

Practical Guidelines for AI-Assisted Historical Interpretation

1. Start With Research, Not Prompts

AI is not a substitute for historical research.

Before creating an image, identify:

- Time period
- Location
- Architecture
- Clothing
- Objects and tools
- Activities
- Social context

The better the research foundation, the less time spent fighting the AI.

2. Build the Scene Around a Story

The strongest images are not portraits.

They are moments.

Think of each image as a Norman Rockwell-style narrative scene rather than a historical illustration.

Examples:

- Sallie stealing a fingerful of pie filling while helping in the kitchen.
- Uncle Thomas reading from a book in his swing-chair.
- The Prescott family making apple cider.
- The girls helping prepare for a family gathering.
- A family reading a newly arrived letter from Philadelphia.

The viewer should immediately wonder:

"What is happening here?"

That question creates engagement, and helps the viewer answer the question themselves.

3. Build Characters Before Building Scenes

Create character studies first.

Determine:

- Face
- Hair
- Body proportions
- Expression
- Clothing
- Age progression
- Height

Once the character is established, use that character repeatedly.

This improves consistency across multiple illustrations.

The Prescott Girls project began with individual character studies before attempting larger narrative scenes.

4. Build Clothing in Layers

Historical clothing is often easier to construct incrementally.

Rather than generating a fully dressed character immediately:

1. Decide upon the figure.
2. Add undergarments to establish it and preserve this version.
3. Add dress layers.
4. Add outer garments.
5. Add accessories.

This approach often produces more accurate and controllable results than attempting everything at once.

5. Complexity Grows Faster Than Expected

Every major element increases the chance of drift.

A useful rule of thumb:

Element	Complexity Cost
One person	Low

Two people	Moderate
Three people	Manageable
Four people	Significant
Five people	Difficult
Distinct architecture	Counts as another character
Animals	Often count as another character

For example:

- Three girls + Pownalborough Court House = effectively four major subjects.
- Four people + courthouse + horse = a very difficult image.

More subjects create more opportunities for errors. This should improve in the future.

6. Watch for Global Drift

When correcting one problem, AI frequently creates another.

You may fix:

- Clothing

and accidentally break:

- Faces
- Hands

- Architecture
- Perspective
- Lighting

Always perform a full review after every major revision.

Image Review Checklist

People

- Correct age
- Consistent facial features
- Appropriate expressions
- Correct number of fingers
- Natural poses
- Proper eye direction

Clothing

- Correct period
- Correct layers
- Consistent fabrics
- Proper fit
- No modern details

Architecture

- Correct roofline
- Correct windows
- Correct doors

- Correct proportions
- Correct materials

Objects

- Historically appropriate
- Correct scale
- Correct placement
- No modern intrusions

Environment

- Correct geography
- Appropriate vegetation
- Consistent lighting
- Consistent weather

Story

- Is the intended action obvious?
 - Does the image support the narrative?
 - Would a visitor understand what is happening?
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7. Know When to Start Over

Sometimes an image develops persistent problems.

You fix one issue.

Another appears.

You fix that issue.

The first problem returns.

This is often a sign that the AI has become locked into an unproductive path.

When that happens:

- Stop.
- Take a break.
- Start a new generation.

In many cases, a fresh start is faster than continuing to repair a damaged image.

8. Expect Safety Systems Around Children

Most image-generation systems include safeguards involving children.

These safeguards are important and intentional.

However, they can occasionally interfere with legitimate historical work.

Examples include:

- Children near water
- Children climbing
- Children interacting with tools
- Historically normal activities that modern systems interpret as risk

Sometimes the solution is:

- Reword the request.
- Emphasize supervision.
- Break the image into smaller steps.
- Start a fresh conversation.

Patience is often required.

9. Historical Accuracy Is an Iterative Process

Do not expect accuracy on the first attempt.

The Prescott Girls project involved repeated corrections to:

- Clothing
- Architecture
- Furniture
- Household tools
- Room layouts
- Building details

The process more closely resembles art direction than image generation.

10. Maintain a "Reference Library"

Save successful outputs.

Keep:

- Character studies
- Wardrobe studies
- Building studies
- Object studies
- Landscape studies

These become reusable assets for future work and greatly improve consistency across a project.

11. The Goal Is Interpretation, Not Perfection

Museums regularly use:

- Paintings
- Dioramas
- Reconstructions
- Artist renderings

AI-assisted imagery belongs within that same tradition.

The objective is not to create a photograph of the past.

The objective is to help visitors visualize a historically informed interpretation while remaining transparent about the process.

12. Transparency Matters

Visitors should understand what they are viewing.

Whenever practical:

- Distinguish historical photographs from AI-assisted interpretations.
- Explain what is documented and what is inferred.
- Cite historical sources when available.
- Be honest about uncertainty.

A good interpretation increases understanding.

It should never create false confidence.

AI allows museums to visualize possibilities, but the distinction between evidence and interpretation remains essential.

One additional lesson worth mentioning

Don't fall in love with an image too early.

Often the first image that feels "magical" contains significant historical errors. The image that ultimately serves the museum best may be the fifth or tenth version after research-driven revisions. The goal is not the most beautiful image. The goal is the image that best supports the historical story being told.

About This Research

The Prescott Girls Historical Research Series

Practical Guidelines for AI-Assisted Historical Interpretation is part of an ongoing effort to document the people, artifacts, family connections, historical discoveries, and technologies developed that inspired *The Prescott Girls: A Letter from Philadelphia*.

For additional research articles, historical images, schoolgirl samplers, family records, and educational resources, visit:

www.theprescottgirls.com

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A Well-Regulated Press

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