Introduction: What is Art History?
To study art history means to study the context of works of art. Art historians work to create a context for a work of art in order to fully understand it – and thus fully appreciate its appearance.

Below are seven key elements of a context:

1. Date/chronology
2. Style
3. Provenance
4. Subject
5. Artist(s)
6. Patron(s)
7. Material(s) and Technique(s)

It is not always possible for all seven elements to be known, but art historians gather what information they can to learn more about works of art beyond just their appearance. The more they learn, the more they can learn about the peoples who created the works.
Creating a Context
#1 Date/chronology

1. Date/chronology

The date, or approximate date, of a work of art is determined by:

- **Physical evidence**
  - When were the materials invented?
  - When was the technique invented?
  - When did the materials and/or technique stop being used?

- **Documentary evidence**
  - This includes dated written documents.

- **Internal evidence**
  - What is the content or subject? For example, is a particular hairstyle depicted, or more specifically, is an identifiable person represented?

- **Stylistic evidence**
  - *Style* is more subjective and less reliable for dating, but it can certainly help.
  - See the next slide for more on style.
2. Style

There are different kinds of artistic style:

- **Period style**
  - This is the characteristic style of a specific time and is usually identifiable within a culture or region.

- **Regional style**
  - Regional style distinguishes between styles according to geography. The region in question can be a broad area (such as Italy) or a very narrow area (such as Vatican City, Rome).
  - It is directly related to a work’s *provenance*, or place of origin.

- **Personal style**
  - This describes the style of an individual artist.
  - Personal style sometimes directly reflects period and/or regional style; however, distinctions in personal style often times reflect deviations from the period and/or regional style.

These different types of styles may or may not be mutually exclusive.
3. Provenance

The provenance of a work of art is its place of origin. This can be as broad as the geographical region from which the work came or as specific as its placement in a home or grave. The more specific the provenance, the more information revealed.

Consider the two figures to the right (from Chapter 2)
• We know they are from the ancient Near East, specifically Sumer. This fact does not reveal much about their possible function.

• However, knowing that they originally stood in the Square Temple at Eshnunna tells us that they were probably *votive figures* that represented the eternal pray and dutifulness of their donors. (more on this in Chapter 2)

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Fig. 2-6. Statuettes of two worshippers, from the Square Temple at Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar), Iraq, ca. 27000 BCE. Gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone, male figure 2’ 6” high.
4. Subject

Subject matter can include such things as:
• The story or narrative
• The scene depicted
• The time and place of the action
• The persons involved
• The environment and its details

For example, in Albrecht Durer’s woodcut to the right...
• The story is part of the Apocalypse narrative.
• The scene depicted is the riding of the Four Horsemen.
• The scene takes place on earth – the realm of the mortal.
• The figures represented are the Four Horsemen, an angel, and mortal men and women.
• Very little of the environment is depicted, but we can assume, based on the conditions of the mortals, that their environment is in chaos.
(Note that the title given to the work by art historians comes from the subject.)

Fig. I-8. Albrecht Durer, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, ca. 1498. Woodcut, 1’ 3.25” X 11”.
4. Subject

Iconography, Symbols, Attributes, and Personifications are particularly revealing in determining the subject and what information the subject reveals.

For example, the Four Evangelists are frequently identified by specific attributes:
- Matthew – Angel/winged man
- Mark – Lion
- Luke – Ox
- John – Eagle

The Four Evangelists writing their respective Gospels are the subject of the image to the right. Had this page been discovered separated from the Gospels book from which it originates, art historians could still identify the subject from previous knowledge of these attributes, and they would know that the page came from a Christian Gospels book or full Bible.

Fig. I-7. The four evangelists, folio 14 verso of the *Aachen Gospels*, ca. 810. Ink and tempera on vellum, 1’ X 9.5”. 
5. Artist(s)

Attributing a work of art to a specific artist can be very difficult without the artist’s signature on the work or written documentation such as a contract. Artists commonly sign their works today, but works were not (and are still not) always created for personal expression or personal profit (therefore a reputation did not need to be established), and record of who created them was not needed. If enough works can be accurately attributed to an artist, art historians can use personal style to determine the possible artist of an anonymous work.

Art historians are sometimes able to identify the school, or group of artists working in the same time and place, that created a work. The artists in such a group work in the same style.

6. Patron(s)

Patrons are the people or institutions who paid for a work of art to be made. The stipulations of the patron can determine the ultimate form of a work to varying degrees.
7. Material(s) and Technique(s)

Artists shape materials, or medium/media, with tools. Sometimes traditional media and tools were used, and sometimes they were invented (such as concrete in antiquity and the camera in modern times).

The technique is the process by which the artist creates a work with the material(s). In some cases, when a medium or tool is invented, a new technique must be invented (such was the case, for example, with the invention of the camera).

Different materials and techniques were popular during different times and in different regions. Identification of such can help identify provenance and chronology.

Identification of materials and techniques can even help detect forgeries. For example, various synthetic pigments used to make paint were not invented until after the beginning of the 20th century. The identification of these pigments in a painting trying to be passed off as a painting from the Northern Renaissance distinguishes it as a forgery and not an original.
The following slides titled “The Words Art Historians Use” define some of the terms you will encounter throughout this course. The terms may be used in a visual analysis or description and/or to discuss materials and techniques.

It may be helpful to refer back to these pages in your textbook as you encounter these terms in other chapters to refresh your understanding of their meaning and usage.

(The sculpture depicted here was casted out of bronze and is a freestanding sculpture/sculpture in the round.)

Fig. I-17. Head of a warrior, detail of a statue (Fig. 5.35) from the sea off Riace, Italy, ca. 460-450 BCE. Bronze, full statue 6’ 6” high.
The Words Art Historians Use

Form: an object’s shape/structure

Composition: how the forms are arranged

Line: defines a work’s shape or form; the path of a point moving in space; or a physical line
  • Plane: a flat surface
  • Contour line: defines the outer shape

Color: revealed by light; hue gives a color its name

Texture: the quality of a surface; can be true or represented

Space: a bounded or boundless “container” of objects; can be literal 3D space or illusionistic

Mass: the bulk, density, and weight of matter in space (for example, the physical walls of a room)

Volume: the space that mass organizes, divides, or encloses (for example, the space contained by the walls of a room or the space divided by the walls of a building)
Perspective: pictoral device for organizing forms in space; different types of perspective are used to create the illusion of depth and space.

- Reduction in size of distant figures
- Convergence of diagonal lines
- Atmospheric perspective, or the blurring of distant forms

Foreshortening: a kind of perspective by which one part of an object, a building, or a person appears to be further away than another part, even though the parts are on the same surface

For example, in Peter Paul Rubens’s Lion Hunt...

- Parts of the figures, animals, and weapons depicted appear to recede in space away from us.
- Rubens accomplished this by depicting the forms at angles to the viewer. Additionally, the forms appear compressed.
- Look at the body of the figure in the lower right corner. His head and left arm appear closest to us, while his feet appear to be further away. His body in between appears to be much shorter than it would naturally be. The body’s proportions have been “squished,” or foreshortened, as it recedes in space.

Fig. I-13. Peter Paul Rubens. Lion Hunt, 1617-1618. Oil on canvas, 8’ 2” X 12’ 5”.
**Proportion:** the size relationships between parts of persons, buildings, and/or objects; proportional systems include:

- **Modules:** basic units of measurement; may be used to determine proportion
- **Canons:** systems of “correct” or “ideal” proportions

**Hierarchy of scale:** the enlarging (out of natural proportion) of elements considered to be the most important

The representation of the figures in the Benin relief to the right is an example of hierarchy of scale.

- The heads are unnaturally large when compared to their bodies, which suggests emphasis of the body part.
- We know the central figure is the most important because he is the largest. He is even unnaturally larger than his horse.
- The other figures diminish in size according to their social status. The smallest and least important figure appears just below the central figure’s feet.

Fig. I-15. King on horseback with attendants, from Benin, Nigeria, ca. 1550-1680. Bronze, 1’ 7.5” high.
Subtractive sculpture: the final form is a reduction of original mass; material is removed (or \textit{subtracted}) until the intended form remains
- Think of the famous quote by Michelangelo Buonarroti: “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”
- **Carving** is a subtractive technique.

Additive sculpture: the form is built up
- Material may be \textit{added} onto itself or around a framework/armature
- **Casting** is also a technique of additive sculpture. A mold is created to shape a fluid material such as bronze or plaster

For example, the two bison to the right (from Chapter 1), were created by the building up (or \textit{addition}) of clay.

Fig. 1-7. Two bison, reliefs in a cave at Le Tuc d’Audoubert, France, ca. 15,000-10,000 BCE. Clay, each 2’ long.
The Words Art Historians Use

**Statue:** a three-dimensional sculpture

**Freestanding sculpture/Sculpture in the round:** sculpture independent of any architectural frame or setting that viewers can walk around; can be subtractive or additive, carved or casted

Though Michelangelo did not finish carving the figure to the right, it is clear he indented it to be a freestanding sculpture. The viewer can walk around and observe all sides of the statue.

![Figure I-16. Michelangelo Buonarroti, unfinished captive, 1527-1528. Marble, 8’ 7.5” high.](image-url)
Relief sculpture: forms project from (or recede into) a surface or background but remain part of it; the degree of relief is designated high, low, or sunken (some reliefs combine high and low relief and levels in between).

- **High-relief sculpture:** the forms project boldly from the surface
- **Low-relief sculpture:** the forms project slightly from the surface
- **Sunken relief:** the forms *sink* below the surface

Reliefs can be created by carving (Fig. I-6) or casting (Fig. I-15). The images below illustrate the carving of a relief sculpture.
**Architectural drawings**: enclosed architectural spaces and architectural masses can be illustrated graphically in several different types of drawings, including...

- **Plans**: shows the placement of architectural masses (and therefore the spaces they enclose); essentially a map of the floor (top image)
- **Sections**: shows the architectural masses vertically as if the building was sliced from top to bottom; can be lateral or longitudinal (bottom image)
- **Elevations**: a head-on view of an external or internal wall; shows the masses that “elevate” the wall from the floor to the roof (see page 468 for an example)
- **Cutaways**: a combination of an exterior view with an interior view; appears as if you are looking at the 3D exterior or a building and a section of its exterior walls have been *cut away* to provide a view of the interior at the same time (see page 284 for an example)

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Fig. I-18. Plan *(above)* and lateral section *(below)* of Beauvais Cathedral, Beauvais, France, rebuilt after 1284.
Different Ways of Seeing
Why study art history?

The study of art history and the cultural context of a work is paramount to understanding why a work looks the way it does. Such an understanding allows us to fully appreciate a work’s appearance.

The portraits here are both of Te Pehi Kupe, a Maori chief. They were painted, though, by artists from two different cultures.

The portrait on the left was painted by John Henry Sylvester, an Englishman. He represented Te Pehi Kupe’s facial tattoos, but he also depicted the chief in the contemporary English fashion for both clothing and hair styles. The chief appears realistic and in natural light and space. Sylvester conceived of Te Pehi Kupe in more than one aspect.

The portrait on the right was painted by Te Pehi Kupe himself. In his self-portrait, the chief represented what to him was the single most important aspect of his identity – his facial tattoos, the design of which symbolizes his rank as chief. Te Pehi Kupe conceived of his identity as separate from his body and represented the two-dimensional design of his tattoos only.

By understanding the cultural context of the creation of these portraits, we understand why they appear so different.

Fig. I-19. Left: John Henry Sylvester, Portrait of Te Pehi Kupe (detail), 1826. Watercolor, 8.25” X 6.25”.