

Chapter 1

What is art history?

A thing of beauty is a joy forever

Keats

Can art have a history? We think about art as being timeless, the 'beauty' of its appearance having meaning, significance, and appeal to humankind across the ages. At least this usually applies to our ideas about 'high', or fine, art, in other words painting and sculpture. This kind of visual material can have an autonomous existence – we can enjoy looking at it for its own sake, independent of any knowledge of its context, although of course viewers from different time periods or cultures may see the same object in contrasting ways.

Art appreciation and criticism

When we look at a painting or sculpture, we often ask the following questions: who made it?; what is the subject?; when was it completed? These are quite valid questions that are often anticipated and answered in, for example, the captions to illustrations in art books and the labels to works displayed in museums and galleries. For many of us these pieces of information are sufficient. Our curiosity about the who, what, and when of art is satisfied and we can get on with appreciating the artwork, or just enjoying looking at it. For those of us also interested in how,

information on the technique used – for instance, oil or tempera (see Chapter 6) – might help us to appreciate further the skill of the artist. The important thing to note about this kind of art appreciation is that it requires no knowledge of art history. The history of an individual work is contained within itself and can be found in the answers to the questions who, what, when, and how. These are the kinds of details that appear in catalogues of museum and gallery collections or those produced for art sales, where perhaps information about the original patron (if relevant) might also answer the question why. Auction houses, museums, and galleries also place emphasis on the provenance of a work of art. This is the history of who has owned it and in which collections it has been held. This acts as a kind of pedigree for the work and might be used to help prove that it is an authentic work by a given artist. All this information is important in determining the monetary value of a painting or sculpture but need not necessarily be important for art history.

In this way, art appreciation requires no knowledge of the context of art; the ‘I know what I like and I like what I see’ approach to gallery-going is sufficient. And this is absolutely fine. We can enjoy looking at something just for what it is and art can become absorbed into what might be called popular culture.

Art appreciation can also involve the more demanding process of criticizing the art object on the basis of its aesthetic merits. Usually aspects such as style, composition, and colour are referred to, and more broadly reference is made to the artist’s other work, if known, or to other artists working at the same time or within the same movement or style.

Connoisseurship

Art appreciation and criticism are also linked to connoisseurship. By its very name this implies something far more elitist than just enjoying looking at art. A connoisseur is someone who has a

specialist knowledge or training in a particular field of the fine or decorative arts. The specialist connoisseur may work for an auction house – we have all seen how on television programmes such as the *Antiques Roadshow* experts are able to identify and value all manner of objects, not just paintings, on the basis of looking at them closely and asking only very few questions of the owner. This kind of art appreciation is linked to the art market and involves being able to recognize the work of individual artists as this has a direct effect on the work's monetary value.

Another aspect of connoisseurship is its relationship to our understanding of taste. A connoisseur's taste in relation to art is considered to be refined and discriminating. Our concept of taste in relation to art is quite complicated, and inevitably it is bound up in our ideas about social class. Let me take a little time to explore this more fully. I have already discussed the practice of art appreciation – art available for all and seen and enjoyed by all. By contrast, connoisseurship imposes a kind of hierarchy of taste. The meaning of taste here is a combination of two definitions of the word: our faculty of making discerning judgements in aesthetic matters, and our sense of what is proper and socially acceptable. But by these definitions taste is both culturally and socially determined, so that what is considered aesthetically 'good' and socially 'acceptable' differs from one culture or society to another. The fact that our taste is culturally determined is something of which we have to be aware, and this crops up throughout this book. Here, though, it is important to think about the social dimension of taste as having more to do with art as a process of social exclusion – we are meant to feel intimidated if we don't know who the artist is, or worse still if we don't feel emotionally moved through the 'exquisiteness' of the work. We have all read or heard the unmistakable utterances of these connoisseurs. But luckily their world does not belong to art history. Instead, art history is an open subject available to everyone with an interest in looking at, thinking about, and understanding the visual. It is my intention in this book to describe how we can engage with art in these ways.

History as progression

For art to have a history we expect not only a timeless quality but also some kind of sequence or progression, as this is what history leads us to expect. Our history books are full of events in the past that are presented as part of either the continual movement towards improvement, or as stories about great men, or as epochs of time that stand out from others – for instance, the Italian Renaissance or the Enlightenment. In regard to these kinds of frameworks for thinking about the past, the history of art does not disappoint. In the coming together of these two separate strands, we see how history reorders visual experience, making it take a range of forms. The most popular of these include writing about the history of art from the point of view of artists – usually ‘great men’. Alternatively, we find art historians have sought to define the great stylistic epochs in the history of art, for example the Renaissance, Baroque, or Post-Impressionism. Each of these traditions can be written about independently of the others and they have provided a backbone for histories of art. Here I use the plural since the results of each of these ways of writing about the history of art are different, placing different emphasis on what is important – in some cases the artist, in others the work or the movement to which the work belongs.

The problem with concentrating on formal elements such as style is that style itself becomes the subject of discussion rather than the works of art. As we become preoccupied with marking out stylistic changes, we have to use our knowledge of what came after the work under discussion. The benefit of hindsight is essential here – how else could we know that the beginnings of an interest in nature and naturalism in the art of Early Renaissance Italy prefigured the consummate achievements of artists of the High Renaissance in this regard? Working backwards from the present imposes a line of development of which the outcome is already known. In this way, tracks or routes through the art of the past can favour certain styles – this is certainly the case with classical art and its reinterpretations.

Also, histories of art that focus solely on style can easily neglect other aspects of an artwork such as its subject matter or its function. It is possible to narrate a history of artistic style using representations of the male and female body. This might begin with the representation of physical perfection achieved in ancient times by the Greeks. By the Middle Ages, however, there was little interest in the naturalistic depiction of the human form. But by the Renaissance period increased knowledge of human anatomy and nature meant that art had become more 'life-like'. But this kind of history could also be told using representations of cats and dogs, although most would agree that domestic pets have not been a principal focus for artists over the last two millennia.

Yet style has played a significant role in the formulation of histories of art, and it is only in recent years that the notion of stylistic progress in Western art has been reassessed. Indeed, the emphasis on style leads us to expect the notion of progression and constant development in art. If we want art to represent the world we think we see, then we can impose an expectation of a continual move towards naturalism. But how do we then think about art that is not interested in naturalistic representation? This kind of abstract or conceptual art can be sidelined and deemed of secondary importance – sometimes it is labelled 'primitive' or 'naïve' art, with a pejorative air. In many ways modern art confronts this prejudice, but often provokes cries of 'is it art?'

In the case of biographical histories, we look for evidence of youth, maturity, and old age in the work of an artist. This works quite well if the artist lived for a long time, but an untimely death does not lend itself to this kind of narrative arch. Claude Monet's (1840–1926) early work *The Poppy Field* (1873) differs from the cycles of pictures of the same object at various times of day he produced in the 1880s and 1890s, as seen in his views of *Rouen Cathedral* (1894; Fig. 1) or *Haystacks* (1891). But although we can see similar preoccupations in the interest in light, shade, and colour as a way of modelling form, these phases of Monet's career stand distinct from

his late works, such as the large-scale paintings of the lily ponds at his Japanese-style garden at Giverny. This kind of biographical approach isolates the artist from their historical context. We often forget that Monet's late works were painted in the early 20th century – at the same time as Picasso was experimenting with Cubism.

Is there then a distinction to be made between the interaction of art and history, and art history? That is to say that histories of art can have a single focus on style or the work in relation to the biography of the artist, where our expectations of a progressive history are inflicted on the visual. What I am suggesting here is that we turn the question on its head and put art in the driving seat, so to speak. By using art as our starting point we can see the complex and intertwined strands that make up art history. This implies that art history is a subject or academic field of enquiry in its own right, rather than the result of the rules of one discipline being applied to another. I return to this point on a regular basis in this book. I aim to set out how histories of art have been constructed, to describe the ways in which we have been encouraged to think about art as a result, and also to introduce other ways of thinking about the visual in terms of its history.

Evidence and analysis in art history

It is important to discuss what kind of archive art history can draw upon, as the range of material used to construct these histories extends well beyond the works themselves. For instance, history has its documents, written records of the past; archaeology focuses on the material record, physical remains of the past; whilst anthropology looks to social rituals and cultural practices as a way of understanding past and present peoples. Art history can draw upon all these archives in addition to the primary archive of the artwork. In this way, art history is the stepping stone into various ways of interpreting and understanding the past.

In contradiction to this, what is known as the 'canon' of art regiments our understanding and interpretation of the evidence. In this instance, the canon is artwork regarded by influential individuals – not least connoisseurs – as being of the highest quality. In art history the canon has usually, but not exclusively, been associated with the 'traditional' values of art. In this way the canon plays an important role in the institutionalization of art, as new works can be judged against it. As such it is a means of imposing hierarchical relationships on groups of objects. This hierarchy usually favours the individual genius and the idea of the 'masterpiece'. Moreover, the canon promotes the idea that certain cultural objects or styles of art have more value (both historical and monetary) than others. One of my principal interests in this book is the impact of canonical works that are considered defining examples of taste and of historical significance on art history.

I have been using the words 'art' and 'visual' almost interchangeably. This raises another important question – what are the subjects of art history? Traditionally, the history of art has been concerned with 'high art'. But a range of artefacts has been included in the discipline, and these have changed over time. When talking about the Renaissance, for instance, it is quite easy to confine discussion to known artists such as Michelangelo or Raphael and to works of painting or sculpture, or their preparatory processes such as drawings. But the remains of the visual outputs of different cultures and epochs are quite varied and invite a range of interpretations. We are all familiar with the rock art of prehistoric times, but the reasons behind its production and who produced it remain enigmatic. We look at the cave paintings at Lascaux in the Dordogne, France, and see in them hunting scenes – depictions of everyday life. But rock art also includes abstract designs and shapes. So could this kind of art have had a more mystical function? Some argue that these images are the work of shamans – members of a religious cult who used hallucinogenic drugs as part of their practice of worship – and these images come from the unconscious as a result.

A different question arises if we look at ancient Greece. The world inhabited by this civilization is seen as a high point in the history of art. But most ancient Greek sculpture is known only through Roman copies, a problem discussed in more detail later on in this volume. And we have very little knowledge of ancient Greek paintings. Partly in response to these gaps in our knowledge, attention has focused on Greek vases, which even from as early as 800 BCE were decorated. The plentiful remains of Greek vases demonstrate a range of painting styles from the geometric designs of the Archaic period through to the silhouette-like bodies on Black Figure vases and the more painterly, fluid representations of the human form on Red Figure vases. These relics from the past are everyday objects, yet, perhaps due to the paucity of specimens of high art, they are venerated examples of ancient Greek art. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their history is mapped against that of Greek sculpture and is the story of ongoing development in the pursuit of the representation of human physical perfection.

In the case of non-Western art, everyday objects, sometimes referred to as material culture, are the best evidence we have for the artistic output of a given society. A Mayan vase (Fig. 2) may well tell us something about the religious or social rituals, as well as indicate the way in which artists chose to represent their world. However, in later periods in Western art, vases – and other everyday objects – have not always enjoyed such attention. Even the exquisite designs on the soft paste porcelain of the Sèvres factory or the classical scenes on Wedgwood vases take second place to the high art of the same period – at least as far as art historians are concerned. It is important to remember, however, that ceramics and furniture were often considered more valuable and prestigious possessions at the time of their production than were painting or sculpture. So the emphasis and value we place on high art may in fact misrepresent its significance in the eyes of contemporaries. And the way in which art history can distort objects in terms of their contemporary and present-day meaning



2. Mayan cylindrical vessel decorated with the image of a dignitary wearing a blossom headdress.

and significance is something I return to at various points in this book.

In recent years the term art history has itself come under question. The so-called New Art History, now a generation old, sought to reassess the way in which we think and write about histories of visual objects. New Art History was particularly influenced by theoretical ways of thinking about art to bring out its social, cultural, and historical meaning. I discuss the various ways of writing and thinking about art history in subsequent chapters; it is enough to say here that the notion of works of art having historical meaning beyond their role in the narrative of the work of great artists or of styles of art was revolutionary. So much so that the subject is still divided between 'new' and 'old' even 20 years later.

This book does not advocate either way of thinking about art

history. I see the merit of both approaches, and I very much want to question the object, confront it, in order to explore its broadest possible meaning and significance. But at the same time I do not want to lose sight of the object itself – its physical properties, and in many cases its sheer aesthetic appeal. After all, I am arguing that art history is a separate discipline from history – the visual is then its primary material, the starting point for any kind of historical enquiry. Although it is important to be able to articulate the appearance of a work of art, to describe and analyse the visual using words is not an end in itself. And making this kind of visual analysis is not always as easy as it sounds. Art history has its own vocabulary, or taxonomic system, that enables us to speak precisely about the objects we see in front of us, as can be appreciated from the glossary at the end of this book. But the ability to discuss or analyse a work of art, even using a sophisticated taxonomic system, is not art history. Certainly, it is the act of accurately describing a work, and this process may be intertwined with the practice of connoisseurship, but this satisfaction with articulating what is in front of us remains largely the preserve of art appreciation. If we compare this practice to the study of English literature, for instance, the point becomes clearer. We would neither consider reading out the text of *King Lear*, nor a synopsis of the plot of the play, the definitive analysis of this work by Shakespeare. It may be that these processes are a necessary part of the analysis, but they are not an end in themselves. Similarly, we should not accept the description of an artwork as the end of the process of study.

It is true that there is a difficulty in this relationship between the verbal and the visual; they are both discrete methods of description. This tension is further explored in the next chapter. We are perhaps more familiar with the use of words to describe art, where one system of articulation is brought to bear on the other. But we must remember that this also works the other way around – the visual can describe and represent the verbal, phenomena usually expressed in words.