Art History 101, Class 1—Ancient and Medieval Art

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The story of art does not begin with Ancient Greece, but it's a good place to start; no other culture has had such a profound and lasting impact on the art and architecture of the western world. As Stokstad points out, "their legacy is especially remarkable given their relatively small numbers, the almost constant warfare that beset them, and the often harsh economic conditions of the time." With little usable farmland in their mountainous islands, the Greeks depended on their seafaring skills to establish an economy based on trade with their Mediterranean neighbors.

In contrast to the art of ancient Egypt, where the desire for permanence and continuity meant that artistic conventions changed little over 3,000 years, Greek art was constantly evolving as artists raised the bar and challenged themselves to improve on their earlier achievements in style and technique. Greek artists worked in every medium, from painting to mosaic to ceramic to sculpture. Ironically, though, professional artists were considered to be no more than skilled laborers.

Religion was central to Greek art and culture. It was a polytheistic society—worshipping many gods—with different gods governing different aspects of human life. Page 110 of Stokstad has a glossary of the major Greek deities. Holy sites called sanctuaries were vast complexes with the expected temples and treasuries as well as features like housing for priests and visitors, theaters, and athletic facilities.

Most surviving Greek art from before the 7th century BC is pottery. The terms used by art historians to describe the different periods of Greek pottery of that era are fairly self explanatory: the Geometric Period, the Orientalizing period, and the Archaic (or old-fashioned) period, meaning old fashioned compared to the Classical period that followed.

In the interests of time, we are going to focus on architecture and sculpture rather than pottery, as these have more resonance with the Huntington collection. Most of you are already familiar with the three Classical Greek architectural orders: the Doric, the Ionic, and the Corinthian. The Doric and Ionic developed during the Archaic period, that is, before the so-called Classical period, circa 600 to 480 B.C, with the Corinthian, a variant of the Ionic order, developing later. By "order" we simply mean a system of proportions that includes every aspect of the building's plan, elevation, and decoration. This is a detailed illustration from page 118 of your book.

This style of architecture has stood the test of time in more ways than one, and lives on at The Huntington. Here, we generally see Ionic columns, characterized by the scroll or volute at the top of the fluted columns. But like most modern interpretations of classical architecture, it combines elements of different orders, plus more recent innovations and creative embellishments.

As Greek temples grew larger and more complex in the Archaic period, sculptural decoration took on increased importance. Builders and sculptors collaborated on

decorative elements that were also part of the structure, like elaborate friezes and caryatids—columns in the form of clothed women. The long friezes of Greek temples provided a perfect stage for storytelling in relief sculpture.

In addition to decorating temples, sculptors of the Archaic period produced a new type of freestanding sculpture made of wood, terracotta, limestone, or marble, brightly painted, called a kore (if female) or kouros (if male). The female figures are always clothed and the males almost always nude. Life-sized or larger, these figures were depicted standing or striding, always front-facing. They seem to have had a commemorative purpose; the Greeks associated young, athletic males with fertility and family continuity, so the male figures may have symbolized ancestors. They are sometimes found marking graves, but they are not portraits of the deceased, or anyone else; these are strictly idealized figures. The characteristic closed-lip smile is known as the Archaic smile, and it is referenced throughout the history of art; the Mona Lisa has been described as having an Archaic smile. Over time, these figures became less stiff and more anatomically accurate; you can see that the kore on the right is more rounded and lifelike, while retaining the motionless, erect pose of the earlier korous. But her gown or peplos falls in regularly spaced, parallel folds. These white marble sculptures would have been painted in vivid colors, heightening the sense of reality, this one has traces of paint on her lower half.

Comparing the austere korous to this dynamic discus thrower and other examples of Classical sculpture, we can see why the Classical period was once thought to be the most admirable and highly developed era of Greek art. Although most art historians no longer

share that view, we cannot deny that this eventful period of 160 years established an ideal of beauty that endures today.

Some scholars have argued that the Greeks' decisive victory over the Persians in 480 BCE gave them a self-confidence that accelerated the development of their art and inspired artists to seek new and more effective ways of celebrating their people's accomplishments. Peacetime brought major new construction projects and social agendas.

Physical beauty and strength were celebrated in Greek culture and Greek art, most famously in the Olympic games; this is a javelin thrower who has lost his javelin. Classical sculptures captured the weight of human flesh and the drama of movement. Instead of depicting an arbitrary moment frozen in time, sculptors now sought to suggest continuing movement. Figures are balanced between tension and relaxation rather than standing rigid and upright. Just as Greek architects had defined and followed a set of standards for ideal temple design, sculptors now celebrated a scientific formula of ideal body proportions and attributes based upon a system of ratios of body parts; for example, the ideal body should be six and a half to seven heads high.

For the purposes of discussion, the Classical period has been subdivided into three phases based on the formal qualities of the art: the Early Classical or transitional period from about 480 to 450 BC, the High Classical Period from about 450 to 400 BC, once called the "Golden Age" of Greek art, and the Late Classical Period from about 400 to 323 BC.

“Hellenistic” means “Greek-like” and refers to the final period of Greek art, from about 323-30 BC, when the Greek style spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world and was imitated by non-Greeks.

Few original Greek bronzes survive because in their quest for novelty and innovation artists recycled old statues to make new ones. Many marble statues we are familiar with are actually Roman copies of earlier Greek bronzes, now destroyed. This life-sized charioteer survived because it was buried during an earthquake. The folds of his robe fall in a natural way rather than being stylized like those of the kore we saw earlier, and his feet have veins, toenails, and other carefully observed anatomical details missing in earlier representations of the human figure. The archaic smile is gone, replaced by a subtler and more individual expression.

It was during the High Classical period that Athens emerged as the center of Greek culture, commerce, and politics, inaugurating an era of wealth and influence that was later seen as a Golden Age. It was during this period that the Acropolis or citadel was developed as a center of civic and religious life. Originally a military fortress, it had been destroyed by Persian troops in 480 BC and left in ruins as a memorial, but it was now rebuilt at staggering cost to honor the gods and especially the goddess Athena, for whom the city was named. This is the Parthenon, a temple to Athena at the pinnacle of the Acropolis.

Athens never fully recovered from war with Sparta in 404 BC. But it retained its reputation as an artistic and intellectual center; Plato and Aristotle lived during this era, known as the late classical period. Artists now began to challenge the long-established standards for ideal body proportions and attributes, and depicted the human figure with more emotion and individuality. Patrons lost interest in ponderous images of mighty gods and heroes and began to commission depictions of minor deities in lighthearted moments. This period also saw the earliest depictions of fully nude women like this *Aphrodite.* Although nudity among athletic young men was admired in Greek society, among women it had been considered a sign of low character. The eventual acceptance of female nudes in statuary may be related to the gradual merging of the Greek goddess Aphrodite with some characteristics of the Phoenician goddess Astarte, who was almost always depicted nude. Here Aphrodite is portrayed with a water jug preparing to take a bath, thus justifying her nudity. She has her hand extended in a gesture of modesty that actually calls attention to her nudity, as does the bracelet on her upper left arm. According to legend this statue was so realistic that Aphrodite herself made a pilgrimage to see it and demanded to know where the sculptor had seen her naked.

Under Alexander the Great, who died in 323 BC, Greek culture spread far beyond its original borders, free from the social homogeneity of the Classical world. The term "Hellenistic" means Greek-like and describes the art produced outside of Greece in the Greek style. But there were some key differences between the original and the copy. As Stokstad writes: "Where earlier artists sought the ideal and the general, Hellenistic artists sought the individual and the specific. They turned increasingly away from the heroic to

the everyday, from gods to mortals, from aloof serenity to individual emotion, and from drama to melodramatic pathos." They appealed to the senses through glittering surfaces and dramatic contrasts of light and shade, as opposed to the Classical preference for smooth surfaces reflecting a clear, even light. They appealed to the emotions through dramatic subjects and poses—a manipulative approach called expressionism, typical of Hellenistic art. The cool gazes and stable postures of Classical figures gave way to extreme poses and expressions. The elegant Ionic order was transformed into the Corinthian order, with its elaborate foliate capitals that almost resemble fussy Victorian architecture.

Hellenistic sculpture is described as larger than life, and sometimes "anti-Classical". On the left, the Winged Victory bursts with a powerful forward momentum accentuated by the backward thrust of her wings and drapery from her environment—originally a hillside niche above a sanctuary. Rather than portraying the Classical ideal, Hellenistic art strives for realism and individuality. Portraiture became popular during the Hellenistic period, as did the representation of people from lower levels of society. At the same time, though, some artists looked back to the past and revived Classical styles, combining them in new ways. The famous Venus de Milo on the right is an example. The subject and proportions evoke Classical models, but the twisting stance and high-contrast surface treatment identifies it as a Hellenistic work.

Another important Hellenistic sculpture is the Apollo Belvedere, so called because it is displayed in the Belvedere Courtyard in the Vatican. The marble statue was discovered in

the fifteenth century and, beginning in the eighteenth century, it was considered the greatest ancient sculpture and the epitome of aesthetic perfection in Europe. From our point of view, it is as important for understanding eighteenth-century art as Hellenistic art. Apollo's pose, his weight shifted forward on one foot, one arm outstretched, having just shot an arrow from the quiver on his back, was used as a model of elegant deportment by artists such as Joshua Reynolds, who posed Captain Augustus Keppel in the same way in this portrait, just as he borrowed the pose of the prophet Isaiah in the Sistine Chapel for his portrait of Sarah Siddons in the Huntington collection. Of course, the figure has continued to appeal to artists and collectors over the years, and Henry Huntington purchased a copy in bronze, with the arms restored, to display outside the library building.

Table discussion: Ancient sculpture

The Latin-speaking Roman people adopted Greek gods and myths as well as Greek art and architectural forms. In addition to the Greek pantheon, the Romans deified their emperors, so religion was a civic duty as well as a spiritual one. Roman culture flourished as Greece began to decline in importance. By 275 BC, Rome controlled the entire Italian peninsula, and by 31 BC it had conquered Greece, most of modern-day France and Egypt. Territorial expansion brought wider exposure to the arts of other cultures, though Greek art continued to be the most admired and imitated. In the Hellenistic tradition, early Roman sculptors sought to create detailed and realistic warts-and-all portraits rather

than generalized ideals, a style called Verism. In the volatile political climate, many of these portraits of imperial officials also served as sophisticated propaganda pieces.

This life-sized bronze is often called *The Orator*, but it is actually a portrait of the Roman official Aulus Metellus. Because the Romans often copied or adapted surviving Greek statues, it can be hard to tell the difference between Greek and Roman works, but in this case, you could easily tell that this was Roman rather than Greek if you didn't know already. The dramatic pose, high level of detail, and realistic rather than idealized features tell you that this is Hellenistic, that is, in the Greek style adopted outside of Greece. He wears a toga, the Roman official dress, indicating both that he is Roman and that this is a portrait, a popular genre in the early Roman Empire.

Roman art is usually categorized by the name of the Emperor or imperial family at the time: Augustan, Flavian, Antonine, Severan. In many cases portraits can be easily dated by their hair and facial hair, as different emperors and empresses introduced different styles that were widely imitated. The first emperor was Octavian, called Augustus or "Exalted," so Augustan art refers to his 60-year reign. That's him on the left. Augustus left a 200-year legacy of peace and prosperity known as Pax Romana or "Roman Peace, which lasted from 27 BC to 180 AD. Just as it had in Greece, government-sponsored art and building projects flourished during this period of stability, including the Colosseum on the right and the famous Roman roads across the ever-growing empire. Even in private, the Romans placed a high value on displaying their wealth and taste through their possessions, art collections, and home décor. They appreciated the art and culture of the

past but they were a society of extremely modern efficiency, organization, and technology.

According to tradition, in 312 the Roman emperor Constantine had a vision the night before a battle in which he saw a flaming cross in the sky and heard the words “in this sign you shall conquer.” He had his army’s shields and flags inscribed with the monogram XP, the Greek letters chi and rho, standing for Christos or Christ. He won the battle and showed his gratitude by recognizing Christianity as a lawful religion. In 313, he issued the Edict of Milan, granting freedom of religion throughout the empire. Non-official monotheistic religions like Judaism and Christianity, which already existed on a small scale within the Roman empire, began to flourish and spread. Constantine himself was baptized a Christian on his deathbed in 337, and by the end of the fourth century Christianity had become the official religion of the empire. Although non-Christians were increasingly persecuted, pagan subjects involving the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus remained popular with artists and patrons, and they were tolerated as part of a rich cultural heritage as long as people didn’t return to pagan worship. Right up to modern times, stories of the ancient Greek and Roman gods and heroes have remained favorites with artists, alongside Christian and secular subjects.

In 330, Constantine moved the capital of the much expanded empire to the port city of Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople; today we know it as Istanbul. The term “Byzantine” refers to the art of Constantinople and the regions under its influence, and it

was heavily influenced by Eastern art: ornate, stylized, two-dimensional. It has survived today in the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches.

On page 238 of Stokstad you'll find a table of Christian symbols and on pages 252 and 253 a helpful list of major events in the life of Christ that have figured prominently in Christian imagery. Stokstad defines "iconography" as the study of subject matter in art. If you didn't know anything about iconography, you might look at the image on the right and say it's a painting of a mother and her baby. Technically, you'd be right, of course, but you'd be missing the point.

Eventually the Roman Empire grew so big that it had to be split into Eastern and Western Empires, with two rulers to govern it. Even so, it proved to be unmanageable, and by the end of the fifth century it had collapsed. It was the beginning of modern Europe as we know it, with political and economic power localized among Germanic tribes, Gauls, Norse, Saxons, and Celts—peoples that had been considered barbarians by the Greeks and Romans because they did not speak the civilized languages of Greek and Latin.

The one thousand years between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance are known as the Middle Ages or Medieval period, a term given by Renaissance and later scholars who regarded the period as an uneventful bridge standing in the middle of the Golden age of Greece and Rome and their own cultural golden age. The period was even referred to as the Dark Ages because it was perceived as being one of ignorance and barbarism, which made little contribution to the story of art or learning. Of course, that is

far from the case. Across Europe, diverse tribes and peoples joined their own regional decorative traditions and skills in metal and woodworking to ancient classical models. In the absence of an empire, the Christian church assumed an ever-greater social role, still headed by the pope in Rome. In many areas, secular and religious authority became tightly intertwined in a mutually beneficial partnership. By the early middle ages, monastic communities had spread across Europe, and they were centers of learning and culture.

Among the richest surviving artworks of the period are the beautifully illustrated and bound religious manuscripts—including many here at The Huntington. Produced by monks and nuns in workshops called scriptoria, these texts helped spread both literacy and Christianity. They were scrupulously edited, authoritative copies of key religious texts, written by hand on animal skin—either fine vellum or heavier parchment. Paper did not come into use in Europe until the early 1400s. The work was sometimes divided between a scribe, who copied the text, and one or more artists, called illuminators, who created the illustrations, working in rare pigments and costly materials like semiprecious stones and gold leaf. Most of the work was done anonymously. Although the monks intended to make exactly copies of the texts and illustrations, they inevitably brought heir own distinctive training and local artistic traditions to the work. As the demand for books increased, professional and private workshops sprang up outside monasteries. Printing with movable type was not practiced until the mid-1400s.

On the left, a portrait of Matthew from a 9th century French gospel manuscript depicts the evangelist in the act of writing, with a tiny angel in the upper right corner inspiring his words. On the right, a typically elaborate jewel-encrusted gold book cover, made in the 9th century, probably for an earlier manuscript, then reused for its valuable materials and craftsmanship.

The term "Romanesque" means "in the Roman manner," and it was first applied to 11th and 12th century European art and architecture in the early 19th century to describe church architecture displaying the solid masonry walls and rounded arches and vaults characteristic of Roman buildings. Compare the Romanesque cathedral on the right to the Roman Colosseum. Like Greek temples and sanctuaries, these churches were lavishly decorated with sculpture, mosaics, murals, and so-called "cloister crafts"—woodworking, carved ivory, embroidery, and metalwork. There was a building boom in Europe in the 11th and 12th centuries—including not just churches and monasteries but castles and manor houses. These monumental structures reflect a culture that saw the church as a fortress against spiritual enemies, and the home as a fortress against earthly enemies.

The period between 1150 and 1400 has been called the age of cathedrals, because so many were built or rebuilt during this time as older wooden churches burned down. Urban seats of ruling bishops, cathedrals surpassed monasteries as centers of religious life and patronage during this era.

In the middle of the 12th century, a distinctive new style of church architecture began to emerge in France, known today as Gothic. While the Romanesque style was heavy and horizontal, the Gothic sought to glorify God through height and light. Before long it was adapted to secular structures, and its influence extended beyond architecture to painting and other art forms. Gothic architecture was a scientific innovation as much as an aesthetic one. Walls were impossibly thin, supported by external flying buttresses. Intricate tracery--geometric decorative patterns in stone or wood—filled window openings. Spires, towers, pointed arches, and slender sculpted figures emphasized the building's verticality. Inside, skeletal rib vaulting provided height and strength, while giving a lacelike appearance, and costly stained glass flooded the interior with light and color, inspiring awe and devotion.

The fourteenth century was a turbulent time in Europe; population growth was beginning to exceed food production, and a series of bad harvests resulted in several famines. France and England were fighting the Hundred Years' War, which actually lasted 116 years; the Catholic Church was divided against itself, with rival papal courts in Avignon and Rome; and the Black Plague wiped out approximately 40 percent of the population. The devastation from war and sickness meant that the Gothic cathedral building boom tailed off, though the French court retained its preeminence as the arbiter of taste in Europe, and Gothic sculptors found lucrative new opportunities working for private clients rather than the church. Similarly, lay people began to commission small decorative prayer books called books of hours, like the famous *Tres Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry, on the left, which were both beautiful and practical, including everything

necessary for private devotions. Portable altarpieces like the one on the right, belonging to Richard the Second, performed the same function; this is a diptych, meaning two panels hinged together; a triptych is three pieces; more is a polyptych.

In general, art became more intimate, less monumental. The cult of courtly romance, tales of chivalry, and troubadour poetry glamorized secular love. Not surprisingly, the decorative arts continued to flourish. There was a strong market for small, personal luxury items like boxes, mirrors, and combs made of precious metals, jewels, enamel, and ivory. “The International Gothic Style” is the term applied to the pan-European composite style that emerged in the late fourteenth century. Whether manuscripts, paintings, tapestries, and polychrome sculpture, artists and patrons alike preferred light, bright colors and a liberal use of gold, like you see here. The International Gothic was so appealing that it remained popular well into the fifteenth century.

The fifteenth century marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance, or cultural “rebirth.” It was a time of growing secularism and urbanity. Whereas towns had once revolved around a court or cathedral, the new European cities were centers of industry and commerce. The church continued to be a major patron of the arts and architecture, but powerful private patrons emerged in these urban centers.

The Flemish influence dominated in fifteenth century Europe; Flanders and the greater Low Countries consisted of present-day Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. It first surfaced in manuscript illumination of the late fourteenth century, when artists began

to create full page scenes set off with frames that functioned as extremely lifelike miniature paintings. Flemish tapestries were the finest in Europe. Stained glass was another Flemish specialty. Flemish painters pioneered the technique of painting in oil on panel rather than the tempera paint preferred by the Italians. Oil paint was slow to dry, and allowed the artists to make changes as they worked. It could also be applied in thin layers, producing deep, luminous colors and subtle textures. Like their manuscript illuminations, Flemish panel paintings were almost photographic in their realism and detail, and the realism extended to the choice of subject matter, including scenes from everyday life and intimate portraits of private patrons. Jan Van Eyck's *Man in a red turban* of 1433 on the left is notable not only for its three dimensionality but for the subject's bold outward gaze, new in portraiture. Van Eyck also painted the iconic and heavily symbolic *Arnolfini Marriage* portrait on the right.

Little is known about Van Eyck, and even less about his contemporary Rogier van der Weyden, who painted the Huntington's masterpiece *Madonna and Child* of about 1460. Van der Weyden didn't sign any of his paintings, and there are only a few in the US; another one is his *Portrait of a Lady* in the National Gallery of Art, on the right. The long, almond-shaped eyes, regular features, and smooth, translucent skin appear in many portraits of women attributed to him. He also popularized the half-length pose with hands clasped in modest piety. Our Van der Weyden was originally half of a diptych, and it would have been paired with a small half-length portrait of the patron, like this one. In the case of the Huntington painting, the patron is thought to have been Philippe de Cory,

a noted book collector, and the Christ child is playing with an elaborately bound book of hours.