

## Dr. Fesperman's Guide to Art History Research Methods

There are five steps to conducting research: 1.) defining the topic, 2.) preliminary research, 3.) advanced research, 4.) analyzing/organizing findings, and 5.) presenting the results.

This document is a guide to basic research methods in the field of art history and should serve as a starting point for any outside research needed for papers or other assignments. Be sure to read this guide *before* embarking on your research journey.

### 1. Defining the topic

The first step to any research paper is defining the topic. Carefully read and review the assignment and decide what you would like to investigate further. Consider the following:

- What is the topic? (Artist, art movement, individual work of art, technique/method, material, etc.)
- How long should the paper be? (Is it a basic overview or a more detailed analysis?)
  - o You'll want to select a topic that is the right size for your paper. For example, it would be difficult to write a 1-page paper on the artist Frida Kahlo, but much easier to address her *Fulang Chang and I* in 1 or 2 pages.
- What interests you?
  - o Consider the assignment instructions and select a topic that is relevant to your own interests, art practice, or is simply something that interests you.

### 2. Preliminary Research

Once you have selected a topic, conduct some preliminary research on the subject. Google Scholar and the library website are great places to start. You might also try searching for your topic to see if there are relevant resources or materials available through a museum website or online collection (this is especially helpful when addressing a specific work of art).

- Be sure to save any sources you locate so that you can cite them in your paper. (See the Style Guide for more on citations.)
  - o **Any** source that you consult should be cited in a research paper or presentation.
- Consider the type of source you are looking at. Is it a credible source?
  - o Credible sources are well-researched secondary sources (things that scholars have written about the topic based on their own research) or primary sources (documents that directly relate to your topic and/or are from the time of your topic).
    - A credible secondary source should have numerous citations of its own.
      - If you are unsure about the credibility of the source, Google the author. Are they a specialist in the subject?
        - o Blogs, social media posts, Wikipedia, etc. should all raise red flags. These are often unresearched and if they are, they are not cited.
    - Primary sources will have dates, language, or other defining characteristics that directly pertain to your topic.
      - For example, a primary source on Niki de Saint Phalle's *tirs* is a review of her 1961 exhibition *Feu à Volonté*, found in a newspaper published in September of that same year.

## Dr. Fesperman's Guide to **Art History Research Methods**

- Artists' statements, websites, exhibition/gallery materials, letters, and articles written in the time of the work are all credible primary sources.

If you are having trouble locating sources on your topic, return to step 1.

### **3. Advanced Research**

Now that you have located several sources on your topic (ideally at least 2 solid secondary sources) dig deeper into these materials. Read them carefully and take notes that you will cite in step 5. Pay attention to:

- What the author says about your topic (What is their argument?)
- The sources that they cite (Are the primary or secondary? Can you locate them?)
  - A good secondary source should give you more avenues for future research. You should be able to follow the author's own research trail and (after some digging) find the materials that they engaged to write their article/book.
    - Be sure to harvest additional sources from the author's bibliography or citations. Just be sure to mention in your own citing that you found the additional sources through them. In art history, you can do this in a footnote.

### **4. Analyzing & Organizing Findings**

Armed with a better understanding of your topic and some good notes from your research phase, review what you've found.

Ask yourself: Given what I know about this topic, what is my argument? When developing your thesis, consider the following:

- What is my research question?
- Given what I have learned in steps 2 and 3, how can I answer this question and demonstrate my argument?

Your thesis should be well-researched and directly engage with the prompt and questions outlined on the assignment guide. Often, the research questions will be laid out for you. It is up to you to determine how to answer them in your final paper.

### **5. Presenting Results**

Present your results in your own research paper. Use one of the secondary sources you found in your research as a model for your own paper. Make sure you clearly present your argument and use the information you found to support your claim. Additionally, your paper should have:

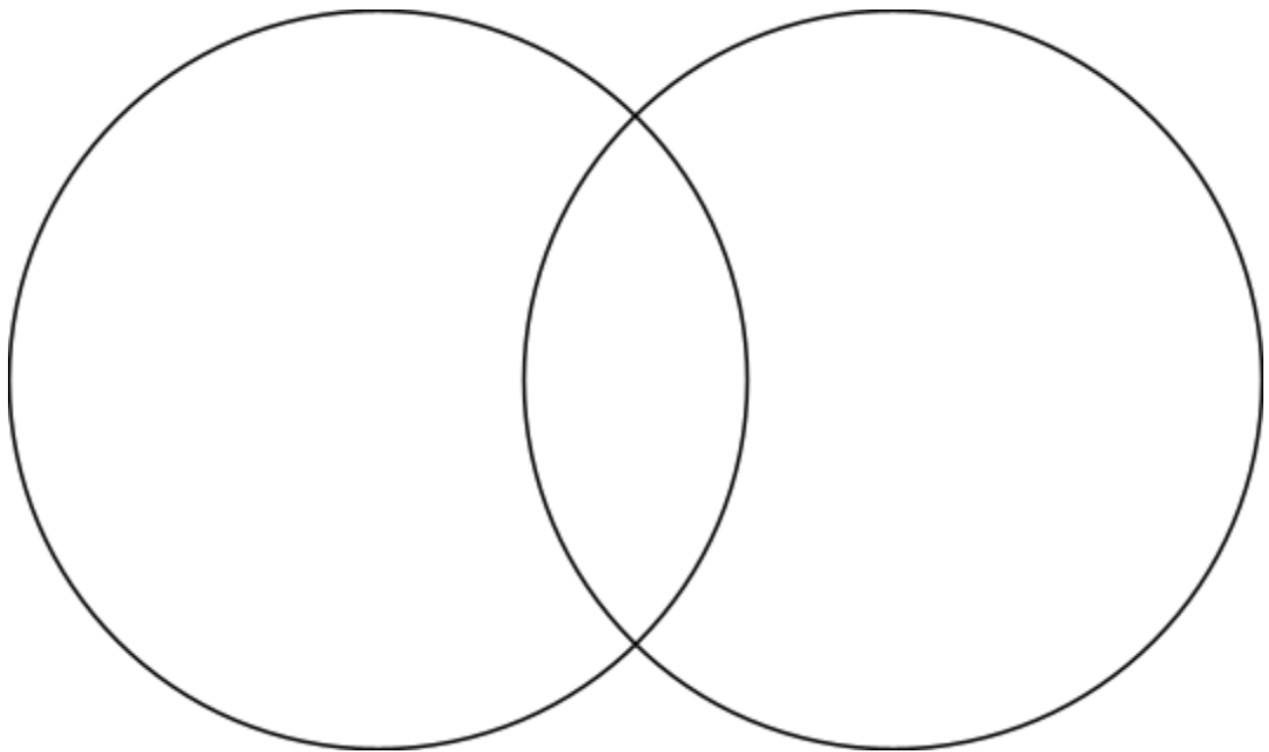
- A clear **introduction** presenting your topic and thesis (1–2 paragraphs)
- **Supporting evidence** that supports your claim (1 paragraph per point)
- A **conclusion** that summarizes your findings/answers the "so what" question (1 paragraph)

Venn diagrams are excellent tools for writing comparison essays in art history. Use one circle to list the characteristics specific to one work of art and the other to discuss traits from the second work. List the similarities between the two works in the center of the diagram, where the circles overlap.

You should list at least 2 or 3 things in each part of the diagram. Be sure to consider the works' formal features (what they look like) and larger contexts (the cultures they are from, how they were made, what they were used for, who made them, etc.).

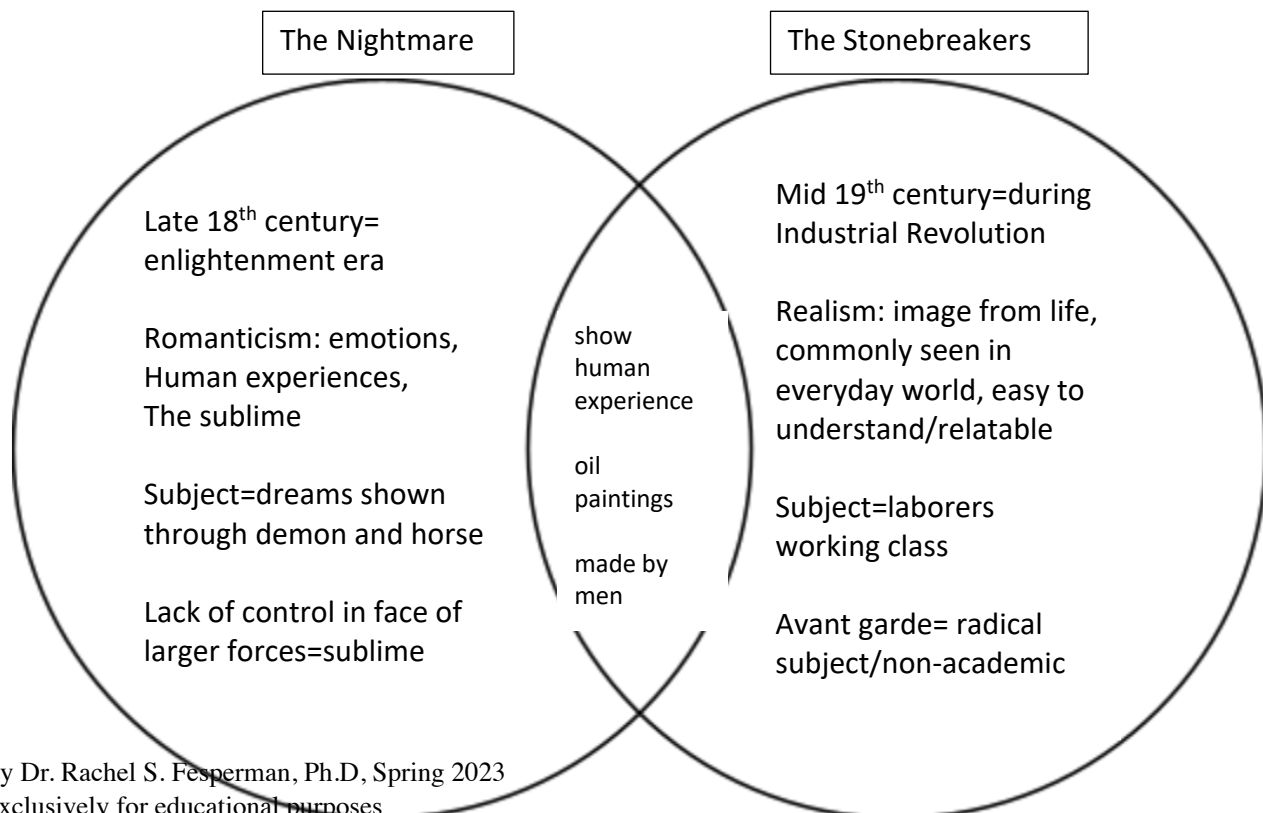
The Venn diagram can serve as notes to help you write your larger essay. You can also make notes in the forms of lists or mind maps, like those linked on the note taking page of Module 1.

There is a completed Venn diagram and successful comparison essay on the following page, which shows you how to use the diagram to plan your comparison essay.



Below is a completed Venn diagram used by a student to complete an Art History Survey II comparison essay question on an exam. The prompt, two images, and the student's notes, in addition to the resulting essay are provided. Study each carefully to see how you can apply a Venn diagram to your next essay.

**Comparison Essay Prompt:** Using the two images below as the basis for your discussion, write a brief essay (at least 2 paragraphs in length) discussing the similarities and differences between realism and romanticism.



Answer:

Henry Fuseli's, *The Nightmare* (1781), and Gustave Courbet's, *The Stone Breakers* (1849), are two wildly different paintings in terms of composition, subject matter, and time period. They show minor similarity in the fact that they are both oil paintings but that is where the similarity's pretty much end. First off, I will talk about Fusilli. Fusilli's paint titled *The Nightmare*, depicts a woman laying on a bed, sleeping, subsequently dreaming, or having a horrible nightmare. The nightmare seems to be of some sort of goblin sitting on the woman's chest as she lays on her bed and a somewhat disturbing horse creeping out from behind the curtains. The expression o her face seems to be that of fear or at least discomfort and the subject matter is dramatic, which is a large theme of Romanticism. It focuses on the idea of unperfect scenarios, and the non-ideal, which is something that it share sin common with realism in that regard. While the two are different in terms of representation through art, the two concepts aren't really that far apart. At there basic forms they both focus on the non-ideal and less noticed aspects of life, and the things you rarely think about. Which leads me into the next painting, Courbet's, *The Stone Breakers*.

Courbet's Painting takes a look at the unseen and underappreciated, and so does this genre of painting as a whole. Realism is all about showing that is normally overlooked. Those in lower places are often depicted in this type of art, showing things such as workers, the less fortunate and even things like funerals. Courbet's, *The Stone Breakers*, shows two faceless men, breaking stone for gravel mining, something that is commonly overlooked, even by todays standers. This style of painting is not overly dramatic like Romanticism but does show the not commonly thought of side of life. While they share many difference stylistically, (such as muted color palette son one hand and highly rendered portraiture on the other) Henry Fuseli's, *The Nightmare* (1781), and Gustave Courbet's, *The Stone Breakers* (1849),are two pieces that aren't so different after all, having similar ideas that are being attempted to convey through both pieces.

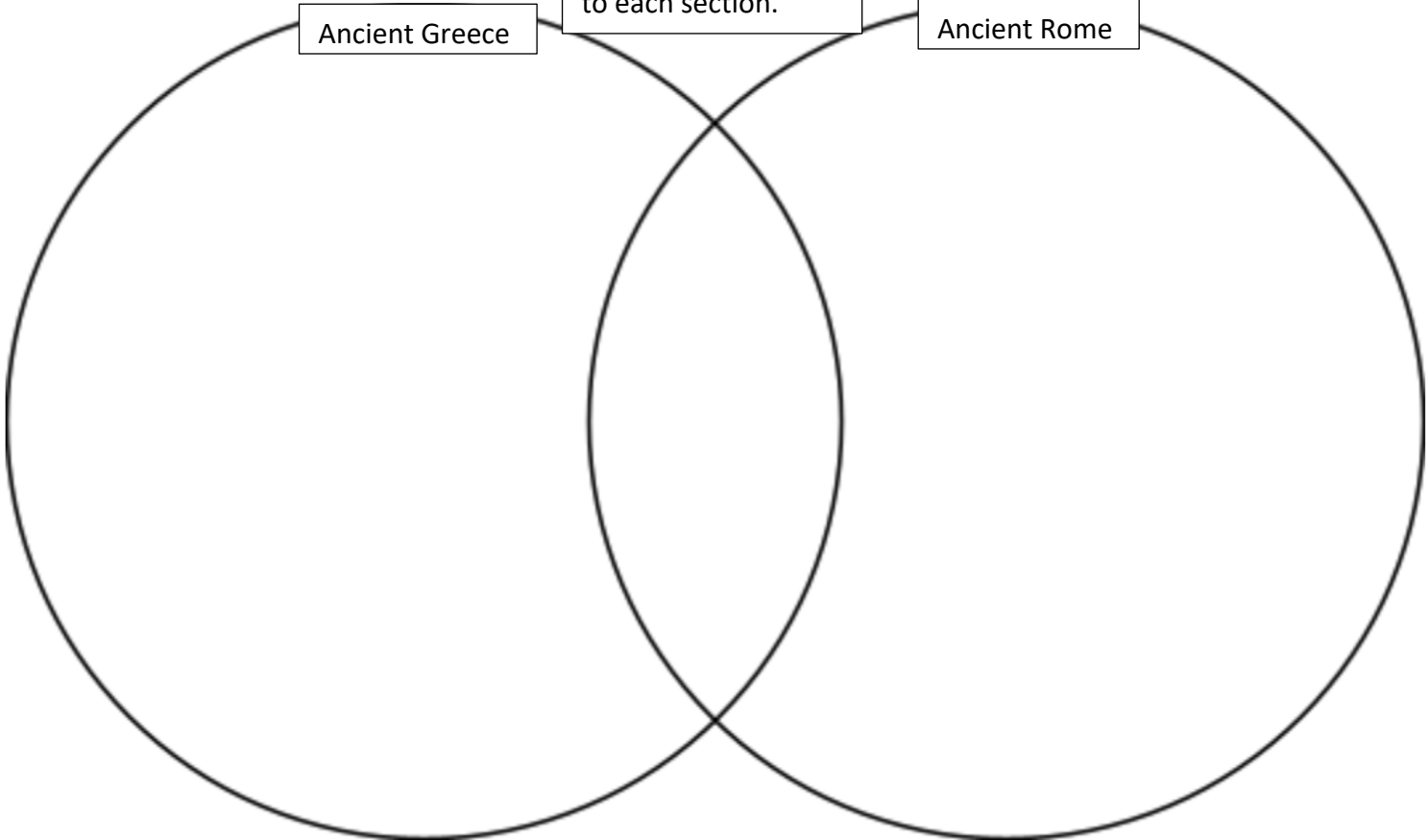
Unit 2: Ancient Art  
Ancient Cultures Compared

In class: list at least  
1 thing in each part  
of the diagram.

Module 7: add at  
least 2 more things  
to each section.

Ancient Greece

Ancient Rome



Under each side of the diagram, list  
one work of architecture that you feel  
represents each culture. List 2 reasons  
this site represents the culture.

Ancient Greece

A large, empty rectangular box intended for students to write their response for Ancient Greece.

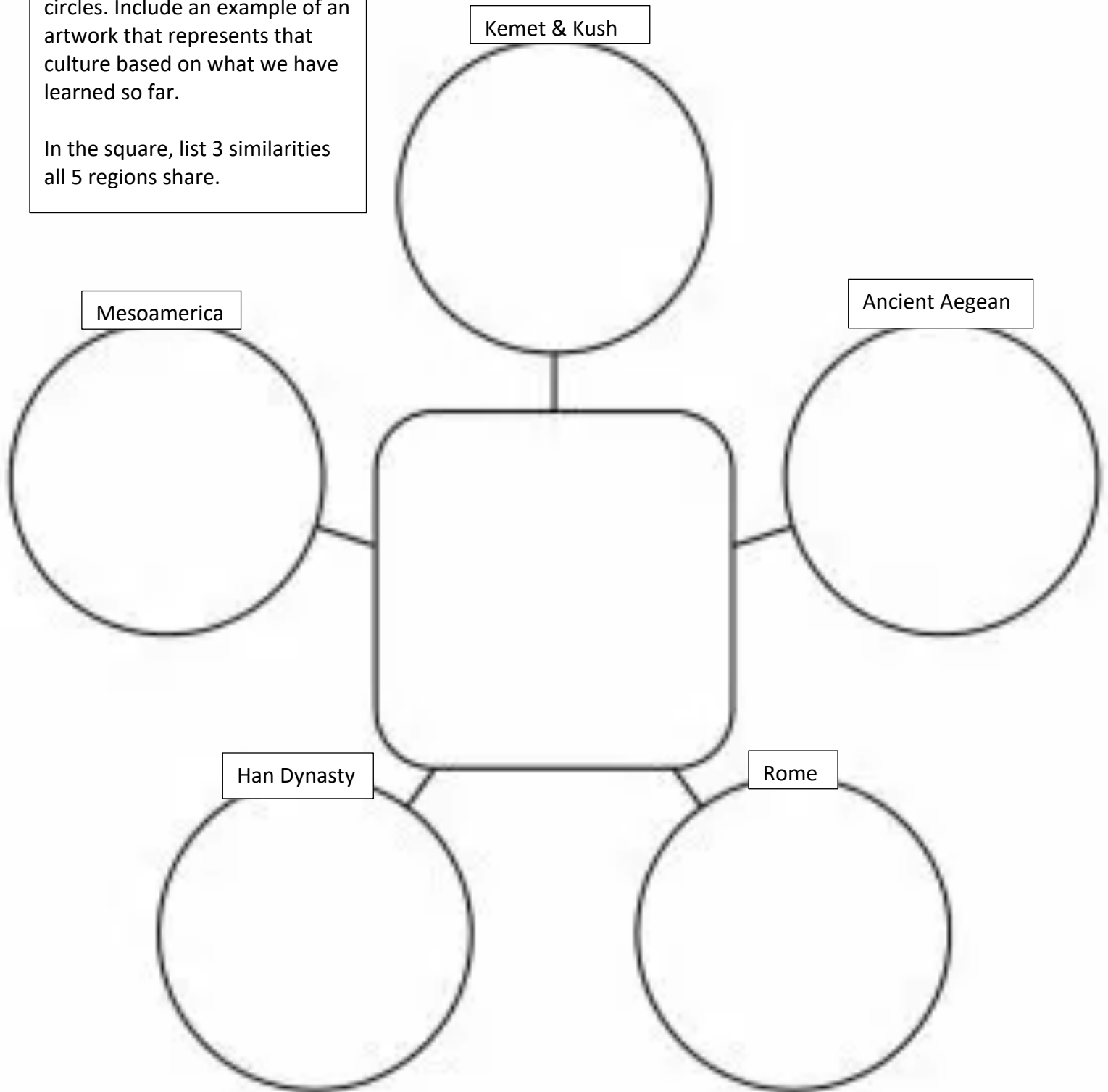
Rome

A large, empty rectangular box intended for students to write their response for Rome.

Unit 2: Ancient Art  
Ancient Cultures Compared

List at least 2 characteristics of art from each culture in the circles. Include an example of an artwork that represents that culture based on what we have learned so far.

In the square, list 3 similarities all 5 regions share.



## The Early Christian Basilica Plan

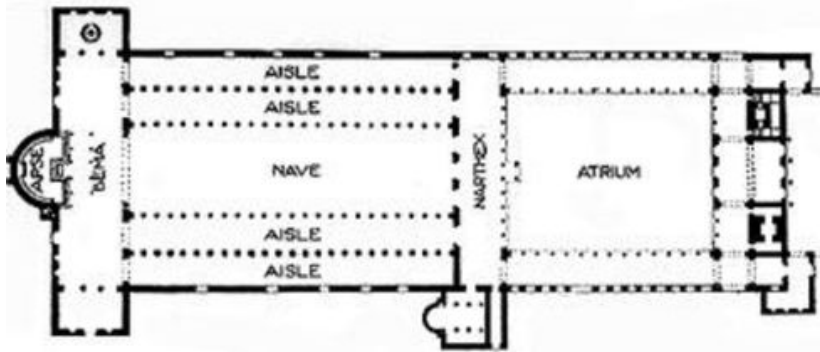
- **Basilica** – a long rectangular hall, used by Romans as public meeting places – adapted to churches.

- **Apse** – semi-circular chapel at the end of the nave used for the throne of the bishop and the altar.

- **Nave** – centre aisle of the church.

- **Arcade** – a series of arches and columns supporting them (supporting the walls).

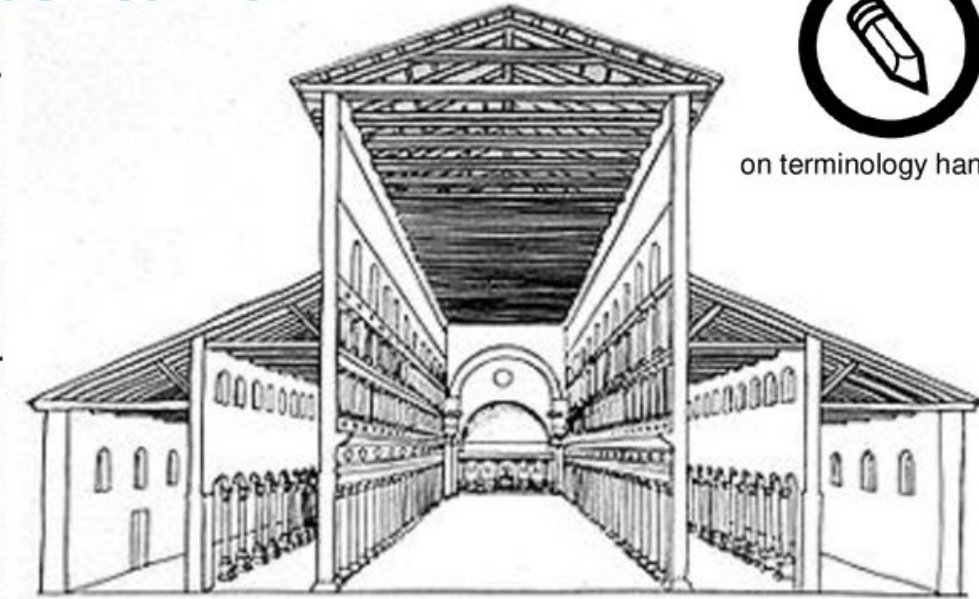
- **Side Aisle** – Walkway of a church running parallel to the nave, separated by piers or columns.



Label the parts of the basilica using the terms/definitions and image below



on terminology handout

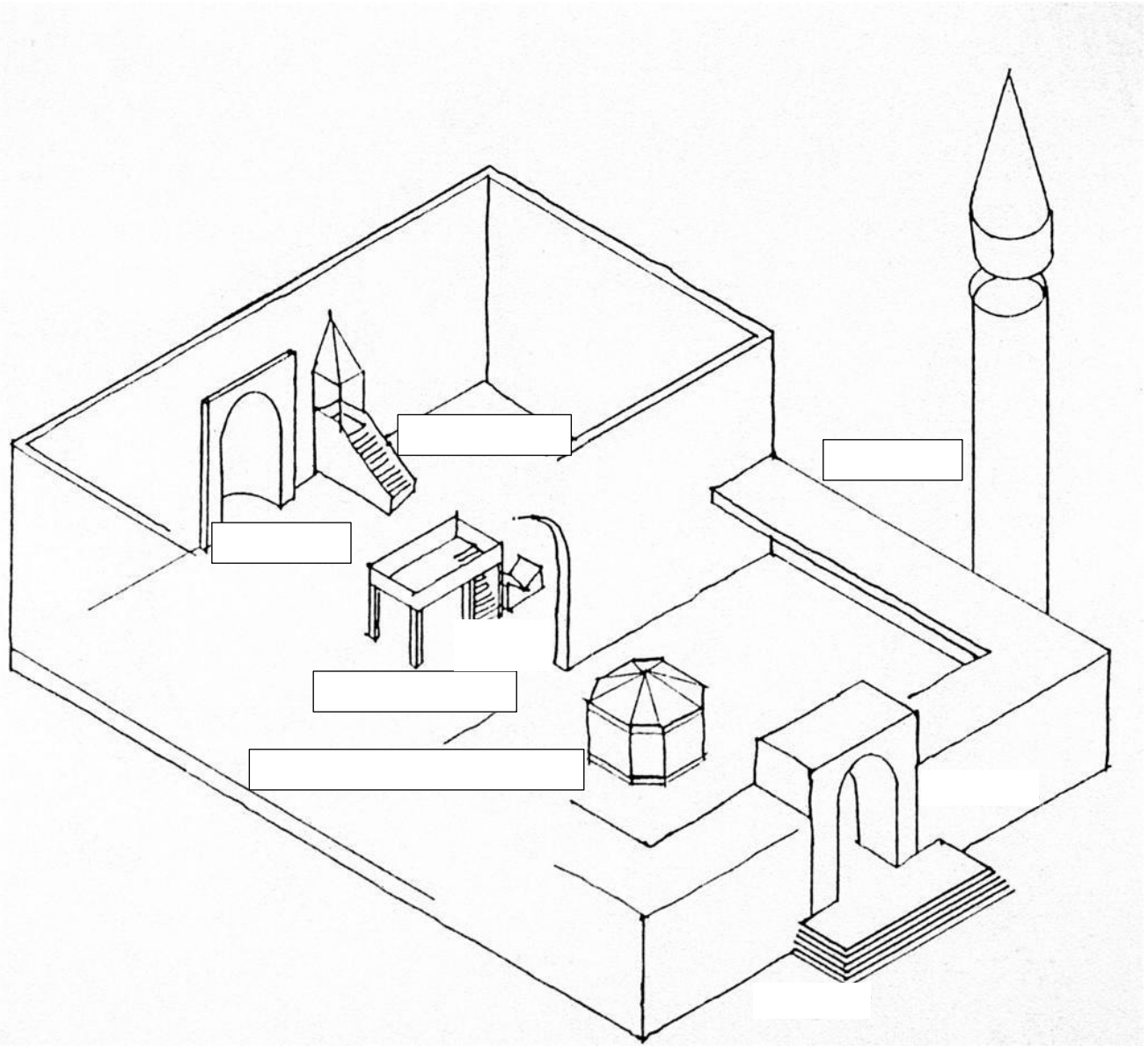


- **Clerestory** – Upper part of a nave containing windows that illuminate the interior of the church.



Unit 3: Art and Early Religions  
Parts of a Christian Basilica and Islamic Mosque

Label the parts of the mosque using the word bank below.



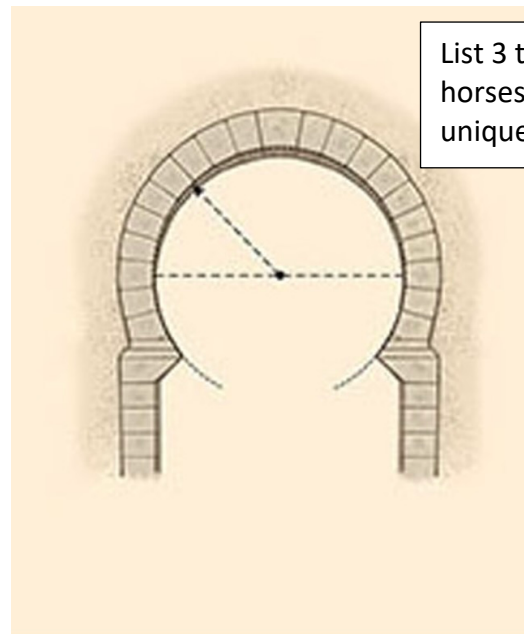
Prayer Hall (riwaq)

Minbar

Minaret

Mihrab

Courtyard (sahn)



List 3 things that make horseshoe arches unique