

Pictures and photographs

Picturing the past

Pictures and photographs are types of evidence particularly suited to primary school children, as

- they may be used with all ages of children and abilities, as difficulties of readability are avoided
- they may be incorporated in various types of lesson: they may be discussed in a whole-class situation if enlarged on a chart or overhead projector or used with small groups or individuals

- they give the teacher opportunities to encourage the development of higher-order critical skills such as deduction and recognition of bias – skills which could be difficult to practise using documentary sources.

Paintings and drawings

A wide range of paintings and drawings are available from many historical periods. Paintings and drawings have some drawbacks as sources: they are highly selective, they portray the rich much more frequently than the poor, and the contents of the representations were often distorted or manipulated by the artist to please the subject or patron for reasons of vanity or to make a political, religious or other statement. However, the paintings can provide a great deal of information and can give the child an impression of what life was like in the past. Older children can also be taught to 'read' a picture and recognise some of the conventions and images which artists used to depict their subjects.

Many excellent paintings from the past are available in relatively inexpensive formats:

- many galleries and historic houses publish copies of their holdings in slide, postcard, poster or book form
- calendars are often available from galleries, companies and other institutions



Older children enjoy learning to 'read' or decode pictures. Above, the figure on the left from the Breac Mhaodhóig book shrine (from the 11th-12th century) may be identified as a cleric, as he holds a missal or book.



A sketch of a building in a man's hand often meant that he was an architect, as in this *Portrait of James Gandon* by William Cuming and Tilly Kettle. Other conventions included books and black robes to indicate a learned man or lawyer, a crown indicating a queen or king, etc

- art books and exhibition catalogues are often expensive, but most will be available from local libraries
- some libraries have framed copies of prints from national and other galleries available for loan
- many pictures are reproduced in textbooks and reference works
- an increasing number of galleries are providing access to their collections on the internet and on CD-ROM
- sometimes children can view the picture in the gallery or in the house in which it is displayed, and this is often the most effective approach.

Items which can be obtained in poster or calendar form or in textbooks will be more suited for use in a whole-class situation, while smaller reproductions may be used with groups. If a drawing or painting has local connections and would be particularly useful in the school, a gallery may agree to photograph it and print a large-scale copy. However, this is usually an expensive service.

Photographs

Photography dates from the middle of the nineteenth century. Initially it was a slow and awkward process, but it was infinitely more flexible and cheaper than painting. Huge collections of photographs were taken throughout the second half (particularly the last quarter) of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century. The Lawrence Collection and the Poole Collection in the National Library and others such as the Father Brown Collection, for example, contain thousands of prints from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As the cost of photography fell and the technology improved, photography became available to more and more people and less skill was required. Photographs are therefore much more likely to show the lives of ordinary people. They are also much more readily available: scenes of Irish towns and localities included in the Lawrence Collection, for example, are often reproduced and sold in picture shops and in interior furnishers. They are also frequently seen in books of photographs, local histories, calendars and posters.



Fish curing on Clare Island, County Mayo. This photograph could be used to discuss the various aspects of this work: catching the fish in nets, carrying them in baskets on the shoulder, cleaning and salting (left foreground) and packing them in barrels. The number of barrels gives an indication of the importance of the trade.



Tombs, such as this one of Pierce FitzOge Butler at Kilcooley Abbey, County Tipperary, tell us much about dress and religious beliefs.

Other visual sources

It should be remembered that visual sources include many other types of images and media including examples of early art such as that completed by Stone Age peoples in the caves of southern France and Spain, paintings adorning tombs such as those on the interiors of the pyramids, decoration on pottery, stained-glass images, statues and even postcards and advertisements.



Greek education depicted on pottery: Masters and pupils in Greek schools depicted on Attic red-figure kylix (cup) from 480 BC, found at Cerreteri, Etruria.

Exemplar 13

Using a picture

first to fourth classes



View from Capel Street from James Malton's *A Picturesque and Descriptive View of the City of Dublin* (1799). Malton prints are widely available in poster format and are often reproduced in books about Dublin.

Introduction

Illustrations may be used to establish basic information about a period. The following activity (based on James Malton's *View from Capel Street* in Dublin) would be suitable as part of work on life in the eighteenth century with third and fourth classes but elements of it could be used with younger children.

Step 1 Where does the picture come from?

The teacher could introduce the picture and explain its main features: the street, a bridge (this can be confusing for the child) and a further street in the distance.

In a classroom situation the teacher might explain the origins of the drawing and its date, but if children were examining the picture independently (for example by using a workcard in a gallery) they should be encouraged to check for the artist's name, his/her dates of birth and death, and the date and title of the print or painting. This is a good habit to instil, as the value of a painting as an historical source will be greater if the representation is a contemporary one.

Step 2 Close viewing

Questions and discussion should help the children to look closely at the picture to establish information about life at that time. These questions could: