UNIT I STUDY GUIDE
Introduction to Art History, Prehistoric Art, and Art of the Ancient Near East

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Identify “What is Art?” based on the stipulation that art is intentionally created to represent something.
2. Summarize the context of an object or a work of art by identifying its style, subject, date, artist(s), and patron(s), to the extent each can be known.
3. Employ art historical terms for conducting a basic visual analysis of a work of art, as well as for identifying and categorizing types of art.
4. Relate the compositional innovations of both the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods to the social values and needs of the cultures that created the works of art.
5. Relate and differentiate between Paleolithic and Neolithic cave paintings in terms of content, technique, and stylistic innovation.
6. Identify the various materials and techniques used to create Paleolithic and Neolithic sculpture.
7. Identify where Neolithic activities first began.
8. Describe the beginnings of urban planning in the Near East during the Neolithic period.
9. Identify architectural techniques used in Western Europe during the Neolithic period.
10. Identify the materials, techniques, and subject matter characteristic of the various regions of the ancient Near East.
11. Summarize the stylistic conventions and innovations of Prehistoric art and the art of the ancient Near East.
12. Explain the role of power and art in the ancient Near East.

Written Lecture

Introduction: What is Art History?

What is art? The word, or concept rather, cannot be definitively identified as a single, all-encompassing and tangible thing. “Art” means different things to different peoples at different points in time.

Unit I begins with an introduction to what art history is and what art historians do. Art historians, and those who study art, ask particular questions to gather information needed to understand and appreciate a work of art in its context. It is by knowing the history and context of a work of art that we may come to truly appreciate it.

The context of a work of art includes its:

1. Date, or chronology in history
2. Style
3. Provenance
Consider this – the word “art,” or even a translation of the word, does not exist in all languages, and the word has not always existed. The concept of “art” does not and did not exist in all languages and with all cultures. “Art” as we in the Western world conceive of it is in fact relatively new in the full timeline of human activity. As you study the objects and works of art in this course, try not to place them in a museum, to put them on a pedestal with a spotlight shining on them, or to put them on display at all (that is until we get to some of the later chapters when display becomes important to artistic production; even then consider how they were intended to be displayed).

The textbook introduction also defines some of the language and terms art historians use to explore the context of a work of art and to conduct a visual analysis. Using the terms will allow you to meaningfully describe a work of art so that the visual description reveals the values of the creators, the time period in which it was created, the region in which it was created, and maybe the patrons, thus revealing parts of the context.

Chapter 1: Art Before History

The study of art history begins with the Paleolithic period. This was the time when early humans began to intentionally represent the world around them to express their values and ideas. Such representations have come to be called art.

The choices early humans made when creating were relative to how they lived. For example, humans of the Paleolithic period were nomadic and did not create permanent dwellings or settlements. They commonly used natural shelters such as caves where much of their works of art have been discovered. Artists would paint images of animals - or, less frequently, humans - and then move on to another area or region that provided the resources they needed such as food, water, and shelter. These artists were either members of the same group, or members of a different group that used the same cave afterward. On the other hand, during the Neolithic period, humans began to settle into communities that did not move around – this is where we begin our study of architecture and architectural monuments. Because the peoples of the Neolithic period were settled in permanent communities, it makes sense that more of their material culture was created with permanent materials, which is why we see more of it today than we do of Paleolithic creations.

The materials and techniques used by artists can also reveal information about the culture or artists who created works of art. For example, the artist who created the human figure with feline head found at Hehlestein-Stadel (Fig. 1-4) went through great effort to create the statuette. Mammoth ivory was very difficult to carve and sculpt. The ivory first had to be shaped using sandstone. The artist then created and used a burin – a sharp, pointed tool – to incise the details. The creation of tools for this specific purpose demonstrates additional effort in the pursuit of creating this statuette and objects like it. The effort put into creating an object or a work of art is relative to its value and importance to the artist(s) and the culture that created it.

We can also learn a lot about the goals and needs of the artists by observing the choices of composition in works of art. Paleolithic and Neolithic art is
characterized by the artists’ choice of strict profile or composite view (the combination of frontal and profile views as opposed to optical view) to represent animals. By depicting animals in these ways, the artists were able to fully describe and define the animals in one representation. Only in profile view can an animal’s body shape, head shape, all four legs, and tail be seen. Now imagine that the animal being represented is a bull – in profile view, both horns cannot be seen. The horns of a bull are two of its most defining characteristics. By turning the head and/or horns so that they are seen frontally and by keeping the body in profile, artists at the Hall of Bulls as Lascaux, France (Fig. 1-11) were able to fully define the bull in representation to meet their needs. The concern of the artists was not strict realism, but rather, the depiction of the bulls and other animals in such a way that they were most recognizable.

Chapter 2: The Ancient Near East

The rise of civilization occurred when humanity gave up hunting and gathering for the more controlled and stable existence of farming and herding. The region of the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia in particular, fostered this revolutionary adaptation. This was the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, known as the Fertile Crescent. Archeological excavations have uncovered a wide range of objects in this area that have proven to be hugely informative. For example, the digs at the Royal Cemetery of Ur revealed clues to the lives of the powerful. From such excavations, scholars have been able to piece together the beginnings of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations and their contributions to the rise of subsequent civilizations.

Iconography

The iconography characteristic of the works of art created by the cultures and regions of the ancient Near East has proven to be especially informative. For example, the iconography of the “Warka Vase” (Fig. 2-5), a Sumerian work, illustrates how the identity of a ruler merged with the god or goddess worshipped by the culture. In narrative format, the vase illustrates a procession to the goddess Inanna with offerings from the community; an act performed in hopes of receiving a blessing or assistance from that deity. The idea represented on the vase validates the community of Uruk – the goddess is pleased with the community as she has blessed them with a bounty of crops and domesticated animals. This is the beginning of iconography, or illustrative symbols, being used as visual petitions to the gods on behalf of the population, and we will see that these types of practices continued for centuries as we progress through the course.

Other cultures used and re-used symbols developed by the Sumerians. Adaptation of a previous society’s symbols and iconography aids in development of a new society, emphasizing its prestige, power, and importance. For example, the victory stele of Naram-Sin (Fig. 2-13) of the Akkadian culture points to an inheritance of symbols from Sumer. Naram-Sin is larger than his troops (hierarchy of scale), leading his army to victory, and almost impervious to harm on the battleground. This theme is very similar to the victory stele of Eannatum (Fig. 2-7) of Sumer, yet the Akkadian rendering presents significant changes to this narrative, indicative of the re-use of a symbol type to fit the new demands of a different culture. Note the symbol of the sun overhanging the mountain in the victory stele of Naram-Sin; this is the symbol for divine support of Naram-Sin as a co-equal. The horned helmet worn by Naram-Sin also suggests divine support, or perhaps even divine status, as bulls’ horns were an attribute of the divine in Akkadian culture. This is a clear change from previous groups – the Sumerians
would never feature their ruler wearing such a helmet; rather they illustrated importance by hierarchy of scale (for example, the "Standard of Ur," Fig. 2-8). The use of hierarchy of scale was also shared between the Sumerians and the Akkadians; however, the Akkadians added the suggestion of divine approval of their ruler. The uniqueness of Naram-Sin's stele is the re-use of a motif (a ruler leading his army to victory) changed just enough to create a new theme (the potential divinity of the ruler, or, at the very least, the special relationship the king had with the gods).

Representation of the human form

In the art of the ancient Near East, gods and goddesses were represented in human form. The “formula” used to represent the human form had its roots in Prehistoric art, and it remained in use for countless representations for centuries even after works such as the “Warka Vase” (Fig. 2-5) were created. Artists working in this manner used a composite view: profile head, frontal torso, and profile legs.

Representations of the king's and the military’s power

The ancient Near East produced many objects and works of art that focused on the might and power of the king or ruler. In Assyrian relief sculptures, the sculptor's primary obligation was to depict the exploits of the king in triumph. Another goal of the artist was to create a visual narrative that clearly indicated the powerful military skills of the Assyrians. For example, in a relief from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II depicting Assyrian archers pursuing enemies (Fig. 2-22), the sculptor created a narrative of a battle, either about to happen or having already happened.

Architecture

The practice of imitation and re-invention can be seen in architecture as well. Compare Uruk's White Temple (Fig. 2-2) with the Ziggurat of Ur (Fig. 2-15). Over one thousand years separate these two structures, yet the imitation is clear, and the differences express the needs of the creators. From excavations in the area, we find the architectural form of the ziggurat appearing in its various sizes and modifications. In examining and comparing these ancient cities, much can be learned. The ziggurat was the focal point of Sumerian cities. However, in Assyrian cities, the temple was not the central focus, but rather the palace of the king became the largest and more luxurious structure in the city, replacing the ziggurat.

In carefully excavating a city, even more information beyond the physical traits and common iconography can be learned about the civilization that built it. What was important to its people, how they worshiped, what industries were available, and other questions about the culture can be answered. For example, a reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate at Babylon gives the viewer a suggestion of what the grand entry into the city must have been like. Seeing the reconstruction and the actual gate (Fig. 2-24) together can give us a better understanding of the opulence of ancient Babylon. A reconstruction drawing of Khorsabad, the citadel of Sargon II of Assyria (Fig. 2-20), offers the viewer a clearer image of the defensive nature of the inhabitants. And the excavation of Persepolis (Fig. 2-25) allows the viewer to picture the size of this palatial construction and to understand the intended impact it must have had on foreign visitors.