

List 2–3 Overview of Artistic Periods

PREHISTORY

Prehistory simply means that there was no *written* history. The Chinese, Egyptian, Indian, Mesopotamian, and Sumerian civilizations developed in great river valleys from 35,000–15,000 BC. It was not until the discovery of the *Rosetta Stone* in 1799 by scholars who accompanied Napoleon to Egypt, and its translation in 1821, that Egyptian Hieroglyphs could be accurately translated. Among the oldest European discoveries were grave artifacts such as the *Venus of Willendorf* approximately 30,000 years old, and cave paintings from 15,000 to 10,000 BC.

WESTERN ART

The historic period of Western art began in Egypt approximately 4000–2000 BC, and moved from Egypt through Greece, to Southern Europe, then Northern Europe, and eventually to the Americas. Egyptian art was *unified*, meaning that paintings and sculpture complemented the architecture for which they were specifically designed. The more closely an Egyptian artist could follow the “rules” of art, the more the work was admired. The discovery of King Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922 provided historians with the first tomb that had not been opened first by grave robbers; therefore, it gave a much more complete view of the life of the pharaohs.

GREEK ART

Greek art almost paralleled Egyptian art. Greek art evolved from stiff, rigid human forms to classical sculptures such as the *Discus Thrower* and architecture such as the *Acropolis*. Throughout the centuries, Neo-Classical revivals based on Greek and Roman art continue to surface in painting, sculpture, and architecture. Not one Greek painting survived (it is presumed because of earthquakes), although the paintings on Greek vases show us how sophisticated it might have been. Greek influence spread to Italy, where it greatly affected the development of Etruscan and Roman art.

ETRUSCAN, ROMAN, AND EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

Etruscan, Roman, and Early Christian art developed from approximately 750 BC–AD 400. The Roman empire fell in AD 476, but its influence was widespread, as Romans occupied Egypt and North Africa, Great Britain, and portions of Northern and Southern Europe. Roman sculpture reflected the Greek influence, and wall paintings probably were similar to those of the Greeks. Roman architecture gave us such innovations as the amphitheater, arch, atrium, groin vault, concrete, organized city planning, and apartment houses.

BYZANTINE EMPIRE

The Byzantine Empire from 323 to 1453 AD began with the move of Roman Emperor Constantine to Istanbul (first called Byzantium, then Constantinople). Early Byzantine church decoration was notable for rich mosaics made of brilliantly colored pieces of glass. The mosaic figures were stiff; frontal, with large staring eyes, unsmiling features, and long, narrow faces. Later Byzantine panel painting featured religious figures, usually placed against gold backgrounds (these were called icons). The greatest Byzantine architectural innovation was the pendentive, which enabled a rounded dome to be placed on square pillars.

ART OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Art of the Middle Ages refers to the time between classical antiquity and modern times. The fifth to thirteenth centuries were referred to sometimes as the “Dark Ages.” This time was primarily notable for manuscript illumination, grave goods (such as elaborately carved burial ships for northern kings), carved ivory book covers, beautiful metalwork reliquaries (to house the relics of saints), and jewelry. In 1073, the first artwork known to be created by women was the *Bayeux Tapestry*, created by Queen Matilda and her court to commemorate the Battle of Hastings. Architecture was considered by some to be the great artistic contribution of this time, with the growth of churches such as the *Palace Chapel of Charlemagne* at Aachen, Germany begun in AD 792.

ROMANESQUE PERIOD

The Romanesque Period from AD 1000 to 1150 reflected the Roman influence in the building of churches. The vaulted ceilings and long nave were reminiscent of the Roman marketplace. An intense period of church building commenced in approximately 1100, when great groups of people made pilgrimages across Europe to Santiago de

List 2-3 Continued**ROMANESQUE PERIOD (cont.)**

Compostelo in Spain. Large churches were needed to accommodate them. Architecture, stained glass, stone carving, manuscript illumination, jewelry, and reliquaries all were dedicated to the glory of a Christian god. The sculptures of people were elongated and quite “wooden,” as if the human form were nonexistent under the outer clothing. Favorite subjects were the lives of the saints, crucifixion scenes, allegories of the months, and zodiac signs. Everything the Greeks had learned about sculpting the human form seemingly was forgotten.

GOTHIC ART

Gothic art, which was from approximately 1100 to 1400, came to its glory through its beautiful churches, with their heaven-reaching spires and glowing stained-glass windows. Although use of the barrel and groin vaults began in Romanesque times, it wasn't until the flying buttress (support) was perfected that churches could rise to previously-unknown heights. Gothic churches are particularly distinguished by the use of ribbed vaults, pointed arches, a high nave, and clerestories with jewel-like stained glass. Carvings, jeweled reliquaries, paintings, and sculpture were mostly based on the Christian religion, although they reflected the Eastern influence (brought back by the Crusaders from their travels to the Middle East). In 1348, the black death (bubonic plague) decimated half of Europe. The artwork that decorated churches was created to instruct a population that was basically illiterate. Illuminated manuscripts and portraits were produced with the patronage of the church and the aristocracy.

NORTHERN RENAISSANCE ART

Northern Renaissance (1350–1600) art was sometimes considered late Gothic, rather than Pre-Renaissance. As artists traveled more and brought back innovations in style and technique, an international style evolved. Elongated, stylized figures, luxurious fabrics, and crowded scenes were typical. Paintings became more portable and affordable by the merchant class as well as royalty and the aristocracy. Jan van Eyck is credited with introducing the use of oil as a painting medium.

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ART

Italian Renaissance art is generally acknowledged to be from 1400 to 1520, and was based on the principles developed by the Greeks. The age of Humanism had arrived. Renaissance philosophers, writers, scientists, and artists based their principles on science and math as they knew it. Leonardo da Vinci felt that even the human form might be based on geometric principles. Renaissance architecture displayed geometric forms and symmetry. The Renaissance actually began with the *Arena Chapel* frescoes of Giotto in 1305, which were based on real people who showed emotion, and whose clothing appeared to cover human forms. Giants of art such as da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Botticelli created enduring masterpieces during this “rebirth.”

MANNERISM

Mannerism closely followed the High Renaissance. Artists chose to depart from the faithfulness to nature that characterized the Renaissance, and instead elongated and distorted the human figure, using harsh, vivid colors for emotional impact. El Greco was among the best-known artists of this period.

BAROQUE ART

Baroque art (1590–1750) developed almost as a reaction to the discipline of Renaissance art, and was intended to appeal to the emotions of the viewer. It was everything the Renaissance was not, in painting, sculpture, and architecture. In place of geometrically developed composition, Baroque paintings were notable for swirling intensity, strong diagonals, brilliant coloration, dramatic contrasts, and an emotional intensity. Patrons continued to be the church, the aristocracy, the government, and now the wealthy merchant class, which purchased paintings for their homes. As in the Renaissance, many magnificent artists became notable in the field of art. Among these were Rubens, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Bernini, Velazquez, and Caravaggio.

ROCOCO ART

Rococo art (1700–1800) applies to the decorative arts of the time of Louis XV of France. It featured designs based on naturalistic forms such as plants, rocks, shells, and flowers. It has come to mean the excessive use of ornament in the decorative arts.