

# Western Art History : Part I

Art History is selective, biased and incomplete.

Art history is better discussed, not as a history of works of art, but **as a history of ideas of what constitutes art**. Thus we cannot discuss Art History, without keeping in the back of our minds the question: what qualities does this work possess that constitute “art”? According to whom?

## **The “Take Home” Message:**

**This lecture is designed to present a selection of ideas, movements, and styles of art that have been developed in the western world since about the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.** This survey is full of gaps and holes, but it also includes those “monuments of art history” that generally educated people are expected to be more or less familiar with.

I want to also stress, that most artists carry on a rather informal, yet informed dialogue with one another about art history and current art trends. That is, artists must be conversant about a variety of art forms, related and unrelated to their own work. Thus, this lecture is also designed to demonstrate or model how artists learn from other historical artists; and how we learn to ‘read’ our own work by comparing it to the works, and intentions of artist who came before us.

According to Marilyn Stockstad,

*“Artists draw on their predecessors in ways that make each work a very personal history of art. They build on the works of the past, either inspired by or reacting against them, but always challenging them with their new creations.”*

*“...When artists appropriate and transform images from the past...they enrich the aesthetic vocabulary of the arts in general...This kind of artistic free-for-all encourages artistic diversity and discourages the imposition of a single correct or canonical (approved) approach or point of view.”*

Thus becoming familiar with art history (the **canon**, is expected of artists. This means taking classes and instruction with art historians (who are usually not artists); it means learning the disciplinary ‘code’ the epistemology of art history – the methodology.

Over the next two lectures:

- we’ll look at how bodies, figures, portraits have been created by artists.
- we’ll look at how approaches to depicting people have changed (and in a few instances, become unfashionable).
- we’ll be looking for the “skill” with which each culture or era depicts figures,
- and then, perhaps question the idea of ‘skill’ in figurative representation.

It is important to keep in mind that artistic representation is not ‘progressive.’ Though historians like to think of it that way – one innovation building on the previous innovation. This is a concept that we have gained with the renaissance and it also stems from philosophic and scientific ideology. The assumption

that humanity is always engaged in **progress, a linear, forward movement toward “better” knowledge or skill** is worthy of questioning in all fields including the arts.

### **Start with a timeline.**

For those of us who think visually, a timeline will help us see the chronology of artistic periods and trends. [SEE TIMELINE]

### **Develop a Context for the Work.**

After a work is historically situated in time, historians look at the context in which a work was created. They ask critical questions:

- Was this object viewed in by its original culture as “art” as we know it today?
- Does the work embody the culture of origin’s idea of “beauty” or “value”?
- What is the significance of one medium over another?
- How does scale suggest meaning?
- What of imagery or ‘content’?
- What about the work’s function as decoration, or healing, or magic or religion or art or utility?

### **Prehistoric Art**

Most of the artifacts considered artistically by art historians are images and small sculptures depicting either nude women or animals.

#### **Bird-headed man with Bison and Rhinoceros, 13,000 BCE, Lascaux Caves, paint on limestone, 9 feet**

This work, is unusual among the other images in the adjacent caves where it was found. This is an image that includes an image of a human (virtually all other images depict animals exclusively). Unlike other images, this one seems to tell a story of a bison, fatally wounded and disemboweled, probably by the woolly rhino on the left. The distinct sophistication of the animals is in stark relief with the ‘simplistic’ rendering of the figure. Why? Some scholars suggest that this image had a shamanic purpose foretelling a future or recalling a vision. Is it possible that by rendering images one could cast a spell on sentient beings? Is this why the animals are drawn accurately and the human figure is stylized and abstracted?

#### **Venus of Laussel 20,000 BCE, carving, 18 inches, found in France**

The woman is holding a bison tusk.

#### **Venus of Lespuge 18,000 BCE, mammoth tusk carving, 6 inches, found in France Female Figure, paleolithic (35,000 – 8,000) fired clay**

These carvings emphasize voluptuousness – big belly, heavy thighs and pendulous breasts. Because so many images depict women, some scholars propose that the earliest social systems may have been matriarchal; others believe that these objects suggest more religious functions – perpetuating fertility. They may also suggest ideals of beauty, may have been erotic images or didactic images.

### **Roman Empire – BC**

The Roman empire emerged in roughly the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and lasted until Constantine (337 AD). Because the empire covered vast regions the art created within the political boundaries of the Empire could vary widely – from the Euphrates River, to N. Africa to Scotland. Roman work was influenced by Greek aesthetic sensibilities. Thus the *idealized* beauty of the Greeks also appears in Roman works.

### **Aulus Metellus, 2 – 1 centuries BCE, bronze, 5'11"**

Aka “The Orator” this form of sculpture was popular in the Roman Empire. These forms were often installed atop columns as memorials to specific individuals. In this form, the “orator” is addressing an audience, hand outstretched in an authoritative and expressive gesture. His garments are those of a Roman official – the toga and leather laced boots.

Events and personages were often immortalized in durable media like bronze and marble and stone. Media were important to the imperial Romans who intentionally used artworks to establish a sense of permanence – They used media that would last generations so that generations would recognize their greatness, so the legacy of the Roman Empire would remain permanent.

### **Young Woman Writing, detail of wall painting (fresco), 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, 14 inches, Pompeii**

This young woman is thoughtfully reflecting on her writing. She is holding a sharp stylus and a wax tablet in her hand – these were used to generate drafts of letters. When the letter was considered finished, it was transcribed onto parchment or papyrus (which were too expensive to waste on drafts).

### **Family of Septimus Severus, 200 AD, painted wood, 14 inches, Faiyum Egypt.**

This work indicates not only figurative representation during the Roman era, but a bit of history as well. The image is of the Emperor, Septimus, his wife and their two sons, Geta and Caracalla. The face of Geta has been defaced and we know that Caracalla grew up to be a ruthless dictator who murdered his brother Geta. Upon his murder, Caracalla authorized the *damnatio memoriae* – the abolishing of any images memorializing Geta, and thus this work was defaced in accord with Caracalla’s decree.

### **Family of Vunnerius Keramus, 250 AD, 2.5 inches, engraved and painted gold leaf between glass,**

This piece was inserted by a later Christian owner of the portrait as the central jewel in a 7<sup>th</sup> century cross. This work seems to adhere to the Roman aesthetic sensibility that the artist must not only represent the likeness of the sitter, but also discern something of the *character* of the subject – to reveal the expression in the eyes.

### **Christian Catacombs (mid/late roman era)**

Christianity was one of several religions practiced within the Roman Empire and so it is not surprising that the earliest christian images would make use of media already in use in by Roman artists.

These works differ though – they were probably not made by professional artisans and were not ‘about’ artistic skill. Rather these images served as reminders to other christians of christian theology; they were not about *Art* as we may think of it.

The lack of figurative verisimilitude in these works may also be intentional and owe to a possible moratorium on creating images of humans, thus challenging the original Creator, God.

These images, though, initiate many, many centuries of works of art that serve the Christian faith. These images established the kinds of themes that would appear over and over through 16 subsequent centuries.

### **View of Via Latina, Rome – corridor into catacomb**

**Susanna Molested by Elders, fresco 36 x 78 inches, late 3<sup>rd</sup> c. Catacomb of Peter and Marcinellus**  
**Eucharist, 14 x 92 inches, fresco early 3<sup>rd</sup> c., Catacomb of Priscilla**

### **Byzantine**

The term ‘byzantine’ refers to the region of the Roman empire that followed the path of Eastern Orthodox christianity and includes Ravenna, Italy, Constantinople (today, Istanbul) and is comprised of what is today, Eastern Europe. The style of art that flourished under the banner of Byzantium was, like early christian art of the catacombs, influenced by existing modes of representation of the late Roman era.

### **Empress Theodora, mosaic, San Vitale, Ravenna, 547 AD.**

This image is located in San Vitale, a church in Ravenna, Italy. Mosaics were made of small pieces of cut glass or glazed ceramic tiles, organized into a pictorial composition. These works celebrate the reign of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora.

This medium, along with the use of gold leaf and gilding, was intended to make the church appear a glistening, jewel. Lavishly decorated, these structures and their decoration was intended to glorify the inexpressible nature of God.

Note that these works do not employ the linear perspective we are used to in the west. The prevailing idea about optics in the east, posited that the ‘vanishing point’ was in the viewer’s eye. Western optics posit that the vanishing point is on the horizon line, usually behind the objects. This is known as *reverse perspective*.

### **Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels, icon, Egypt, late 6<sup>th</sup> c. AD, encaustic on wood**

This is an icon – it is one of the rare few to survive the *iconoclasm* (trans., “image breaking”) of the 8<sup>th</sup> century in which religious images were destroyed for fear that they contributed to idolatry (one of the 10 commandments forbids “false gods” and worshipping idols).

Icons were devotional images. They served a function that was focused on contemplation and these images did not fall into a category of “art” as we know it today. They were more like rosaries or other functional objects that assisted in meditation.

This image shows a characteristic mode of representing the Virgin Mary and Jesus (later artists will reuse this format over and over and over). The christian warrior-saints, Theodore and George flank Jesus and Mary. One of the striking elements of this work is the relatively accurate portrayal of infant proportions.

### **Old Testament Trinity by Andrei Rublev, 1411, 56 x 45 inches, painted panel**

Icons of the later Byzantine era, following the iconoclasm, were motivated by the desire for a more immediate and personal religion. Icons continued to be made, even after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. They continue to be ‘written’ today, so this is form – not just a style, that transcends history.

In this image depicts the angels that appeared to Abraham. They are depicted here to prefigure the Incarnation and the Trinity (God, Christ, Holy Spirit).

In Byzantine work, there is an abstraction and energy to the folds of garments and the depiction of the body. We often see a z-design in fold or in musculature in these images. These works are calculated to stir contemplation and meditation – not to serve as portraits. They are windows into the spiritual world.

### **Italo-Byzantine**

The transition from the Byzantine style to the Renaissance can be seen in this work – the figure is not as flattened as it might be in Byzantine images. There is less reliance on the z-design/zig-zag in the body and drapery. The figure takes on a more voluminous look and is more corporeal than ethereal.

### **Crucifixion #15, School of Pisa, 13<sup>th</sup> cen. Italy, tempera on panels**

This work probably functioned as an altarpiece, not in the same manner of icons – though it has the stylistic appearance of an icon.

This is a **storied** painting. A narrative of Jesus’ passion is presented flanking the vertical post of the cross. At his left and right are saints and above his head, angels and God.

### **The Renaissance (or The Renaissances)**

The Renaissance is a rather broad era and begins a bit earlier in the south (Italy) than the north (Netherlands). For Hundreds of years, Art Historians have been swayed by the work of Giorgio Vasari, who immortalized mostly the Italians as the most innovative artists (ever). Further, Michelangelo, one of the artists immortalized by Vasari, has been quoted dutifully as explaining that the Northern artists did so many things well that they ultimately did *nothing well* in their paintings.

### **Italy (1300 – 1550)**

The Italian Ren. begins, according to art historians, with Giotto. His work shifted dramatically away from the flattened, stylized, abstracted figures of the Byzantine. His images depict narratives with contexts, environments and his portrayal of figures is volumetric – they have weight and mass, unlike the flattened icons of the east. Giotto also signed his work, took credit for it in a way that had been, previously atypical of artisans. By signing his work, he signaled himself as an authority and professional.

### **Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel paintings, 1305, fresco Meeting of Anne and Joachim at the Gates Raising of Lazarus**

During the Renaissance, the role of the artist shifts from artisan to intellectual and elite professional. Artists are expected to be educated on a wide range of topics (in a way that they may not be expected to

be educated today). The vast majority of their training was in fields outside of the arts in an effort to produce more effective, authoritative art work. Thus, artists had to know theology, iconography, art history, anatomy, and most also studied optics, perspective, mathematics, grammar, and other natural sciences.

### **Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538, 3 x 5.5", oil**

This is a late renaissance work by the Italian artist, Titian. The work indicates a shift away from strictly religious imagery toward more secular and pagan imagery. This work likely served as a form of pornography for the patron, thinly veiled as a mythological goddess (presented as a courtesan or mistress). This type of image – the reclining female nude will become a staple of western art history over the next 450 years. And we'll see how artists mimicked this composition and theme.

### Netherlands (1350 – 1575)

Art historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have generally depicted the Italian Renaissance as superior to the Netherlandish Renaissance (in part because of the work of Vasari and Michelangelo's comments). A glaring 'problem' with Netherlandish art, according to the historians, has been the lack of clarity in their compositions. The lack of focus. And the lack of 'correct' linear perspective.

- Contemporary, regional and domestic environments and attire – even in religious images
- A focus on observation/representation of *minute* detail *throughout* a single work

More recently, art historian Craig Harbison, has argued that Northern artists, in fact, DID know how to develop linear perspective, they simply declined to use it in the same manner as the Italians, because for them *fragmentary realism* was more effective.

### ***The Merode Altarpiece (Tryptych of the Annunciation), Robert Campin, 1425 – 28, oil on panel, center panel 25 x 24"/wings 25 x 10" and detail of left panel***

*fragmentary realism*, according to Harbison involves the breaking down of things into 'puzzle pieces' and organizing them not according to a visual or narrative hierarchy (italian/rational) but according to details that speak to an inner or intuitive sense. Since many of these works were religious, an organizing principle that spoke to the intuition probably made more sense than an organizational principle that spoke to reason or the rational mind.

*The Merode Altarpiece* strikes us as quintessentially Northern Renaissance:

- Its detailed attention to fine, specific details,
- the contemporary (15<sup>th</sup> c.) setting for a religious (and Roman-era) narrative,
- the presence of the landscape (viewed out the window over Joseph's head),
- the acute facility at representing forms illusionistically in a two-dimensional picture plane,
- the numerous perspectives employed in a single image;
- numerous ordinary objects that have symbolic meaning (iconography);

The work was probably made for a private chapel or altar – one of those works the emerging middle class might be able to afford.

Symbolism that continues from the middle ages (and some of this may have been invented by Campin):

The lilies = Mary's virginity

The towel = her purity (born without original sin)

The hanging water pot = the vessel of Christ's incarnation/Mary's womb

The immediacy of the action in the central panel is clear – the floating garments of the angel, the candle recently blown out by his entry

The quality of light is strong (see the shadows and determine the source of light), yet diffused. A few rays enter through the windows at the left, along with a baby, cross-carrying Christ – the literalness of the work in narrating this event is equally Northern—the baby Jesus heading for Mary, is exclusively Northern.

In the right wing, the mousetraps would have been easily recognizable as referring to St. Augustine's reference to Christ as the bait in a trap set to catch Satan. (Stockstad). Joseph is drilling holes in a small board – likely used to drain wine – referring to the blood of Christ – the eucharist.

On the left wing, in the distance is a man standing, clutching his hat. Some historians believe this is a portrait of the artist (similar gesture of self-inclusion to that of Van Eyck in the Arnolfini wedding). It may also be an Old Testament prophet.

**The Arnolfini Wedding, Jan van Eyck, oil on panel, 1434, 32 x 22 inches**

**LECTURE DIDN'T FULLY COVER THIS WORK/WON'T BE ON AN EXAM**

“Fragmentary realism” His paintings suggest that he thinks and portrays in ‘units’, but that he never quite establishes the relationships between units. He paints each unit beautifully and convincingly, yet fails to recognize *the relationships between the units*. Thus, the overall image of the figure seems ‘off’ to the contemporary viewer.

Historical context for this piece:

This is a wedding portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife, Giovanna Cenami. Arnolfini was an Italian businessman living and conducting business in the North (Flanders).

Weddings in the 15<sup>th</sup> century were not church functions, but functions enacted in civil courts. Still, Van Eyck tries to present some of the sacredness of the church in this bedroom – they have removed their shoes and covered their heads (acts of religious humility); Arnolfini's gesture toward his wife is one of blessing; of benediction.

The single candle burning in the chandelier attests to Christ's presence (the light of the world); it also alludes to the marriage candle which was typically carried in procession and placed on the marriage bed until the marriage was consummated.

The statuette on the chair to the right of the mirror is an image of St. Margaret who attests to Giovanna's new role as bearer of children (St. Margaret is patron saint of women in labor).

Some historians have stated that this painting may serve as a contract – a marriage license, or a power of attorney – attesting that the marriage did take place and that Giovanna is being qualified, by the marriage to Arnolfini as being able to act on her husband’s behalf. The presence of the artist’s portrait (in the convex mirror) and the inscription above the mirror, “Jan Van Eyck *was here*, 1434” indicate the painting’s possible legal function. More common signage would have been an inscription that stated that Jan Van Eyck “*made this.*”

The mirror and its reflection tells us even more about what is in the room...and it’s medallions depict the Passion of Christ – a reference to the fading overtly religious subject matter of paintings.

*[aside: this is one of a few pieces of work that have been studied by scientists trying to determine whether Van Eyck used a camera obscura to achieve the realism of this painting – one of the primary ways they check this is to try to find a single vanishing point for all the items in the room – if there were one clear vanishing point, that would suggest the use of a observation from single view point: which a camera obscura would provide. See also Science News, May 31, 2003 by Peter Weiss]*

## **Baroque (17<sup>th</sup> century)**

The Baroque followed the Renaissance and was most pronounced in Italy. The most noteworthy, influential approach to imagery was the Caravaggesque, named for the artist, Caravaggio.

### **Caravaggio**

**The Conversion of the Magdalene, 39 x 53 inches, 1598**

**The Conversion of St. Paul, oil, 90 x 69 inches, 1600**

**Incredulity of St. Thomas (Doubting Thomas), oil, 42 x 57 inches, 1602**

The works make use of strong contrast to convey emotional impact. Caravaggio also employs strong angles in his work to energize or even agitate the viewer. Things are often a little asymmetrical or unbalanced. Caravaggio’s images don’t have the stability and symmetry and peacefulness of the icons we saw earlier.

These works also avoid the iconography of earlier religious painting. No halos, no angels, a more earthy approach that emphasizes humanity, corporeality.

Note too how the dimensions get larger and larger the later in his career the works appear. Large paintings can’t be moved easily. Thus, there may be something about status, or prestige in these works. The scale is grandiose in comparison to smaller, devotional icons or netherlandish altarpieces.

### **Artemesia Gentileschi**

Gentileschi’s father was a student of Caravaggio and he taught her to paint.

**Judith and her Maidservant, 1613, oil**

**Judith Slaying Holofernes, 1620, oil**

**Judith and Maid with Head of Holofernes, 1625, oil**

These works suggest a prevailing theme in Gentileschi’s work and indicates that artists often work in series or continue refining and revisiting the same idea as they come to know more about it or improve their technique.



