IN THIS CHAPTER

- Understanding the difference between art history and plain, old history
- Recognizing the importance of art from prehistoric times to the present
- Seeing how art periods are linked to environment and culture
- Identifying the various art historical periods
- Noting the effects of modern pressures on art development

Chapter 1
Art Tour through the Ages

Why study art history rather than music history, literary history, or the history of the postage stamp? Art history, which begins around 30,000 BC with the earliest known cave paintings (see Chapter 4), predates writing by about 26,500 years! That makes art history even older than history, which begins with the birth of script around 3500 BC. Along with archaeology, art history is one of our primary windows into *prehistory* (everything before 3500 BC). Cave paintings, prehistoric sculpture, and architecture together paint a vivid — although incomplete — picture of Stone Age and Bronze Age life. Without art history, we would know a lot less about our early ancestors.

Okay, but what do you need art history for after people learned to write during the historical period, which kicks in around 3500 BC? History is the *diary* of the past — ancient and relatively recent peoples writing about themselves combined with our interpretations of what they say. Art history is the *mirror* of the past. It shows us who we were, instead of telling us, as history does. Just as home movies document a family's history (what you wore when you were five, how you laughed, and what you got for your birthday), art history is the "home movie" of the entire human family through the ages.

History is the study of wars and conquests, mass migrations, and political and social experiments. Art history is a portrait of humankind's inner life: people's aspirations and inspirations, hopes and fears, spirituality, and sense of self throughout the ages.

Connecting Art Divisions and Culture

Art history is divided into *periods* and *movements*, both of which represent the artwork of a group of artists over a specific time period. The difference between a period and a movement has to do with duration (periods are typically longer than movements) and intention (movements have specific intent). See Chapter 3 for more about art movements. An art period can last anywhere from 27,000 years to 50 years, depending on the rate of cultural change.

Here is a brief list, with examples of art periods and related cultural attributes:

- **Prehistoric art, the first leg of the longest art period,** starts with the first known art around 30,000 BC, give or take a few thousand years, and lasts until the end of the Paleolithic period, or Old Stone Age, around 10,000 BC. The exact duration depended on where the artists lived with respect to the receding Ice Age. In those days, culture changed about as fast as a glacier melts — and this was long before global warming.
- **Prehistoric art, the next leg of the first period,** the Neolithic or New Stone Age, lasted roughly another 6,500 years, from 10,000 to 3,500 BC, again depending upon where people lived. In the first period, people used stone tools, survived by hunting and gathering (in the Old Stone Age) or agriculture (in the New Stone Age), and didn't know how to write — these are the period's defining cultural characteristics.

  Painting hit rock bottom during the New Stone Age (the Neolithic Age), despite the fact that they had better stone tools, herds of domesticated animals, and permanent year-round settlements. But architecture really got off the ground with massive tombs like Stonehenge, temples, and the first towns.

  
  CULTURAL WISDOM

  Although they couldn't write, Old and New Stone Agers sure could express themselves with paint and sculpture. In the Old Stone Age, artists painted pictures of animals on cave walls and sculpted animal and human forms in stone. It seems their art was part of a magical or shamanistic ritual — an early form of visualization — to help them hunt.
- **The Neoclassical art period,** by contrast, only lasted about 65 years, from 1765 to 1830. The pressures from the Industrial Revolution accelerated the rate of social and cultural change after the mid-18th century.

It's Ancient History, So Why Dig It Up?

Ancient art teaches us about past religions (which still affect our modern religions) and the horrors of ancient warcraft. Rameses II's monument celebrating his battle against the Hittites (see Chapter 6) and Trajan's Column (see Chapter 8), which depicts the Emperor Trajan's conquest of Dacia (modern-day Romania), are enduring eyewitness accounts of ancient battles that shaped nations and determined the languages we speak today.

Art isn't just limited to paintings and sculptures. Architecture, another form of art, reveals the way men and women responded to and survived in their environment, as well as how they defined and defended themselves. Did they build impregnable walls around their cities? Did they raise monuments to their own egos like many Egyptian pharaohs (see Chapter 6)? Did they erect temples to honor their gods or celebrate the glory of their civilizations like the Greeks (see Chapter 7)? Or did they show off their power through awe-inspiring architecture to intimidate their enemies like the Romans (see Chapter 8)?

Mesopotamian period (3500 BC–500 BC) and Egyptian period (3100 BC–332 BC)

If we know who we were 3,000 years ago during the Mesopotamian period or the Egyptian period, we have a better sense of who we are today. Mesopotamian art is usually macho war art, propaganda art, or religious and tomb art. Egyptian art was nearly all tomb art — art to lead the dead into a cozy afterlife without snags. By learning to read Mesopotamian and Egyptian art, we also learn about how they influenced later cultures, especially the Ancient Greeks and Romans, and in turn, how the Greeks and Romans (and others) still influence, guide, and inspire us today.

Ancient Greek period (c. 850 BC–323 BC) and Hellenistic period (323 BC–32 BC)

Because of the conquests of Alexander the Great (356 BC–323 BC) and the later Roman love affair with Greek culture, the art produced in the city-states of Ancient Greece spread from the British Isles to India, changing the world forever. Even studying a few Ancient Greek vases can reveal a lot about our times — if you know how to *read* the vases. Many Greek vases show us what Ancient Greek theater looked like; modern theater and cinema are the direct descendants of Greek theater (see Chapter 7). Greek vases depict early musical instruments, dancers dancing, and athletes competing in the ancient Olympics, the forerunner of the modern Olympic Games. Some vases show us the role of women and men: Women carry vases called *hydrias;* men paint those vases. Modern gender roles are still affected, and in some cases driven, by ancient ones.

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The Greeks invented techniques like red-figure painting, the *contrapposto pose* (in which a human figure stands gracefully at ease with most of its weight on one foot), and perspective to enable artists to represent the world realistically (see Chapter 7). But as real looking as classical Greek art is, it is also idealized (made to look better than real life). Greek statues don't have pot bellies or receding hairlines. Art of the classical period (when Greek art peaked) is known for its otherworldly calm and beauty. The Hellenistic period (the extension of Greek culture via the conquests of Alexander the Great) added realism and emotion to the Greek's art palette.

Roman period (300 BC–AD 476)

The Romans and their predecessors on the Italian peninsula, the Etruscans, both copied the Greeks. But art historians don't call the Roman period a Greek replay. The Romans didn't merely imitate — they added on to the Greek style, often replacing idealism with realism. The busts and statues of Roman senators and emperors can look tough, chubby, and even pockmarked.

REMEMBER

In architecture, the Romans contributed the Roman arch, an invention that helped them to build the biggest system of roads and aqueducts the world has ever seen.

Did the Art World Crash When Rome Fell, or Did It Just Switch Directions?

Art definitely changed course in the West with the exponential rise of Christianity during the last phase of the Roman Empire and in the East and South with the birth and rapid growth of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Byzantine period (AD 500–AD 1453)

Byzantine art — a marriage of Roman splendor, Greek art styles, and Christian subject matter — flourished in the Eastern Roman Empire after the fall of Rome in AD 476. But Byzantine art is less naturalistic than the Greek and Roman art that inspired it. It points to the hereafter rather than the here and now.

The most popular Byzantine art form was icon painting. *Icons* (holy images of Jesus, Mary, and the saints) were used in prayer. Byzantine artists also worked in *mosaic* (pictures made from pieces of cut glass).

Islamic period (seventh century+)

Islamic art and architecture spread across the Near East, North Africa, and Spain following the wave of Islamic conquests between AD 632 and AD 732. Like Moses, Mohammed condemned graven images, so there aren't many representations of people in Islamic art. Instead, Islamic artists created astoundingly intricate patterns in carpets, manuscripts, and architecture.

Medieval period (500–1400)

Medieval art is mostly Christian art created in Europe between Rome's fall and the Renaissance. Its art forms include stained-glass windows, illuminated manuscripts, *reliquaries* (containers for holy relics — the bones and clothes of saints), architectural reliefs, and Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals.

Throughout the Middle Ages, art and architecture had a spiritual mission: to direct people's attention toward God. Churches soared in that direction, and sculpture and paintings pointed the way to paradise. They depicted the sufferings of Christ, the Apostles, martyrs, the Last Judgment, and so on. Humans' physical features mattered less to medieval artists than their spiritual struggles and aspirations. So they tended to represent people more symbolically than realistically.

High Renaissance (1495–1520) and Mannerism (1530–1580)

During the Renaissance, humankind's spiritual focus shifted again. You could say that the people of the Renaissance had a double vision: Educated men and women wore mental bifocals so that they could see close up (earthly things) and far away (heaven). With this double vision, Renaissance artists celebrated both humans and God without short-changing either.

The close-up focus allowed realism to make the comeback we call the Renaissance: humans reclaiming their classical (Greek and Roman) heritage (see Chapters 11 and 12).

Baroque period (1600–1750) and Rococo period (1715–1760s)

The Reformation split Christianity down the middle, unleashing a maelstrom of religious wars between Catholics and Protestants and nearly 200 years of intolerance. To recover what lost ground it could, the Catholic Church launched the Counter-Reformation in the middle of the 16th century. One critical Counter-Reformation weapon was religious art that reaffirmed Catholic values while rendering them more people friendly. Baroque saints shed the idealistic luster they had during the Renaissance and began to look like working-class folk — the class the Church was trying to hold on to.

Baroque art and architecture are characterized by grandiose decoration, dramatic lighting, and theatrical gestures that reach out to viewers, mixed with earthy realism. Rococo art dropped the drama of Baroque art and most of the religion while taking Baroque's ornamental side to extremes.

In the Machine Age, Where Did Art Get Its Power?

Many 18th- and 19th-century artists rejected, criticized, or ignored the Industrial Revolution. Instead of uplifting humankind, industry seemed to demoralize and dehumanize people. Men, women, and children were forced to work 14 hours a day, 6 days a week in urban factories, without benefits or vacations. Factories polluted the cities, alienated people from the soil, and seemed to benefit only those who owned them. This led many artists to turn to nature or the past or to a make-believe Golden Age when life was beautiful and just. It provoked others to try to reform society through their art. Neoclassicism and Romanticism occurred during the Enlightenment and the American, French, and Industrial Revolutions.

Neoclassicism (1765–1830)

Neoclassicism (*neo* means "new") looked back to the pure air and refined beauty of the classical era. Often, artists dressed contemporary heroes like George Washington or Voltaire in Roman togas and posed them like Roman statesmen or Olympians. In Neoclassical art, no one sweats or strains; no one's hair is ever mussed; everything is elegant, balanced, and orderly (see Chapter 16).

Romanticism (late 1700s–early 1800s)

Romantic artists often criticized the Industrial Revolution, championed the rights of the individual, and supported democratic movements and social justice; they opposed slavery and the exploitation of labor in urban factories.

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Freedom, liberty, and *imagination* were the Romantics' favorite words, and some were willing to die for these ideals. Many Romantics tried to reform humankind by emphasizing a spiritual kinship with nature. (see Chapter 17).

After Romanticism, art is divided into movements rather than periods (see Chapter 3).

The Modern World and the Shattered Mirror

By the beginning of the 20th century, the camera seemed to have a monopoly on realism. That may be one reason painters turned toward abstraction. But it's not the only reason. Following Cézanne's example, many artists strove to simplify form (the human body, for example) into its geometrical components; that goal was partly the impetus for Cubism (see Chapter 22). For others, expressing feeling was more important than painting realistic forms. The Fauves expressed emotion with color while simplifying form, and the Expressionists suggested it by distorting form (see Chapter 21 for details).

Responding to modern pressures

Table 1-1 offers a breakdown of some specific art movements that happened in response to modern political, social, and cultural pressures.

TABLE 1-1: Art Movements of the 20th Century

Stimulus	Responding Art Movement	Description
World War I	Dada	The so-called "anti-art" movement, Dada was a direct reaction to World War I and the old order that triggered it. If war was rational, artists would be irrational. See Chapter 23.
Sigmund Freud's Theories	Surrealists	Freud's theories of the role of the unconscious (the home of the irrational) inspired the Surrealists (the offspring of Dada) to paint their dreams and coax the unconscious to the surface so they could channel it into their art. Also in Chapter 23.
Einstein's Theory of Relativity	Futurists	Published in 1905, Einstein's theory of relativity stimulated the Futurists to include the fourth dimension, time, in their work. See Chapter 22.
Global Depression, Racism, and World War II	Activist Art	Horrendous acts of injustice fired up many artists, including photographers, to create activist art. New technology enabled photographers to capture people quickly and discreetly, showing life more "honestly," more unposed than ever before. Pioneering photojournalists like Henri Cartier-Bresson and Dorothea Lange zoomed in on urban life, poverty, and war, and showed the world grim realities that had previously been swept under the carpet. See Chapter 25.
Psychoanalysis	Abstract Expressionism	After the Holocaust and Hiroshima, humankind seemed overdue for an appointment on the psychoanalyst's couch. This inspired postwar American artist Jackson Pollock to pioneer Abstract Expressionism, the first international art movement spawned in the U.S. Pollock's works look like he dropped a paint bomb on his canvases. Actually, he just dripped, poured, and threw on paint instead of slathering it on with a brush. See Chapter 23.

Conceptualizing the craft

Pollock's and de Kooning's *action painting* — as dripping and throwing paint came to be called — signaled that art had moved away from craft toward pure expression and creative conceptualization. Many new forms of art grew out of the notion that process is more important than product. Craft had been the cornerstone of art for millennia. But after the war, Pollock and de Kooning seemed to drop an atom bomb on art itself, to release its pure creative energy (and shatter form to smithereens — or to splashes and drips).

Conceptualization began to drive the work of more and more artists. However, while this trend continued in performance art, installation art, and conceptual art, some artists backtracked to representation. The Photorealists, for example, showed that painting could reclaim realism from the camera (see Chapter 25).

Expressing mixed-up times

Postmodernism (see Chapter 26) is an odd term. It suggests that we've hit a cultural dead end, that we've run out of ideas and can't make anything new or "modern." All that's left is to recycle the past or crab-leg it back to the cave days. Postmodern artists *do* recycle the past, usually in layers: a quart of Greece, a cup of Constructivism, a pound of Bauhaus, and a heaping tablespoon of Modernism. What's the point of that?

Postmodern theorists believe society is no longer centered. In the Middle Ages, art revolved around religion. In the 19th century, Realist art centered around social reform. But since the 1970s, point of view has become fluid. To express our uncentered existence, artists try to show the relationships between past eras and the present. Some critics argue that Postmodernism is a spiritual short circuit, a jaded view that cuts off meaning from real life. You be the judge.