

Research Guidelines for Documenting Works of Art

Prepared by staff of the Whitney Western Art Museum at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West as a research aid for private collectors or organizations.

- **Artist, Title, Date:** Record artist's name, title of the work, and the date of the work. (Indicate source of information; see below.) If the artist is unknown, write "unknown" and include any information about possible geographical origin of work.
- **Inscriptions:** Record all inscriptions found on the front and back of the work, such as the signature, date, and any attached labels. Be sure to copy the inscriptions exactly as they are seen. For instance, use capital letters if there are capital letters. Also note the location of the inscriptions. On sculpture, inspect the work carefully and record all inscriptions, including those found under the base.
- **Measurements:** Measure the work of art itself, first the height, then the width and depth. Then measure the frame or base dimensions, in same order. Record, indicating units of measurement used (such as inches or centimeters).
- **Materials:** Describe the materials used to create the work accurately and precisely. If you are unsure about or unfamiliar with the type of materials used, ask an artist, art teacher, framer, or another individual likely to be knowledgeable about materials used in making art.
- **Subject matter:** Describe subject matter as precisely and accurately as possible.
- **Provenance:** Develop a provenance (ownership history). Indicate when, where, how, and from whom the work was acquired. If possible, go back to the previous owner and obtain direct information on how that person/business acquired it, and continue tracing backwards. If the individual is deceased, interview other people who might have knowledge or records about the work.
- **Archival Research:** Search relevant records associated with the work. If the work descended through the family, look through family inventories (sometimes made for estate or insurance purposes), letters, account books, journals/diaries.
- **Documentation:** Photograph the work of art. Make copies of any written documentation, such as receipts for purchases.
- **Exhibitions:** List exhibitions in which this work of art appeared. Labels on the work of art often give information about exhibition history.
- **Secondary Research:** Research the artist, using your local library or similar resource. The Whitney Gallery has prepared annotated bibliographies on several major western artists. If the artist is not known or is obscure, consult an historical society in the region from which the artist or work originated.
- **Bibliography:** List publications that mention the work of art and/or that have reproduced an image of it.