

ART IN HISTORY

600 BC - 2000 AD

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INTRODUCTION

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The artists and works of art in this book have transformed how art affects us. Over the ages, painters and sculptors have invited us to do radically new things.

To take just one example, we do not know how the first viewers of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* reacted to his mighty canvas, but we can be sure that they had seen nothing like it before. It is recognisable as a group portrait, but does not conform to the norm. The artist is there, but we see only a portion of the back of his painting. The young princess and her entourage have assembled in the grand room. But at whom are they looking? At someone more important than us, we imagine. The king and queen are visible in the mirror. But where are they? They are the absent subject of the picture. Velázquez, in common with other great artists, presents us with a field for interpretation in which we can all play our part.

Art in History concentrates on the triangular relationship between art, artist and spectator – frequently in the context of God and nature. This is how the present book differs from the numerous previous histories of 'Western Art'. It looks at the varied historical notions of art and artists as categories within which art is produced and consumed. What art required of the spectator and what the spectator required of art changed radically over the ages. We will see the artist

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emerge as an individual who makes a distinct contribution to the development of art in ancient Greece and again later in the Renaissance. Subsequent centuries witness the evolution of the categories until they assume their modern meanings. The developments often embody the idea of 'progress', a powerful concept in the forging of modern economic and political systems. Indeed, every aspect of the rise of art and artists is deeply involved in material and conceptual shifts in society.

In setting art *in* history, a big question looms into view: is the maker of artefacts a subservient agent or an autonomous hero of creativity? Or to frame more subtle questions: how far is the art work first and foremost an expression of a series of social imperatives; and how far does it depend on the direct and timeless communication of human values from one individual to another? Can it be both of these things? I will argue that the power of images depends on both, in a wholly integrated manner.

How a work of art is embedded in history varies as widely as the works and the artists vary. A medieval Madonna and Child is directly concerned with a kind of spiritual beauty that lies beyond this world, while Goya's painting of a contemporary massacre speaks of violent contention. What we call the 'style' of the work is integral to its effect. The suave grace and high polish of the Madonna would not serve Goya well. The violent colour contrasts and incendiary brushwork of Goya would not exercise the right effect on a medieval worshipper. All the works here demonstrate a compelling unity of style and content. Each of them posits their own special relationship with the spectator in the

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context of the society from which they emerged, and they 'speak' to us in a period voice. Although we can still hear them speak, we gain enormously from attuning our ears to their very varied accents.

We will be encountering our key works in a broadly chronological order, because what each artist does is articulated in relation to what went before, and affects our view of the past. As the great poet T. S. Eliot wrote in 1921, 'what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it'.

Until comparatively recently, works of art that have emerged from the changing frameworks tell the story of big blokes – whether artists or their funders – and play to what is a familiar story of canonical masterpieces that stood at the centre of new developments in European and North American art. There are of course other stories, but the narrative I follow, looking at European and North American art, is a real and massive one, not least in terms of where the international art world is now, in China no less than in the USA. It is also the story that I am best equipped to tell but I don't claim that it is definitely what the history of art is about. As one of the possible stories, not the least of its attractions is its focus on some of the most enriching works human beings have produced. It is also closely related to what we experience when we step into major galleries and museums.



1

THE 'PROGRESS' OF ART IN GREECE AND ROME

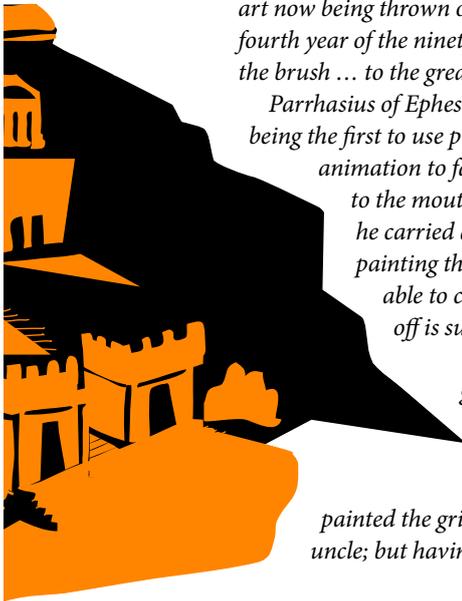
From the *Natural History*, c. 79 AD, by the Roman soldier and natural philosopher, Pliny the Elder:

Successive painters' quest for nature and beauty

Apollodorus of Athens, in the ninety-third Olympiad [408 BC] was the first to imitate the appearance of objects, and the first who truly conferred glory on the painter's brush ... The gates of art now being thrown open, Zeuxis of Heraclea entered in the fourth year of the ninety-fifth Olympiad, truly destined to lead the brush ... to the greatest levels of glory ...

Parrhasius of Ephesus also greatly carried things forward, being the first to use proportions in his figures, the first to give animation to faces, elegance to the hair, and beauty to the mouth, and it is recognised by artists that he carried away the palm for contour lines. In painting this is the very highest subtlety. ... To be able to create the boundaries and round them off is successfully achieved in art only rarely ...

As to Timanthes, he was plentifully gifted with genius [ingenium], and some of the orators have with praise celebrated his Iphigenia, as she stands fatefully at the altar. He painted the grief of all present, and in particular her uncle; but having exhausted all the images of sorrow,



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he veiled the features of the victim's father, unable adequately to represent his feelings ... Timanthes is the only one in whose works something more is always conveyed than is actually painted.

It was Apelles of Cos in the hundred and twelfth Olympiad who surpassed all the other painters who came before or after. Single-handedly, he took forward painting more than all the others. Moreover, he published some volumes containing the principles of his art.

With respect to the conscious display of artistry by artists, the ancient Greeks laid the foundations, just as they established all the major branches of modern learning. From the sixth century BC onwards the Greeks were the

first (outside China) to lay down a systematic body of recorded thought dealing with the fundamental aspects of human nature, including the soul, and its intersections with the natural and divine worlds. The idealising philosophy of Plato and the nature-based thought of Aristotle set the tone for centuries. Alfred North Whitehead, the twentieth-century mathematician and philosopher, famously declared



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that 'the safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato'. If we include Aristotle, Whitehead's statement becomes eminently supportable. However Plato himself was notably disparaging about visual representation, regarding it as second-hand reflection of the sensory world, which was itself a shadowy manifestation of higher mental and spiritual realities.

The visual arts in Greece were centred on the representation of the human body. They participated in contemporary views about humanity and the gods, granting bodily form to concepts, and in turn shaping the notion of ideal beauty, not least through the artists' own writings. The Roman scholar Pliny noted that the great Apelles wrote on art, as did the fifth-century BC sculptor Polycleitus. In his famous *Canon*, Polycleitus established a system of proportions that comprised the musical mathematics of the parts of the body in the context of the whole. Endowing art with a 'science' – a systematic base in rational knowledge – was and remains a vital component in certifying the status of art and artists alongside other prestigious disciplines. All the Greek treatises on the visual arts are lost, but Pliny, in his extraordinary compilation of everything he considered worth knowing, provides a Roman echo of how the Greek artists regarded themselves and were regarded by others.

Art, for Pliny, arose from the imposition of high culture on physical materials – paint, bronze, marble and so on – involving supreme individual talent (*ingenium* or 'genius'), the imitation of nature, the distillation of beauty, the imaging of the divine, and the conveying of emotion

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in narratives. Successive artists contributed to the long march towards perfection, from primitive beginnings to the diverse glories drawn from nature. Painting, for instance, progressed from the tracing of lines around shadows, to full line drawing, to monochrome painting and the addition of shading, followed by the mastery of colours and the scintillation of highlights.

There are too few surviving works of painting to trace this progression. However, enough sculpture has emerged over the ages, occasionally in the original and more often as later copies, to flesh out the Plinian narrative. This progress is usually shown via a sequence of statues representing a *kouros* (a young man). We can juxtapose an example from



Marble statue of a Kouros,
c. 590–580 BC

Kouros, c. 540 BC

Riace Warrior A, 5th century BC

THE 'PROGRESS' OF ART IN GREECE AND ROME

the sixth century BC with one from less than a century later. The earlier *kouros* retains large quotients of Egyptian rectitude, emerging from a rectangular marble block with the planes of front, side and back still very much apparent. Key transitions in the youth's anatomy are delineated as grooves, in keeping with the line drawing described by Pliny. His successor humanises the basic schema with rounded contours, a tremor of flesh and blood and perhaps a hint of a smile. In this instance, very exceptionally, we know the funerary function of the statue. Its inscription instructs us to 'stop and show pity beside the marker of Kroisos, dead, whom, when he was in the front rank [of the troops], raging Ares [Mars] destroyed'. It is likely that each of the *kouroi* and the *korai* (female counterparts) had a specific memorial function, representing the ideal essence of the person commemorated rather than a realistic portrayal.

When a century later we encounter two Greek warriors we find that the communicative presence of the figure has been transformed. The bronze hero's weight (looking at the one known as *Warrior A*) is poised with easy athletic grace. His head turns, his calcite eyes staring assertively, fringed with silver lashes, while his copper lips open in speech, disclosing his silver teeth. Bronze was already an expensive and prestigious material; here it is notably enriched. Beyond a possible memorial function, we know nothing definitive of the identity of the warriors, or their authorship.

Warrior A can be seen generically as a classic hero. He could readily serve as Agamemnon, the tragic hero of the Trojan wars, who had sacrificed his own daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis (Diana), and was murdered by

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his adulterous wife on his return. Such heroes, male and military in mien, became god-like in their virtues, while the disputatious gods displayed the human vices of vanity, lust, jealousy and revenge. In the plays of the great Greek tragedians, the human actors are separated from the gods by immortality and power but not by character. The vibrant *Warrior* would need no visible transformation for him to become *Ares* (Mars), the god of war. In a general sense, the warriors are the male embodiments of the self-proclaimed moral virtue and athletic heroism that was valued in Hellenic civilisation, above all in the city-state of Athens. It is worth remembering that the Greek dating system was based on the four-year cycle of the Olympic games.

In the representation of the female form, the ideal envisaged by male fantasy becomes more poetically real than the reality. By no one was this more potently expressed than by Praxiteles, who in the fifth century BC created iconic images of Apollo, Hermes, Artemis and Venus. His *Venus* for Knidos, known like his other masterpieces through later copies, shows the goddess of love after bathing, making an ineffectual gesture of sexual modesty as her hand hovers over her highly idealised genital triangle. The statue was a sensation. During a rapturous account in the *Amores*, a dialogue about love formerly attributed to Lucian, the author declares that 'all her beauty is uncovered and revealed, except in so far as she unobtrusively uses one hand to hide her private parts ... The temple had a door on both sides for the benefit of those also who wish to have a good view of the goddess from behind, so that no part of her be left unadmired'. Of the many later versions, that in Munich gives