Chapter 1

Art Tour through the Ages

In This Chapter

- Understanding the difference between art history and plain, old history
- Recognizing the importance of art from prehistoric times to the present

Why study art history rather than music history, literary history, or the history of the postage stamp? Art history, which begins around 30,000 B.C. 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 B.C.

Along with archaeology, art history is one of our primary windows into *prehistory* (everything before 3500 B.C.). 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 the historical period kicks in around 3500 B.C.? History is the *diary* of the past — ancient peoples writing about themselves combined with our interpretation 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 5, 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 man's inner life: his aspirations and inspirations, his hopes and fears, his spirituality and sense of self.

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

If we know who we were 10,000 years ago, we have a better sense of who we are today. Even studying a few Ancient Greek vases can reveal a lot about modern society — if you know how to look at and 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.

Ancient art teaches us about past religions (which still affect our modern religions) and the horrors of ancient war craft. Rameses II's monument celebrating his battle against the Hittites (see Chapter 6) and Trajan's Column (see Chapter 9), 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 the female pharaoh Hatshepsut and the vainglorious Rameses II (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 architecture to intimidate their enemies like the Romans (see Chapter 8)?

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

Art definitely changed course with the exponential rise of Christianity during the last phase of the Roman Empire.

Throughout the Middle Ages, art and architecture had a spiritual mission: to direct man'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.

Man's physical features mattered less to medieval artists than his spiritual struggles and aspirations. So they tended to represent man more symbolically than realistically (see Chapter 10). In Byzantium, religious art had the double role of celebrating the Orthodox Church and the Eastern Roman Empire, which endured until 1453. The Islamic world channeled much of its creative energy into architecture and decorative splendor that has never been surpassed (see Chapter 9).

During the Renaissance, man's spiritual focus shifted again. You could say that Renaissance man had a double vision: He wore spiritual bifocals so that he could see close up (earthly things) and far away (heaven). With this double vision, Renaissance artists celebrated both man and God without short-changing either. The close-up focus allowed realism to make the comeback we call the Renaissance: man reclaiming his classical (Greek and Roman) heritage (see Chapters 11 and 12).

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 she could, the Catholic Church launched the Counter-Reformation in the middle of the 16th century. One of the weapons the Church used 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 (see Chapter 14). Baroque art and architecture are characterized by grandiose decoration, dramatic lighting, and theatrical gestures that seem to reach out to viewers, mixed with earthy realism.

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 man, industry seemed to demoralize and dehumanize him. 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 man 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.

Neoclassical artists didn't paint factories or the urban poor, and they didn't celebrate the upside of the Industrial Revolution: the wider availability of products. Instead, Neoclassicism looked back to the pure air and refined

beauty of the classical era. Often, artists dressed contemporary heroes in Roman togas and posed them like Olympians. In Neoclassical art, no one sweats or strains; no one's hair is ever mussed; and everything is tame, elegant, and orderly (see Chapter 16).

The Romantics believed in individual liberty and the rights of man. They supported and actively encouraged democratic movements and social justice; they opposed slavery and the exploitation of labor in urban factories. *Freedom, liberty,* and *imagination* were their favorite words, and some were willing to die for these ideals. Many Romantics tried to reform man by emphasizing his spiritual kinship with nature. Others sought a spiritual communion with the divine through their imaginations. Romanticism is an art of intense emotions and passion that exalts individual freedom, while facing off with the infinite and even with death (see Chapter 17).

The next generation of artists, the Realists (see Chapter 18), tried to elevate middle- and upper-class consciousness regarding the struggles of the poor (factory workers and agricultural laborers) by illustrating them plainly and honestly. The invention of tin tubes for oil paint in 1841 enabled these artists to paint outdoors *(en plein air),* capturing laborers on canvas while they worked.

Impressionist painters tried to capture on canvas fleeting moments and the changing effects of light (see Chapter 19). Their rapid brushstrokes (you have to paint fast if you're going to catch a fleeting moment) give their work a fuzzy, slightly out-of-focus look. In the 1870s, people thought their paintings looked unfinished — or that the artists needed glasses. Today Impressionism is the most popular style from all of art history.

The Post-Impressionists (see Chapter 20) didn't have one guiding vision like the Impressionists. In fact, each Post-Impressionist had his own artistic philosophy. Van Gogh pursued a universal life force behind all things; Gauguin tracked primitive emotions and the "noble savage" all the way to Tahiti; Cézanne painted the geometrical building blocks of nature; and Ensor unmasked society by giving everyone a mask!

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 increasingly 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). The Fauves expressed emotion with color; and the Expressionists did the same thing by distorting form (see Chapter 21 for both).

World War I slammed the door on the past for a lot of artists because the old order had caused the war — the worst in history. The so-called "anti-art" movement, Dada (see Chapter 23), was a direct reaction to World War I. If war was rational, artists would be irrational. Sigmund 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 (see Chapter 23). Einstein's theory of relativity (published in 1905) stimulated the Futurists to include the fourth dimension, time, in their work (see Chapter 22).

Horrendous acts of injustice during the global depression of the 1930s, racism, and World War II fired up many artists, especially photographers, to create activist art. New technology enabled photographers to capture people quickly and discreetly, showing life more "honestly" or more unposed than ever before. The cameras of pioneering photojournalists like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Dorothea Lange, and Margaret Bourke-White zoomed in on urban life, poverty, and war, and showed the entire world grim realities (as well as beautiful ones) that had previously been swept under the carpet (see Chapter 25).

After the Holocaust and Hiroshima, mankind seemed overdue for an appointment on the psychoanalyst's couch. That's exactly where some artists and thinkers went. Psychoanalysis inspired one postwar American artist to pioneer Abstract Expressionism (see Chapter 23), the first influential and imitated American art movement. Jackson Pollock's Abstract Expressionist works look like he dropped the big one on each of his canvases — or at least a paint bomb. Actually, he just dripped, poured, and threw paint at his canvases instead of slathering it on with a brush.

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). 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).

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 that society is no longer centered. In the Middle Ages, art revolved around religion. In the 19th century, Realist art centered around social reform, and Surrealism dove into dreams and the unconscious. But since the 1970s, point of view has become fluid. Even the political left and right get mixed up sometimes. To express our uncentered or ungrounded 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 separates meaning from life. You be the judge.