

The shapes of art history

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Organization of this talk:

- I. Twelve outline models of art history
- II. A couple of maps of art history
- III. Pictorial models of art history
- IV. The workshop

I.

Twelve outline models of art history



I. Erwin Panofsky's model

Classical
Medieval
Renaissance
Baroque
Modern
(Postmodern)

2. Erwin Panofsky's model, with subheadings

CLASSICAL

Mycenean

Hellenistic

MEDIEVAL

Carolingian

Gothic

RENAISSANCE

Early Renaissance

High Renaissance

MODERN

The capitalized entries are *megaperiods*: the largest conceivable divisions of history, beyond which history is a unified whole

3. Erwin Panofsky's debate with Franz Boas

Boas was a mid-century anthropologist; Panofsky mentions an exchange he had with Boas over the periodization of history.

Boas thought that all artworks and artists are different, so that there is no sense in lumping them together.

Panofsky called this “atomism,” and noted that it destroys the possibility of history.

The opposite tendency, which would also collapse history, would be to say that all art is one thing, a single enterprise (e.g., “creativity”), and so there is no sense in subdividing it.

Panofsky pointed out that all of us periodize and arrange automatically, so neither option is realistic.



An example of inadvertent periodization

This Chinese bronze object looks “baroque”

The “cloud pattern” forms remind Western viewers of rococo ornaments and 18th c. *Chinoiserie*



It may seem easy to overcome this Western prejudice, but the literature on Chinese art is full of terms like “Classical,” “Baroque,” and “rococo.”

Periodization is automatic, whether it is Western or not.

Chinese incense burner, Han Dynasty, 113 BC

4. The concept of the expanded Renaissance

ANCIENT
CLASSICAL
MEDIEVAL
RENAISSANCE

Baroque
Neoclassical
Modern
Postmodern

In this schema, the Renaissance was the turning point in (Western) art history

5. An alternate to the expanded Renaissance: expanded modernism

PREMODERN

Ancient
Medieval
Renaissance
Baroque
Romanticism
Realism

MODERN

Postimpressionism
Cubism
Abstraction
Surrealism
Abstract Expressionism
Postmodernism

6. An example of non-Western megaperiods

AFRICAN ART

Saharan rock art

Egyptian

Nok

Djenné

Ife and Benin

Colonial

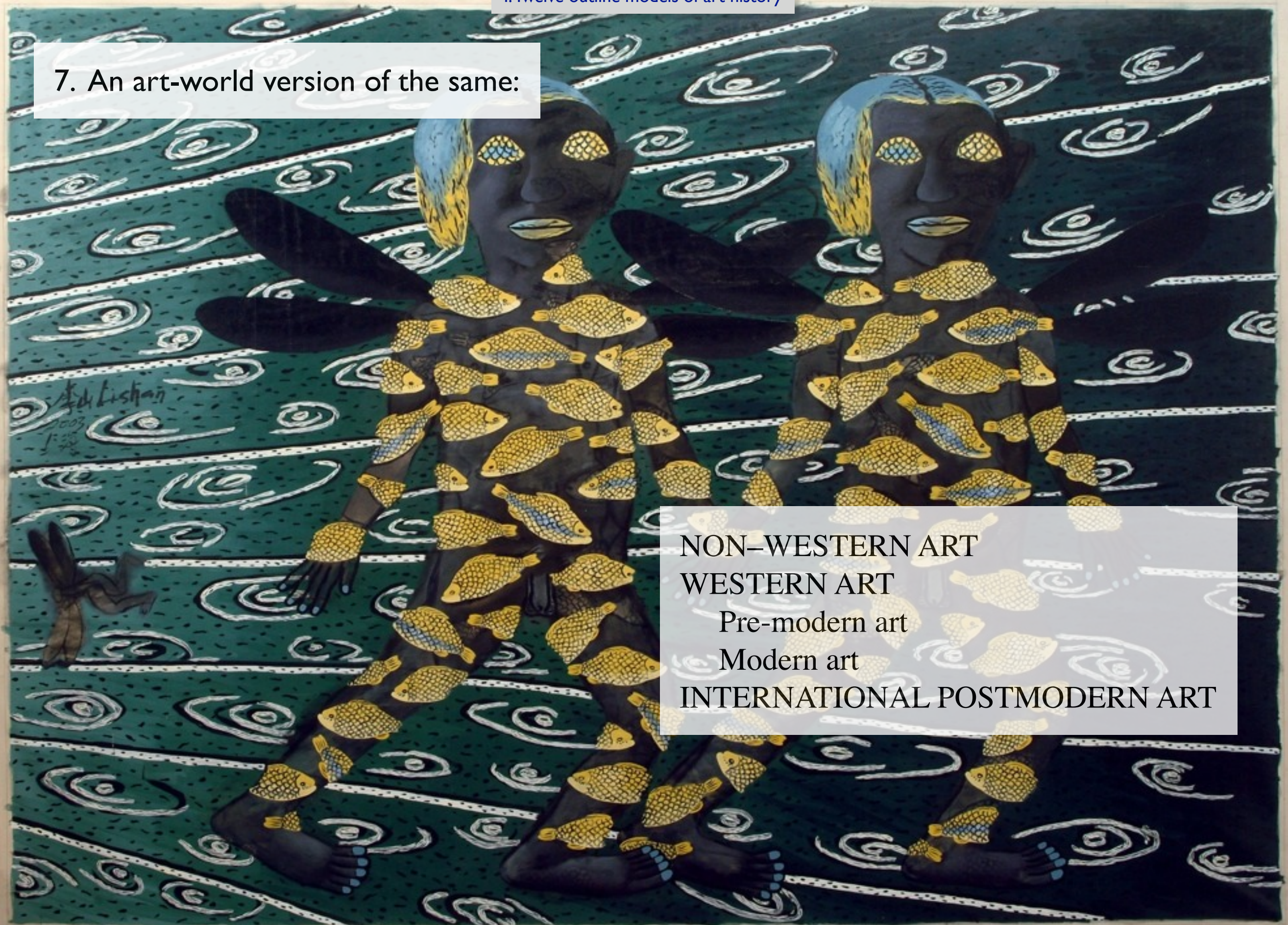
Postcolonial

EUROPEAN ART

ASIAN ART

AMERICAN ART

7. An art-world version of the same:



NON-WESTERN ART
WESTERN ART
Pre-modern art
Modern art
INTERNATIONAL POSTMODERN ART

8. Postmodern appropriation

PREMODERN = HISTORY
(no divisions)
THE PRESENT

This is close to monism, but with no theory about the unity of history.

An advantage of this approach is that it removes the anxiety that history causes: there is no need to worry about past achievements, or what directions history points us in...

9. Oscillating history

This is associated with the German art historian Heinrich Wölfflin

He identified two movements in history, a classical or classicizing moment, and a subsequent baroque or elaborative moment:

Classical

Medieval (=Baroque)

Renaissance (= Classical)

Baroque

Modern (= Classical)

Postmodern (= Baroque)

Ultimately, this reduces to an oscillation:

Classical
Baroque
Classical
Baroque
Classical
Baroque
Classical
Baroque
Classical
Baroque
Classical
Baroque
Classical
Baroque
Classical
Baroque

10. Life history

An ancient Roman way of ordering history is by making an analogy to a human life:

infantia, adulescentia, maturitas, senectus =
infancy, adolescence, maturity, old age

The idea would be that every culture goes through this naturally—every civilization “dies.”

The life-history model is associated with two historians:

Giorgio Vasari (16th c.) and Johann Joachim Winckelmann (18th c.)

Examples, from Winckelmann (for Greek art) and Vasari (for Italian art):

| Period | Winckelmann on Greek art | Vasari on Renaissance art |
|-------------|--|--|
| Infancy | Archaic Greek art (600-480 BCE) | 14th c. Italian painting from Giotto onward |
| Adolescence | Early Classical period (480-450 BCE) | Italian 15th c. painting |
| Maturity | Athenian art of the 5th and 4th c. BCE | High Renaissance |
| Old age | The century before Alexander the Great, through Hellenistic art, to the rise of Rome in the 1st c. BCE | Italian mannerism and academic art in the later 16th c. (and on into the 17th and 18th centuries...) |

Drawbacks:

A. How can you explain what happens when the culture keeps going?

B. Is it logical to assume cultures grow and decline like people?

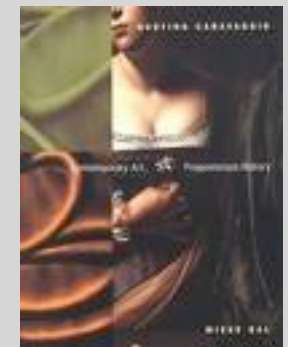
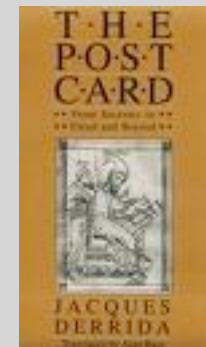
II. Paradoxical history

The idea here is that our own lives influence what we see and think of the past, so really all time lines have to run backward.

This has been theorized by several recent writers:

Jacques Derrida,
in a text called *The Post Card*

Mieke Bal,
in a text called *Quoting Caravaggio: Preposterous History*



A time line might look like this:

POSTMODERNISM

Modernism

Renaissance

Middle Ages

Classical Greece

Prehistory

12. Models of postmodernism

A particular problem is posed by postmodernism. How important is it? And what kind of period (or megaperiod) is it?

One model, partly following the philosopher Arthur Danto, would have it that history itself ended with Warhol or with the inception of what is normally called postmodernism:

BEFORE ART

Prehistory

Classical Greece and Rome

Middle Ages

ART

Renaissance

Baroque

Modernism

AFTER ART

Postmodernism

Another way of looking at it is that postmodernism isn't a period at all, but a *condition*, something that need not be succeeded by anything that we would recognize as a period.

It is like the *endgame* in some chess games: a condition in which both players might make moves indefinitely, and neither could ever win. There are no new moves left to discover, and nothing interesting remains in the game.

Endgame theory was discussed in the 1980s and is associated, for example, with Sherrie Levine.

NORMAL PERIODS

Classical

Medieval

Renaissance

Baroque

Modern

ABNORMAL PERIODS

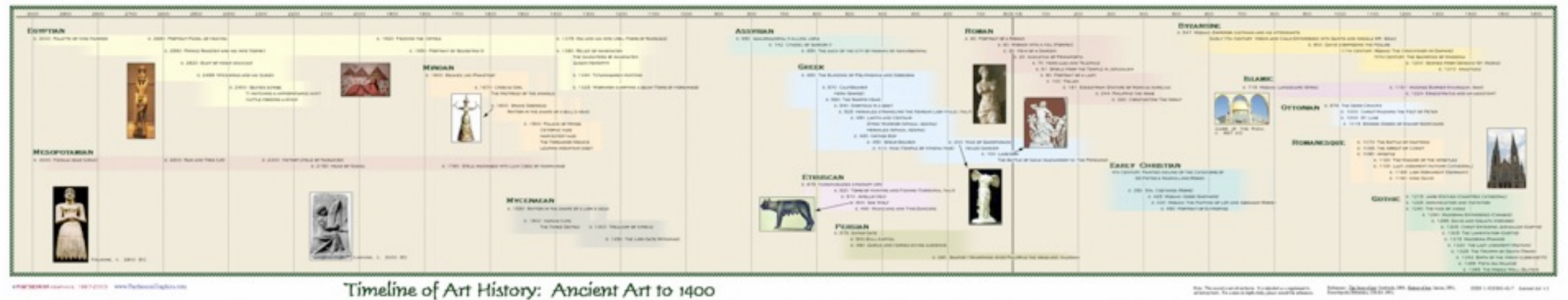
Postmodernism

...

II.

A couple of maps of art history

A graphical version of the outline is the timeline:



But each depends on an implicit outline (or avoids one)

