

A **primary source** is any object, image, or written material that has survived from the past, and that tells us something about the past. Because primary sources were created when or soon after the events happened, they are usually more useful to historians than secondary sources. Primary sources reproduced electronically (digitized) are still primary sources: they record the original words, images, or objects created by people who were present at the time.



Examples of primary sources include:

- **Written materials:** books, stories, and myths written at the time; witness reports; journals and letters; government documents; newspaper reports; cookbooks; literature and biographies of the time; written words from songs, plays, and poems of the time
- **Images:** art, including paintings, sketches, calligraphy, sculptures, decorative designs; maps; photographs
- **Objects or artifacts:** burial sites, clothing, pottery and baskets, crafts, tools, weapons, buildings and furniture, instruments, items constructed by people living at that time. Artifacts are the physical evidence of the past: archeologists who study them call them the "material culture" of past societies.
- **Recordings** (for modern societies): films, video footage, sound recordings on tape, records, and CDs produced at that time
- **Other:** oral stories, songs, music, and dance, passed on through generations and performed by people who were present at the time

Anthropologists and historians use the material culture of a past society as evidence to help them analyze and interpret the "symbolic culture"—that is, the non-physical beliefs, values, attitudes, religions, and world views of that society.

A **secondary source** is any image or description of an event or place that has been made some time after the events, usually by someone who was not there.

Examples of secondary sources include:

- **History textbooks, stories, or accounts of the past** written by someone who was not there, encyclopedias, historical articles, and interpretations
- **Pieces of art, literature, music, or dance** created later to represent life in that time period
- **Recordings or recreations of past events;** artifact reproductions based on theories about the past, et cetera

How do primary and secondary sources compare?

Primary sources often give a more genuine picture of life from another time period. However, primary sources (like secondary sources) may have a biased view of past events.

Written primary sources often include opinions, attitudes, and values that reflect the biases and world views of a particular group living in a particular time. Neither primary sources nor secondary sources are necessarily bias-free or error-free. Be sure to think critically about any source you consult during your historical research. Keep these questions in mind as you do your inquiry:

- Why was this item created?
- What was its original purpose?
- What does it tell us about life at that time?

