? Who or what is it About? About words describe emotions and abstract concepts. A picture of a bridge, then, might be About modern architecture.

**Target audience.** Subject access to pictures should be related to the use of the pictures. Keep in mind the target audience. There are two types of audiences: a specific user population or general unspecified users. What groups of people are expected to be making the primary use of the images? Are they artists? Elementary school students? The University community? Scholars in a specific discipline? Genealogists? Researchers seeking an illustration for a book or article they're writing? The general public? Or a specialized group of people from a particular community? Remember also that:

Different users want different kinds of pictures. The same image means different things to different people.

The same user wants different kinds of pictures at different times. The same picture can mean different things to the same person viewing it at different times.

## Three levels of meaning:

**Description.** What is the picture of? Generic description of the objects and actions represented in the picture are factual descriptions. What is the picture about? Descriptions of the mood of the picture are expressional descriptions.  
**We will be assigning terms generally at the descriptive level.**

**Analysis.** What is the context? This requires knowledge of the specific culture. Although we will keep the context in mind, we will often not be capable of providing an analytical description.

**Interpretation.** What is its intrinsic meaning? What feelings and images does it bring to mind? This cannot be indexed with any degree of consistency. In general, we will not be providing interpretations of the images.

### **Ask yourself these questions:**

**Who?** Who or what is this a picture of? Are there people? Children? Men? Women? Cows? Horses? Trees? Buildings? A specific named person or thing?

**What?** What are the creatures or objects in this picture doing? What is their condition or state of being? What emotions are conveyed by these actions or conditions? What abstract ideas do these actions or conditions symbolize?

**Where?** Where is this picture spatially? Is it an identifiable geographic place? Is it a mythical place? Does place matter in this picture?

**When?** The concept of When can be both a specific date and a time period. Is the time period significant? Can you determine the time period?

If a subject is not prominently or clearly shown in an image, can it be omitted in indexing because it is better represented elsewhere?

Is this image informative regarding [possible term]?

If I were a researcher interested in [possible term], would I appreciate being brought to this image?

*\*Information distilled from:*

*Sara Shatford, "Analyzing the Subject of a Picture: A Theoretical Approach,"  
Cataloging & Classification Quarterly, v. 6(3), Spring 1986.*

*Thesaurus of Graphic Materials* <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/tgm1/>