

Smithsonian American Art Museum
 Permanent Collection Database
 Guide to Subject Categories

Staff entering records of objects into the database describes each work by assigning various subject categories developed for cataloging artworks at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Subject categories reflect prominent images or significant themes depicted in the work. Each subject category consists of up to three terms --*Primary* --*Secondary* --*Tertiary*. The *Primary* term is the broadest classification and the *Tertiary* is the most specific. Most subject categories have *secondary* terms, but not all have *tertiary* terms. An unlimited number of subject categories may be assigned. If more specific information is unavailable, just a *Primary* or a *Primary* and *Secondary* term is assigned. These terms are available for searching under keywords on the SAAM website. The following is an alphabetical listing of the *Primary* terms for each subject category along with notes about their usage. A brief listing of the *Secondary* terms that fall under each *Primary* term is included. Examples of term strings indicate the types of terms that are *Tertiary*.

PRIMARY TERM

DESCRIPTION

Abstract:	Images appear to have no reference to known objects, or images in which identifiable objects have been distorted. <i>Secondary</i> term is: Geometric.
Allegory:	Individuals, objects, events, ideas, places, etc. are illustrated symbolically. <i>Secondary</i> terms are: Arts & Sciences, Civic, Death, Element, Life, Passion, Place, Quality, Religion, Season, Senses, Time, and Other. Examples: Allegory--Arts & Sciences--Literature Allegory--Civic--Liberty Allegory--Life--Childhood
Animal:	Living creatures, domesticated or wild, are shown in detail and prominently featured. For mammals -- name of mammal appears in the <i>Secondary</i> term and specific breeds of only cats, dogs and horses appear in the <i>Tertiary</i> . <i>Secondary</i> terms are: Amphibian, Bird, Fish, Insect, (Mammal name), Portrait, Reptile, Unspecified, and Other. Examples: Animal--Dog--Dalmatian Animal--Fish--Salmon

PRIMARY TERM

DESCRIPTION

- Architecture:** Exterior or interior views of structures that are identified and/or shown in sufficient detail to be of interest as documents of style. Proper names of buildings, boats, bridges, etc. appear in the *Tertiary* term. *Secondary* terms are: Art Building, Boat, Bridge, Castle, Civic, Classical, Commercial, Design, Detail, Domestic, Education, Farm, Industry, Lighthouse, Machine, Military, Monument, Religious, Ruins, Science, Studio, Vehicle and Other.
Examples: Architecture--Civic--Library
 Architecture--Detail--Window
 Architecture--Vehicle--Automobile
- Cartoon:** Figures or narrative scenes in which features are intentionally exaggerated out of naturalistic proportion are depicted. Includes any political or satirical cartoon as well as comic strip. *Secondary* terms are: Comics, Political.
Example: Cartoon--Comics--Pink Panther
- Ceremony:** Used for a formal act performed as prescribed by ritual, custom, or etiquette. *Secondary* terms are: Civic, Coronation, Dance, Festival, Funeral, Holiday, Indian, Military, Procession, Religion, Royal, Wedding and Other.
Examples: Ceremony--Civic--Election
 Ceremony--Festival--Olympics
- Children:** Used for depictions of children at play or performing home activities. No *Secondary* terms.
- Cityscape:** Used for views of or within populated or built environments that are characteristic of incorporated communities, villages, towns, or cities. State or country names are referenced in the *Secondary* term and city names are referenced in the *Tertiary* term. If only the city name is known, the term Foreign appears as the *Secondary* term and the city name appears as the *Tertiary*. If only a general US location is known, United States appears in the *Secondary* and the location appears in the *Tertiary*. *Secondary* terms are: (name of country), (name of state), Bird's Eye View, Celestial, Foreign, Imaginary, River, Ruins, Season, Street, Time, Town, United States, Water, Weather, and Wharf.
Examples: Cityscape--Missouri--St. Louis
 Cityscape--River--Mississippi River
 Cityscape--Street--Union Square
- Disaster:** A sudden calamitous event bringing great damage, loss or destruction is depicted. *Secondary* terms are: Accident, Avalanche, Drought, Earthquake, Famine, Fire, Flood, Landslide, Shipwreck, Storm, and Volcanic Eruption.
Examples: Disaster--Accident--Car Accident
 Disaster--Earthquake
 Disaster--Storm--Hurricane

PRIMARY TERM

DESCRIPTION

Dress:	Assigned to apparel or clothing that is significant, or may be of interest to researcher. <i>Secondary</i> terms are: Accessory, Ceremonial, Costume, Ecclesiastical, Ethnic, Historic, Royal, Theater, and Uniform. Examples: Dress--Accessory--Eye Wear Dress--Historic--Pioneer Dress
Ethnic:	Any depiction of people whose nationality, race, tribal, religious, linguistic or cultural origin/background is emphasized in visual terms or in title is cited. The most specific ethnic group is always referenced in the <i>Secondary</i> . <i>Secondary</i> terms are: (nationality name such as --African, French, Russian, etc.) and (ethnic group name such as --Black, Hispanic, Indian, Asian-American, etc.) <i>Tertiary</i> terms include Native-American tribe names. Examples: Ethnic--Chinese Ethnic--Indian--Hopi
Fantasy:	Used to reference weird, bizarre, fantastic, imaginary or incongruous juxtapositions of animals and beings. Narrative scenes from literature are not included. <i>Secondary</i> terms are: Animal, Dragon, Elf, Fairy, Ghost, Monster, and Winged Being. Examples: Fantasy--Animal--Bird Fantasy--Ghost
Figure: Figure female: Figure male:	Used for representations of the human form. If gender cannot be determined, use figure unmodified by male or female. If the identity of the figure is known, use the subject category Portrait, instead of Figure. <i>Secondary</i> terms are: Bust, Child, Equestrian, Elderly, Fragment, Full length, Head, Knee length, Nude, Torso, and Waist length. Examples: Figure--Bust Figure--Fragment--Foot Figure female--Child--Full length Figure male--Elderly--Bust
Figure group:	Used for generic groupings of adults. Figure group implies mixed genders. If the identity of the figures is known, use the subject category Portrait, instead of Figure. <i>Secondary</i> terms are: Artist & Model, Bust, Equestrian, Elderly, Family, Female, Female & Child, Male, Male & Child, and Nude. Examples: Figure group--Family--Mother and Child Figure group--Female--Nude
Figure(s) in exterior: Figure(s) in interior:	Used for a figure or figures when they and the setting share equal importance. <i>Secondary</i> terms are: Arena, Battlefield, Castle, Civic, Classical, Commercial, Desert, Domestic, Education, Farm, Frontier, Garden, Industry, Lighthouse, Military, Mountain, Orchard, Park, Religious, Rural, Science, Studio, Urban, Water, and Other. Examples: Figure(s) in exterior--Farm Figure(s) in interior--Religious Figure(s) in exterior--Other -- Campfire

PRIMARY TERM

DESCRIPTION

History:

Used for depictions of unique events specifically identified by date and/or circumstances. Representation may be contemporary to the event and intended as documentary record, or may be an imagined and idealized reconstruction of an event. Country names are generally cited in the *Secondary* with the historical event in the *Tertiary*. For pre-Renaissance time periods the terms Ancient or Medieval are cited as the *Secondary* term and country names are in the *Tertiary*. *Secondary* terms are: (country names such as France, Italy, United States), Ancient, Arts & Sciences, Exploration, Medieval, Prehistoric, and Religion.

Examples: History--Ancient—Egypt
History--France--Revolution
History--Medieval--England
History--United States--Civil War
History—United States—Black History

Landscape:

Used for views of natural scenery on land. Figures, animals, buildings, and other objects may be included as secondary elements in the composition. Scenes of the United States and Canada are referenced with the state or province name in the *Secondary* and the city name in the *Tertiary*. Foreign landscapes (excluding Canada) have the name of country in the *Secondary* and name of city in the *Tertiary*. If only a general US location is known, United State appears in the *Secondary* and the location name appears in the *Tertiary*. If only the city name is known, use Foreign in the *Secondary* and the city name in the *Tertiary*. *Secondary* terms are: (name of state or Canadian province), (name of country), Beach, Bird's Eye View, Building, Canyon, Celestial, Cemetery, Coast, Composition, Desert, Farm, Foreign, Forest, Garden, Imaginary, Island, Lake, Marsh, Mountain, Orchard, Panorama, Park, Phenomenon, Plain, Plant, River, Road, Rocks, Season, Time, Town, Tree, Tropic, United States, Valley, Water, Waterfall, Weather, and Wharf.

Examples: Landscape--Virginia--Richmond
Landscape--Beach--Miami Beach
Landscape--Canyon--Grand Canyon
Landscape--Mexico
Landscape--Time--Sunrise
Landscape--United States--Pacific States

PRIMARY TERM

DESCRIPTION

- Literature:** An established literary reference is evident in the subject matter of the painting or sculpture. If name of author and title of work are known, the author is referenced in the *Secondary* and the title is referenced in the *Tertiary*. If the title of the publication is a magazine or newspaper, the name of the publication is referenced in the *Secondary*. If the character name is known, use the term Character in the *Secondary* and the character's name in the *Tertiary*. *Secondary* terms are: (name of author), (name of magazine or newspaper), Character, and Proverb.
- Examples: Literature--Dante--Inferno
Literature--Saturday Evening Post
Literature--Character--Hiawatha
- Miscellaneous:** Use for terms that cannot be placed under any other *Primary* heading. Terms will be reviewed periodically for incorporation into existing *Primary* or *Secondary* categories. *Secondary* terms include: Advertisement, Art allusion, Art display, Currency, Decorative motif, Decorative object, Emblem, Homage, Humor, Map, Medal, Mural, Series, Signature, and Written matter.
- Examples: Miscellaneous—Advertisement—Coca Cola
Miscellaneous--Emblem--Coat of Arms
Miscellaneous—Homage--Washington
Miscellaneous--Written matter--Christmas card
- Modern Art Movement:** Use for art from the 1950s forward. *Secondary* terms are: Assemblage, Collage, Film, Installation exterior, Installation interior, Kinetic art, Luminist art, Performance, Video, Other.
- Examples: Modern Art Movement--Luminist art--Laser
Modern Art Movement--Other--Body art
Modern Art Movement--Other--Soft sculpture
- Monument:** Used for sculpture but can also include the depiction of a monument that is prominent in a composition. *Secondary* terms include: Arch, Column, Equestrian, Fountain, Gravestone, Obelisk, Religious, Statue, Tomb, Other.
- Examples: Monument--Fountain--Trevi Fountain
Monument--Gravestone--Mozart
Monument--Obelisk--Washington Monument
Religious--Cross
Religious--Stonehenge
Statue--Iwo Jima Memorial
- Mythology:** Depictions of characters or narrative scenes derived from the myths about the history and origin of a people and their ancestors, deities, and heroes are use this category. *Secondary* terms are: American Indian, Classical, Egyptian, Nordic, Oriental, and Other.
- Examples: Mythology--Classical--Prometheus
Mythology--Egyptian--Phoenix
Mythology--Oriental--Genii
Mythology--Other--Hawaiian

PRIMARY TERM

DESCRIPTION

- Occupation: Use for depictions of people at work as well as emblematic pictures such as tools of a trade. Performers, such as musicians and actors, are referenced separately under *Primary* category of Performing Arts. Be sure to distinguish Occupation and Recreation as appropriate.
Secondary terms are: Art, Beggar, Communication Arts, Cook, Craft, Crime, Domestic, Education, Farm, Hunter, Industry, Labor, Law, Medicine, Military, Monetary, Occult, Political, Religion, Science, Service, Sport, Transportation, Vendor, Writer, and Other.
Examples: Occupation--Crime--Pirate
Occupation--Domestic--Nursemaid
Occupation--Monetary--Banker
Occupation--Service--Policeman
- Performing Arts: Use when performance is a major theme of the artwork, or whenever the occupation of the person is that of a performer or entertainer. Includes performances in theaters and home recitals as well as casual representations of musical or acting abilities. *Secondary* terms are: Circus, Dance, Music, Opera, Theater, and Other.
Examples: Performing Arts--Circus--Acrobat
Performing Arts--Opera--Verdi
Performing Arts--Other--Comedian
- Portrait:
Portrait female:
Portrait group:
Portrait male
- If gender of sitter cannot be determined, Portrait is referenced without male or female. Proper names appear under the *Secondary* term in Last name, First name format. *Tertiary* terms include length of pose, Child, Elderly, Equestrian portrait, Self-portrait.
Examples: Portrait male--Washington, George--Bust
Portrait female--Washington, Martha--Waist length
Portrait group--Washington--Family portrait
- Primitive: This term is used for paintings only. *Secondary* terms are: Fractur, Mourning, and Theorem.
Examples: Primitive--Mourning
Primitive--Theorem
- Recreation: Use this category to cite depictions of sports, games and leisure activities. *Secondary* terms are: Cafe, Camping, Carnival, Courting, Craft, Dancing, Dress Up, Fair, Gambling, Gathering, Leisure, Party, Picnic, Sport and Play, Theater, and Tourism.
Examples: Recreation--Dancing
Recreation--Leisure--Eating and Drinking
Recreation--Leisure--Reading
Recreation--Sport and Play--Checkers

PRIMARY TERM

DESCRIPTION

- Religion:** References religions, personages, and events. Specific personages or iconographic themes are prefaced by New Testament or Old Testament in the *Secondary* term. *Secondary* terms are: New Testament, Old Testament, (name of a religion such as Buddhism or Mormonism), Prayer.
- Examples: Religion--Old Testament--Adam and Eve
Religion--New Testament--Crucifixion
Religion--Judaism
Religion--Prayer
- State of Being:** Use to indicate obvious aspects of the human condition. *Secondary* terms are: Death, Emotion, Evil, Handicapped, Illness, Mood, Phenomenon, and Other.
- Examples: State of Being--Emotion--Anger
State of Being--Handicapped--Blind
State of Being--Phenomenon--Dream
State of Being--Other--Widow
- Still Life:** Depictions of inanimate objects, generally removed from natural context, arbitrarily arranged for pictorial composition. *Secondary* terms are: Art Object, Art Tool, Flower, Foliage, Foodstuff, Fruit, Furniture, Game, Letter, Musical Instrument, Numeral, Tool, Toy, Vegetable, Weapon, and Other.
- Examples: Still Life--Flower--Rose
Still Life--Game
Still Life--Vegetable--Tomato
- Study:** References studies, maquettes, and sketches when the word study or sketch appears as part of the title or when the work is an actual study for a larger or more complete composition. *Secondary* terms are: Academic Study, Anatomical Study, Botanical Study, Maquette, Motion Study, and Technical Study.
- Examples: Study--Botanical Study--Flower
Study--Maquette
- Travel:** Detailed depictions of the equipment and/or operations of vehicles of transportation. Used when travel is the dominant theme and motion is evident. *Secondary* terms are: Air, Land, and Water.
- Examples: Travel--Air--Balloon
Travel--Land--Subway
Travel--Water--Submarine
- Waterscape:** Used for views dominated water in which land plays a subordinate role. Proper names are referenced in the *Tertiary* after appropriate *Secondary*. *Secondary* terms are: Bay, Boat, Canal, Celestial, Channel, Coast, Harbor, Inlet, Lake, River, Sea, Season, Sound, Time, Weather, and Wharf.
- Example: Waterscape--Lake--Lake Michigan
Waterscape--Time--Sunset
Waterscape--Weather--Mist