

The background of the cover is a classical painting. In the foreground, four figures are shown in a line, holding hands. From left to right: a woman in a blue and red dress with a floral crown; a man in a dark, draped garment with a crown of thorns; a woman in a white and orange dress with a braided headpiece; and a man in a red and orange dress with a turban. They appear to be in a dynamic, possibly dancing or marching, pose. In the upper center, there is a circular inset depicting a figure on a horse, possibly a chariot or a mythological scene. The overall style is reminiscent of 19th-century academic painting.

A HISTORY OF  
**WESTERN**  
ART

LAURIE SCHNEIDER ADAMS

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# A HISTORY OF WESTERN ART

LAURIE SCHNEIDER ADAMS

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# To John, Alexa, and Caroline

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## FRONT COVER AND SPINE:

Nicolas Poussin, details of *The Dance of Human Life*, fig. 19.35. c. 1638–40. Oil on canvas, whole canvas 2 ft 8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in × 3 ft 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in (0.83 × 1.05 m). Wallace Collection, London. Reproduced by Permission of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection.

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Christo, *The Umbrellas*, Japan–U.S.A., 1984–91, detail of a section of 1760 yellow umbrellas in California, U.S.A. (see figs. 31.14 and 31.15). Nylon and aluminum. Photo Wolfgang Volz. © Christo.

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*God as Architect*, from the *Bible Moralisée*, Reims, France, fol.1v, fig. 1.3. Mid-13th century. Illumination, 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in (21.2 cm) wide. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

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# Preface

The object of this text is to introduce students to the history of western art and of its most important styles. Although works of art have a history, they lose much of their meaning if separated from their cultural context, from the personalities of their makers, or from the requirements of patronage. As far as possible given the limitations of space, therefore, I try to place works of art within their context of time and place. I also emphasize the evolution of artistic style, a bias that is reflected in chapter and section headings.

This book differs from most others in its focus on relatively fewer works in greater depth. As a result, certain key artists and works are given more attention than in some texts, while others have had to be omitted entirely. Also, since this is a history of *western* art, many cultures—African and Asian, for example—are left out except to the extent that they have significantly influenced western style. Nonwestern arts and cultures are so complex that they deserve their own texts, and I have resisted the politically correct, but intellectually incorrect, temptation to present nonwestern arts as “chapters” of western art.

Many people have assisted generously in this endeavor. Marlene Park was particularly helpful during its formative stages. In the course of its development, sections have been read by Paul Barolsky, James Beck, Larissa Bonfante, Ellen Davis, Jack Flam, Sidney Geist, Donna and Carroll Janis, Carla Lord, Oscar White Muscarella, Maria Grazia Pernis, and Leo Steinberg. Their suggestions have been immensely helpful. John Adams contributed in a

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PART ONE  
**INTRODUCTION**

## CHAPTER ONE

# Why Do We Study Art?

We study art because by doing so we learn about our own creative expressions and those of the past. The arts bridge the gap between past and present, and may even be the primary means of exploring a culture that never developed written documents. For example, the prehistoric cave paintings dating as far back as 30,000 B.C. reveal the importance for early societies of hunting. Their wish to reproduce and ensure the survival of the species is expressed in faceless prehistoric female figurines whose breasts and pelvis are disproportionately large. Prehistoric structures, whether oriented toward earth or sky, provide insights into the kinds of gods people worshiped. Without such objects, which have fortunately been preserved, we would know far less about ancient cultures than we now do.

We would also know less about ourselves, for art is a window on human thought and emotion. Certain themes, such as the wish to survive and to define oneself, persist in very different times and places. It is through the arts that the unique creative spirit of different peoples — as well as the similarities that bind them together — begins to emerge.

This book surveys the major periods and styles of western art. The arts of nonwestern cultures, such as those of Asia, Africa, and Pre-Columbian America, are so extensive that each requires its own text. Nonwestern examples are included here only when they influence western art. In the West, the major visual arts fall into three broad categories: pictures, sculpture, and architecture.

Pictures (from the Latin *pingo*, meaning “I paint”) are two-dimensional images (from the Latin *imago*, meaning “likeness”) with height and width, and are usually on a flat surface. But the discussion of pictures covers more than painting; it includes mosaics, stained glass, tapestry, some drawing and printing techniques, and photography.

A sculpture, unlike a picture, is a three-dimensional image — besides height and width, it has depth.

Architecture, literally meaning high (*archi*) building (*ecture*), is the most utilitarian of the three categories. Buildings are designed to enclose space for a specific purpose — worship, recreation, living, working — although they often contain pictures and sculptures as well, and

other forms of visual art. The pyramids of ancient Egypt, for example, were filled with statues of the pharaoh (king) who built them and their walls were painted with scenes from his life. Many churches are decorated with sculptures, paintings, mosaics, and stained glass windows illustrating stories of Christ and the saints. Likewise, the sumptuous palaces of western Europe would look bare without the decoration provided by paintings, sculptures, and tapestries.

## The Artistic Impulse

Art is a vital and persistent aspect of everyday life. But where, one might ask, does the artistic impulse originate? We can see that it is inborn by observing children, who make pictures, sculptures, and buildings before learning to read or write. Children trace images in dirt or sand, and decorate just about anything from their own faces to the walls of their houses. They spontaneously make mud pies and snowmen. If given a pile of building blocks, they usually attempt to stack one on top of another to make a tower. All are efforts to create order from disorder and form from formlessness. While it may be difficult to relate a Greek temple or an Egyptian pyramid to a child’s sandcastle, all three express the same natural impulse to build.

## Chronology

The Christian chronological system, generally used in the West, is followed throughout this book. Other religions (for example, Islam and Judaism) have different calendars.

Dates before the birth of Christ are followed by the letters B.C., an abbreviation for “Before Christ.” Dates after his birth are denoted by the letters A.D. — an abbreviation for *anno Domini*, Latin for “In the year of our Lord.” There is no year 0, so A.D. I immediately follows I B.C. If neither B.C. nor A.D. accompanies a date, A.D. is understood. Approximate dates are preceded by “c.,” an abbreviation for the Latin *circa*, meaning “around.”

In the adult world, creating art is a continuation and development of the child's inborn impulse. But now it takes on different meanings. One powerful motive for making art is the wish to leave behind after death a product of value by which to be remembered. The work of art symbolically prolongs the artist's existence. This parallels the pervasive feeling that, by having children, one is ensuring genealogical continuity into the future. Several artists have made such a connection. For example, according to Michelangelo's biographers, he said that he had no human children because his works were his children. Giotto, the great Italian painter of the early Renaissance (see p.213), expressed a similar idea in a fourteenth-century anecdote which begins as the poet Dante asks Giotto how it is that his children are so ugly and his paintings so beautiful. Giotto replies that he paints by the light of day and reproduces in the darkness of night. The twentieth-century artist Josef Albers (see p.448) also referred to this traditional connection between creation and procreation: he described a mixed color as the offspring of the two original colors and compared it to a child who combines the genes of two parents.

Related to the role of art as a memorial is the wish to preserve one's image after death. Artists have been commissioned to paint portraits, or representations of specific people; they have also made self-portraits. "Painting makes absent men present and the dead seem alive," wrote Leon Battista Alberti, the fifteenth-century Italian humanist (see p.238). "I paint to preserve the likeness of people after their death," wrote Albrecht Dürer, the sixteenth-century German artist (see p.291). Even as early as the Neolithic era (c. 8000–2000 B.C.; see p.46) skulls were modeled into faces with plaster, and shells were inserted into the eye sockets. In ancient Egypt (see Chapter 5), the pharaoh's features were painted on the outside of his mummy case so that his *ka*, or soul, could recognize him. And gold death masks of kings have been discovered from the Mycenaean civilization of ancient Greece (c. 1500 B.C.; see fig. 6.15).

It is not only the features of an individual that are valued as an extension of self after death. **Patrons**, or people who commission works, may prefer to order more monumental tributes. For example, the Egyptian rulers (3000–1000 B.C.) spent years planning and overseeing the construction of pyramids, not only in the belief that such monumental tombs would guarantee their existence in the afterlife, but also as a statement of their power while on earth. The Athenians built the Parthenon (see p.105) in 448–432 B.C. to house the colossal sculpture of their patron goddess Athena and, at the same time, to embody the intellectual and creative achievements of their civilization and to preserve them for future generations. King Louis XIV (see p.303) built his magnificent palace at Versailles in the seventeenth century as a monument to his political power, his reign, and the glory of France.

## The Value of Art

Works of art are valued not only by the artist or patron, but also by entire cultures. In fact, those periods of history that we tend to identify as the high points of human achievement are those in which the arts were most highly valued and vigorously encouraged. In ancient Egypt, the pharaohs initiated building activity on a grand scale. They presided over the construction of palaces and temples in addition to pyramids, and commissioned vast numbers of sculptures and paintings. In fifth-century-B.C. Athens, the cradle of modern democracy, artists created many important sculptures, paintings, and buildings; their crowning achievement was the Parthenon. During the Gothic era (c. A.D. 1200–1400; see Chapter 13), a major part of the economic activity of every cathedral town revolved around the construction of its cathedral, the production of cathedral sculpture, and the manufacture of stained glass windows. In fifteenth-century Renaissance Florence, Italian banking families such as the Medici spent enormous amounts of money on art to adorn public spaces, private palaces, churches, and chapels. Today, corporations as well as individuals have become patrons of the arts and there is a flourishing art market throughout the world. More people buy art than ever before — often as an investment — and the auctioning of art has become an international business.

The contribution of the arts to human civilization has many facets, a few of which we shall now explore.

### Material Value

Works of art may be valuable simply because they are made of a precious material. Gold, for example, was used in Egyptian art to represent divinity and the sun. These associations recur in Christian art, which reserved gold for the background of religious icons and for **halos** on divine figures. Valuable materials have unfortunately inspired the theft and plunder of art objects down the centuries by thieves who disregard their cultural, religious, or artistic value and melt them down. Even the monumental cult statue of Athena in the Parthenon disappeared without a trace, presumably because of the value of the gold and ivory from which it was made.

### Intrinsic Value

A work of art may contain valuable material but that is not the primary criterion by which its quality is judged. Its intrinsic value depends largely on people's assessment of the artist who created it and on its own **esthetic** character (that is, the degree to which the viewer experiences it as beautiful). The *Mona Lisa* (fig. 16.13) is made of relatively modest materials — paint and wood — but it is a priceless object nonetheless, and arguably the western world's most famous image. Leonardo da Vinci, who painted it around A.D. 1500 in Italy, was an acknowledged genius in his own day and his work has stood the test of time. The

paintings of the late nineteenth-century Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh (see p.401) have also endured, although he was ignored in his lifetime. It was not until after his death that his esthetic quality and originality were recognized. Today, the intrinsic value of an oil painting by van Gogh is reflected by its market price, which has risen to as high as \$80 million.



**1.1** Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*. 1928. Bronze, unique cast, 54 x 8½ x 6½ in (137.2 x 21.6 x 16.5 cm). Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Given anonymously). Brancusi objected to the view of his work as abstract. In a statement published shortly after his death in 1957, he declared: "They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things."<sup>1</sup>

Intrinsic value is not always apparent, as seen in the changing assessment of van Gogh's works. "Is it art?" is a familiar question, which expresses the difficulty of defining "art" and of recognizing the esthetic value of an object. One famous example of this dilemma is illustrated by a trial held in New York City in 1927. Edward Steichen, the prominent American photographer, had purchased a bronze sculpture entitled *Bird in Space* (fig. 1.1) from the Romanian artist Constantin Brancusi, who was living in France. Steichen imported the sculpture to the United States, whose laws do not require payment of customs duty on original works of art as long as they are declared on entering the country. When the customs official saw the *Bird*, however, he balked. It was not art, he said; it was "manufactured metal." Steichen's protests fell on deaf ears. The sculpture was admitted into the United States under the category of "Kitchen Utensils and Hospital Supplies," which meant that Steichen had to pay \$600 in import duty.

Later, with the financial backing of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the American sculptor and benefactor of the arts, Steichen appealed the ruling of the customs official. The ensuing trial received a great deal of publicity. Witnesses discussed whether the *Bird* was a bird at all, whether the artist could make it a bird by calling it one, whether it could be said to have certain characteristics of "birdness," and so on. The conservative witnesses refused to accept the work as a bird because it lacked certain biological attributes, such as wings and tail feathers. The more progressive witnesses pointed out that it had bird-like qualities—upward movement and a sense of spatial freedom. The final decision of the court was in favor of the plaintiff and Steichen got his money back. The *Bird* was declared a work of art. In today's market a Brancusi *Bird* would sell for millions of dollars.

## Religious Value

One of the traditional ways in which art has been valued is in terms of its religious significance. From prehistory to the sixteenth-century Reformation, art was one of the most effective ways to express religious beliefs. Paintings and sculptures depicted gods and goddesses and thereby made their images accessible. Temples, churches, and mosques were symbolic dwelling places of gods and served to relate worshippers to their deity. Tombs expressed belief in the afterlife.

During the Middle Ages in western Europe, art often served an educational function. One important way of communicating Bible stories and legends of the saints to a largely illiterate population was through the sculptures, paintings, and stained glass windows in churches and cathedrals.

Beyond its teaching function, the religious significance of a work of art may be so great that entire groups of people identify with the object. The value of such a work is highlighted when it is taken away. In 1973, the Afo-a-Kom—a sacred figure embodying the soul of a village in

the Cameroon — disappeared. The villagers reportedly fell into a depression when they discovered that their statue was missing. The subsequent reappearance of the Afo-a-Kom in the window of a New York art dealer caused an international scandal that died down only after the statue was returned to its African home.

## Patriotic Value

Works of art have patriotic value inasmuch as they express the pride and accomplishments of a particular culture. Patriotic sentiment was a primary aspect of the richly carved triumphal arches of ancient Rome (see p.142) because they were gateways for the return of victorious emperors and generals. Statues of national heroes stand in parks and public squares in most cities of the western world.

But a work need not represent a national figure or even a national theme to be an object of patriotic value. In 1945, at the end of World War II, the Dutch authorities arrested an art dealer, Han van Meegeren, for treason. They accused him of having sold a painting by the great seventeenth-century Dutch artist Vermeer to Hermann Goering, the Nazi Reichsmarschall and Hitler's most loyal supporter. When van Meegeren's case went to trial, he lashed out at the court. "Fools!" he cried, "I painted it myself." What he had sold to the Nazis was actually his own forgery, and he proved it by painting another "Vermeer" under supervision while in prison. Van Meegeren thus saved himself from conviction of treason by proving that he had been guilty of a lesser crime, namely forgery. It would have been treason to sell Vermeer's paintings, which were (and still are) considered national treasures, to Holland's enemies.

Another expression of the patriotic value of art can be seen in recent exhibitions made possible by shifts in world politics. Since détente between the Communist bloc and the West, Russia has been sending works of art from her museums for temporary exhibitions in the United States. In such circumstances, the traveling works of art become a kind of diplomatic currency and contribute to improved relations between nations.

The patriotic feeling that some cultures have about their works of art has contributed to their value as trophies, or spoils of war. When ancient Babylon was defeated by the Elamites in 1170 B.C., the victors stole the statue of Marduk, the chief Babylonian god, together with the law code of Hammurabi (see p.55). In the early nineteenth century, when Napoleon's armies marched through Europe, they plundered thousands of works of art. Napoleon's booty is now part of the French national art collection at the Louvre in Paris.

The patriotic value of art can be so great that nations whose works of art have been taken go to considerable lengths to recover them. Thus, at the end of World War II, the Allied army assigned a special division to recover the vast amounts of art stolen by the Nazis. A United States army task force discovered Hermann Goering's two

personal caches of stolen art in Bavaria, one in a medieval castle, and the other in a bombproof tunnel in nearby mountains. The task force arrived just in time, for Goering had equipped an "art train" with thermostatic temperature control to take "his" collection to safety. At the Nuremberg trials, Goering claimed that his intentions were nothing if not honorable — he was protecting the art from air raids.

A contemporary example of the patriotic value of art can be seen in the case of the Elgin Marbles. In the early nineteenth century when Athens was under Turkish rule, Thomas Bruce, the seventh earl of Elgin, obtained permission from Turkey to remove sculptures from the Parthenon and other buildings on the Acropolis. At great personal expense (amounting to £75,000), Lord Elgin sent the sculptures to England by boat. The first shipment sank, but the remainder of the works reached their destination in 1816. The British Museum in London purchased the sculptures for just £35,000. Now referred to as the Elgin Marbles, they are still in the British Museum, where they are a tourist attraction and a source of study for scholars. For years, the Greeks have been pressuring England to return the sculptures and the British have refused to do so. This kind of situation is a product of historical circumstance. Although Lord Elgin broke no laws and probably saved the sculptures from considerable damage, he is seen by many Greeks as having looted their cultural heritage.

Since art continues to have patriotic value, modern legislation in many countries is designed to avoid similar problems by making it difficult, if not illegal, to export national treasures. International protocols, such as the Hague Convention of 1959, the UNESCO General Conferences of 1964 and 1970, and the European Convention of 1967, protect cultural property and archeological heritage.

## Other Symbolic Values

There are other aspects of the symbolic value of art besides religious and patriotic significance. Art is valued for its ability to convey illusions with which we identify. This identification leads us to endow art with symbolic power and to create legends about the origins of art.

Reactions to the arts cover virtually the entire range of human emotion. They include pleasure, fright, amusement, outrage, even avoidance. People can become attached to a work of art and not want to part with it, as Leonardo did after he painted the *Mona Lisa*. Instead of delivering it to the person who had commissioned it, Leonardo kept the painting until he died. Conversely, one may wish to destroy certain works because they arouse anger. In London in the early twentieth century, a suffragette slashed Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (fig. 19.33) because she was offended by what she considered to be its sexist representation of a woman. Such examples illustrate the intense responses to the symbolic power of art. The remainder of this chapter considers psychological responses to the symbolic nature of the arts.



## Art and Illusion

Before considering illusion and the arts, it is necessary to point out that when we think of illusion in connection with an image, we usually assume that the image is lifelike, or **naturalistic**. This is often, but not always, the case. With certain exceptions, such as Judaic and Islamic art, western art was mainly representational until the twentieth century. **Figurative**, or **representational**, art depicts recognizable natural forms or created objects. When the subjects of painting and sculpture are so convincingly portrayed that they may be mistaken for the real thing, they are said to be **illusionistic**. Where the artist's purpose is to fool the eye, the effect is described by the French term, *trompe l'oeil*.

The deceptive nature of pictorial illusion was simply but eloquently stated by the Belgian Surrealist painter, René Magritte, in his painting *The Betrayal of Images* (fig. 1.2). This work is a convincing (although not a *trompe l'oeil*) rendition of a pipe. Directly below the image, Magritte reminds the viewer that in fact it is not a pipe at all — “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” (“This is Not a Pipe”) is Magritte's explicit message. To the extent that observers are convinced by the image, they have been betrayed. Even though Magritte was right and illusion does fall short of reality, however, the observer is nevertheless pleased by its effect.

The pleasure produced by *trompe l'oeil* images is reflected in many anecdotes, or stories which may not be literally true but illustrate an underlying truth. For example, the ancient Greek artist Zeuxis was said to have painted grapes so realistically that birds pecked at them. In the Renaissance, a favorite story recounted that a fellow artist was so fooled by Giotto's realism that he tried to brush off a fly that Giotto had painted on a figure's nose. The contemporary American sculptor Duane Hanson (see



**1.2** René Magritte, *The Betrayal of Images* (“This is Not a Pipe”). 1928. Oil on canvas, 23½ × 28½ in (55 × 72 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California.

p.471) is a master of *trompe l'oeil*. He uses synthetic materials to create statues which look so alive that it is not unusual for people to approach and ask them questions. When the unsuspecting observers realize that they have been fooled, they are embarrassed by their own mistake, but admire the artist's skill.

In these examples of illusion and *trompe l'oeil*, artists produce only a temporary deception. Such may not always be the case. For instance, the Latin poet Ovid relates the tale of the sculptor Pygmalion, who was not sure whether his own statue was real or not. Disappointed with the infidelities of real women, he turned to art and fashioned a beautiful girl, Galatea, out of ivory. He dressed her and brought her jewels and flowers. He undressed her and took her to bed. Finally, during a feast of Venus (the Roman goddess of love and beauty), Pygmalion prayed for a wife as lovely as his *Galatea*. Venus granted his wish by bringing the statue to life — something that only gods and goddesses can do. Human artists have to be satisfied with illusion.

## Traditions Equating Artists with Gods

The fine line between illusion and reality, and the fact that gods are said to create reality while artists create illusion, has given rise to traditions equating artists with gods.



**1.3** *God as Architect*, from the *Bible Moralisée*, Reims, France, fol. Iv. Mid-13th century. Illumination 8⅓ in (21.2 cm) wide. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.