

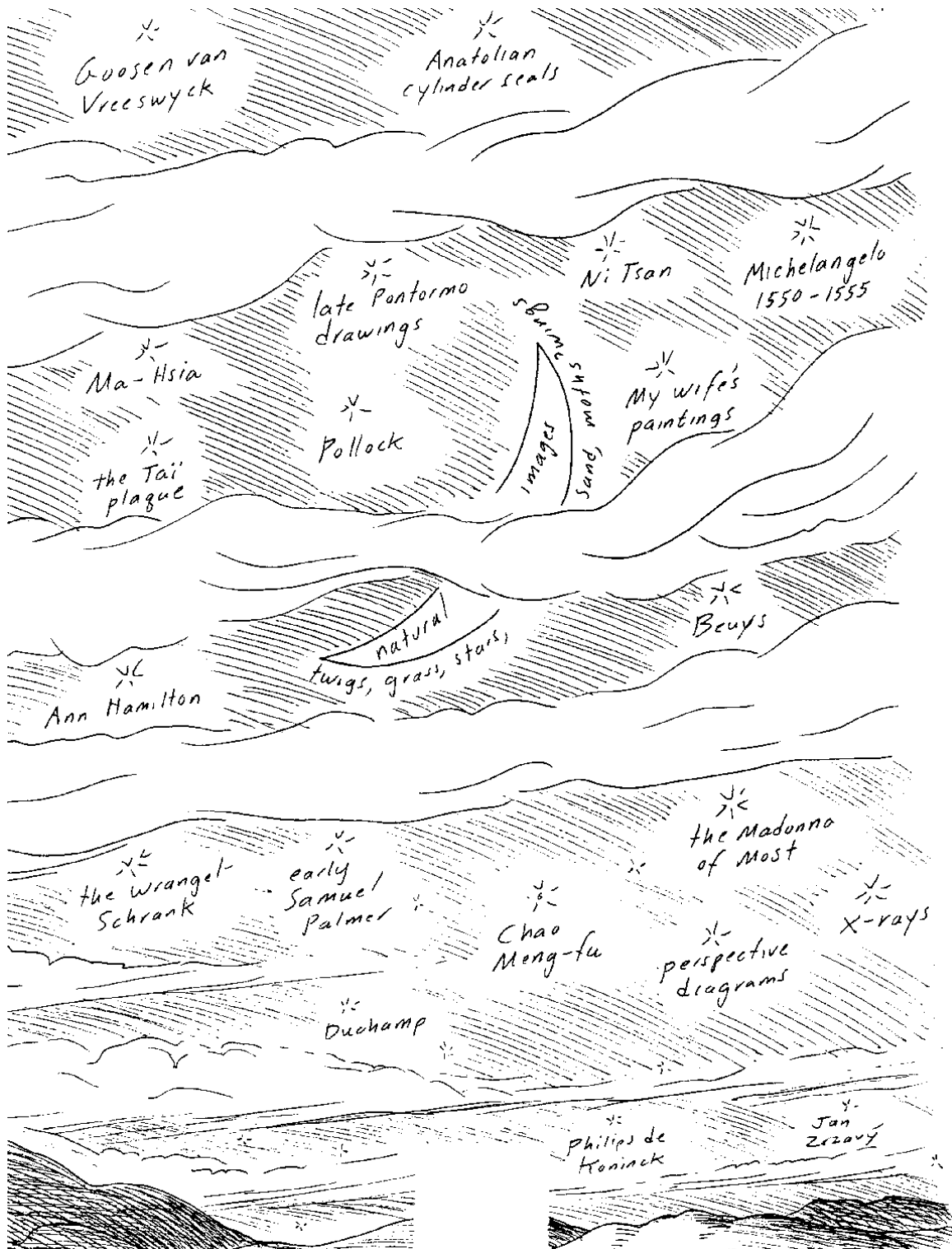
*[Note to readers: this is an unedited version of chapter 1 of Stories of Art (New York: Routledge, 2002). It was originally posted on the author's website, [www.jameselkins.com](http://www.jameselkins.com). Send all comments, suggestions, to [jameselkins@fastmail.fm](mailto:jameselkins@fastmail.fm)—but please check the published version first.]*

## 1 Intuitive Stories

Sometimes the most difficult subjects need to begin with the simplest exercises. Einstein invented thought experiments to help him clear the thickets of equations in his new physics. His frequent antagonist Niels Bohr spent a great deal of time inventing and drawing thought experiments designed to overturn Einstein's thought experiments. Even today physicists talk about "toy systems" when they can't work with the full mathematics. Many complex enterprises begin with things so simple they seem laughable. Language textbooks are certainly like that: Mr. Smith meets Mr. Brown, and asks when they will go to the movies; they part without another word. Only after several hundred pages—and a thousand new vocabulary words—can Mr. Smith speak freely to Mr. Brown.

Let me start, then, with a simple exercise to help think about the shape of art history. It is also a thought experiment: the idea is to draw or imagine a very free and informal map of art history as it appears to you. You're to find the mental shape, the imaginative form of history, and do it by avoiding the usual straight timelines. In other words, the drawing must be a product of your own imagination, suited to your preferences, your knowledge, and your sense of the past. The map will be your working model, your "toy system." As this book moves through the influential histories of art that have been written in the past, you may discover that your ideas have been posed and sometimes critiqued by previous generations of historians. You'll also see, I hope, that your version of art history has a great deal to say about *you*: who you are, when you were born, and even where you live.

## Maps of Art History



For me one of the easiest pictures to draw is a constellation, where favorite artists and artworks are loosely arranged around some center (plate 1). This is a drawing I made of the images that I was thinking about in the summer of 1998; at the time I was writing about several of them. Naturally such a drawing is very personal, and it isn't likely to correspond to anyone else's. One of the stars is the Tai plaque, a little prehistoric piece of bone inscribed with tiny lines; another is Duchamp, who always seems to be floating somewhere around; a third is the "Wrangel-Schrank," a German Renaissance cabinet with bizarre pictures done in wood inlay. A star at the right of the moon stands for the paintings my wife made: they aren't as well known as some of the other stars on the chart, but for me they are nearly as important.

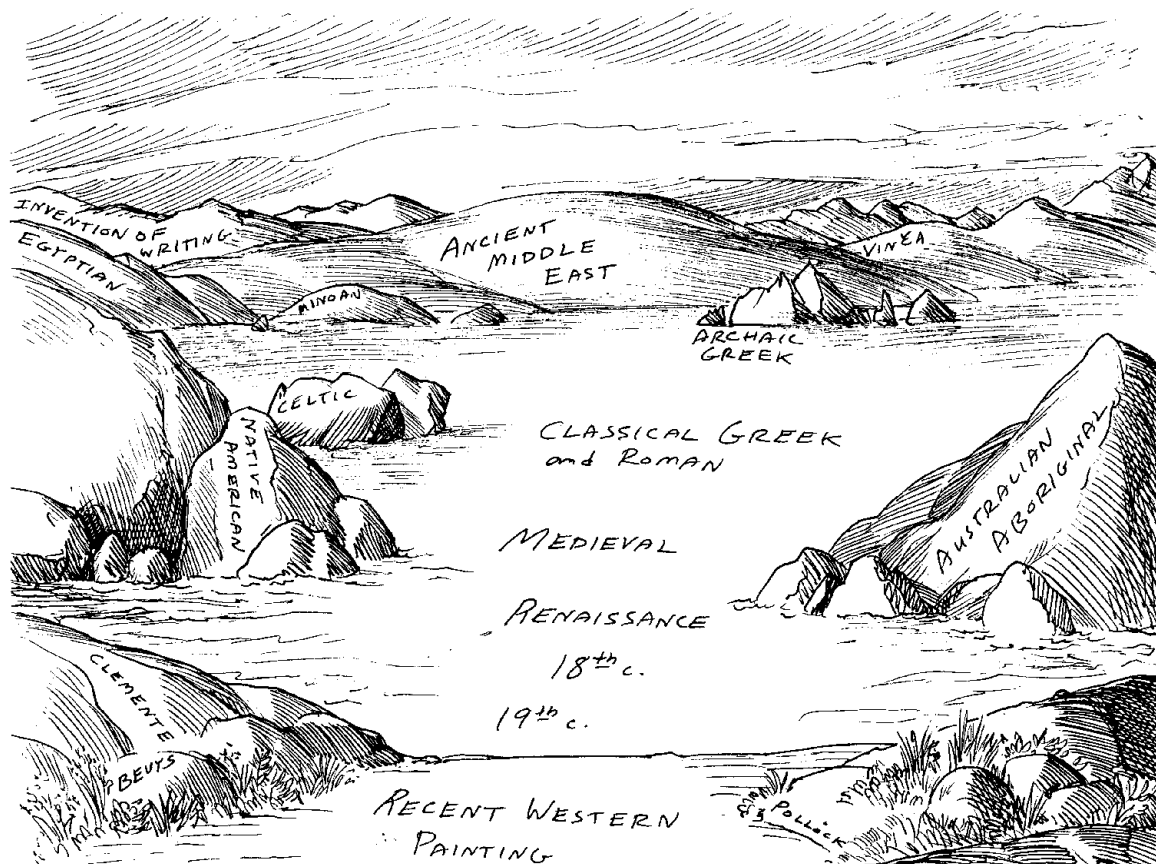
At the center is the moon, which I labeled "natural images: twigs, grass, stars, sand, moths' wings." I put those things at the center because at the time I was studying natural history as much as I was studying art. Down near the horizon, shining faintly, are the Dutch artist Philips de Koninck, and the Czech artist Jan Zrzavy: the one invented landscapes with low horizons, like this one, and the other showed me just how eccentric a 20<sup>th</sup> c. artist can be. To most people this constellation would be fairly meaningless, or just quirky; but for me, it conjures the pattern of history that preoccupied me at the time, and it does so surprisingly strongly: as I look at it, I find myself being pulled back into that mindset.

When I present this thought experiment to students, I show them a picture like this one to start off. A constellation is better than an old-fashioned time line, and it is a good way to begin to loosen the grip of your education and start looking for the pattern that history has for you. The star chart also has a drawback, in that it doesn't show the *structure* of history. It isn't clear which artists and images are further from the center, so there is no way to tell what matters more, and what less. The stars in this picture don't fall into any order, even though they seemed ordered at the time. Nor does the picture reveal which artists and works I thought were better, and which worse.

Another option, more like the conventional time-lines, is a bar chart. One student drew me one with just three bars. The last bar on the right was marked "NOW," and it was labeled with the names Blue Man Group, Laurie Anderson, Pina Bausch, Robert Wilson, Bill Viola, Stelark, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein—all things

considered, a fairly unhistorical grouping. (The Blue Man Group and Laurie Anderson are successful performance artists, Pina Bausch is a choreographer, Robert Wilson designs and stages plays, Bill Viola makes experimental videos and installations, Stelark is a performance artist best known for suspending himself naked from hooks, and the last three are abstract or Pop painters.) The other two bars on the student's graph represented artists further back in time. That part was fairly empty. He picked out just a few artists by name: Pollock, Max Ernst, Oskar Schlemmer, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Luigi Russolo, and Rembrandt. (That's an Abstract Expressionist, a Surrealist, a producer of abstract ballets, two Italian Futurists, and a 17<sup>th</sup> c. Dutch painter.) It was a mighty strange graph. He admitted, too, that his choices came from art history classes that he had recently taken, and that he was only just discovering art history: these were simply the artists who stuck in his mind.

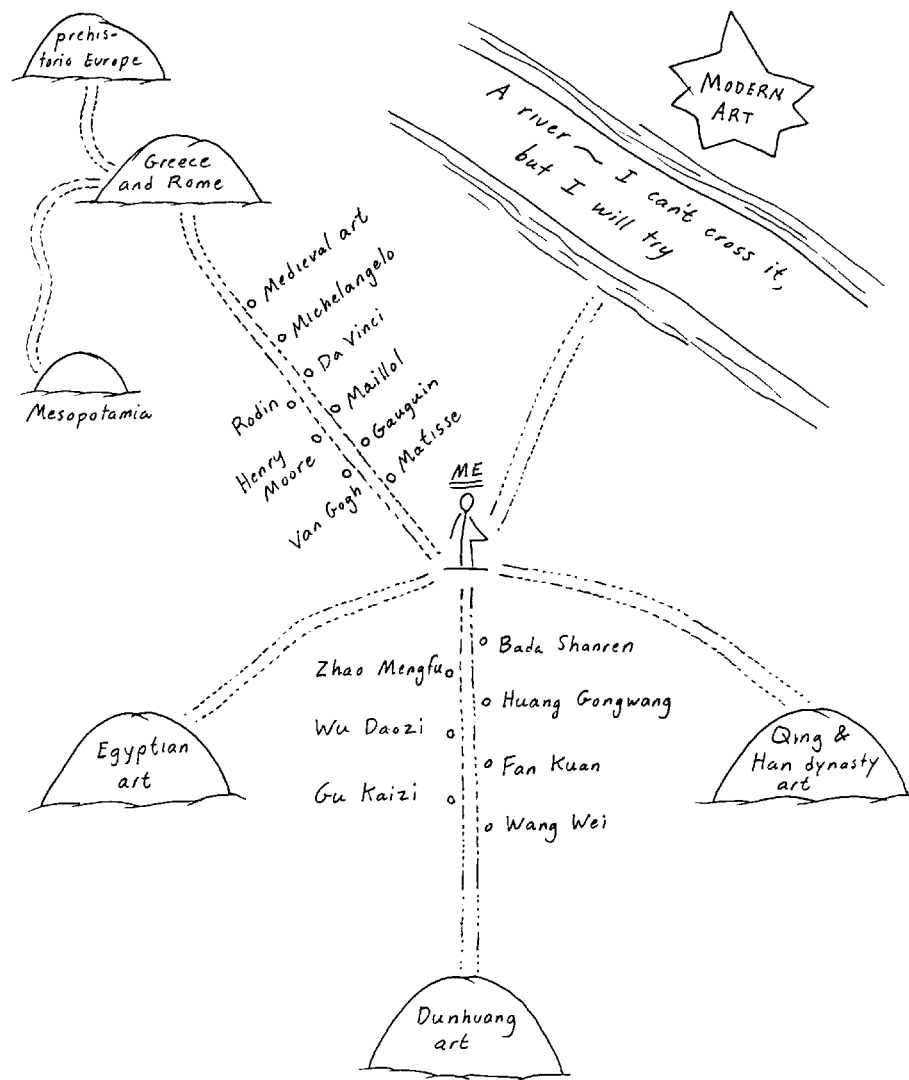
Some of the most interesting mental maps of art history use landscapes. For example, imagine standing on a beach and looking out at the ocean, and say that looking out to sea is like looking into the past. The sand at your feet is whatever art you're used to, and the shallow water is art of the recent past. Deep ocean water stands for art that seems very distant. What would your version of such a landscape look like? Which artists or periods would be nearby, and which would be sunk in the abyss? (One student who tried this exercise drew some strange creatures in the deep, and called them "bioluminescent non-Western art.")



My own version is shown in plate 2; for me, the march of western painting seems to dip under water some time in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., and from there it just gets progressively deeper until art itself becomes invisible. I have studied the art of the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and Rome; but for me they still seem somehow less accessible, less definitely *present*, less clear and familiar than more recent art. Other art historians would no doubt draw things very differently.

Erwin Panofsky, one of the preeminent 20<sup>th</sup> c. art historians, once remarked that everyone's knowledge is like an archipelago—little islands drowned in a sea of ignorance. Even for Panofsky, the history of art wasn't spread out like some geometrically level salt flat, ready to be divided up into years and centuries. Panofsky may have meant that if a person had enough time, he could eventually fill in the ocean, and learn everything. But I'm not sure: there are times and places that we are prohibited from ever understanding because our time, or place, or temperament make them in some degree inaccessible. I would rather say the sea of ignorance cannot be drained. In my imaginary landscape, the ancient Middle East seems mysteriously *more* familiar than

classical Greek art, so I drew it as a distant headland. These things don't always make perfect sense: I can't entirely account for the reason that Australian Aboriginal painting (on the right) and Mayan painting (on the left) appear more solid than medieval painting; but I know that part of my task as an art historian is to try to explain why that should be so.

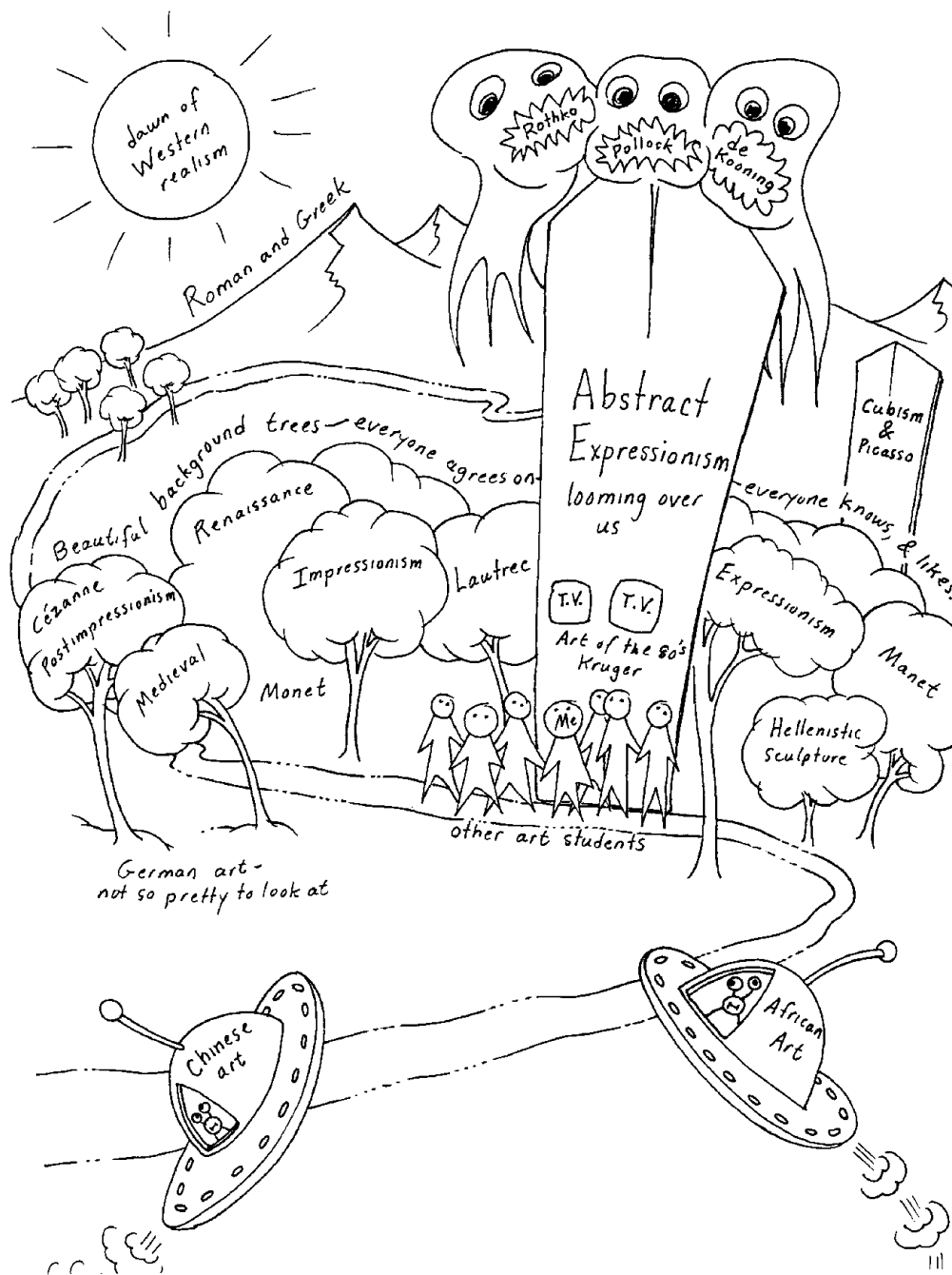


I have a collection of intuitive maps drawn by students, art instructors, and professors from all around the world. An art history graduate student in China drew a map showing five paths into the past (plate 3). One road, leading to the upper left, leads past a selection of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> c. artists back to the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and finally the distant hills of Greece and Rome, prehistoric Europe, and Mesopotamia.

Notice her choice of Western artists: Moore, Maillol, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Matisse are commonly favored in Chinese art because the first generations of Chinese artists who visited France in the 1920s and 1930s studied mostly conservative works and avoided Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism. From Rodin, another Chinese favorite, she jumps abruptly back to the Renaissance.

She puts modern Western art on an entirely separate path (at the upper right), and she sees it as a shining star that she can't quite reach, even though she promises "I will try." This is also a common perception among Chinese artists since the mid-1990s: contemporary Western art is an exotic challenge, one that demands an adventurous plunge into alien territory. Egyptian art is also isolated, off on a road of its own (lower left).

At the bottom and the lower right, she draws two routes into her own Chinese past. One leads straight down, past the classic inkbrush painters to the ancient Chinese Dunhuang cave paintings (c. 750 ACE). This road is essentially the history of Chinese painting, with some venerable forefathers who are like Michelangelo and Leonardo, and also some moderns who are like Matisse and Van Gogh. Neither road quite reaches the present, and it is telling that there is no place on her map for contemporary Chinese art, the way there is for modern Western art. That is partly because Chinese inkbrush painting is widely perceived to have gone into a decline in the last century or so, and partly because for her, "modern art" includes modern Chinese art. A final road, at the lower right, leads directly to two other periods of Chinese art, one recent (the Qing Dynasty, 1644-1912) and the other much older (the Han Dynasty, 206 BCE-220 ACE). This is her way of pointing out another kind of Chinese tradition, which includes ceramics, bronzes, and sculpture; for her it is best captured by one very old period and one new period, the way a Westerner might pair Rome with the revival of Roman ideas in the Renaissance.



I'll reproduce one more map here, to suggest the kinds of things you might draw if you try this yourself. Here is a very inventive drawing by an American undergraduate art student (plate 4). He sees himself and his friends on a meandering path in the middle of a woods, like Dorothy on the way to Oz. The path isn't labeled, but he told me it represents Surrealism because sometimes Surrealism seems "right there," and other times it feels "far away and incomprehensible." His intuition reflects a widespread feeling that



the original French Surrealist movement, which began in the 1920s and petered out in the 1940s, is really still with us, but in unexpected forms. Art historians have developed the same idea. A book called *Formless: A User's Guide*, published in 1997, tells the history of the original French movement and also updates it, expanding on the founders' ideas so they can be useful to contemporary artists and critics. Such a project, midway between art history and art criticism, makes sense for the same reason this student's map makes sense: for many people Surrealism is at one and the time a movement whose time has come and gone, and also a living possibility for art.

The student draws himself standing at the base of a big pillar or tombstone haunted by frightening Abstract Expressionists. In the distance is a less threatening monument to Picasso and Cubism. He feels most at home with TV and "art of the '80s," especially Barbara Kruger's media-savvy photography. Abstract Expressionism and Cubism are a different matter: they are big, serious history, and not at all friendly or accessible.

All around the student and his friends is a forest, which he calls the "beautiful background trees": painting that is well known but not really engaging. In the forest is a host of periods and styles, none of them too interesting and none too difficult or distant. This is a characteristically postmodern sense of the past, where times as utterly different as the Renaissance, Hellenistic sculpture, and Postimpressionism are all equally available. Surrealism, a movement confined to the 20<sup>th</sup> c., meanders all over his mental map, but at the same time nearly three thousand years of art is clustered conveniently around him, scrambled up in no particular order.

In the background are the Olympian mountains of Greece and Rome, and the shining "dawn of Western realism." Greece and Rome are solid, but far away. Many Western students and teachers who have made drawings for me do the same with Greece and Rome: it's a reflection of the idea that Classical civilization is the indispensable foundation stone of the West. The sun that illuminates the landscape is nothing other than the central theme of Gombrich's *Story of Art*: the far-reaching invention of realistic depiction.

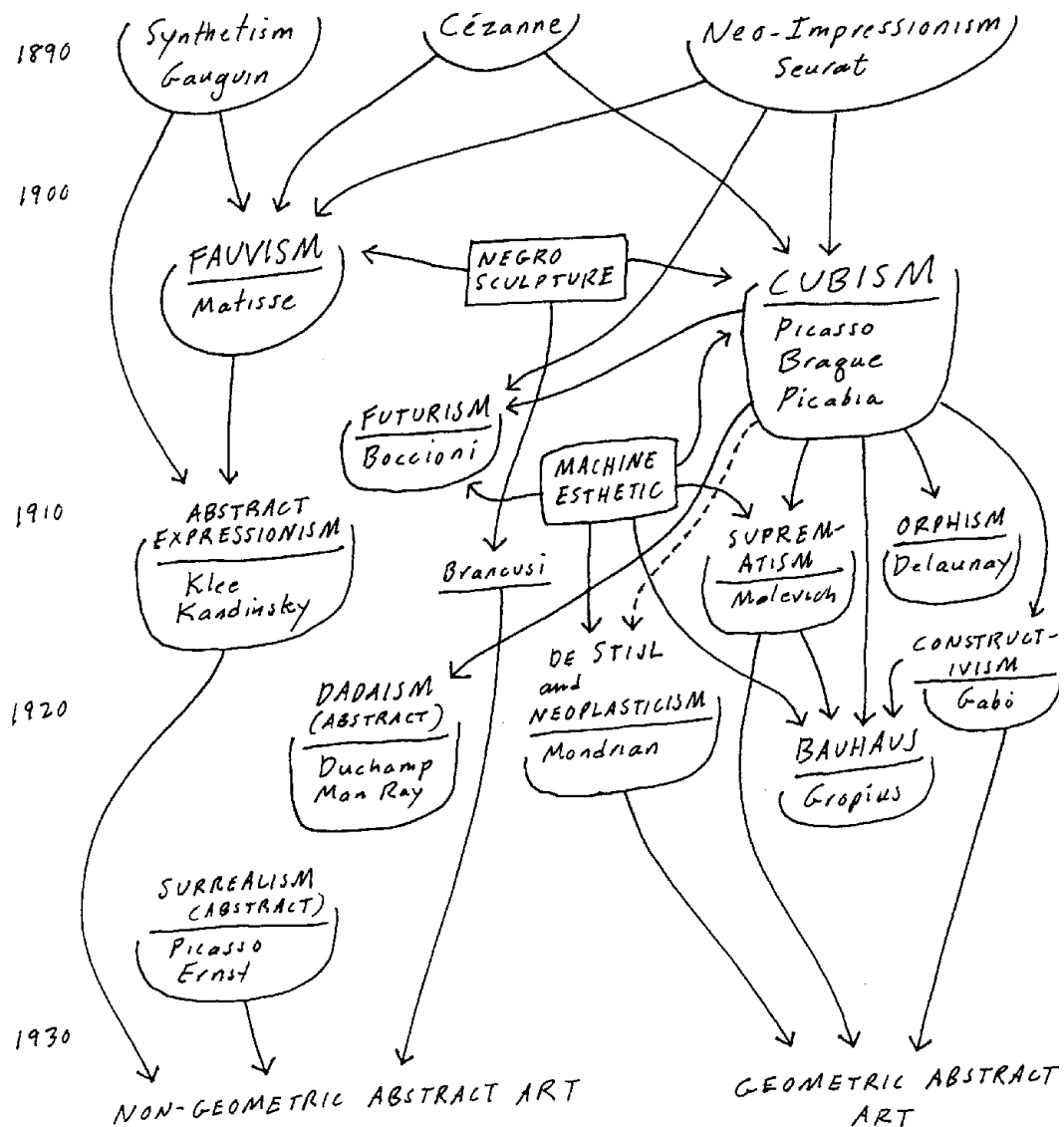
Gombrich wouldn't have agreed with the jumbled forest, or the preeminence of the Abstract Expressionists, or the TV culture, or the Yellow Brick Road of Surrealism.

But he would have recognized the overwhelming Westernness of the picture. For this student, non-Western art is literally alien: it appears as two UFOs, piloted by bug-eyed monsters. (The student who drew this apologized for his two aliens, which he said “aren’t very politically correct.” Yet they are honest, and that is all that matters in this exercise.)

Needless to say, drawings like these can’t fully describe the shape of history. They are too simple, and besides, most of us don’t normally think in diagrams. Drawings and diagrams are unfashionable in art history, because they are too neat to represent the real truth. Yet I risk showing them here because they are unguarded and informal, and that makes them tremendously valuable. The exercise is simple but it isn’t simpleminded: it can help dislodge the weight of pedagogy, and uncover a sense of art history that is closer to the way the past is imagined, felt, and used. I hope you are thinking of making a diagram for yourself—at least a mental one—because it will help you compare your ideas to other peoples’ as we go along through this book. Once you have made such a drawing, you can begin the refining and rearranging that leads, in time, to a coherent and independent sense of what has happened to art from prehistory to the present. What counts is not the drawing itself, but the insight it provides into the *necessity* of thinking about the shape of your imagination. Otherwise art history is just a parade, designed by other people, endlessly passing you by.

## **Periods and Megaperiods**

Another way to think about art history is by considering how the periods of art should be ordered. Period-names are the familiar litany of high-school level art history: Classical, Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Modern, Postmodern. There is no fixed number of periods, and I might as well have said Classical, Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Romantic, Realist, Impressionist, Postimpressionist, Modern, Postmodern, or any number of other permutations. The more detailed the book or the course, the more periods there will be; Horst Janson’s *History of Art*, one of the modern textbooks we will be looking at in Chapter 3, has a folding timeline several feet long.



If you add modern “isms” to your list, you can make it as long as you like: Orphism, Luminism, Futurism, Constructivism, Neo-Plasticism, Purism... Around mid-century, at the height of international Modernism, it looked as if the 20<sup>th</sup> c was a cacophony of isms. Alfred Barr, who worked at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, has gone down in art history as a compulsive lister and codifier of isms; in all he counted several dozen, some of which he invented himself (plate 5). As time passes, the many isms coalesce into major movements, but it is not yet sensible to speak of the 20<sup>th</sup> c as a single movement, with no subdivisions. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> c there are fewer isms but just as many periods: Ottonian, Carolingian, Romanesque, Gothic... and of course the names

only multiply when the subject is non-Western art: in Indian art, for instance, there is Vedic art, and followed by Maurya, Andhra, Kushan, and Gupta. A book could easily be filled with such names.

It is possible to go to extremes, either listing names compulsively (as Barr did), or maintaining that all periods should be gathered under one or two big headings. If all of art is one thing to you, and periods do not really matter, then you are a *monist*: you believe that a cave painting is of a piece with a painting by Pollock, and ultimately there is no sense distinguishing the two. (What would count is creativity, or genius.) On the other hand, if every period name seems meaningful, and every ism is worth recording, then you are an *atomist*. A fundamentalist atomist would say that isms and periods can also be divided, until art history is reduced to a sequence of individual artists. Ultimately even an artist's oeuvre can be subdivided, because each artwork is different from every other. Michelangelo's early sculpture *Bacchus*, with its precious antique looks, does not fit well with his later Florentine *Pietà*, a massive sculpture with nothing precious about it. In a sense every single artwork is a "period" unto itself. In the atomist mindset, art history disintegrates into its component atoms, and in a monist mindset, art history congeals into a single unworkable lump.

Most art historians behave like atomists—they study individual artists and works—but teach like moderate monists, organizing art history into a reasonable number of large periods. There have been exceptions. Gombrich once remarked that he regretted never having written a monograph on an individual artist. His books tend to be on particular themes—there's a book on fresco painting, and a famous one called *Art and Illusion*—or else they are collections of essays that move through different Renaissance or modern subjects. Gombrich's work can be thought of as monist in the sense that he is attracted by ideas and less so by individual artists and periods. The German art historian Wilhelm Pinder was drawn more to atomism: he wrote a *Problem of Generations in European Art History* (1926), proposing art be organized not by periods but according to contemporaries and near-contemporaries. Art since the Renaissance would then be a sequence of about one hundred generations, rather than a half-dozen periods. If Pinder experimented with atomism, then the French art historian Pierre Daix is a specialist in subatomic particles: he made a special study of Picasso's work from 1900 to 1906,

dividing it into many subperiods by season and even by month. Barr's chart is atomist, but his unpublished sketches include many more artists' names, because he was thinking initially of individuals—atomist fashion—and trying to order them as best he could—monist fashion. (Barr was roundly criticized for his diagram of Modern isms, and his approach helped provoke Postmodern scholarship, as we'll see later.) The majority of art historians never get a literal or inventive with the shapes of history as Pinder or Barr: each historian negotiates the treacherous middle ground between the joy of looking at a single work, and letting it pose its own unique questions, and the very different happiness of stepping back, and finding at least a provisional pattern in the chaos of history.

Most of the conversations about periods among art historians have to do with particular periods, and transitions between them. The border between Modern art and Postmodern art is an especially contested case. Some art historians say Postmodernism began in the 1960s with Andy Warhol and Pop art. The philosopher Arthur Danto has argued that at some length, and Danto's conclusion is implicit in work by art historians who do not stray far back before Pop art. Art critics have also weighed in on the question. Dave Hickey, a critic known for writing that conjures giddy mixtures of periods and styles (his concoctions are not unrelated to the student's drawing of the grove of trees), places the beginning of Postmodernism in 1962, with the first Pop art exhibition. Thomas McEvilley, another critic very much engaged in questions of art history, puts it in 1961. The art historian Leo Steinberg, who first introduced the word "postmodern" into art historical writing, also associates the movement with Pop art, and specifically with Rauschenberg's collages. There is a myriad of other opinions: Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois have argued that Postmodernism is less a period than an ongoing resistance to modernism; and historians such as the Belgian Thierry De Duve have found Postmodern elements in Duchamp and Dada, back nearly at the beginning of the century.

The same kinds of conversations are going on with respect to the beginnings of Modern art. According to one version, it got underway in the generation of Jacques-Louis David, at the time of the French Revolution. The art historian Michael Fried locates some elements of Modern art in David's generation, and others in Manet's generation. Other art historians name Cézanne as the origin of Modern art, and still others begin with Cubism.

Debates of this sort also go on with respect to older periods. In the 1960s there was discussion about the span of Mannerism, and whether it should be said to begin directly after the High Renaissance, or later in the century. The first art historians who wrote about Mannerism (in a sense they rediscovered it, as archaeologists find new cultures between known ones) pictured it as a time of tortured, existential passions. In the 1960s John Shearman wrote an influential book on the subject, redefining Mannerism as a lighter, more intellectual pursuit., and moving it away from Florence and toward Rome. Other scholars, such as Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, study Mannerist developments very late in the 16<sup>th</sup> c, at the court of Rudolf II in Prague. Today the question is less often debated, but there are still at least three viable senses of the term “Mannerism.”

These questions of the times and places of isms and movements are both complicated and crucial, and they cannot be abbreviated with doing them serious injustice. Luckily there is another question that is easier to introduce, and arguably even more fundamental: the overall sequences of *all* the periods. It makes a world of difference to your idea of Modernism if it begins with David, Manet, Cézanne, or Picasso; but pondering the sequence of periods that includes Modernism raises deeper questions about the relation between Modernism and art history as a whole.

Erwin Panofsky, who named atomism and monism, has done some of the most sober and useful thinking on this topic. If I look again at the list I made at first:

Classical  
Medieval  
Renaissance  
Baroque  
Modern  
Postmodern

It may occur to me to lump the first two and the last three, like this:

PRE-RENAISSANCE

Classical

Medieval

RENAISSANCE

POST-RENAISSANCE

Baroque

Modern

Postmodern

Panofsky called these new headings *megaperiods*: the largest groupings of periods short of all of art. If this list corresponded to my sense of history, then Pre-Renaissance, Renaissance, and Post-Renaissance would be my three megaperiods: I would not be able to imagine anything larger than them. A radical monist could take the last step, compressing the three megaperiods into one huge “period” called “art.” In so doing, the monist would also collapse the entire idea of history. That is why Panofsky’s megaperiods are so interesting: they are necessary to any sense of art history, and they are also just one step from irrationality.





Arranging the major periods and megaperiods helps reveal the largest units of Western art, and it is also relevant to non-Western art. Art historians tend to use words like “Baroque” and “Classical” to describe the art of many times and places. Such words are used, informally, to describe such things as Mayan stelae, Chinese porcelain, Medieval furniture, and Thai architecture. If I look at this incense burner (plate 7), I may say it looks “Baroque” even though I know the term isn’t right. After all, the object was found in a Han Dynasty tomb dated 113 BCE, a full 1,900 years before the European Baroque. What I mean by calling it “Baroque” is that the burner shares some traits—superficially, coincidentally—with a movement that is otherwise distinct. Art historians tend to say such things offhandedly, without placing much emphasis on them, but they are ingrained in the discipline. The literature on non-Western art is rife with veiled and passing references to “Classical” “Baroque,” “Neoclassical,” “Rococo,” “Modern,” and “Postmodern.”

Notice that art historians don’t casually apply non-Western periods to Western art: it would not occur to me to try to shed light on a Baroque sculpture by Bernini by calling it “Han-like,” or try to elucidate Brunelleschi’s architecture by calling the earlier work “Maurya” or “Andhra” and the later “Kushan” or “Gupta.” That is partly a matter of familiarity, and to a Chinese or Indian art historian such comparisons might make more sense. But it is also a telltale sign of how deeply Western the discipline of art history still remains: the overwhelming majority of art historians *think* in terms of the major Western periods and megaperiods. Even if I avoid calling the burner “Baroque” and call it “curvilinear” or “dynamic” instead, I am drawing on traits that are part of the Baroque. No art history, even the practices emerging in non-European countries, avoids this quandary. For that reason the central sequence of Western periods is relevant to the entirety of the history of art.

The large periods and megaperiods are at the heart of any historical response to artworks, even when it seems they are far from the real European Renaissance or Baroque. Here is another thought experiment that demonstrates that point. Imagine two vases, side by side on a table. Say they are in a style you have never seen before, and you don’t know what culture produced them. They could be tourist art made in Cairo in 1990, or ceramics fired in Sweden in 2000 BCE. Say one has straight lines running across it, in

a simple black and white stripe pattern, and the other has a gorgeous serpentine vine twirling around from the base up to the rim. Which one is older? Here you are on a par with even the most experienced art historian or archaeologist: anyone would say that one is definitely older than the other. There is no telling who might pick which vessel: I might decide the vine shows greater skill and freedom, so it must have come later; you might say the stripes are expert abstractions, the sign of a sophisticated culture. For the purposes of this thought experiment, it doesn't matter who is right: what matters is that each of us has *automatically* put the two vases in a chronological sequence. If I then add one more vase, with horizontal red and white stripes, we would both put it in the same period as the black-and-white striped vase. We have *automatically* started arranging the unknown artifacts into periods: and those periods will almost always be influenced by Western periods from the main sequence. (Stripes look Modern to me, and vines Baroque.)

This kind of thinking was trusted from the beginnings of connoisseurship in the 17<sup>th</sup> c. to early modern art historians like the German Heinrich Wölfflin; contemporary art historians call it *style analysis* and put no stock in it. Today an art historian would rather wait for some other evidence—dates, a chemical analysis, or some documents to prove the vessels' ages—but no viewer can resist arranging artworks into periods. The more highly trained the historian, the more confidently and quickly she will make the identification—and then begin to doubt it. But the damage is done in that first half-second: periods, and the ways we conceptualize them, lead to judgments practically without our knowing it. The sequence of Western periods is central to many peoples' imagination of art history, whether they live in Europe, America, or elsewhere.

What, then, are the optimal ways of arranging the periods and megaperiods? In practice several solutions have held sway over many possible alternates. A person who thinks of the Renaissance as a turning point may put everything afterward in a subheading. (Megaperiods are in capitals, and ordinary periods in lowercase.)

ANCIENT

CLASSICAL

MEDIEVAL

RENAISSANCE

Baroque  
Neoclassical  
Modern  
Postmodern

This scheme has been called an *expanded Renaissance*, because it implies that in some way the Renaissance made everything else possible. It is a popular view among historians who specialize in the Renaissance, but it also has strong evidence in favor of it. Art itself got underway in the Renaissance: in the Middle Ages paintings and sculptures were religious objects, not collectibles or objects of aesthetic appreciation. Along with the concept of art came a host of other terms we now find indispensable: the notion of the avant-garde, the idea that great artists are lonely geniuses, the practice of art criticism, the disciplines of aesthetics and art theory, the rise of secular art, and even the field of art history itself. In comparison to those changes, it could be argued that the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism is relatively superficial.

Panofsky himself preferred four megaperiods with period subheadings:

CLASSICAL

Mycenean

Hellenistic

MEDIEVAL

Carolingian

Gothic

RENAISSANCE

Early Renaissance

High Renaissance

MODERN

Panofsky's outline is probably the closest to a consensus of art historians' working notions. If I were to add some period subheadings under "MODERN," such as Baroque, Romantic, Impressionist, and Postmodern, Panofsky's list would correspond fairly well to

the job descriptions that universities post when they need to hire additional faculty, and also to the names of different sessions in art history conferences. Probably the largest divergence of opinion is between art historians who specialize in pre-Modern art, who would subscribe to something like Panofsky's outline, and those who teach Modern and Postmodern art, who might feel more at home with an outline like this:

#### PREMODERN

Ancient

Medieval

Renaissance

Baroque

Romanticism

Realism

#### MODERN

Postimpressionism

Cubism

Abstraction

Surrealism

Abstract Expressionism

Postmodernism

Art historians who work primarily with 20<sup>th</sup> c. material tend to use less of the deeper past, on average, than historians who work with some period of pre-Modern history. In conferences and in the day-to-day life of art history departments, Modernists and specialists in contemporary art are less engaged with the whole range of history than pre-Modernists are engaged with recent art.

There is also the question of non-Western art, which will loom larger later in this book. A specialist in non-Western art might put all the Western periods and megaperiods under the heading "WESTERN," making the West just one culture among many. A specialist in African art might think of history this way:

#### AFRICAN ART

Saharan rock art

Egyptian  
Nok  
Djenné  
Ife and Benin  
Colonial  
Postcolonial  
EUROPEAN ART  
ASIAN ART  
AMERICAN ART

(The African cultures and periods might still follow the *logic* of the sequence Classical-Medieval-Renaissance-Baroque, but that's another question.)

And finally, among contemporary artists, I find the working sense of art history is more centered on late capitalist America and Europe, and that the rest of history gets telescoped in a fairly drastic manner, like this:

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

Some museums also organize their collections this way, putting non-Western art in one place, "European art" in another, and "Twentieth-Century Art" in another. Often enough those divisions also correspond to different departments in museums, each with its own budget, specialists, and subculture.



If you feel the most affinity with this last list, you are siding with the current art scene, and with the globalization of all art and the compression of art history into a single

pre-Modern past. In Postmodern art practice, *appropriation* is the name given to the practice of taking bits and pieces from all periods of art history, and putting them into new art. Such artists are not reticent to pick and choose at will, because history itself seems to have fallen in ruins at their feet. Everything is now equally distant from the present, whether it is a prehistoric artifact or a Picasso collage. This perspective is nicely captured in the “Picasso Madonna,” a Florentine restorer’s joke made in the 1960s (plate 8). It’s like a postmodern map of the Renaissance: its deepest layer is a 13<sup>th</sup> c. painting, visible in the Madonna’s right eye, her mouth, two little angels, and the infant Jesus just below the Madonna’s face. Over that layer are two further layers painted in the Renaissance. (See if you can disentangle them.) The result is a playful collage of at least four centuries of art, all stuck together like any postmodern collage.

The same idea can be captured in an intuitive map like the ones in plates 1-4. One artist drew a picture for me showing himself on a desert island, with all of history like a treasure trove (or a garbage pile) all around him. Nothing, he said, was more than an arm’s length away. His list of periods and megaperiods might have looked like this:

## ART HISTORY

(No subdivisions)

## THE PRESENT

Psychologically, such a radically collapsed sense of history is a great relief for people burdened by a nagging sense of the importance of history. Suddenly, all art is possible, and nothing needs to be studied. The first student I mentioned, who drew the bar graphs with Pina Bausch and Blue Man Group, is close to that way of thinking. Some art historians who work exclusively on contemporary art feel the same exhilaration: they can apply any theories they want, interpret in any fashion they choose, and cite or ignore precedents at will. But as Milan Kundera might say, sooner or later the apparent lightness of art history reveals itself as an “unbearable lightness,” and finally as an unbearable burden.



## Oscillating history

The outline lists I've given so far are the commonest models, but they are not the only ones. Wölfflin claimed there are far-reaching affinities between "Baroque" or "Classical" moments in different times and places, and he supported his contention by making elaborate analyses of the styles of selected artworks, entirely avoiding mention of their surrounding cultural contexts. (Wölfflin might have been more at ease than I would be calling the Han Dynasty incense burner "Baroque.") Graduate students of art history are taught about Wölfflin, in part to help them avoid his reductive kind of style analysis. Even with that precaution, the simple fact that he continues to be taught is testimony to the seductive nature of his theories. Maybe there *is* something Baroque about the twirling smoky shapes in the incense burner: perhaps the human eye does return to the same possibilities over and over. It is an idea that needs to be taken seriously simply because it will not go away. If I were a dyed-in-the-wool Wölfflinian, I might rewrite my initial sequence of periods like this:

Classical  
Medieval (=Baroque)  
Renaissance (= Classical)  
Baroque  
Modern (= Classical)  
Postmodern (= Baroque)

Or, in simplest terms,

Classical  
Baroque  
Classical  
Baroque  
Classical  
Baroque

and so on without end. No art historian would subscribe to such a list, and Wölfflin himself avoided being so explicit, but there *is* something Baroque about Medieval art, and there *is* something austere, intellectual, and Classical about Modern art.



If Wölfflin's sense of alternating periods is taken seriously, history swings back and forth like a pendulum, instead of moving forward or spreading through an imaginary landscape. There are some viable models of oscillating history, and one of the most influential concerns the nature of German art. Writing about Albrecht Dürer, Germany's preeminent Renaissance artist, Panofsky said that

the evolution of high and post-medieval art in Western Europe might be compared to a great fugue in which the leading theme was taken up, with variations, by the different countries. The Gothic style was created in France; the Renaissance and Baroque originated in Italy and were perfected in co-operation with the Netherlands; Rococo and nineteenth century Impressionism are French; and eighteenth century Classicism and Romanticism are basically English.

In this great fugue the voice of Germany is missing. She has never brought forth one of the universally accepted styles the names of which serve as headings for the chapters of the History of Art.

The problem is widely debated in Germany. Has Germany produced a characteristic kind of visual art, one which was a "leading theme" at some point in Western history? Or is it preeminently a country of composers and poets? The question is vexed for many reasons; after the Second World War, discussion of the Germanness of visual art was anathema. As the German art historian Hans Belting points out, Germany did not even exist as such after the War: Half of it (East Germany) was inaccessible to scholars in the West, and it wasn't even possible to write about the Germanic culture of northwest Poland. Nothing to do with national art could be raised, and German critics and scholars were relieved to be able to speak about "Occidental" or "European" art, and even global art, rather than have to think about the Germanness of German art. Into that vacuum stepped several generations of German artists: first Joseph Beuys, who tried to recapture a viable sense of the German past by reaching back into hoary Germanic prehistory; and then Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer, who are at one and the same time seriously involved with issues of German history and maddeningly evasive. German art history has yet to catch up with those new voices. With some exceptions, such as Belting, Karl Werkmeister, and Benjamin Buchloh, there is little scholarly discussion of claims like Panofsky's.

Panofsky does not propose that Dürer is Germany's contribution to the "fugue" of European art; rather he says that Dürer, like many German artists after him, fell prey to the impossible allure of Italian art without ever fully incorporating it into a German style. Dürer visited Italy twice to learn secrets of Italian art theory, and he complained about the lack of theoretical training among German artists. Yet he never synthesized Italian and German art. From the art North of the Alps, Dürer inherited the Germanic qualities of attention to detail and "inwardness" (*Innerlichkeit*); from the South, he learned the Italian concern with unified, balanced, and theoretically informed pictures. Many of Dürer's pictures make use of both sources, but none, according to Panofsky, remakes them into something new. Dürer's style oscillated, but did not move forward to something fundamentally new.

Traditionally artists' careers are divided into periods or phases on the model of the human life, so that there is an early period, a mature period, and a late period. If the artist is lucky, he or she will achieve a *late style*, usually conceived as a crowning synthesis. Panofsky says Dürer's oscillation prevented him from following this sequence. It is possible to tell Dürer's earlier works from his later ones, but there are no essential differences, and he never achieved a late style. (Panofsky says he only had a *last style*, meaning the style he happened to be working in when he died.)

Panofsky thinks there was "an innate conflict" in Dürer's mind, a principle of "tension" galvanizing all of his ideas and achievements. Dürer spent a few years working in an Italianate manner, than a few in a German mode, and so forth, so that his work "is governed by a principle of oscillation which leads to a cycle of what may be called *short periods*: and the alternation of the *short periods* overlaps the sequence of the customary three phases. The constant struggle... was bound to produce a certain rhythm comparable to the succession of tension, action and regression in all natural life, or to the effect of two interfering waves of light or sound in physics." Panofsky's analysis, proposed in 1955, is one of the most lucid statements of an oscillating model of art history. He means it to apply to Dürer, but it resonates, unavoidably, with the larger question of German art.

Even though Germany is the most prominent model for this particular historical quandary, there are many other countries and regions that have been similarly divided between two (or more) influences. Bulgarian art in the twentieth century has shifted

between Soviet Socialist Realism and French Impressionism, Postimpressionism, and Surrealism. Like artists in other small countries, Bulgarian artists have tried to define the Bulgarian qualities of their work, and have been acutely aware that their art is mainly a mixture of Soviet and French models. Just as the Germany of Dürer's time was polarized between North and South, Bulgarian art was polarized between East and West. (This is an overview, of course: in practice Bulgarian artists distinguish German, French, and Italian influences, as well as Russian and other Balkan influences. Often, however, those other influences were themselves filtered through French and Russian art.) And as in the case of post-war Germany, postwar Bulgarian artists have recently suspended those these questions, turning instead to the new international art market.

Oscillating models of history permeate the discipline. Another example is Netherlandish art of the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, which has been described as a kind of inverse or shadow of Italian art. Just as Dürer said German art lacked Italian theory, so Dutch painters have been described as lacking Italian traits. The art historian Svetlana Alpers has proposed a new model of Netherlandish painting that would free it of its traditional dependence on Italy, by putting the Northern achievement in positive terms. She sees Dutch painting as an “art of describing,” in which Italian optical models are supplanted by a more direct, materially based way of seeing the world. Books like Alpers's are art history's best chance of escaping its traditional polarities, but some oscillations—perhaps including Germany's—have been around so long, and been tacitly accepted by so many writers, that they are built into the fabric of our understanding.

These examples (Germany, Bulgaria, the Netherlands) are all local ones, within Europe. The largest oscillations aren't North-South or East-West: they are the huge swings that non-Western countries can feel between their own art and the art of the West. That kind of polarity can be crippling, dividing a country's sense of itself right down the middle.

## **Life history**

Each of these models of history has its own history. Oscillating history may be a Renaissance invention, because the Renaissance itself was a renascence, a rebirth of

Classical art, and therefore a revival—in other words, the beginning of an oscillation. There's also the fact that oscillations and cycles were theorized shortly after the end of the Renaissance, by the historian Giambattista Vico. The divisions of history into periods and megaperiods has its origin in the universal histories of the 18<sup>th</sup> c., which were arrangements of all nations according to their genealogical links to Noah and his sons. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> c. art historians were applying the same organizational methods to their more limited materials, and the notion of periods and groups of periods was routine in textbooks from the late 19<sup>th</sup> c. onward.

A third model of history is more ancient than either oscillations or outlines: it is the *organic model*, the notion that the periods of a culture are like the periods of a person's life, or the life of an animal or plant. The organic model was known to the Greeks, and it became a stock in trade of Roman historiography.

The fundamental notion is that each culture, nation, or style goes through a life cycle: first comes the rough, unstable beginnings, when the culture is “young” and no rules have been fixed. In the 20<sup>th</sup> c., a period that has been thought of that way is Archaic Greek art (600-480 BCE); under the influence of Cubism and other Modern art, Archaic vase paintings and sculptures came to be seen as the raw but honest beginnings of Greek art. Another such period, also more widely appreciated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. than before, is 14<sup>th</sup> c. Italian painting from Giotto onward. That century, before Masaccio and the discovery of perspective, includes the first jumbled attempts to make naturalistic depictions of the world, and it appealed to 20<sup>th</sup> c. tastes weaned on Modern art.

In the organic model, the next stage sees the end of adolescence and the beginning of maturity. In Greek sculpture that would be the Early Classical period (480-450 BCE) and in Italian painting, the 15<sup>th</sup> c. Those periods were more fully appreciated earlier than the 20<sup>th</sup> c.; the early 19<sup>th</sup> c. German art historian Carl Friedrich Rumohr wrote as enthusiastically about 15<sup>th</sup> c. Italian art as he did about the High Renaissance.

Then follows the period of full manhood (the schema is traditionally sexist, so it isn't full womanhood). The 18<sup>th</sup> c. antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who has been called Germany's greatest art historian, described Greek archaic art but preferred the perfection of Athenian art of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. That period, the “apogee” of Greek

art, came to be known as the High Classical period. In Italian painting, the period of full maturity is the High Renaissance (beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> c.).

After the peak of life has passed, a man gets older, passing through middle age and beginning the slow decline toward death. In Greek art, that would be from the century before Alexander the Great, through Hellenistic art, to the rise of Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE. Winckelmann wrote heartfelt pages on the decadence of Hellenistic art, which he saw as a model for declines in other cultures. In Italy, the decline would begin with Mannerism and academic art in the later 16<sup>th</sup> c., and end sometime in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Of course not all cultures die—Greece and Italy are still extant—and so the final period tends to be inconclusive. Sometimes the life-history model can become an oscillating model, as if the culture's "life" were reincarnated. Italian art is sometimes considered to have partly revived by the 19<sup>th</sup> c. landscape tradition called the *Macchiaioli*, and then decisively by the Futurists. In other cases, the decline continued unabated for centuries. The slow death of late Roman art is a well-known example. Greek art after the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE was also moribund. In one sense the culture changed when it became Byzantine, but in another sense modern Greece continues a nearly unimaginably long decline that began before Alexander's lifetime. These days art historians have learned not to judge so harshly, and the "decadent" late periods are studied as earnestly as classical ones. Yet these questions lurk in the background of much that is written about Greek and Italian art. Winckelmann's quandary was even greater, because he was investing so much in a culture that had no connection with Germany except that German scholars studied it and collected its masterpieces. It is as if Winckelmann were trying to recapture a full history for Germany, replete with pathos and greatness, simply by writing about it.

The schema of the life cycle was codified in ancient texts into a set sequence: *infantia*, *adulescentia*, *maturitas*, *senectus*. Occasionally there are five stages, and sometimes only three. Sometimes too, the metaphors are taken from botany and not from human life, and writers speak of the "seeds" of a culture, its "blossoming," and its "withering" or "decline." Any way it's cut, the life-history model has one fatal flaw: it has to die in the end.

## Paradoxical history

For many purposes these four models are sufficient. (Maps, periods, oscillations, life histories.) They cover a large percentage of viewers' intuitive concepts of history, and a surprising percentage of the serious scholarship. I will mention just one more, much less influential and conceptually more difficult.

It is possible to imagine an art history that would work against chronology altogether. Artistic influence is normally traced from one generation to the next, so that artists in a tradition are linked by the anxiety each feels in thinking about the past. Yet it is not entirely nonsensical to speak of influence extending backward in time, so that Picasso "influences" Rubens, or Winckelmann's 18<sup>th</sup> c. German classicism "influences" ancient Greece. That apparently paradoxical result is really only an image of the way that history builds meanings: as I look back *past* Picasso to see Rubens, Rubens begins to seem clunkier, more extravagant, and more unintentionally humorous than he could possibly have appeared in his own time. I see him through Picassoid glasses, as it were, tinted with the colors of Postimpressionism and Cubism. The Dutch art historian Mieke Bal has written a book about Caravaggio that says essentially the same thing: we can only see Caravaggio through the works of recent artists influenced by him. "Preposterous history," she calls it. In a similar way German scholarship in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. did much to give us our sense of the timeless beauty of High Classical Greece. Even though Winckelmann's ideals are largely abandoned, there is still a real lingering feeling that Greece is perfect and timeless the ways the German scholars and poets hoped it was.

Paradoxical history isn't really paradoxical at all—in fact it is inescapable. How *could* I see Rubens or Caravaggio, except with the 20<sup>th</sup> c. in the back of my mind? Good scholarship suppresses the more egregious anachronisms, but it can never erase them entirely. If you are more an artist than a student of art history, then you may think of art entirely in these terms, and even have a backwards timeline:

## POSTMODERNISM

Modernism

Renaissance

Middle Ages

Classical Greece

Prehistory

A few art historians other than Bal have experimented with paradoxical history. At least three universities have experimented with teaching art history backwards. (Apparently it doesn't work: influence always also goes forward, and the students become confused.) A book on Marcel Duchamp tells the story of his life starting with January 1, and under that heading the authors put whatever is known about Duchamp's activities on the first of January for every year he lived. Then they go on to January 2. When they have recounted all 365 days of the year, their "chronology" ends. It's really entirely nonsensical—no one experiences their own life that way—but it is intended to capture something real and historically true about Duchamp: his penchant for illogic and whimsy. Literary theorists have already toyed with the fabric of history in this fashion, and produced results that are not at all counterintuitive. Perhaps in the future more art historians will also try their hand at such things.

## **Posthistory**

At the end of history there is the problem of the present. If Postmodernism is our current period—and that's an assertion that is far from generally accepted—then what happens when it ends?

If Postmodernism sticks as a label for the latter portion of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, sooner or later Postmodernism will start to appear as a period like any other. At the moment, however, it seems more like the name of something in process than a discrete period like the Baroque, with an agreed-upon beginning and end. For some, postmodernity is a condition or a mode of living, rather than a period. In the 1980s art historians began speaking of the *endgame*, a term borrowed from chess and applied to the workings of historical periods. In a chess endgame, only a few pieces remain on the board, and it may not be clear whether one player can force a win, or whether the play will continue indefinitely. Endgame problems are especially intractable, slow-moving,

and repetitive, and chess experts have written books on the subject. In visual theory, endgame art is a postmodern condition in which little remains to be done, and yet it is unclear whether the “game” of art can actually be ended. Endgame artists make minimal moves, trying to finesse the dying mechanisms of art a few more incremental steps.

If endgame theory captures some of the mood of Postmodernism in art history, then Postmodernism itself may not be a period with a normal ending. Instead it may continue indefinitely, until the players in the art world (the artists, their critics and historians, and the gallerists and curators) agree to call a draw and start a new game. All of art history would have decisively broken with the advent of Postmodernism, because Postmodernism would be the first “period” with no determinate length. Like a course of psychoanalysis, it might continue interminably.

Alternately, the game of Western art may have already ended, and Postmodernism may be a new kind of game that starts after art. That theory, endorsed by Arthur Danto, holds that art ended when Andy Warhol made his *Brillo Boxes*. (Technically, they’re hand-made counterfeits of ordinary wholesale cardboard boxes holding retail Brillo boxes.) Some art historians say the same about Duchamp’s *Fountain* (a porcelain urinal he bought from a catalogue and submitted to an art exhibition). If either account of the end of art becomes generally accepted—again, a far from certain outcome—then Postmodernism could be the name of something after art, just as the middle ages was something before art:

#### BEFORE ART

Prehistory

Classical Greece and Rome

Middle Ages

#### ART

Renaissance

Baroque

Modernism

#### AFTER ART

Postmodernism



Some help in thinking about Postmodernism might come from China, because Chinese art history has also had a period with “Postmodern” qualities. From the Qing Dynasty onward, Chinese painters continuously simplified their past art history, telescoping different movements into single schools. Like Western artists, they had to try ever harder to be noticed, resulting in pictures with exaggerations and eccentricities (several groups of Chinese painters are known as “eccentrics”). As in the West, artists began to develop *signature styles* and personal quirks that would make them instantly recognizable, like Damien Hirst’s cows in formaldehyde or Barbara Kruger’s *National Enquirer*-style photographs. Later Chinese painting evolved in a pluralist atmosphere filled with heterogeneous styles, short-lived schools, idiosyncratic works, and artists distinguished by single hypertrophied traits or monomaniacally repeated tricks—all typical traits of contemporary Western art.

Art in Qing Dynasty China has only superficial similarities to art in the West, but it is intriguing that the Chinese “Postmodernism” began about 250 years ago and showed no signs of ending when it was swept away, along with much of traditional Chinese culture, in the revolution. If the parallel has any merit—and such parallels tend to fall apart as quickly as they are made—it does not bode well for our notion that Postmodernism is a period like any other. Rather it implies that Postmodernism is not a period but a state, like a coma, that might go on indefinitely. Perhaps Yve-Alain Bois has said it best when he imagines the endgame as an act of mourning, in which painting slowly recognizes that its hopes for a future are not going to come true, and turns to the business of “working through the end of painting.” If so, then art history doesn’t have a neat tabular structure like the ones I’ve been proposing. Instead it “ends” with suspension points, leading away toward an indefinite future:

#### NORMAL PERIODS

Classical

Medieval

Renaissance

Baroque

Modern

## ABNORMAL PERIODS

Postmodernism

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