

# Art and visual culture: Medieval to modern



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# Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Medieval to Renaissance	6
1.1 Art, visual culture and skill	6
1.2 Artists, patrons and workshops	16
2 Academy to avant-garde	19
2.1 From function to autonomy	19
2.2 From the Baroque to Romanticism	29
2.3 From patronage to the public sphere	36
3 Modernity to globalisation	42
3.1 Autonomy and modernity	43
3.2 National, international, cosmopolitan	50
Conclusion	54
Keep on learning	55
References	56
Acknowledgements	60

# Introduction

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This introduction to the history of art and visual culture provides a broad overview of the major developments in western art between c.1100 and the present day. It is divided into three parts, each of which explores the concept and practice of art in a distinct historical period. The first part, 'Medieval to Renaissance', explores the diverse forms of art and the varied functions it fulfilled before 1600. The second part, 'Academy to avant-garde', explores a period in which the theory and practice of art was dominated by painting, sculpture and architecture. The final part, 'Modernity to globalisation', explores the period since 1850, showing how art has diversified into a wide range of forms and media.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [\*A226 Exploring art and visual culture\*](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the changing perceptions and definitions of art across history
- understand the relationship between 'art' and visual culture
- understand the global dimension of art and how it has changed over time
- understand the significance of notions of 'function' and 'autonomy' for art history
- understand the role of patronage, institutions and the wider historical context in shaping art.

# 1 Medieval to Renaissance

We begin by considering the production and consumption of art from the Crusades through to the period of the Catholic Reformation. The focus is on art in medieval and Renaissance Christendom, but this does not imply that Europe was insular during this period. The period witnessed the slow erosion of the crusader states in the Holy Land, finally relinquished in 1291, and of the Greek Byzantine world until Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453. Famously, Columbus made his voyage of discovery of the New World in 1492. Medieval Christendom could not but be aware of its neighbours. Trade, diplomacy and conquest connected Christendom to the wider world, which in turn had an impact on art. The luxury oriental fabrics painstakingly represented in paintings by Simone Martini (c.1284–1344), and the feather pictures made in Mexico for European collectors, are only two examples.

The important point to be made is that the medieval and Renaissance period was not parochial and neither were its artists. Any notion of the humble medieval artist oblivious to anything beyond his own immediate environment must be dispelled. Artists and patrons were well aware of artistic developments in other countries. Artists travelled both within and between countries and on occasion even between continents. Such mobility was facilitated by the network of European courts, which were instrumental in the rapid spread of Italian Renaissance art. Europe-wide frameworks of philosophical and theological thought, reaching back to antiquity and governing religious art, applied – albeit with regional variations – throughout Europe, just as challenges in the form of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations rapidly became pan-European phenomena.

## 1.1 Art, visual culture and skill

The term ‘visual culture’ is used here in preference to ‘art’ for the fundamental reason that the arts before 1600 were very much more wide-ranging than they were subsequently defined. From the founding of the first art academy in Florence in 1563 up to the twentieth century, ‘art’ has been understood primarily in terms of the three so-called arts of design: painting, sculpture and architecture, all of which were considered to demand talent and intellectual application as well as the acquisition of manual skill. Medieval art and Renaissance art present a challenge to this definition.

### Art and ‘ars’

The Latin word ‘ars’ signified skilled work; it did not mean art as we might understand it today, but a craft activity demanding a high level of technical ability including tapestry weaving, goldsmith’s work or embroidery. Literary statements of what constituted the arts during the medieval period are rare, particularly in northern Europe, but proliferate in the Renaissance. They deliver the odd surprise. In 1504, the Netherlandish writer Jean Lemaire de Belges wrote a poem for his patron Margaret of Austria, sister of the ruler of the Netherlands, in which he listed prominent artists of the day. In addition to painters, he mentions book illuminators, a printmaker, tapestry designers and goldsmiths (Stechow, 1989 [1966], pp. 27–9). Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), the biographer of Italian artists, claimed in his famous book *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (*Lives of the*



*Painters, Sculptors and Architects*; first edition 1550 and revised 1568) that the architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) was initially apprenticed to a goldsmith ‘to the end that he might learn design’ (Vasari, 1996 [1568], vol. 1, p. 326). According to Vasari, several other Italian Renaissance artists are supposed to have trained initially as goldsmiths, including the sculptors Ghiberti (1378–1455) and Verrocchio (1435–88), and the painters Botticelli (c.1445–1510) and Ghirlandaio (1448/49–94). The design skills necessary for goldsmiths’ work were evidently a good foundation for future artistic success. All of this calls into question the subsequent academic division between the so-called arts of design and crafts, and not least the relegation of goldsmiths to the realm of craft.

## Medieval and Renaissance visual culture

The term ‘visual culture’ is also used for a second reason that is less to do with definition than with method. Including the various arts under the umbrella of ‘visual culture’ implies their inseparability from the visual rhetoric of power on the one hand, and the material culture of a society on the other. Before 1500 at least, art did not signify painting or sculpture to be scrutinised in a gallery, but an aspect of the persuasive power and cultural identity of church, ruler, city, institution or individual. In this sense, art might be considered alongside ceremonies, for example, as strategies conveying social meaning or magnificence, or alongside coins and ceramics as aspects of identity. Equally, visual culture serves as an eloquent indicator of gender.

If art is defined, as it was in later centuries, solely as an aesthetic entity prompting scrutiny for its own sake alone, then the purposefulness of the varied forms of art produced during the medieval and Renaissance period might appear to lie outside this definition. Yet objects were made that invited the most attentive scrutiny for their ingenuity in design while at the same time fulfilling a variety of functions. Purposefulness is also predicated on skills of looking and interpreting. No one in medieval times would have bothered with ‘purposeful’ works of art unless they could assume that their contemporaries were vulnerable to their communicative power. For example, the wealthy lavished money on rich artefacts or dynastic portraits in part because they were an aspect of the social exclusiveness that a representative number of their entourage could notice and grasp. In reiterating the convention that religious art was particularly useful for those unable to read, medieval thinkers seem to have assumed that ordinary people too were capable of thoughtful looking. This suggests that attentive and intelligent scrutiny was a cultural skill that might, to a degree at least, be taken for granted by both patrons and artists during the medieval and Renaissance periods. Works of art might not have hung in galleries, but it seems that medieval and Renaissance audiences knew how to look at them.

## Art and adornment

It is also the case that some objects, particularly those made by ancient Greek and Roman artists, were indeed treated as objects for aesthetic admiration during the fifteenth century. Among these were the highly prized antique cameos owned by the Medici family in Florence (Richardson et al., 2007, pp. 291–303). Earlier written evidence that works of art were recognised as offering visual delight quite apart from function and meaning is sparse but there is a little. In a treatise written sometime between 1227 and his death in 1254, Lucas, Bishop of Tuy in Spain, reiterated the medieval convention that the purpose of religious art in churches was both to convey doctrine and to inspire imitation. He also recognised a third category, however, that some art in churches was there simply for adornment:

there are in the church painted forms of animals, birds and serpents, and other things, which are for adornment and beauty only ... for the house of God must shine with varied worship, so that its outward beauty in itself will lead men to it, and not inflict weariness on those who are present ... the outward beauty of the house of God soothes the eyes.

(Lymberopoulou et al., 2012, pp. 30–1 and Gilbert, 1985, pp. 136–7)

The profusion and variety of ornament in some medieval church architecture or in illuminated manuscripts suggests this was not an isolated view, for all that it was seldom articulated (Schapiro, 1977). His statement is a valuable indication that even within the church, art might serve the purposes of simple enjoyment. It seems implausible that visual delight did not also form a key motive for lay patrons to commission art for their own private use.

## Artistic quality

The fact that a work of art had a function did not mean that artistic quality was a matter of indifference. Some artists' guilds, such as the painters' guild of Tournai, south of Brussels, required candidates to submit a 'masterpiece' for examination by the guild in order to win the status of master. Those scrutinising the masterpieces must have had a clear idea of the criteria of quality they were hoping for, even if these criteria were never set down in writing. The careful selection of artists even from far-flung locations, and the preference for one practitioner above another, shows that patrons too were quite capable of discriminating on the basis of artistic prowess. Abbot Suger (c.1081–1151) explained that the twelfth-century windows at Saint-Denis in Paris, for example, were done 'by the exquisite hands of many masters from different regions' (Suger, 1979, p. 73). The effectiveness of a work of art depended to a great extent on peculiarly artistic factors. This much is implied by the *Libri Carolini* written at the court of the Emperor Charlemagne as early as c.790 CE: 'images sometimes turn out beautiful and sometimes ugly, according to the understanding [*ingenium*] and skill [*artificium*] of the artist' (Belting, 1994, p. 533). A work of art during the medieval and Renaissance period was expected to be of high quality as well as purposeful.

The chronicler of England and France during the Hundred Years War, Jean Froissart (c.1337–c.1405), made a clear judgement of artistic quality in favour of the Netherlandish sculptor André Beauneveu (active 1364–1402) claiming that he 'did not then have a better, nor equal in any land, nor any who made so many fine works living in France or in Hainaut – which was his country of origin – or in the kingdom of England' (Nash, 2007, p. 31). A native of Valenciennes, now in northern France, Beauneveu became 'ymagier' to Charles V of France (ruled 1364–80) and carved his marble tomb at Saint-Denis between 1364 and 1366 (Figure 1).





**Figure 1** André Beauneveu, tomb of Charles V, c.1364, marble. Church of Saint-Denis, Paris. Photo: Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

In addition to various Netherlandish commissions, between 1374 and 1386 he worked on the tomb and funerary chapel of the Count of Flanders, Louis de Mâle (1330–84), for which the statue of Saint Catherine at Kortrijk was probably made (Figure 2). Froissart encountered him in Bourges in France at the court of Jean, Duc de Berry (1340–1416), where he worked from 1386 to 1402.



**Figure 2** André Beauneveu, *Saint Catherine*, 1374–86, alabaster, height 186 cm. Church of Our Lady, Kortrijk. Photo: © IRPA-KIK, Brussels.

A damaged stone *Virgin and Child* now in Santa Sofia, Venice (Figure 3), has convincingly been associated with Beauneveu's style (Wolters, 1967, and Wolters, 1976, cat. 204, pp. 259–60; Nuttall, 2012, Part 3, Chapter 5). It is distinctively naturalistic in the intensity of the lifelike locked gaze of mother and child, while the courtly yet restrained sinuous forms 'soothe the eyes', to use Lucas of Tuy's turn of phrase. At slightly under life-size, it would almost certainly have been commissioned rather than sent for speculative sale.

Italy was certainly not short of skilled local sculptors in the later part of the fourteenth century. This statue is very likely to have been perceived as distinctively different from Venetian sculpture. To go to the trouble and expense of transporting it from northern Europe represents a deliberate choice on the part of the commissioner, whether an individual, group or institution, that requires explanation.



**Figure 3** Circle of André Beauneveu, *Virgin and Child*, last quarter fourteenth century, stone, height 116 cm. Santa Sofia, Venice. Photo: © Kim Woods.

## Reputation and skill

Beauneveu's connections with the court of France, which arguably took the cultural lead in fourteenth-century Europe, can have done his reputation no harm. It remains uncertain whether his Venetian patron desired a Beauneveu-style statue for the reflected prestige value of the French court or of Beauneveu himself, as sculptor at no less than three different courts, or for its artistic qualities first and foremost (see Nuttall, 2012). The possibilities are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is worth stating, however, that for a high-status, courtly work of art this is not an extravagantly expensive sculpture, despite its size. The statue is made out of ordinary stone, not a particularly rare or valuable material, though the pigments used to paint it and the formidable transport costs would have added greatly to the price. It is unlikely to have impressed for its intrinsic material value, however. The renowned art historian Michael Baxandall (1933–2008) identified a crucial change in values around the beginning of the fifteenth century. Increasingly, he argued, patrons were impressed not by material ostentation of precious materials such as gold and expensive pigments, but by the prowess of the artist (Baxandall, 1972, Chapter 1). This is a key and much cited point that deserves closer discussion. There is no doubt that artistic skill had always been valued, demonstrated in the virtuoso character of works of art associated with courts and the prestige of artists such as Beauneveu cited above, and in the careful selection of outstanding artists to work on expensive, high-status projects such as great churches. According to Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, the verses formerly accompanying the great bronze and gilt doors of the abbey church with their reliefs of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ read: 'If thou seekest to extol the glory of these doors, marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the craftsmanship of the work ...' (Suger, 1979, pp. 47–8). Suger's comment shows that even in 1145–49 skill might be prized above materials. Artistic skill per se was not really the issue at stake; it was the cultural importance of expensive materials, the status of painting and the status of artists.

Even taking into account expensive pigments, the use of gold and painstaking labour, painting was a relatively low-cost option compared with the work of goldsmiths or embroiderers, for example. While prices were linked to the cost of materials, it was affordable by a much wider range of clients, and hence could not offer the social elite the exclusive cultural cachet they sought. It was when artistic skill became a commodity to be appropriated by the elite that painting attained parity with the arts more traditionally associated with the very wealthy.

## Alberti on painting

The Italian humanist, theorist and architect Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) wrote a short treatise *De pictura* (*On Painting*) in 1435, partly to explain the art of perspective, partly to set out 'correct' principles of design and partly as an apology for painting itself. It circulated in the following year in Italian, but this first edition appears to have been directed at the patron class as it was in Latin, with which the ordinary artist was unlikely to be familiar. Tellingly, he criticises the use of real gold: 'There are some who use much gold in their *istoria* [narrative paintings]. They think it gives majesty. I do not praise it ... for there is more admiration and praise for the painter who imitates the rays of gold with colours' (Alberti, 1966 [1435], p. 85). Here Alberti confronts the mentality that looked to precious materials for ostentation, and suggests that prestige lies in the prowess of the artist alone.

Alberti goes further, however, in claiming that painting was pre-eminent in the arts: 'Who can doubt that painting is the master art ... all the smiths, sculptors, shops and guilds are



governed by the rules and art of the painter. It is scarcely possible to find any superior art which is not connected with painting ...' (Ibid., p. 64). Painting had a long history in Italy, in northern Europe and in the Greek world, but this jostling for primacy is very much a fifteenth-century phenomenon. The eventual success of the arguments should not blind us to the fact that painting was one art among many before this date. Its importance, however, was increasing.

## The Medici as patrons and collectors

One example will suffice to illustrate the point. The legendary Medici family were self-styled rulers of Florence but not of noble, let alone royal, extraction, and hence the imperative of material ostentation was perhaps less powerful than it might have been, say, for a northern European king, and even inadvisable where the degree of magnificence was widely expected to correspond to social class. For this reason, despite their wealth, painting was arguably a medium in keeping with Medici status. Undoubtedly art lovers, the Medicis included in their private collection a rich variety of artistic media, from ancient artefacts and cameos to imported Byzantine miniature mosaics, goldsmiths' work and Netherlandish tapestries, in addition to paintings. However, one incident in the career of Lorenzo de' Medici, effective ruler of Florence from 1469 to 1492 and one of the patrons of Botticelli, illustrates the lengths to which Lorenzo was prepared to go to acquire coveted paintings.

The *Battle of San Romano* (Figure 4) by the Florentine painter Paolo Uccello (1397–1475) is one of the most canonical of Renaissance works of art. It is often chosen by art historians as an example of a Renaissance artist's grasp of mathematical perspective with its carefully placed 'fallen' weapons and soldiers receding to a single vanishing point just to the right of centre, leading the eye on to the second picture in the series. It is the first of three paintings representing a famous victory of Florentine troops over the Sienese in 1432, led by the condottiere Nicolò da Tolentino. The second (Figure 5) shows the Sienese leader falling from his horse, and the third (Figure 6) shows Florentine troops attacking from the rear.



**Figure 4** Paolo Uccello, *Battle of San Romano* (Niccolo' Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano), c.1440s, tempera with walnut oil and linseed oil on poplar panel, 182 × 320 cm. National Gallery, London, Acc.n.: 4577. Photo: © The National Gallery, London/Scala, Florence.



**Figure 5** Paolo Uccello, *Battle of San Romano* (The Sienese leader falling from his horse), c.1440s, tempera on panel, 182 × 320 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Photo: © 2011, Photo Scala, Florence – reproduced with the permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali.





**Figure 6** Paolo Uccello, *Battle of San Romano* (Florentine troops attacking from the rear or The counter-attack by Micheletto da Cotignola), c.1440s, tempera on panel, 182 × 317 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, MI469. Photo: © RMN/Jean-Gilles Berizzi.

These three huge paintings were of a size and subject matter to warrant display in a public place as a commemoration of a famous victory and stimulus to Florentine patriotism. In fact, paintings of comparable secular subjects had been produced over a century earlier for precisely these motives, so the subject matter in itself does not signify a fundamental innovation. The painter Simone Martini contributed to a series of wall paintings of Sienese castles in the Siena town hall in the 1330s, apparently as a record of the military might of Siena. The San Romano pictures were designed for private viewing, however. Famously, they are recorded in 1492, displayed in the private room of Lorenzo de' Medici in the Medici palace. As the de facto ruler of Florence, Lorenzo's palace was presumably designed to impress visitors, and these victorious battle pictures could have been shown to a carefully selected few.

The Medici did not commission these battle scenes, however. They were originally owned by a wealthy Florentine family, the Bartolini Salimbeni. It appears that Lorenzo took advantage of his involvement in the division of the family property in 1483 to appropriate the pictures without the consent of at least one of the brothers. This in itself testifies to the value Lorenzo placed on adding the paintings to the Medici collection. In 1495, Damiano Bartolini Salimbeni brought an unsuccessful court case to get them back (see Gordon, 2003, pp. 390–1, and Roy and Gordon, 2001).

Originally designed to fill the arch-topped walls of a room, the pictures were in effect vandalised by the Medici, who cut them down at the top and built them up at the corners to make three rectangular paintings that could hang side-by-side, rather like tapestries. Battle scenes were a favourite subject for northern European tapestries, which may well have been too expensive to be within the grasp of the Bartolini Salimbeni family. The Medici could and did afford expensive tapestries imported from the Netherlands, so the fact that Lorenzo coveted these paintings appears symptomatic of the increasing enthusiasm for painting from the fifteenth century onwards.

## 1.2 Artists, patrons and workshops

In Italy, at least, the rising prestige of painting was linked to the prestige attached to ancient Greek and Roman culture, evident throughout the medieval period and particularly prominent from the fourteenth century onwards in what has come to be known as the Italian Renaissance. Alberti drew on a variety of ancient Roman and Greek texts to champion painting and painters, including comments by the ancient Roman writer Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) on ancient Greek artists in his *Historia naturalis* or *Natural History* (77 CE). Alberti was certainly not the first to do so. The Italian poet Petrarch (1304–74) owned an annotated copy of Pliny's *Natural History*, and in the margin of Pliny's life of the Greek painter Apelles made a comparison with Simone Martini. Alberti emphasised the esteem in which ancient Greek painters such as Zeuxis and Apelles had been held, claiming that 'painting was given the highest honour by our ancestors. For, although almost all of the artists were called craftsman, the painter alone was not considered in that category' (Baxandall, 1971, pp. 62–3). In fact, Pliny also extols several ancient Greek sculptors, and it is a moot point whether Alberti's claim is actually correct, but the evidence he went on to cite was of the utmost significance for the status of painting in the Renaissance.

### Painting, the liberal arts and humanism

Alberti pointed out that ancient philosophers and kings had enjoyed painting, including it as part of the liberal education of their children and even practising it themselves (Alberti, 1966 [1435], pp. 65–6). Such arguments served to vindicate painting in the minds of status-conscious patrons; they also struck a blow for the status of painters. Traditionally, a division had been drawn between the manual arts (or crafts), undertaken to earn a living and depending on practical skill, and the liberal arts pertaining to the leisured classes and studied for their own sake. Self-evidently, the distinction is a false one in that all artists needed to earn a living. To claim that painting was a liberal art narrowed the social gap between artist and patron, however, and put painting on a par with educated activities to do with reading and writing, such as poetry. For this too there were antique antecedents. The ancient Roman poet Horace (65–8 BCE) had compared poetry and painting in his essay *Ars poetica* ('The art of poetry'), while the Roman writer Plutarch (c.50 – after 120 CE) cited the maxim that painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture (Lee, 1967, pp. 2–5, and Hardie, 1993, pp. 120–1). Such comparisons were used to assert the parity of status of painting and poetry, something that neither Horace nor Plutarch is likely to have intended.

Alberti himself had received a humanist education based on the study of ancient Greek and Roman culture, and he was not alone in pointing out that painting and drawing had been included in an ancient liberal education. Early fifteenth-century humanist educator Vittorino da Feltre, working at the Gonzaga court in Mantua, employed artists in the programme of liberal education he offered the sons of rulers (Warnke, 1993, p. 39). It is no accident that some of the most famous paintings of all time were commissioned by regional Italian rulers well versed in such humanist ideas.

### Artists and patrons

Just as antiquity provided a model for the status of painting, so it provided a model for the relationship between illustrious patron and artist. Pliny described the esteem in which Alexander the Great held the painter Apelles, visiting his studio, allowing him liberties and

even passing on to him his mistress (Edwards, 1999, p. 99). In 1549, the Italian sculptor Leone Leoni mentions in a letter that the Emperor Charles V visited his studio and spent two to three hours at a time chatting with him (LyMBERopoulou et al., 2012, p. 89 and Plon, 1887, pp. 45–7). The familiar relationship between artist and ruler by this date is symptomatic on the one hand of the degree to which antique role models were taken to heart and on the other the degree to which artists had made the transition from jobbing craftsmen to respected court employees. Whether Netherlandish ruler Philip the Good could have been aware of the precedent of Apelles and Alexander the Great when he visited the Bruges workshop of his court painter Jan van Eyck almost a century earlier in 1432 is unclear, but it demonstrates that Philip too was on familiar terms with his court painter and keenly interested in van Eyck's work (Paviot, 1990, p. 88).

Famously, in 1516, the renowned Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was invited to the French court of Francis I (ruled 1515–47), perhaps not so much for the work that he might produce at what was then an advanced age, as out of admiration and presumably for the prestige that the presence of such a renowned figure might endow on the French court. The advancement of artistic status is often associated with princely employment, for example by Martin Warnke in his seminal study of the court artist (Warnke, 1993, pp. 33–45). Given the example of Leonardo da Vinci, this appears to make sense. Maintained on a salary, a court artist was no longer a jobbing craftsman constantly on the lookout for work. Potentially, at least, he had access to projects demanding inventiveness and conferring honour, and time to lavish on his art and on study. Equally, however, court artists might be required to undertake mundane and routine work which they could not very well refuse. Court salaries were also often in arrears or not paid at all. In the same letter in which Leone Leoni described Charles V chatting with him for two to three hours at a time, he complains of his poverty, while carefully qualifying the complaint by claiming he serves the emperor for honour and cares for studying not moneymaking. The lot of the court artist might appear to fulfil aspirations for artistic status, but it certainly had its drawbacks.

## Patterns of artistic employment: workshop, guild and court employment

The pattern of artistic employment in the medieval period and the Renaissance varied. Traditionally, craftsmen working on great churches would be employed in workshops on site, albeit often for some length of time; during the course of their career, such craftsmen might move several times from one project to another. Many other artists moved around in search of new opportunities of employment, even to the extent of accompanying a crusade. Artists working for European courts might travel extensively as well, not just within a country but from country to country and court to court: Michael Sittow (c.1469–1525) is a case in point, working at the court of Castile in Spain and in the Low Countries for the Habsburgs. El Greco (1541–1614) moved between three different countries before finding employment not at the royal court in Spain but in the city of Toledo. Botticelli (c.1445–1510) worked almost continuously in Florence under the protection of the Medici family, but even he was sent to Rome by his patrons to work temporarily for Pope Sixtus IV. On the other hand, Jan van Eyck (c.1395–1441) and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) were able to maintain fixed workshops while remaining in court employment, and Titian (c.1485–1576) remained based in Venice exporting work to clients such as Philip II in Spain.

A fixed artist's workshop depended not only on local institutional and individual patronage, but often also on the willingness of clients from further afield to come to the artist rather

than the artist travelling to work for clients. Simone Martini epitomises this range. It remains uncertain whether he travelled to Naples to paint the Saint Louis altarpiece for Robert of Anjou sometime around 1317, or whether the commission was placed remotely, and the panel painted in Siena and exported to Naples. For much of his career, before moving to Avignon in the 1340s to work at the papal court, he had an urban workshop in his native Siena, and received commissions from both civic and ecclesiastical authorities. The professional benefits of a permanent workshop are reasonably clear in terms of the supply of artistic materials, the employment of long-term assistants and establishing a client base. Whether the advantage lay in urban employment within a guild structure or with employment at a princely court is less clear-cut. While upholding the importance of court employment, Warnke maintains the corollary that the guild structure was stifling to artistic freedom (Warnke, 1993, p. 38, and Baxandall, 1980, pp. 106–16). Like the role of court artist, this bears closer scrutiny, however. Although there were a few exceptions, notably the imperial free city of Nuremberg, most cities associated with craft industries established guilds sometime during the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. A guild served three main functions: promoting the social welfare of its members, maintaining the quality of its products and protecting its members from competition. This usually meant defining quite carefully the materials and tools that a guild member was allowed to use to prevent activities that infringed the privileges of other guilds and for which they had not been trained, for example a carpenter producing wood sculpture.

It is the protection from competition that art historians have seen as eliminating artistic freedom, but it is worth pausing to wonder whether this view owes more to modern free-market economics than to the realities of fifteenth-century craft practices. In practice, it meant that indigenous craftsmen enjoyed preferential membership rates, but in many artistic centres foreign craftsmen were clearly also welcomed so long as their work reflected favourably on the reputation of the guild. The higher dues a foreigner had to pay were arguably a way of ensuring this: in order to pay the dues he (or more rarely she) needed already to have attained a level of success, suggesting a degree of skill that otherwise could not be verified given that the craftsman had trained elsewhere. The painter's guild of Bruges may appear oppressively protective yet many illustrious Bruges painters were not native to the city and must in practice have been welcomed by the guild, among them Petrus Christus (c.1410–75/76), Hans Memling (1430/40–94) and Gerard David (c.1460–1523). The protectionism of the Venice guild of stonemasons, which included sculptors, was clearly directed at controlling the influx of itinerant craftsmen and imported works of art for sale; masons wishing to settle and work permanently in the city might do so much more easily (Connell, 1976, Chapter 6).

While some artists' guilds lacked strength, such as the painter's guild in Florence, there is ample evidence, particularly in northern Europe, of artists such as the Antwerp painter Quinten Metsys (1466–1530) making a substantial living through the guild system while retaining their professional independence. The powerful Antwerp artists' guild was even responsible for a chamber of rhetoric, associating artists with literature in a manner quite independent of Italian art theory. As the debate about artistic status grew, the real disadvantage of the guild system for artists was not so much lack of freedom or profitability or even status so much as the connotations of manual craft attached to the guild system of apprenticeship as opposed to the 'liberal' training offered by the art academies.

It would be a mistake to accept uncritically the notion that one form of training and practice was inherently more advantageous to artists than another, just as it would be wrong to adopt the idea of artistic progress postulated by Vasari in his *Lives*. Instead, we have here



sought to indicate the range and richness of visual culture in medieval Christendom and of some of the artistic developments associated with the Renaissance.

## 2 Academy to avant-garde

We now consider the key developments in the history of western art between c.1600 and c.1850.

### 2.1 From function to autonomy

The most important idea for this purpose is the concept of art itself, which came to be defined in the way that we still broadly understand it today over the course of the centuries explored here.

This concept rests on a distinction between art, on the one hand, and craft, on the other. It assumes that a work of art is to be appreciated and valued for its own sake, whereas other types of artefact serve a social function. A significant step in this direction was made by a group of painters and sculptors who in 1563 set up an Accademia del Disegno (Academy of Design) in Florence in order to distinguish themselves from craftsmen organised in guilds. Their central claim was that the arts they practised were 'liberal' or intellectual rather than 'mechanical' or practical. After 1600, academies of art were founded in cities throughout Europe, including Paris (1648) and London (1768). Most offered training in architecture as well as in painting and sculpture. A decisive shift took place in the mid eighteenth century, when the three 'arts of design' began to be classified along with poetry and music in a new category of 'fine arts' (a translation of the French term, 'beaux-arts'). Other arts, such as landscape gardening, were sometimes included in this category. Architecture was occasionally excluded on the grounds that it was useful as well as beautiful, but the fine arts were usually defined in terms broad enough to encompass it. One writer, for example, described them as 'the offspring of genius; they have nature for model, taste for master, pleasure for aim' (Jacques Lacombe, *Dictionnaire Portatif des Beaux-Arts*, 1753 (1st edn 1752), p. 40, as translated in Shiner, 2001, p. 88).

#### Bürger's functions of art: the sacral

To chart what these conceptual shifts meant in practice, we can borrow the categories elaborated by the cultural theorist Peter Bürger (1984, pp. 47–8), who outlines a long-term shift away from the functions that art traditionally served. (Bürger defines each category in terms of its function, production and reception. I am simplifying here by focusing on function.) Such functions continued to play an important role after 1600, especially in the seventeenth century, when academies were rare outside Italy and many artists still belonged to guilds. As in the medieval period, the primary function was religious (or, in Bürger's terminology, 'sacral'). The so-called Counter Reformation gave a great boost to Roman Catholic patronage of the arts, as the church sought to renew itself in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. It was in this context that the word 'propaganda' originated; it can be traced back to 1622 when Pope Gregory XV (reigned 1621–23) founded the Congregazio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the Propagation of Faith) in Rome. The commitment to spreading the faith that this organisation embodied helped to shape art not just in Europe but in every part of the world reached by the

Catholic Missions, notably Asia and the Americas, throughout the period explored here (Figure 7). The churches that rejected the authority of Rome also played a role in supporting 'sacral art', primarily architecture since their use of other art forms was limited by Protestant strictures against 'Popish' idolatry (see for example Levy, 2004; Bailey, 1999; Haynes, 2006). Even in Catholic countries, however, the religious uses of art slowly declined relative to secular ones. The seventeenth century is the last in western art history in which a major canonical figure like the Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610) might still be a primarily religious artist (Figure 8).



**Figure 7** Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary (Capilla del Rosario), Church of Santo Domingo, Puebla, Mexico, 1632–90. Photo: © Martin Barlow/Art Directors.





**Figure 8** Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Death of the Virgin*, 1601–03, oil on canvas, 369 × 245 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 54. Photo: © RMN/René-Gabriel Ojéda.

### Bürger's functions of art: the courtly

By 1600, it was 'courtly art' (Bürger's second category) that increasingly prevailed in much of Europe. 'Courtly art' can be defined as consisting primarily of art actually produced at a

royal or princely court, but also extending beyond it to include works of art that more generally promote the leisured lifestyle of an aristocratic elite (some of who may not strictly be nobles, that is, they might not have a title). As in the Renaissance, artists served the needs of rulers by surrounding them with an aura of splendour and glory. In this context, art was integrated into the courtly or aristocratic way of life, as part of a culture of spectacle, which functioned to distinguish the nobles who frequented the court from other social classes and to legitimate the ruler's power in the eyes of the world (see for example, Elias, 1983; Adamson, 1999; Blanning, 2002). The consolidation of power in the hands of a fairly small number of European monarchs meant that their need for ideological justification was all the greater and so too were the resources they had at their disposal for the purpose. Exemplary in this respect is the French king Louis XIV (ruled 1643–1715), who harnessed the arts to the service of his own autocratic rule in the most conspicuous manner imaginable. From 1661 onwards, he employed the architects Louis Le Vau (1612/13–1670) and Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1648–1708), the painter Charles Le Brun (1619–90) and the landscape gardener André Le Nôtre (1613–1700), among many others, to create the vast and lavish palace of Versailles, not far from Paris. Every aspect of its design glorified the king, not least by celebrating the military exploits that made France the dominant power in Europe during his reign (Figure 9).



**Figure 9** The Salon de la Guerre (War room), Château de Versailles, designed by Jules Hardouin-Mansart, showing plaster relief by Antoine Coysevox of Louis XIV trampling over his enemies and lower part of the ceiling paintings by Charles Le Brun, 1678–86. Photo: © Château de Versailles/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Artists continued to be employed by royal and princely courts for the purpose of painting dynastic portraits, producing designs for tapestries and similar tasks into the nineteenth



century. A notable example is Francisco Goya (1746–1828), many of whose early works were painted for the Spanish crown (Figure 10); he drew a salary as court painter from 1789 until his death in 1828 (Tomlinson, 1994, pp. 147, 282).



**Figure 10** Francisco Goya, *The Family of Carlos IV*, 1800, oil on canvas, 280 × 336 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Photo: © Museo Nacional del Prado/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

## Bürger's functions of art: bourgeois art

By 1800, however, the predominant category was what Bürger calls 'bourgeois art'. His use of this term reflects his reliance on a broadly Marxist conceptual framework, which views artistic developments as being driven ultimately by social and economic change (Bürger, 1984, p. 47; Hemingway and Vaughan, 1998). Such art is bourgeois in so far as it owed its existence to the growing importance of trade and industry in Europe since the late medieval period, which gave rise to an increasingly large and influential middle class. Exemplary in this respect is seventeenth-century Dutch painting, the distinctive features and sheer profusion of which were both made possible by a large population of relatively affluent city-dwellers. In other countries, the commercialisation of society and the urban development that went with it tended to take place more slowly. Britain, however, rapidly caught up with the Netherlands; by 1680, London was being transformed into a modern

city characterised by novel uses of space as well as by new building types. Here too, artists produced images that were affordable and appealing to a middle-class audience; notable in this respect was William Hogarth (1697–1764), who began his career working in the comparatively cheap medium of engraving. Even his famous set of paintings *Marriage A-la-Mode*, which satirises the manners and morals of fashionable society, was primarily intended as a model for prints to be made after them (Figure 11). Hogarth's work, like that of many other artists of the period, embodies a sense of didactic purpose, in accordance with the prevailing view that art should aim both to 'instruct and delight'.



**Figure 11** William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode: 2, The Tête à Tête*, 1743–45, oil on canvas, 70 × 91 cm. National Gallery, London, acc. NG114. Bought 1824. Photo: © 2011, The National Gallery, London/Scala, Florence.

What fundamentally distinguishes 'bourgeois art' from previous categories, however, is its lack of any actual function. Its defining feature, according to Bürger, is its autonomy, which he defines as 'art's independence from society' (Bürger, 1984, p. 35). As we have seen, a conception of 'fine art' as a category apart from everyday needs was formalised in the mid eighteenth century. What this meant in practice is best demonstrated by the case of easel painting, which had become the dominant pictorial form by 1600. Unlike an altarpiece or a fresco, this kind of picture has no fixed place; instead, its frame serves to separate it from its surroundings, allowing it to be hung in almost any setting. Its value lies not in any use as such, but in the ease with which it can be bought and sold (or what Marxists call its 'exchange value'). In taking the form of a commodity, easel painting accords with the commercial priorities of bourgeois society, even though what appears within the frame



may be far removed from these priorities (an open landscape, for example: see Figure 12). Art's previous functions did not simply vanish, however, not least because the nobility and its values retained considerable power and prestige. In the household depicted in Hogarth's *The Tête à Tête* (Figure 11), for example, paintings serve in typically courtly fashion for purposes of ostentation and decoration; one is set within a carved overmantel, while those on the walls are mostly large and ornately framed. Being far more expensive, sculpture especially functioned as a kind of luxury commodity; royal and aristocratic art collectors showed off their 'taste' by displaying statues by the most famous sculptors in their residences.



**Figure 12** Caspar David Friedrich, *The Solitary Tree*, 1822, oil on canvas, 55 × 71 cm. Nationalgalerie, Berlin, inv. NG 77. Photographed by Jörg P. Anders. Photo: © 2011, Scala, Florence/BPK, Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin.

Ultimately more important than such residual courtly functions, however, is the distinctly paradoxical way that art in bourgeois society at once preserves and transforms art's sacral functions. Autonomous art does not promote Christian beliefs and practices, as religious art traditionally did, but rather is treated by art lovers as itself the source of a special kind of experience, a rarefied or even spiritual pleasure. This type of pleasure is now called 'aesthetic', a word that was coined in 1735, by Alexander Baumgarten, though it was only towards the end of the eighteenth century that writers began to talk about their experience of art in such high-flown quasi-religious terms (for examples, see Shiner, 2001, pp. 135–6). What this boils down to is that art increasingly functioned during this period as a cult in its own right, one in which the artist of genius replaces God the creator

as the source of meaning and value. This exalted conception of art consolidated the separation between the artist and the craftsman, which had motivated the foundation of the Florentine Academy some two centuries earlier. Nevertheless, throughout the period from 1600 to 1850, artists, and of course architects, continued to carry out a wide range of social functions. They might design a trade card to advertise a shop (Figure 13), for example, or a tomb to commemorate the dead. A crucial means by which art remained integrated into society was through the practice of drawing, on which the very definition of the arts of design depended (*disegno* means 'drawing' as well as 'design' in Italian). On the one hand, it was an amateur pastime pursued by both men and women (Figure 14). On the other hand, professional draughtsmen produced visual records for commercial, military and scientific purposes (Bermingham, 2000). Both functions would eventually be taken over by photography.





**Figure 13** Comte de Caylus after François Boucher, trade card for Edme Gersaint: *A la Pagode*, 1740, etching and engraving, image size 36 × 21 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Photo: BnF, Paris.





**Figure 14** Paul Sandby, *A Lady Copying at a Drawing Table*, c.1760–70, graphite, red and black chalk and stump on paper, 18 × 15 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. Photo: © Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.

## 2.2 From the Baroque to Romanticism

Among the various approaches that have been applied to the study of art produced between c.1600 and c.1850, the most important has traditionally been one based on the concept of style. Art historians who employ this type of approach view the period in terms of a succession of styles: from the Baroque in the seventeenth century, by way of the Rococo in the first half of the eighteenth and Neo-classicism towards the end of the century, to Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. However, such a focus on style has fallen out of favour since the 1970s, which saw the publication of the last volumes in the influential 'Style and Civilization' series edited by John Fleming and Hugh Honour (Honour, 1968; Honour, 1979). Popular surveys and textbooks continue to be published with titles such as *Baroque and Rococo* or *Neoclassicism*, but many scholars have become reluctant to use such labels to sum up the art of a whole epoch. Recent publications of this kind tend instead to have titles such as *Art of the Seventeenth Century* or *Art in Europe 1700–1830*; their authors often begin by explaining the limitations of the concept of style as applied to the art of the period in question (Harris, 2008, p. xxi; Craske, 1997, pp. 7–11). Nevertheless, style labels still appear in even the most serious and scholarly works, suggesting that they may have their uses after all. For this reason, it is necessary to examine the ways in which they have been defined in order to assess their relevance to artistic developments in the two and a half centuries explored here.

### Baroque 'style'

First of all, it needs to be acknowledged that most of these labels date from long after the phenomena to which they are applied. Take 'Baroque', for example. Originating in the late eighteenth century as a derogatory term applied particularly to what certain writers saw as the bizarre and excessive architecture of Francesco Borromini (1599–1667) (Figure 15), it was elaborated into a coherent stylistic category in the late nineteenth century by the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin. Wölfflin's account of the Baroque is a formalist one, that is to say, he analysed what he identified as the purely visual features of the works of art he took to exemplify the style. Such a mode of analysis has as its precondition the autonomy of art, which makes it possible to conceive of works in isolation from the historical context in which they were produced and the social functions that they served. More recent accounts of the Baroque, by contrast, take account of its sacral and courtly functions, applying the label especially to works that sought to make an overwhelming effect on their beholders in order to impress them with the power and glory both of the sacred mysteries and of earthly authority (Snodin and Llewellyn, 2009; for a recent attempt to rethink the whole category of the Baroque, see Hills, 2011). The exemplary instance is papal Rome from the 1620s onwards, but the quintessential Baroque painter is the Flemish (and also Catholic) artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), whose many works include twenty-one vast canvases illustrating the life of the French queen Marie de Medici (Figure 16). It was because he disregarded art's functions that Wölfflin could apply the label much more broadly, such that Rembrandt (1606–69) too became an exemplar of the Baroque along with other Dutch painters (Figure 17).





**Figure 15** Francesco Borromini, façade of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome, 1665–67. Photo: © 2012 Scala, Florence.



**Figure 16** Peter Paul Rubens, *The Arrival of Marie de Medici at Marseilles*, 1622–26, oil on canvas, 394 × 293 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 1774. Photo: © RMN/Hervé Lewandowski.





**Figure 17** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Aristotle Looking at a Bust of Homer*, 1653, oil on canvas, 144 × 137 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/The Bridgeman Art Library.

## Rococo 'style'

The use of style labels such as the Baroque can thus be justified so long as they are employed to analyse the formal means used by artists to achieve specific effects in particular historical circumstances. It remains problematic when what began as a rhetorical device for disparaging certain artists and works is transformed into an ostensibly neutral category applied in a broad-brush way. In the case of the Baroque, this does not matter very much any more; Borromini, for example, is now generally admired for precisely the tendencies for which he was vilified in the late eighteenth century. It is still



a live issue, however, in the case of the Rococo, a term that originated at around the same date. It is said that students of the Neo-classical painter Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) coined the word (a conflation of *rocaille*, meaning a kind of ornamental rock and shellwork, and *barocco*, that is, Baroque) just before 1800 in order to castigate whatever they associated with the fashionable taste of the court society that had been swept away by the French Revolution. It is now used to designate the erotic, playful and decorative style that developed in France during the first half of the eighteenth century. The example by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806) shown in Figure 18 is a ‘cabinet picture’, identifiable as such from its small size and known to have been commissioned by a courtier, who would have displayed it with other paintings, sculptures and precious objects to create a harmonious ensemble (Bailey, 1987; Bailey, 2002, p. 1). The problem lies in the way that the pejorative connotations with which the word was originally imbued still cling to it, with the result that the Rococo still tends to be damned for its supposed frivolity, superficiality and decadence rather than analysed with reference to the functions that it was designed to serve and the significance it held at the time. (For recent works that offer a properly historicised account of the Rococo, see Sheriff, 1990; Scott, 1995; Hyde, 2006.)



**Figure 18** Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767, oil on canvas, 81 × 64 cm. Wallace Collection, London. Photo: © Wallace Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.

As Wölfflin's use of Dutch art to exemplify the Baroque suggests, a reliance on style labels is also problematic in so far as it projects a homogenous model of artistic development across Europe, regardless of geographical differences. Take Britain, for example, which defined itself during this period as a Protestant nation by contrast to its Catholic neighbours and took pride in the tradition of political liberty that set it apart from the absolutist regimes on the Continent, above all France. For these and other reasons, the

Baroque made comparatively little impact in this country. Its main British exponents were a small group of architects who worked in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: Christopher Wren (1632–1723), John Vanbrugh (1664–1726) and Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661/62–1736). Similarly, though what we now call the Rococo, but was then known as the ‘modern taste’, gained a certain currency in Britain, its use was restricted to small-scale pictures and decorative objects. Hogarth parodied what he saw as its fanciful excesses in the leafy wall ornament sprouting a clock, a cat, a fish and a Buddha in *The Tête à Tête* (Figure 11): a preference for natural, irregular forms and a vogue for Chinese artefacts were both typical of the Rococo (compare Figure 13) (Snodin, 1984; Crown, 1990; Porter, 2010). British art can also be seen as anomalous in having produced a major Neo-classical painter, Benjamin West (1738–1820), who was in any case American by birth, some two decades before David exhibited what is usually taken to be the style’s manifesto picture, *The Oath of the Horatii*. Of course, West’s classical paintings are only ‘premature’ from the perspective of a conception of art history as a succession of period styles that expects Britain to be a provincial backwater lagging behind the rest of Europe.

The point here is not to assert Britain’s status as a pioneer of Neo-classicism, but rather to draw attention to the dominance of classicism throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This point applies especially to architecture; the classical vocabulary of columns, arches, domes and pediments derived from ancient Greek and Roman buildings was used for virtually all important architectural projects during this period, with only rare exceptions until well after 1800 (see Arciszweska and McKellar, 2004; Bergdoll, 2000). However, painting and sculpture were also profoundly indebted to the legacy of classical antiquity, even during the heyday of the Baroque and Rococo. *The Arrival of Marie de Medici at Marseilles* (Figure 16), for example, reveals Rubens’s familiarity with ancient allegory and mythology; the winged figure at the top personifies fame, while the naked figures in the water are pagan goddesses. Classicism ‘proper’ is distinguished from other styles by its greater reliance on antique sculpture, such as could then be seen in papal, royal and aristocratic art collections. It also looks back to the Renaissance, when the legacy of antiquity had first been ‘rediscovered’, taking artists such as Raphael (1483–1520) as a source of inspiration. Both of these sources, but especially antique sculpture, were central to the curriculum of art academies. Together, they formed the basis of what was then known by such labels as the ‘great style’ or the ‘true taste’. The crucial point is that what we now call classicism was not regarded at the time as a distinct style identified by a specific set of formal features (of the sort elaborated by Wölfflin). Rather, ‘the antique’ (as it was known) functioned as a cultural norm, setting the standards of good taste that distinguished the social elite from the working poor, who had no access to the body of ideas, texts and objects that constituted the classical tradition (Haskell and Penny, 1981). Images and artefacts that lay outside that tradition did not count as art by these standards; this applied both to those for a ‘popular’, non-elite audience and to those from other cultures.

## Neo-classical ‘style’

What is now known as ‘Neo-classicism’ was conceived of at the time as a return to the true spirit of the antique after what its proponents saw as the aberrations from these standards represented by the Baroque and Rococo. The label itself was not coined until the end of the nineteenth century and only gained its current meaning in the twentieth (Irwin, 1997, p. 9). It is used to distinguish late eighteenth-century classicism from earlier versions, such as the work of Raphael or that of the seventeenth-century French painter



Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665). When it was first formulated around 1900, however, ‘Neo-classicism’ could refer to every kind of classical art produced since the Renaissance (Poussin included) or even since antiquity. Like many other style labels, it originally had a pejorative function, serving to characterise the works of art to which it was applied as derivative and inauthentic. Such accusations were bound up with a reaction against academic values; criticising ‘neo-classical’ tendencies in art implied a challenge to the central idea on which academies were based: the belief in universal standards of taste that could be taught. This kind of rejection originated in the late eighteenth century when it began to be claimed that academies constrained ‘original genius’, but became widely accepted only after 1800 when the idea that artists ought to express themselves in a wholly personal style developed. This idea defines Romanticism; it follows from it that there could be no single Romantic style exemplified by one major artist, as Neo-classicism in painting is embodied by David. In the case of sculpture, moreover, classical forms might be infused with a distinctively romantic intensity and inwardness. The word also differs from other style labels in having been current at the time, even if its major figures did not necessarily identify with it (Honour, 1979, p. 22). As a movement inspired by a set of definite principles that challenged those of the Academy, Romanticism prefigures later developments in modern art.

## 2.3 From patronage to the public sphere

Among the various approaches that have been applied to the study of art produced between c.1600 and c.1850, the dominant one in recent decades has been a concern to locate art in its historical context. Art historians who employ this kind of approach take account both of the institutional and commercial conditions in which works of art were produced and consumed and of the broader cultural, social, economic and political conditions of the period. Such an approach (known as the social history of art) represents a reaction against an older model of art history, which relied ultimately on a vague notion of the *zeitgeist* (or ‘spirit of the age’) as a means of explaining artistic developments. This model of art history was closely associated with a focus on style, each style being assumed to reflect the spirit of a different age (Wölfflin, 1950, pp. 9–11, 233–4). Even a pioneer of the social history of art, Arnold Hauser, who pointed out that the notion of a *zeitstil* (‘style of the time’) did not square with the co-existence of contrasting Baroque and classical tendencies in the seventeenth century, retained style as the organising principle for his work, arguing that each style expresses a distinct ‘world-view’ (see Hauser, 1962 [1951], vol. 2, pp. 158–68; vol. 3, pp. 153–72). It is now recognised that artistic practice within a period is invariably more diverse and complex than a style-based art history admits. Furthermore, rather than simply ‘reflecting’ or ‘expressing’ wider social forces, works of art are primarily shaped by the structures and values of the art world, but also connected to society at large in myriad subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways (Clark, 1982, pp. 9–20).

### Patronage

In exploring artistic developments in the centuries with which we are concerned here, the first structure or institution to consider is that of patronage. As in the Renaissance, many artists worked for patrons, who commissioned them to execute works of art in accordance with their requirements. Patronage played an important role throughout the period, most obviously in the case of large-scale projects for a specific location that could not be

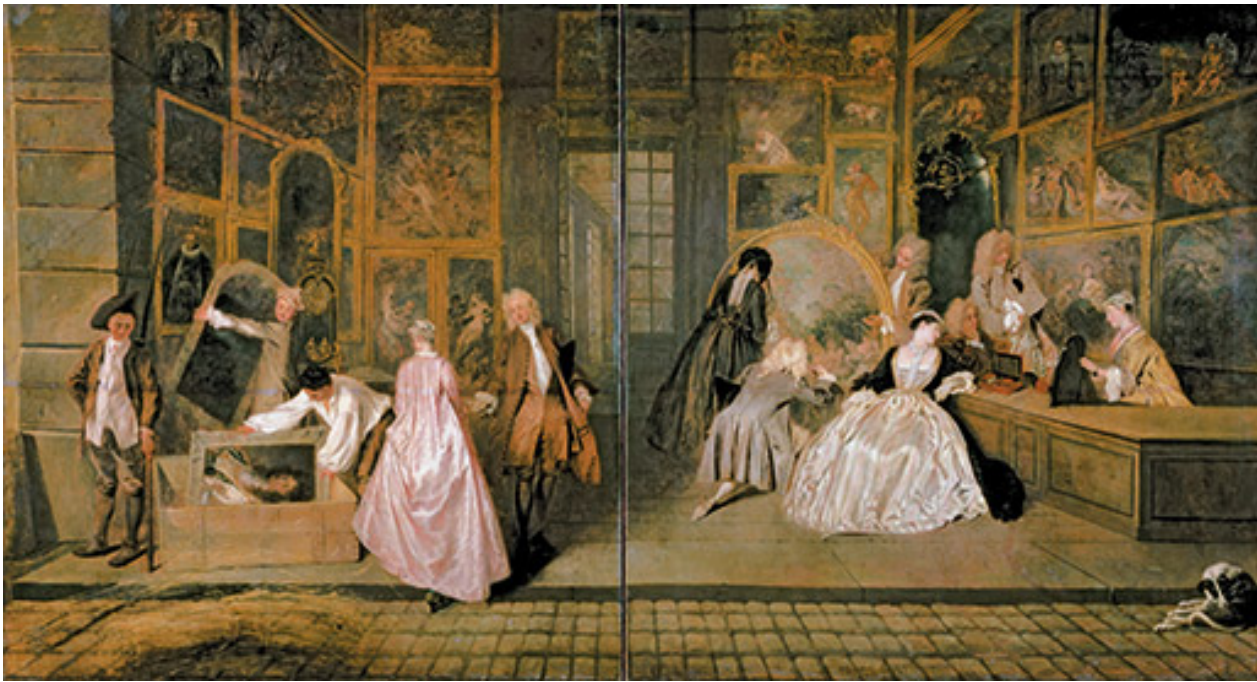


undertaken without a commission. Exemplary in this respect is the work that the sculptor (and architect) Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) carried out at St Peter's Basilica in Rome for a succession of popes from the 1620s onwards. Landscape gardening is another case in point. Artists also executed on commission for a patron works that, though not actually immovable, involved too much risk to be executed 'on spec', in the hope that someone would come along and buy them after they were completed, either because they were large and expensive or because they did not make for easy viewing. Both considerations applied in the case of David's *The Oath of the Horatii*, a huge picture of a tragic subject painted in an uncompromising style, which was commissioned by the French state. An artist greatly in demand such as the sculptor Antonio Canova (1757–1822) would also tend to work on commission; in his case, the grandest patrons from across Europe sometimes waited for years to receive a statue by the master, even though he maintained (as both Bernini and Rubens also did) a large workshop to assist him in his labours.

Finally, portraiture was a genre that, with rare exceptions, such as the portrait of Omai by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), required a patron to commission an artist to take a likeness.

## From patronage to the open market

Nevertheless, the period after 1600 saw a shift away from patronage towards the open market. This shift accompanied the gradual decline of 'sacral' and 'courtly' art, both of which were normally executed on commission. Consider the case of Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*, an altarpiece commissioned for the church of Santa Maria della Scala in Rome in 1601 (Figure 8). In the event, the resolutely human terms in which the painter depicted the subject and the unidealised treatment of the figures scandalised the monks responsible for the church. The painting was therefore put up for sale, exciting intense interest among artists, dealers and collectors; it was snapped up (at a high price) by the Duke of Mantua, on the advice of Rubens, who was then employed as the duke's court painter (Langdon, 1998, pp. 246–51, 317–18). Thus a functional religious artefact was transformed into a secular artwork, acclaimed as a masterpiece by a famous artist and sold to a princely collector, for whom the possession of such a work was a matter of personal prestige. The comparable transformation of courtly art in response to the market can be illustrated by reference to another picture immediately displaced from the location for which it was painted. In 1721, the Flemish-born artist Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) painted a large canvas as a shop sign for his friend, the Parisian art dealer Edme Gersaint (Figure 19). It shows the kind of elegant figures that the artist typically painted, but here, rather than engaging in aristocratic leisure and dalliance in a park-like setting, they are scrutinising items for sale in an art dealer's shop; a portrait of Louis XIV is being packed away into a case, as if to mark the passing of the era of grand courtly art. Rapidly sold to a wealthy (though not aristocratic) collector, *Gersaint's Shop Sign* exemplifies the way that Watteau repackaged courtly ideals for the market to reach a wider audience. The painting also shows how art collecting became a refined pastime for the social elite, in which art dealers played a crucial role (McClellan, 1996).



**Figure 19** Antoine Watteau, *Gersaint's Shop Sign*, 1720–21, oil on canvas, 151 × 306 cm. Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin. Photo: © Schloss Charlottenburg/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

As these two examples demonstrate, more market-oriented structures and practices emerged in countries such as Italy and France from the end of the Renaissance onwards (see Haskell, 1980; Pomian, 1990; Posner, 1993; North and Ormrod, 1998). However, the tendency towards commercialisation is even more striking elsewhere: for example, in the growth of large-scale speculative building in late seventeenth-century London. As already noted, the emergence of 'bourgeois art' (as distinct from architecture) is best exemplified by the Netherlands, where most artists produced small easel paintings for sale. This model of artistic practice went hand in hand with the rise of art dealers and other features of the modern art world, such as public auctions and sale catalogues (see Montias, 1982; North, 1997; Montias, 2002). In important respects, the Dutch case remains idiosyncratic, but nevertheless the genres of painting that dominated in this context – that is, portraiture, landscape, scenes of everyday life and still life – soon became the most popular and successful elsewhere in Europe too. It was not just subject matter that counted, however; increasing emphasis was also placed on the distinctive brushwork of the individual artist and on the skills of connoisseurship that both dealers and collectors needed in order to recognise and appreciate the 'hand' of each 'master' and, of course, to distinguish genuine works from misattributed ones and outright forgeries. Exemplary in this respect is the work of Rembrandt; it was thanks above all to his exceptionally broad and hence highly distinctive handling of paint that he came to be generally regarded as the greatest of all post-Renaissance artists by the mid nineteenth century (see Figure 17). As a result of these developments, painting increasingly tended to overshadow other art forms, especially tapestry, which lost its previous high status with the decline of courtly art. However, Neo-classicism in general and the career of Canova in particular temporarily boosted the status of sculpture around 1800 (Potts, 2000; Lichtenstein, 2008).

## Habermas and the public sphere

The emergence of a recognisably modern art world between 1600 and 1850 formed part of the development of the 'public sphere', as it has been defined by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas argues that the late seventeenth century onwards saw a shift away from 'representational culture', which embodied and displayed the power of the ruler and nobility, as courtly art traditionally did. It was replaced by a new urban culture, the 'bourgeois public sphere', which was brought into existence by private individuals, that is, middle-class people like merchants and lawyers, who came together to exchange news and ideas, giving rise to new cultural institutions, such as newspapers, clubs, lending libraries and public theatres (Habermas, 1989 [1962]; Blanning, 2002). A pioneering role in this respect was played by London as a consequence of the limited power of the monarch, which meant that the court dominated culture much less than it did in France at the same time. Public interest in art grew rapidly during the eighteenth century, aided by an expanding print culture, which allowed the circulation of high-art images to an ever larger audience (see Pears, 1988; Clayton, 1997). In both London and Paris, large audiences also attended the exhibitions that began to be held during the middle decades of the century. The first public museums were established around the same time. Most were royal and princely collections opened up to the public, whether as a benevolent gesture on the ruler's part or, in the case of the Louvre, by the French Revolutionary government in 1793 (McClellan, 1994; Sheehan, 2000; Prior, 2002). However, it was a charitable bequest from an art dealer that led to the creation of the first public art museum in Britain; housed in a building designed for the purpose by the architect Sir John Soane (1753–1837), Dulwich College Picture Gallery opened to the public in 1817 (Figure 20).



**Figure 20** Joseph Michael Gandy, *Preliminary Design by Sir John Soane for Dulwich College Picture Gallery: The West Front*, 1812, pen and watercolour, 74 × 128 cm. Sir John Soane's Museum, London. By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum.

## The art museum and the painting of current events

With the establishment of the art museum, the autonomy of art gained its defining institution. In a museum, a work of art could be viewed purely for its own sake, without reference to its traditional functions. Nevertheless, as indicated above, art's autonomy was far from complete. From around 1800 onwards, for example, the public sphere also opened up the possibility that artists might try to bridge the gap dividing art from society by independently producing works that engaged with current events, as the French painter Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) did in his vast picture, *The Raft of the Medusa*. This and comparable works by other French artists, notably *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), which was painted just after the July Revolution of 1830 (Figure 21), are often seen as having inaugurated a new tradition of politically committed modern or 'avant-garde' art, which came to the fore towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, it was during this period that the French military term 'avant garde' (meaning a section of an army that goes ahead of the rest) came to be applied to works of art. It was first used in this sense in a text published in 1825 under the name of the Utopian Socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, who argued that artists could help to transform society by spreading 'new ideas among men' (Harrison et al., 1998, p. 40). Although he does not seem to have had any specific type of art in mind, his emphasis on its role as a means of communication makes it plausible to apply the term to works such as *The Raft of the Medusa* and *Liberty Leading the People*, which convey a political message on a large scale and to striking effect.





**Figure 21** Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, oil on canvas, 260 × 325 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, RF129. Photo: © RMN/Hervé Lewandowski.

For present purposes, however, what is important about these two paintings is the way that they depended on the institutions of the public sphere. Rather than being commissioned by a patron, each was intended first and foremost for display at the official art exhibition in Paris known as the Salon. Both, moreover, were bought by the state for the Luxembourg museum, which was founded in 1818 to house modern French art (though, in Géricault's case, not until several years later). Indeed Delacroix may have painted his picture in the hope or even the expectation that this would happen, since two of the artist's works had already entered the museum. It should also be noted that such ambitious and challenging works were very much the exception, even in France and much more so in other countries where the state did not support living artists in the same way. Most of them earned a living by catering to the demands of the market, typically by specialising in a particular genre, such as portraiture. In this respect, the first half of the nineteenth century is continuous with the previous two centuries, during which high-status works by celebrated artists also constituted only a small part of the broad field of visual culture. Rather than tracing a single narrative of art's development from the establishment of the academies to the beginnings of the avant-garde, it is important to be aware of its diversity and complexity throughout western Europe during this period.

## 3 Modernity to globalisation

This section addresses art and architecture from around 1850 up to the present.

During this period, art changed out of all recognition. At the beginning of our period, the various academies still held sway in Europe. Artists continued to learn their craft by drawing from plaster casts before progressing to the figure, and the trip to Rome remained a cultural rite of passage. It is true that the hierarchy of the genres was breaking down and the classical ideal was becoming less convincing. In 1859, the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) poured scorn on the new medium of photography. According to him, photographs that imitated paintings of ancient history were ludicrous:

By bringing together a group of male and female clowns, got up like butchers and laundry-maids in a carnival, and by begging these heroes to be so kind as to hold their chance grimaces for the time necessary for the performance, the operator flattered himself that he was reproducing tragic or elegant scenes from ancient history.

(Baudelaire, 1981 [1859], p. 112)

Baudelaire was suggesting that photographs that mirrored history painting – ‘male and female clowns, got up like butchers and laundry-maids in a carnival’ – were utterly unpersuasive, because tawdry details from everyday life undermined references to ancient history. Many of his contemporaries went a step further, believing that paintings and sculptures of contemporary women posed as classical nymphs were equally preposterous. Increasingly, academic art failed to generate conviction, and ordinary landscapes and scenes from everyday life began to replace ‘resurrected Romans’. Nevertheless, what counted as art in much of the nineteenth century remained pretty stable. Whether in sculpture, painting, drawing or printmaking, artworks represented recognisable subjects in a credible human-centred space. To be sure, subjects became less high-flown, compositional effects often deliberately jarring and surface handling more explicit. There were plenty of academicians and commentators who believed these changes amounted to the end of civilisation, but from today’s perspective they seem like small shifts of emphasis.

In contrast, art in the first part of the twentieth century underwent a rapid gear change. Art historians agree that during this time artists began to radically revise picture making and sculpture. Painters flattened out pictorial space, broke with conventional viewpoints and discarded local colour. (‘Local colour’ is the term used for the colour things appear in the world. From the early twentieth century, painters began to experiment with non-local colour.) Sculptors began to leave the surface of their works in a rough, seemingly unfinished state; they increasingly created partial figures and abandoned plinths or, alternatively, inflated the scale of their bases. Architects abandoned revivalist styles and rich ornamentation. To take one often cited example from painting, while the art of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) is based on a recognisable motif, say a landscape, when looking at these paintings we get the distinct impression that the overall organisation of the colours and structural elements matters as much or more than the scene depicted. To retain fidelity to his sense impressions, Cézanne is compelled to find a new order and coherence internal to the canvas. Frequently this turns into incoherence as he tries to manage the tension between putting marks on a flat surface and his external observation of space.

In fifteen years some artists would take this problem – the recognition that making art involved attention to its own formal conditions that are not reducible to representing external things – through Cubism to a fully abstract art. Conventionally, this story is told as a heroic progression of ‘movements’ and ‘styles’, each giving way to the next in the sequence: Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Constructivism, Surrealism .... Each changing of the guard is perceived as an advance and almost a necessary next step on the road to some preset goal. This rapid turnover of small groups and personal idioms can seem bewildering and, in fact, this is a minimal version of this story. Whether they sought new expressive resources, novel ways of conveying experience or innovative techniques for representing the modern world, modern artists turned their backs on the tried and tested forms of mimetic resemblance. But what counted as art changed too. Bits of the everyday world began to be incorporated into artworks – as collage or montage in two-dimensional art forms; in construction and assemblage in three-dimensional ones. The inclusion of found materials played a fundamental role in modern art. The use of modern materials and technologies – steel, concrete, photography – did something similar. Some artists abandoned easel painting or sculpture to make direct interventions in the world through the production of usable things, whether chairs or illustrated news magazines. Not all artists elected to work with these new techniques and materials, and many carried on in the traditional ways or attempted to adapt them to new circumstances.

### 3.1 Autonomy and modernity

Broadly speaking, there are two different ways of thinking about modern art, or two different versions of the story. One way is to view art as something that can be practised (and thought of) as an activity radically separate from everyday life or worldly concerns. From this point of view, art is said to be ‘autonomous’ from society – that is, it is believed to be self-sustaining and self-referring. One particularly influential version of this story suggests that modern art should be viewed as a process by which features extraneous to a particular branch of art would be progressively eliminated, and painters or sculptors would come to concentrate on problems specific to their domain. Another way of thinking about modern art is to view it as responding to the modern world, and to see modern artists immersing themselves in the conflicts and challenges of society. That is to say, some modern artists sought ways of conveying the changing experiences generated in Europe by the twin processes of commercialisation (the commodification of everyday life) and urbanisation. From this point of view, modern art is a way of reflecting on the transformations that created what we call, in a sort of shorthand, ‘modernity’.

#### Greenberg and autonomy

While it has its roots in the nineteenth century, the approach to modern art as an autonomous practice is particularly associated with the ideas of the English critics Roger Fry (1866–1934) and Clive Bell (1881–1964), the critic Clement Greenberg (1909–94) and the New York Museum of Modern Art’s director Alfred H. Barr (1902–81). For a period this view largely became the common sense of modern art (O’Brian, 1986–95, 4 vols; Barr, 1974 [1936]). This version of modernism is itself complex. The argument presumes that art is self-contained and artists are seen to grapple with technical problems of painting and sculpture, and the point of reference is to artworks that have gone before. This approach can be described as ‘formalist’ (paying exclusive attention to formal



matters), or, perhaps more productively drawing on a term employed by the critic Meyer Schapiro (1904–96), as ‘internalist’ (a somewhat less pejorative way of saying the same thing) (Schapiro, 1978 [1937]). According to Greenberg:

Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, colours, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.

(Greenberg, 1986 [1939], p. 9)

Rather than cloaking artifice, modern art, such as that made by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) (see Figure 22), drew attention to the conventions, procedures and techniques supposedly ‘inherent’ in a given form of art. Modern art set about ‘creating something valid solely on its own terms’ (Ibid., p. 8). For painting, this meant turning away from illusion and story-telling to concentrate on the features that were fundamental to the practice – producing aesthetic effects by placing marks on a flat, bounded surface. For sculpture, it entailed arranging or assembling forms in space. In a series of occasional pieces, Greenberg produced an account of the coming to consciousness of artists (or art) in which this fundamental recognition of the nature of painting was brought to fruition. For him modern art began with Edouard Manet (1832–83), who was the first to recognise or emphasise the contradiction between illusion and the flat support of the canvas. Cézanne pushed this recognition much further and his legacy was picked up by Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and the Cubists and further developed by Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and the interwar abstract painters and some Surrealists (particularly Joan Miró, 1893–1983), culminating in the Abstract Expressionist generation of American painters, who were his contemporaries. Greenberg represented this trajectory as the modernist ‘mainstream’ (Greenberg, 1993 [1960]).



**Figure 22** Wassily Kandinsky, *Painting with Green Center*, 1913, oil on canvas, 109 × 118 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Arthur Jerome Eddy Memorial Collection, 1931.510. Photography: © The Art Institute of Chicago. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2012.

It is important to understand that the account of autonomous art, however internalist it may seem, developed as a response to the social and political conditions of modern societies. In his 1939 essay 'Avant-garde and kitsch', Greenberg suggested that art was in danger from two linked challenges: the rise of the dictators (Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler and Franco) and the commercialised visual culture of modern times (the kitsch, or junk, of his title). Dictatorial regimes turned their backs on ambitious art and curried favour with the masses by promoting a bowdlerised or debased form of realism that was easy to comprehend. Seemingly distinct from art made by dictatorial fiat, the visual culture of liberal capitalism pursued instant, canned entertainment that would appeal to the broadest number of paying customers. This pre-packaged emotional distraction was geared to easy, unchallenging consumption. Kitsch traded on sentimentality, common-sense values and flashy surface effects. The two sides of this pincer attack ghettoised the values associated with art. Advanced art, in this argument, like all human values, faced an imminent danger. Greenberg argued that, in response to the impoverished culture of both modern capitalist democracy and dictatorship, artists withdrew to create novel and challenging artworks

that maintained the possibility for critical experience and attention. He claimed that this was the only way that art could be kept alive in modern society. In this essay, Greenberg put forward a left-wing sociological account of the origins of modernist autonomy; others came to similar conclusions from positions of cultural despair or haughty disdain for the masses.

The period from around 1850 onwards has been tumultuous: it has been regularly punctuated by revolutions, wars and civil wars, and has witnessed the rise of nation states, the growth and spread of capitalism, imperialism and colonialism, and decolonisation. Sometimes artists tried to keep their distance from the historical whirlwind, at other moments they flung themselves into the eye of the storm. Even the most abstract developments and autonomous trends can be thought of as embedded in this historical process. Modern artists could be cast in opposition to repressive societies, or mass visual culture in the west, by focusing on themes of personal liberty and individual defiance. The New York School championed by Greenberg coincided with this political situation and with the high point of US mass cultural dominance – advertising, Hollywood cinema, popular music and the rest. In many ways, the work of this group of abstract painters presents the test case for assessing the claim that modern art offers a critical alternative to commercial visual culture. It could seem a plausible argument, but the increasing absorption of modern art into middle-class museum culture casts an increasing doubt over these claims. At the same time, the figurative art that was supposed to have been left in the hands of the dictators continued to be made in a wide variety of forms. If figurative art had been overlooked by critics during the high point of abstract art, it made a spectacular comeback with Pop Art.

Greenberg's story was particularly influential in the period from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s. He produced a powerful synthetic account of developments or changes in art, but it was always a selective narrative. Even in the case of the paradigmatic example of Cubism, it is possible to see other concerns. Whereas the internal focus concentrated on the flattening of picture space through the use of small 'facet planes', art historians have recently paid a lot of attention to the way Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Georges Braque (1882–1963) engaged with the signs and materials of mass culture: their inclusion of newspaper cuttings, handbills, cinema tickets and the like. Cubism can be viewed as an experiment with the internal or formal concerns of art for a small audience of cognoscenti, and there is no denying that it is this, but embedded in this work is an engagement with the new forms of visual culture.

## The emergence of modern art in Paris

Let's take a step back to the middle of the nineteenth century and consider the emergence of modern art in Paris. The new art that developed with Gustave Courbet (1819–77), Manet and the Impressionists entailed a self-conscious break with the art of the past. These modern artists took seriously the representation of their own time. In place of allegorical figures in togas or scenes from the Bible, modern artists concerned themselves with the things around them. When asked to include angels in a painting for a church, Courbet is said to have replied 'I have never seen angels. Show me an angel and I will paint one.' But these artists were not just empirical recording devices. The formal or technical means employed in modern art are jarring and unsettling, and this has to be a fundamental part of the story. A tension between the means and the topics depicted, between surface and subject, is central to what this art was. Nevertheless, we miss something crucial if we do not attend to the artists' choices of subjects. Principally, these artists sought the signs of change and novelty – multiple details and scenarios that made



up contemporary life. This meant they paid a great deal of attention to the new visual culture associated with commercialised leisure.

Greenberg contrasted the mainstream of modern art, concerned with autonomous aesthetic experience and formal innovation, with what he called 'dead ends' – directions in art that he felt led nowhere. Even when restricted to the European tradition, this marginalised much of the most significant art made in interwar Europe – Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism (Greenberg, 1961). The groups of artists producing this art – usually referred to collectively as the 'avant-garde' or the 'historical avant-garde' – wanted to fuse art and life, and often based their practice on a socialist rejection of bourgeois culture (see, in particular, Bürger, 1984). From their position in western Europe, the Dadaists mounted an assault on the irrationalism and violence of militarism and the repressive character of capitalist culture; in collages, montages, assemblages and performances, they created visual juxtapositions aimed at shocking the middle-class audience and intended to reveal connections hidden behind everyday appearances (see Figure 23). The material for this was drawn from mass-circulation magazines, newspapers and other printed ephemera. The Constructivists participated in the process of building a new society in the USSR, turning to the creation of utilitarian objects (or, at least, prototypes for them). The Surrealists combined ideas from psychoanalysis and Marxism in an attempt to unleash those forces repressed by mainstream society; the dream imagery is most familiar, but experiments with found objects and collage were also prominent. These avant-garde groups tried to produce more than refined aesthetic experiences for a restricted audience; they proffered their skills to help to change the world. In this work the cross-over to visual culture is evident; communication media and design played an important role. Avant-garde artists began to design book covers, posters, fabrics, clothing, interiors, monuments and other useful things. They also began to merge with journalism by producing photographs and undertaking layout work. In avant-garde circles, architects, photographers and artists mixed and exchanged ideas. For those committed to autonomy of art, this kind of activity constitutes a denial of the shaping conditions of art and betrayal of art for propaganda, but the avant-garde were attempting something else – they sought a new social role for art. One way to explore this debate is by switching from painting and sculpture to architecture and design.



**Figure 23** Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Last Epoch of the Weimar Beer-Belly Culture* (*Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche, Deutschlands*), 1919–20, photomontage and collage with watercolour, 114 × 90 cm. State Museums, Berlin, inv. NG57/61. Photo: © bpk/ Nationalgalerie, SMB/Jörg P. Anders. © DACS 2012.



## Responses to the modern world

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), who is now seen as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century, occupies an important place in this alternative story. Duchamp started out as a Cubist, but broke with the idea of art as a matter of special visual experience and turned his attention to puns and perceptual or conceptual conundrums (Duchamp, 1975). These activities brought him into the orbit of Dada in Paris and New York, but this was probably nothing more than a convenient alliance. Duchamp played games with words and investigated the associations of ordinary objects. He also messed around with gender conventions, inventing a female alter ego called Rose Sélavy – a pun on '*Eros, c'est la vie*' or 'Eros is life'. Critics and other artists have particularly focused on the strain of his work known as the 'readymades'. From 1914, Duchamp began singling out ordinary objects, such as a bottle rack, for his own attention and amusement and that of a few friends. Sometimes he altered these things in some small way, adding words and a title or joining them with something else in a way that shifted their meaning; with *Bicycle Wheel*, he attached an inverted bike wheel to a wooden stool – he seems to have been particularly interested in the shadow play this object created. We can see this odd object among the clutter of Duchamp's studio on West 67th Street in the photograph by Henri-Pierre Roche (Figure 24). He called these altered everyday things 'assisted readymades'.



**Figure 24** Henri-Pierre Roche, *Bicycle Wheel, 33 West 67th Street, New York, 1917–18*, gelatin silver print, 4 × 6 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gift of Jacqueline, Paul and Peter Matisse in memory of their mother Alexina Duchamp, 1998-4-61. Photo: © 2012 The Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence. © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2012.

Duchamp was interested in interrogating the mass-produced objects created by his society and the common-sense definitions and values that such things accrued. Mischievously, he probed the definitions and values of his culture for a small group of like-



minded friends. It isn't at all clear that any of this was meant to be art; in fact, he explicitly posed the idea of making 'works' that could not be thought of as 'art' (Nesbit, 2000). Nevertheless, artists in the late 1950s and the 1960s became fascinated with this legacy and began to think of art as something the artist selected or posited, rather than something he or she composed or made. According to this idea, the artist could designate anything as art; what was important was the way that this decision allowed things to be perceived in a new light. This was to lead to a fundamentally different conception of art practice.

With the break-up of the hegemony of the New York School, artists began to look at those features of modern art that had been left out of the formalist story. During this period, Duchamp came to replace Picasso or Matisse as the touchstone for young artists, but he was just one tributary of what became a torrent. Perhaps most significantly, painting and anything we might straightforwardly recognise as sculpture began to take a back seat. A host of experimental forms and new media came to prominence: performance art, video, works made directly in or out of the landscape, installations, photography and a host of other forms and practices. These works often engaged with the representation of modernity and the shifting pattern of world power relations we call 'globalisation'.

## 3.2 National, international, cosmopolitan

Whether holding itself apart from the visual culture of modernity or immersed in it, modern art developed not in the world's most powerful economy (Britain), but in the places that were most marked by 'uneven and combined development': places where explosive tensions between traditional rural societies and the changes wrought by capitalism were most acute (Trotsky, 1962 [1928/1906]). In these locations, people only recently out of the fields encountered the shocks and pleasures of grand-metropolitan cities. As the sociologist of modernity Georg Simmel (1858–1918) suggested: 'the city sets up a deep contrast with small-town and rural life with reference to the social foundations of psychic life'. In contrast to the over-stimulation of the senses in the city, Simmel thought that in the rural situation 'the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly' (Simmel, 1997 [1903], p. 175). This situation applies first of all to Paris (see Clark, 1984; Harvey, 2003; Prendergast, 1992). In Paris, the grand boulevards and new palaces of commercial entertainment went hand in hand with the 'zone', a vast shanty town ringing the city that was occupied by workers and those who eked out a precarious life. Whereas the Impressionists concentrated on the bourgeois city of bars, boulevards and boudoirs, the photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927) represented the Paris that was disappearing – the medieval city with its winding alleys and old iron work – or those working-class quarters composed of cheap lodgings and traders recycling worn-out commodities (see Figure 25) (Nesbit, 1992; see also Benjamin, 1983). This clash of ways of life generated different ways of inhabiting and viewing the city with class and gender at their core. Access to the modern city and its representations was more readily available to middle-class men than to those with less social authority, whether they were working people, women or minority ethnic or religious groups (Wolff, 1985, pp. 37–46; Pollock, 1988, pp. 50–90).



**Figure 25** Eugène Atget, *Untitled (Ragpicker)*, c.1899–1900, gelatin silver print on paper, 22 × 17 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Abbott-Levy Collection. Partial gift of Shirley C. Burden 1.1969.889. Photo: © 2012 The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence.

## Contradictions

Before the Second World War, the alternative centres of modernism were also key sites of uneven and combined development: Berlin, Budapest, Milan, Moscow and Prague. In these places, large-scale industry was created by traditional elites in order to develop the production capacities required to compete militarily with Britain. Factory production was plopped down into largely agrarian societies, generating massive shocks to social equilibrium. In many ways, Moscow is the archetypal version of this pattern of acute contradictions. Before the 1917 Revolution, Moscow was the site of enormous and up-to-date factories, including the world's largest engineering plant, but was set in a sea of peasant backwardness. This is one reason that Vladimir Lenin described Russia as the weakest link in the international-capitalist chain.

This set of contradictions put a particular perception of time at the centre of modern art. Opposition to the transformations of society that were underway could be articulated in one of two ways, and in an important sense both were fantasy projections: on the one hand, artists looked to societies that were seen as more 'primitive' as an antidote to the upheavals and shallow glamour of capitalism. On the other hand, they attempted a leap into the future. Both perspectives – Primitivism and Futurism – entailed a profound hostility to the world as it had actually developed, and both orientations were rooted in the conditions of an uneven and combined world system.

The vast urban centres – Paris, Berlin, Moscow – attracted artists, chancers, intellectuals, poets and revolutionaries. The interchange between people from different nations bred a form of cultural internationalism. In interwar Paris, artists from Spain, Russia, Mexico, Japan and a host of other places rubbed shoulders. Modernist artists attempted to transcend parochial and local conditions and create a formal 'language' valid beyond time and place, and 'the school of Paris' or the 'international modern movement' signified a commitment to a culture more capacious and vibrant than anything the word 'national' could contain. The critic Harold Rosenberg (1906–78) stated this theme explicitly. Rejecting the idea that 'national life' could be a source of inspiration, he suggested that the modernist culture of Paris, was a 'no-place' and a 'no-time' and only Nazi tanks returned the city to France by wiping out modernist internationalism (Rosenberg, 1970 [1940]).

## A move to New York

'No-place' then shifted continent. Perhaps for the only time in its history, after the Second World War modernism was positioned at the heart of world power – when a host of exiles from European fascism and war relocated in New York. American abstract art was centred on New York and a powerful series of institutions: the Museum of Modern Art, Peggy Guggenheim's gallery Art of This Century and a host of small independent galleries run by private dealers (including Betty Parsons, Samuel Koontz and Sidney Janis). In the main, these artists, such as Jackson Pollock (1912–56), Mark Rothko (1903–70), Arshile Gorky (1904–48), Robert Motherwell (1915–91) and Barnett Newman (1905–70), and associated critics (Greenberg and Rosenberg) were formed during the 1930s in the circles of the New York Left: they were modernist internationalists opposed to US parochialism in art and politics. After the war, they retained this commitment to an international modern art, while the politics drained away or was purged in the Cold War. The period of US hegemony in modern art coincided with the optimum interest in autonomous form and pure 'optical' experience. This was the time when artists working in the modernist idiom were least interested in articulating epochal changes and most



focused on art as an act of individual realisation and a singular encounter between the viewer and the artwork. At the same time, these artists continued to keep their distance from mainstream American values and mass culture. Some champions of autonomous art are inclined to think art came to a shuddering halt with the end of the New York School. Alternatively, we can see Conceptual Art as initiating or reinvigorating a new phase of modern art that continues in the global art of today.

It should be apparent from this brief sketch that the predominant ways of thinking about modern art have focused on a handful of international centres and national schools – even when artists and critics proclaim their allegiance to internationalism. The title of Irving Sandler's book *The Triumph of American Painting* is one telling symptom (Sandler, 1970). There is a story about geopolitics – about the relationship between the west and the rest – embedded in the history of modern art. These powerful forms of modernism cannot be swept aside, but increasingly critics and art historians are paying attention to other stories; to the artworks made in other places and in other ways, and which were sidelined in the dominant accounts of art's development. A focus on art in a globalised art world leads to revising the national stories told about modernism. This history is currently being recast as a process of global interconnections rather than an exclusively western-centred chronicle, and commentators are becoming more attentive to encounters and interchanges between westerners and people from what has helpfully been called the 'majority world', in art as in other matters. This term – majority world – was used by the Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam, to describe what the term 'third world' had once designated. We use it here to characterise those people and places located outside centres of western affluence and power; they constitute the vast majority of the world's inhabitants and this reminds us that western experience is a minority condition and not the norm.

## The local and the global

The standard perception of globalisation is that the entire world will gradually develop into the equivalent of New York or Strasbourg. Depending on your point of view, this is either utopia or hell. But irrespective of the value judgements, this idea of upward standardisation is a misconception. The reality is not that the majority world will be transformed into a high-tech consumer paradise. In fact, inequality is increasing across the world. What is referred to as globalisation is the most recent phase of uneven and combined development. The new clash of hypermodern and traditional forms of economic activity and social life are taking place side by side; megacities spring up alongside the 'planet of slums', and communication technologies play an important role in this clash of space and time (see Figure 26). Under these conditions, the making of modern art has entered a new and geographically extended phase. If an earlier phase of modernism is identified with internationalism, it is increasingly apparent that this dream of a place that was nowhere (Paris, New York) was just that – a dream. Recent debates on globalisation and art involve a rejection of modernist internationalism; instead, artists and art historians are engaged with local conditions of artistic production and the way these mesh in an international system of global art making. Modern art is currently being remade and rethought as a series of much more varied responses to contemporaneity around the world. Artists now draw on particular local experiences, and also on forms of representation from popular traditions. Engagement with Japanese popular prints played an important role in Impressionism, but in recent years this sort of cultural crossing has undergone an explosion.



**Figure 26** Baha Boukhari, *My Father's Palestinian Nationality*, 2007, medium variable, dimensions variable. 12th Istanbul Biennial, 2011. Photographed by Natalie Barki.

Drawing local image cultures into the international spaces of modern art has once more shifted the character of art. The paradox is that the cultural means that are being employed – video art, installation, large colour photographs and so forth – seem genuinely international. Walk into many of the large exhibitions around the globe and you will see artworks referring to particular geopolitical conditions, but employing remarkably similar conventions and techniques. This cosmopolitanism risks underestimating the real forces shaping the world; connection and mobility for some international artists goes hand in hand with uprootedness and the destruction of habitat and ways of life for others. International travel and exhibition sit alongside increasing restrictions on migration and strong borders. Nevertheless, we are here dealing with art engaged with the most recent phase of modernity; this art brings other experiences and claims to the attention of a museum-going public.

## Conclusion

This overview has provided examples of the shifting perceptions and definitions of art across time. The first part demonstrated the changing role of the artist and diverse types of art in the medieval and Renaissance periods. The second part outlined the evaluation of art in the academies, issues of style, and changes to patronage, where art and its consumption became increasingly part of the public sphere during the period 1600 to 1850. The last part addressed the way in which artists broke from conventions and the influence of globalisation on art production, in the period 1850 to the present.

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