



art through time

A GLOBAL VIEW

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Table of Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 1. CONVERGING CULTURES | 4 |
| 2. DREAMS AND VISIONS | 36 |
| 3. HISTORY AND MEMORY | 73 |
| 4. CEREMONY AND SOCIETY | 103 |
| 5. COSMOLOGY AND BELIEF | 134 |
| 6. DEATH | 163 |
| 7. DOMESTIC LIFE | 192 |
| 8. WRITING | 226 |
| 9. PORTRAITS | 262 |
| 10. THE NATURAL WORLD | 314 |
| 11. THE URBAN EXPERIENCE | 354 |
| 12. CONFLICT AND RESISTANCE | 379 |
| 13. THE BODY | 410 |



INTRODUCTION

The impetus to create art and its power to communicate ideas has spanned the globe and millennia. Long before the invention of writing, artistic expressions included music, dance, and mythic storytelling, with visual representations seen in forms such as painting, sculpture, drawing, pottery, and body adornment.

The first human markings can be found in what is called African rock art—red ochre marks that are thought to have been made around 100,000 BCE. Beginning as early as circa 40,000 BCE, Pre-Estuarine Aborigines painted animated stick figures on rock walls at the site of Ubirr in northern Australia, using brushes they had fashioned from bark, feathers, or the chewed ends of sticks. In what is now northwest Namibia, early humans had the impulse to etch and paint stones with geometric and animal representations, which they then buried at a site archaeologists call Apollo 11. While in Europe, Paleolithic peoples in southern France and northwest Spain painted their cave dwellings with a dazzling array of murals depicting the animals that inhabited their world and enabled their continuing survival.

By 20,000 BCE, humans had traversed the world and settled on every continent except Antarctica. Female figurines, examples of portable art carved from mammoth ivory or stone, have come from sites such as Mal'ta in northeastern Asia and central Europe. Painted and engraved depictions of flora and fauna can be seen in rock shelters of the Pachmari Hills in central India. In the eastern Mediterranean, sites of Natufian settlements, such as Eynan/Ain Mallaha (10,000-8,200 BCE), have yielded decorated pottery, figurative sculpture, and jewelry made of bone, shell, and stone, while pottery, tools, and bone flutes have been found at Jiahu in the Yellow River Basin of Henan Province in central China. In the Americas, the continents most recently settled by humans, examples of tools can also be found at Fell's Cave in Patagonia, Argentina, and Blackwater Draw in eastern New Mexico.

The first civilizations and the earliest forms of writing developed in the Indus Valley of India and Pakistan, and in city complexes filled with monumental art and architecture, such as Uruk in Mesopotamia.¹ While art has changed from generation to generation and has often taken distinct forms and meanings from one culture to the next, it is all connected by the human mind and heart. In 1972, simple line drawings and geometric forms were incised into a small aluminum plaque, carrying a symbolic message from humanity into outer

space, onboard the first human-built spacecraft to leave our solar system—the Pioneer 10.²

Since the dawn of civilization, human beings created art in their quest to find meaning while, at the same time, expressing ideas about themselves, their lives, their beliefs, and the world around them. Disparate cultures have created objects that fulfill similar purposes, such as tools, weapons, objects for adornment, ritual objects, and memorials. Likewise, artists of many different cultures have persistently addressed similar themes in their art, such as life, death, beauty, power, war, beliefs, fantasy, the natural environment, and their fellow human beings. The art objects of different cultures, separated by geography or time, reflect remarkable commonalities and distinctions in the sensibilities of the people who created them. In some cultures, individuals identified as artists have given form to these objects while, in others, the words “art” and “artist” have not even been part of their language.

For this reason, the history of art must reach beyond the rigid chronology of recording important dates and events, classifying stylistic periods, or focusing on the creative genius of a select few. Therefore, this text follows significant themes and ideas, unrestricted by maps and timetables, offering perspectives that reveal similarities and differences between artistic expressions found in different cultures and historical eras, ultimately reinforcing the concept of art as a meaningful endeavor that addresses basic human concerns.

Adopting a global and thematic approach to art encourages the exploration of objects in terms of function, aesthetics, content, meaning, visual form, materials, and technological advancements relative to the specific culture in which they were made. However, the relationship between art objects, cultural aesthetics, and the context in which an art object was created is highly significant. Cultural styles become more evident with the comparison of many works. Yet such styles can also be influenced by factors such as political, historical, or cultural events, developments in science, geophysical occurrences, or by contact with other cultures as a result of trade or colonization. A goal of these materials is to prompt the consideration of contextual questions, such as:

- How, where, and by whom was this object used?
- What can we learn about this culture from the art it produced? What was the function of this object within the culture that created it?
- Why was this object made with this material or created using this technique? What technological knowledge and/or skills were necessary to create this object? What environmental factors affected its creation?

- What did this object symbolize to the culture that created it? What collective values, customs, or beliefs influenced its production?
- Was this object created in a way that was unique or typical of similar objects produced by this culture at this time? In what way is it similar to or different from objects produced by this culture at an earlier time?
- What can we infer from the art's content or imagery?
- Does this object reflect influences from other cultures?

An individual's perceptions of art can be influenced by the context in which an object might be seen today, compared to where it was originally intended to be seen—or not intended to be seen at all. For example, some objects were specifically created for ceremonial or private use. Do we perceive such works differently if they are now presented in an art, historical, or ethnographic museum? Does a work have more or less meaning if it is seen in a glass case or around the head or shoulders of an individual wearer? Do works created for public consumption have the same value as those one might pay to see?

Exploring artworks within a thematic context prompts thinking about art in a way that overlaps with other disciplines, including history, archaeology, and anthropology. When viewed as the visual expression of basic human ideas, issues, and concerns, individuals can associate their own experiences with those of the people who created these art objects. As this approach presents art from an integrated worldview, rather than as the progressive achievements of one civilization or another, the goal is to promote a deeper appreciation and respect for the work and life experiences of others.

Endnotes

¹ Laura A. Tedesco. "Introduction to Prehistoric Art, 20,000–8000 B.C.," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/preh/hd_preh.htm (August 2007).

² Richard O. Fimmel, James Van Allen, and Eric Burgess. *PIONEER: First to Jupiter, Saturn, and Beyond*. NASA SP-446 (Washington, D. C.: Scientific and Technical Information Office, NASA, 1980), 247-249.