QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN PREPARING ART HISTORY PRESENTATIONS: WRITTEN OR ORAL

ABOUT THE WORK:

1. What is the entry for this work: title / artist / materials used / year of creation / current location
2. What are the technical elements of the work? Painting / mosaic / oil / tempera / wood / canvas / metal plate / engraving?
3. What are we seeing when we first view the work? A family scene / an athlete / a battle
4. What is going on in the work? Worship / play / static portrait / dynamic movement
5. What interested you about this aspect of the work?
6. Are there OTHER works of art that treat of the same topic by the same artist? By different artists? Where/How does this work fit into that larger context
7. Does the work we see today look anything like the original work? Has the work been changed, damaged, cut into many pieces, etc. Is the work we see today just a fragment? How badly has the work been damaged or aged – this can be VERY important for works before 1700!
8. Where is this work of art located today? Where / What was its original location? Is this important to know? For example, an altarpiece from the 15th century may have been in the Cathedral of Bruges in Belgium but today it has been cut in 3 pieces and this section is found in the National Gallery/London.
9. How do these qualities of the work like its colors, its light and dark sections, its movement (or lack of!) affect our first impression of the work?

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

1. Name of the Artist – both ‘common’ name and real name
2. Data about his birth / death / life story
3. With whom did he study art?
4. What’s the story of his life? Be BRIEF if it’s a long and complicated story!
5. How does this work compare, if at all, with his other works – early, middle, late?
6. Is this the only artwork he did of this kind?
7. What seems to be the reason for the artist making this work? Commission from a patron? He/She just wanted to? Some other reason?
8. Did the artist have a studio/atelier with apprentices or assistants who may have helped create the work?
ABOUT THE PROVENANCE:
NB: “Provenance” is the technical term in Art History that refers to the history of the ownership of a work of art. Sometimes, the provenance of a picture is very complex and a fascinating story in and of itself, e.g., the provenance of da Vinci’s Mona Lisa is complex, interesting, and fun to read – many books have been written on its provenance alone! For other works, the provenance is quite short and simple – and not very interesting. CHECK the Provenance, if you can, of your work of art. Many times, the Provenance of works before 1600 is difficult or impossible to determine, but check it out anyway!

ABOUT THE HISTORICAL/CULTURAL CONTEXT:

1. How does this work reflect (or not!) the culture and historical period in which it was created?
2. Does the work have a ‘propaganda’ value to it? Perhaps it was created to ‘send a message’ to one person or group – if so, tell us about that.
3. Many works have MYTHOLOGICAL or ALLEGORICAL meanings to them. But, if we don’t know the STORY behind the artistic work, we won’t understand it; so, explain what may be necessary background knowledge.
4. When a 21st century person looks at a work, how would that be different from someone who lived during the time of the Artist? Is it important that we know this difference?

ABOUT WHAT YOU FEEL/THINK WHEN SEEING THIS WORK:

1. You have chosen a work of art and spent a goodly amount of time with it. What drew you to choose this work? Why does it ‘speak’ to you and ‘how’ does it speak to you.
2. Do you think other people would be inclined to understand or ‘read’ the work in the same way that you have?