

HILBERT MUSEUM

OF CALIFORNIA ART • AT CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

Narratives in Art: California's People & Places

A Resource Guide for Visiting The Hilbert Museum

About this Guide

This guide contains information and activities that will help you prepare for your students' visit to The Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University. This guide includes—

- **Selected works of art with information, questions, and prompts:** These examples represent the kinds of art, the type of discussion, and the activities that your students will experience in the galleries. The artworks are subject to change, but the guide will be updated to reflect them.
- **Pre-visit Activities:** As you prepare for your visit, you may want to use the works and discussion questions in tandem with the activities listed in the 'Before your Visit to the Museum' section below.
- **Post-visit Activities:** After your visit, continue to develop students' learning with the activities recommended in the 'After Your Visit to the Museum' section below.
- **Related California Standards:** All Hilbert Museum tours for students address Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and other California state standards.

About the Museum

The Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University opened in 2016 and is the home of one of the world's largest collections of California narrative art. Founded through the ongoing generosity of art patrons and philanthropists Mark and Janet Hilbert, it represents the only museum in the world committed to tracing the rich, iconic history of the Golden State from the late 19th century to the present day through works by leading California Scene artists, Hollywood studio artists, and animators.

About Hilbert Museum School Tours

Our museum tours invite students to engage in a thoughtful, open-ended exploration of art. Teachers are encouraged to begin by inviting students to spend a brief moment in quiet, focused observation of a selected painting. This pause allows students to slow down, look closely, and engage with the artwork on their own terms before discussion begins. The experience emphasizes both careful viewing and the process of meaning-making.

Rather than leading students to a single "correct" interpretation, this approach encourages them to develop their own ideas through observation and discussion.

Historical context – often grounded in a specific time and place in California's past – can be introduced to deepen understanding but should serve to expand the conversation rather than conclude it. Teachers can guide discussion with open-ended questions such as: What stands out as important? What feels unusual? What might this work be about? These prompts support critical thinking and highlight the value of ambiguity in interpreting art and history. While students may expect a definitive answer, they instead discover that meaning is flexible and shaped through group dialogue. Each discussion may lead to different insights, reinforcing that interpretation is something students actively construct. By balancing historical knowledge with openness to new perspectives, this approach helps students engage more deeply and confidently with works of art.

More Details

This guide brings together four works of art made in and about California, spanning from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. These artists were making deliberate choices about who and what they were capturing—choices that tell us something about the world they lived in and the stories they believed were worth portraying. All of them ask you to slow down, look carefully, and ask: What is really going on here?

The approach used in this guide is grounded in Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) and inquiry-based learning, encouraging students to cite visual evidence and explore the big question of the tour – *What can art tell us about the people who lived in California, their communities, and how their stories continue to shape the way we see our world today?*

Before Your Visit to the Museum

To prepare students for this tour, you may want to complete the following activities.

People and Places in Your Community

Before your visit, ask students to reflect on their own community as a place worth painting. The artists here made choices about who and what to portray – and these choices tell us about the time they lived in and what they valued. What choices would your students make?

Ask students to respond in writing or through a brief sketch:

- Name three places in your community that feel important to you – a park, a street corner, a building, a restaurant. Why do they matter?
- Think about the people you see in those places. What kind of story do they tell?
- If you were going to paint your community or neighborhood, what would be important to you to have in your painting?

What Do We Remember – and Why?

Several of the paintings in this tour were made during or after periods of significant historical change: the end of the California Ranchero era, the Great Depression, and the transformation of Los Angeles into a modern metropolis. Before your visit, introduce students to the idea that artists make choices about what to remember — and that those choices are rarely neutral.

- Show students two images of the same place at different points in time (e.g., a neighborhood before and after freeway construction, or a California mission before and after secularization). Ask: What was achieved? What was lost? Who decides what happened?
- Discuss: If you were painting a scene from California's history, which moments would you want to paint? What would you leave out and why?
- Optional: Have students research one historical period represented in the tour (the Mission era, the Great Depression, post-war Los Angeles) and bring one fact, image, or question to share on the day of the visit.

After Your Visit to the Museum

Extend your students' learning after their visit with one or more of the following activities. Each can be adapted in length and complexity to match your grade level and available time.

Your California Story (Writing)

Ask students to choose an artwork that stuck with them the most after the visit. Have them write a personal response addressing the following:

- What was happening in the artwork, in your own words?
- What did you notice that surprised you – something you did not expect to see or feel?
- What question do you still have about the person, place, or moment shown?
- Does this painting connect to anything in your own life, community, or family history? If so, how?



ALEXANDER FRANCIS HARMER (1856 - 1925)

Ramona - Santa Barbara, CA - The Proposal

C.1894

Oil on canvas

The Hibert Museum of California Art at Chapman University

Gift of the Hilbert Collection

Ramona – Santa Barbara, CA – The Proposal

About the Work of Art

Alexander Francis Harmer was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1856 and showed an early gift for art. At 16, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was stationed in California — a place that captivated him completely. He later requested a discharge to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, but when funds ran low, he re-enlisted, hoping to return west. After leaving military service for good, he settled in Santa Barbara, married into a prominent local family, and spent the rest of his career painting the landscapes, people, and vanishing ways of life that defined 19th-century California. His paintings of the region during this period of rapid transformation are now considered invaluable historical documents.

This painting, completed in 1894, presents a romanticized scene of California's Mission and Rancho era — a world that, by the time Harmer painted it, had already disappeared. We see what appears to be a courtship or farewell: a man of mixed Native American and Spanish heritage offers a gift to a woman in colorful colonial dress, while a companion urges her to accept it. In the background, two figures embrace near a saddled horse, possibly parting ways. Adobe walls, flowering vines, and cobblestone create an idyllic, sun-drenched setting. To the left, a young man in similar Spanish colonial dress watches from behind a pillar, perhaps enviously. Behind him, the elegant women of the Rancho seem to be enjoying tea, taking little notice of the interaction between the main subjects.

This romanticization was not accidental. By the 1880s, railroad companies were actively marketing California to tourists and settlers, and the image of the peaceful, gracious rancho proved far more marketable than the reality. The Ranchos' origins date to the California Mission period, which began when Spanish colonists established missions to convert Native peoples to Christianity in the early 1770s, promising a ten-year arrangement before returning land to indigenous communities. That promise was never kept. Missions remained for generations, exploiting Native labor and punishing resistance. When Mexico gained independence in 1821, the missions were

secularized, giving way to the Rancho era — a period of large land grants that systematically excluded Native populations. When California joined the United States, legal battles stripped many Californio families of their land as well. By framing this world as a picturesque, lost era, artists like Harmer helped make its violence feel like natural, inevitable history — and that made it easier to leave unexamined.

Sources

- Smith, Joan Irvine, et al. *California: This Golden Land of Promise*. Chapman University Press; Irvine Museum, 2001.
- Hughes, E. M. (1989). *Artists in California, 1786-1940*. Hughes.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work of art using the following questions. Encourage students to point to specific visual details to support their responses.

- Look closely at this painting. Describe what you see happening. What clues help you understand what is going on?
- How are the two central figures dressed? What might their clothing suggest about who they are and the world they live in?
- This painting was made in 1894, yet it shows a way of life that had already disappeared. Why do you think an artist would choose to paint something that no longer exists?
- Considering the title, *The Proposal*. What do you think is being proposed? Could there be more than one kind of proposal happening in this scene?

Have students select characters in the painting, come up and act out particular elements that stand out to them. Remind them to have fun and encourage other students to participate by having them correct poses or call out adjustments. Afterwards, ask students if acting out the particular poses or actions changed how they relate to the characters and the story being told.



MILLARD SHEETS (1907-1989)

Pleasures Along the Beach

1969-1970

Murano glass tesserae mosaic

16.5 x 40 feet

The Hibert Museum of California Art at Chapman University

Gift of Wilshire-26, LLC

Pleasures Along the Beach

About the Work of Art

Millard Sheets was often seen as “a farm boy drawn to painting” in his early years entering the art world. His mother had passed away when he was young, and he was raised by his grandparents, largely on farms, in his hometown of Pomona. When he was around 12, his uncle entered one of his paintings into the Los Angeles County Fair, where he won first place in his division. Sheets would continue entering juried shows until he declined a scholarship to Pomona College to attend the renowned Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, where many of his classmates would go on to work for Disney. He made ends meet by helping his cousin raise rabbits while attending school, often making the hour-long trek each way.

Millard Sheets would go on to pioneer the watercolor movement in Southern California and become a leading inspiration for future artists capturing the California landscape. He was one of the founding members of the “California Scene Painters,” a group that helped define a distinctly Western American style of painting. His work covers some very recognizable landmarks, including a mural at the Hilton Hawaiian Village in Waikiki and the Word of Life mural on the Hesburgh Library at the University of Notre Dame, affectionately known as “Touchdown Jesus.”

This monumental mosaic was created as part of a collaboration between Sheets and Howard Ahmanson, the founder of Home Savings and Loan. Ahmanson’s commission was simple and ambitious: “I want buildings that will be exciting 75 years from now. I want it done the way you would do it if you were doing it for yourself. Forget about a budget!” What followed was one of the most ambitious public art programs in California history. Sheets designed and oversaw the creation of dozens of large-scale mosaics and murals across Southern California, each celebrating the community where a Home Savings branch was located.

Pleasures Along the Beach is made from Murano glass

— a material produced exclusively on the island of Murano, Italy, prized for its extraordinary range of color and its ability to hold that color across centuries. The mosaic depicts figures at leisure on a Southern California beach: swimmers, sunbathers, children at play, men launching a boat. When Washington Mutual acquired Home Savings and subsequently collapsed during the 2008 financial crisis, many mosaics were destroyed as buildings were sold. This mosaic survived, but its reassembly required six months, over one million dollars,

and a team that included one of the original artists who had helped install it decades before.

Sources

- McClelland, G. (2010). *Millard Sheets- The Early Years (1926 - 1944)*. The California Regionalist Art: Information Center.

Millier, A., Armitage, M., & Alexander, H. B. (1935). *Millard Sheets*. Dalzell Hatfield.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

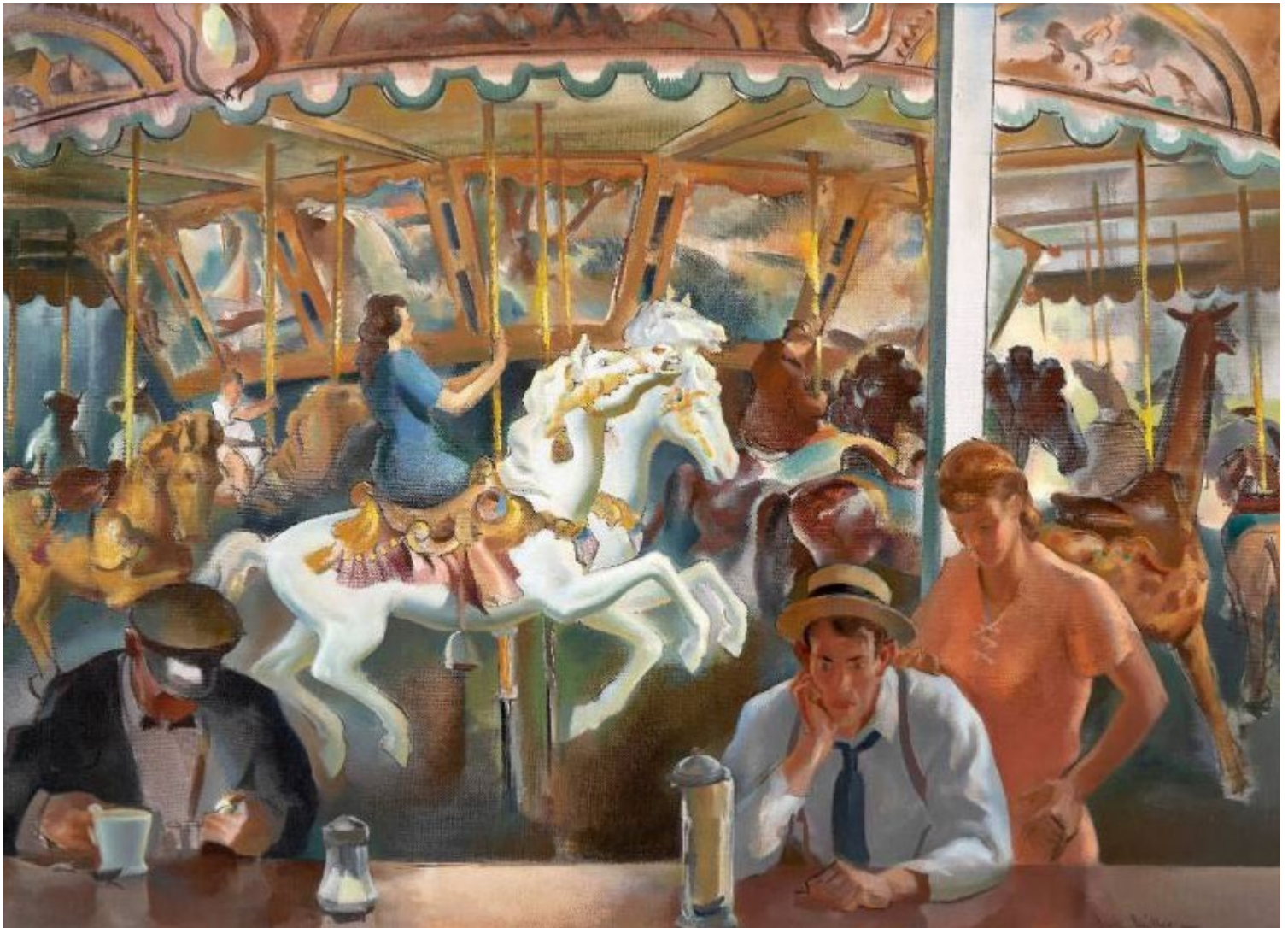
Discuss the work of art using the following questions. Encourage students to point to specific visual details to support their responses.

- Stand back and look at the mosaic as a whole. What is the first thing you notice?
- Now look closely. How many different people and activities can you find? Who is here, and what are they doing?
- This mosaic is very large. How does its scale affect the way you feel standing in front of it? What would change if it were the size of a painting you could hang in a living room?
- Mosaics are made of thousands of individual pieces of glass or tile, each placed by hand. Why might an artist choose this labor-intensive medium rather than simply painting a mural? How does knowing that change how you look at it?
- Many of these mosaics were destroyed when the banks that commissioned them were sold. Does a public artwork belong to the people who paid for it, or to the community? Who should decide what happens to it?

Design Your Own Public Artwork

Inspired by the Millard Sheets mosaic commission, challenge students to design a public artwork for a real building or space in their community. This can be a sketch, a collage, a digital design, or whichever medium fits best.

- What building or space would you choose?
- What people or activities from your community would you want to show?
- What medium would you use – mosaic, mural, sculpture, something else – and why?
- Then share it with the class. Explain your choices: what you included, what you left out, and what you hope people feel when they encounter it.



BARSE MILLER (1904-1973)

If I had the Wings of an Angel

1937

Oil on Canvas

The Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University Gift of
the Hilbert Collection

If I had the Wings of an Angel

About the Work of Art

Barse Miller was born in New York City and trained at two of America's most prestigious art institutions — the National Academy of Design and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts — where he focused on figurative and portrait painting. Growing up, his household stressed physical fitness, and he retained this love for athletic activity well into his adulthood, becoming an active swimmer, tennis player and champion yachtsman winning titles. After settling in California, he joined the faculty at Chouinard Art School, teaching alongside many of the artists who would come to define Southern California's cultural identity. At one point he created a piece of artwork that criticized a well know local evangelist, Aimee Sample McPherson, portraying her image in an apparition type form over her church and flanked by cherubs holding large bags on money. The painting was both extremely popular and controversial. He later served as a war correspondent-artist during World War II, then returned to New York to teach at Queens College, while continuing to travel back to California to paint throughout his career.

This painting depicts a scene at Lincoln Park in East Los Angeles — one of the first public parks in the Los Angeles region, and at its height a gathering place so popular that certain events drew upward of 100,000 people in a single day. In the foreground, at a lunch counter, a man sits with his head in his hands, visibly distressed, as a woman stands behind him with her hand on his shoulder in a gesture of comfort or consolation. To his left, another figure

— likely a streetcar conductor — checks his watch, ready to leave. In the background, a carousel blazes with light and color, its riders gliding through the air on white horses, seemingly weightless.

The year is 1937. The Depression has worn on for nearly a decade. The contrast between the carousel's dreamlike brightness and the quiet despair at the counter is entirely deliberate. Miller may be asking whether those riders are really there at all — or whether they are something the man at the counter is

turning over in his mind, a memory of how things once were or a vision of how they might be again. The title, drawn from a traditional folk song about longing for freedom and escape, suggests the painting is not simply a genre scene but a thoughtful consideration on the distance between suffering and relief, holding both realities at once.

Sources

-Stern, J., & Hilbert, M. (2015). *Windows in Time: California Scene Paintings from the Hilbert Collection*. California Scene Press.

-Stern, J., & Hilbert, M. (2023). *Windows in Time II - The Post-War Era: California Art from the Hilbert Collection*. California Scene Press.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work of art using the following questions. Encourage students to point to specific visual details to support their responses.

- Look carefully at the entire painting. Describe everything you see — who is there, where are they, and what are they doing?
- Now focus on the foreground. Describe the body language of the figures at the lunch counter. What do you think is happening between them?
- The back of the painting is bright and joyful. The foreground is somber and heavy. Why do you think Miller placed these two very different emotional worlds in the same painting?
- Some people think the carousel in the background might not be real — that it is a memory or imagined scene belonging to one of the figures at the counter. What do you think? If so, whose memory do you think it might be?
- Think about a public space in your community where people from very different circumstances share the same place at the same time. What stories might be playing out there, side by side, that most people never notice?



MILLARD SHEETS (1907-1989)

San Dimas Train Station

1933

Watercolor on paper

The Hilbert Collection

San Dimas Train Station

About the Work of Art

By 1933, Millard Sheets was already earning recognition as one of Southern California's most promising young artists — but he was also a young man in the thick of the Great Depression, hustling for teaching jobs and art commissions wherever he could find them. Despite the economic turmoil that had enveloped much of the US, Hollywood was one of the few industries that had survived relatively well. People craved distraction and were willing to pay the price of admission (ranging from 25 to 50 cents) to take their minds off the dire straits they often found themselves in. As a result, thousands of artists flocked to Hollywood in search of jobs designing movie set backdrops or creating animation cells for the burgeoning Disney Studios.

Despite the demand, Millard Sheets rarely worked in the movie industry, opting to pursue his passion for watercolors while teaching. This train station was very familiar to him, as he would often pass it on his commute into Los Angeles while attending the Chouinard Art Institute.

The painting captures the station at night, rendered in the Precisionist style: a movement characterized by clean geometry, sharp edges, and a calm, architectural clarity that strips scenes of sentimentality while somehow making them more affecting. A single lamp casts a warm circle of light over the entrance. Below it, a lone figure sits on a bench reading a newspaper, leaning into the glow. To the left, another figure stands waiting in shadow. The sky above is a wash of muted blue-grey. Everything feels still, anticipatory — a constant sense of waiting.

The Depression cast a long shadow over this scene without ever appearing in it directly. Sheets was fortunate — his relentless drive to find work, combined with WPA commissions that employed artists as part of federal relief efforts, allowed him to keep making art. But the feeling of the era is present in this painting's quietness, its solitary figures, its sense of suspension between one thing and the next. Two months after Sheets completed this work, the San Dimas station burned to the ground. What

remained was this painting — the most detailed record we now have of a building that existed and then vanished.

Resources

-McClelland, G. T., & Last, J. T.

(2002). *California Watercolors: 1850-1970 - An Illustrated History & Biographical Dictionary*. Hillcrest Press.

- McClelland, G. (2010). *Millard Sheets- The Early Years (1926 - 1944)*. The California Regionalist Art: Information Center.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work of art using the following questions. Encourage students to point to specific visual details to support their responses.

- Describe what you see. Where does your eye go first? What draws you there?
- The scene is dominated by quiet and stillness. What creates that feeling? Look at the colors, the light sources, the figures, the space — what specific details contribute to the mood?
- There is a figure sitting under the lamp, and another standing to the left. Imagine each of them for a moment. Who might they be? What are they thinking about?
- Millard Sheets rode this very train regularly, passing through this station on his way to and from art school. How do you think that personal connection affected what he chose to paint — and how he painted it?
- Think of a place in your life — a bus stop, a corner store, a familiar building — that feels important to you. How would you paint it, and at what time of day?

California State Content Standards for Visual Arts

Grade 4

- **VA: Cr1.2:** Collaboratively set goals and create artwork that is meaningful and has purpose to the makers.
- **VA: Cr2.3:** Document, describe, and represent regional constructed environments.
- **VA: Pr5:** Analyze the various considerations for presenting and protecting art in various locations, indoor or outdoor settings, in temporary or permanent forms, and in physical or digital formats.
- **VA: Pr6:** Compare and contrast purposes of art museums, art galleries, and other venues, as well as the types of personal experiences they provide.

Grade 5

- **VA: Cr2.3:** Identify, describe, and visually document places and/or objects of personal significance.
- **VA: Cr3:** Use art vocabulary to describe personal choices in artmaking and in creating artist statements.
- **VA: Pr6:** Cite evidence about how an exhibition in a museum or other venue presents ideas and provides information about a specific concept or topic.

Grade 6

- **VA: Cr1.2:** Formulate an artistic investigation of personally relevant content for creating art.
- **VA: Cr3:** Reflect on whether personal artwork conveys the intended meaning and revise accordingly.
- **VA: Pr6:** Assess, explain, and provide evidence of how museums or other venues reflect history and values of a community and/or culture.

Grade 7

- **VA: Cr1.2:** Develop criteria to guide making a work of art or design to meet an identified goal.
- **VA: Cr3:** Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.
- **VA: Pr5:** Based on criteria, analyze and evaluate methods for preparing, preserving, and presenting art.
- **VA: Pr6:** Compare and contrast viewing and experiencing collections and exhibitions in different venues (physical and/or virtual).

Grades 8

- **VA: Cr1.2:** Collaboratively shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present-day life using a contemporary practice of art and design.
- **VA: Cr3:** Apply relevant criteria to examine, reflect on, and plan revisions for a work of art or design in progress.
- **VA: Pr6:** Analyze why and how an exhibition or collection may influence ideas, beliefs, and experiences.

Proficient (High School)

- **VA: Cr1.2:** Shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present-day life using a contemporary practice of art or design.
- **VA: Pr5:** Analyze and evaluate the reasons and ways an exhibition is presented.
- **VA: Pr6:** Analyze and describe the impact that an exhibition or collection has on personal awareness of social, cultural, or political beliefs and understandings.

Accomplished (High School)

- **VA: Cr3:** Engage in constructive critique with peers, then reflect on, reengage, revise, and refine works of art and design in response to personal artistic vision.
- **VA: Pr5:** Evaluate, select, and apply methods or processes appropriate to display artwork in a specific place.
- **VA: Pr6:** Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history.

Advanced (High School)

- **VA: Cr3:** Engage in constructive critique with peers, then reflect on, reengage, revise, and refine works of art and design in response to personal artistic vision.
- **VA: Pr5:** Investigate, compare, and contrast methods and processes for preserving, presenting, and protecting a variety of artworks

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (Grades 4–12)

Reading

- **R.1:** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- **R.7:** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- **R.9:** Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Speaking and Listening

- **SL.1:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **SL.3:** Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
- **SL.4:** Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Writing (Grades 4–12)

- **W.1:** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- **W.3:** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

California History–Social Science Standards Grade

4

4.2 Students describe the social, political, cultural, and economic life and interactions among people of California from the pre-Columbian societies to the Spanish mission and Mexican rancho periods.

Grade 11

11.2 Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, urbanization, and cultural change.

11.6 Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and its impact on American society.