Chapter 2
Writing art history

In recent years much scholarship has been concerned with the historiography, that is to say the study of the history or the histories, of art, rather than with the subject itself. This is an important concern that intersects at certain points with the issues raised in this chapter. Here, I want to emphasize the different narrative frames for art history to examine the various ways in which it can be written. These modes of writing emerged in the previous chapter, where emphases on the biography of individual artists or on style were shown to be both popular and enduring narrative frames for art history. Furthermore, I introduced the question of how we respond to visual objects using words. I now want to think about the ways in which art histories have been written in order to describe art and to give it a context. Following on from this, I discuss various ways of thinking about art history in Chapter 4, and there are points of contact between that chapter and this.

There are three main strands that I want to address here. Firstly, I take examples of writing about art from a broad time span to see what, if anything, the writers have in common and also to consider the differences between them. Secondly, I look at how gender and gender bias have influenced the development of art history. Thirdly, it is important to think about our expectations of progress and evolution in art in relation to how histories are written. In this way, we can see how the various ways of writing about art can change the way in which we see the object and think about its history.

Art historians through the ages

Gaius Plinius Secundus, known as Pliny the Elder (CE 23/24–79), was a Roman writer whose 37-volume *Natural History*, dedicated to the Emperor Titus, is one of the best-known works on art and architecture from the ancient world. The huge work is largely

concerned with natural history, as the title suggests, of the Graeco-Roman world, but art is also covered. In the Renaissance period in Italy a great deal of attention was paid to textual sources about the art of antiquity. There was a wide range of texts available, but some survived only in fragments or were only available in Greek. By contrast, Pliny's encyclopaedic volumes had survived intact and were translated into Italian in 1476, making them far more easily accessible. As a result, the attention paid to Pliny's discussion of art took on a disproportionate significance to the aims of the work as a whole. Nevertheless, the *Natural History* was an important influence on the development of writings on art as well as on art itself. And Pliny's description of art objects helped in the identification of antique sculptures that were discovered during the Renaissance, as well as later periods. It is hard for us to imagine what it must be like not to recognize the subject of sculptures such as the *Apollo Belvedere* (Fig. 7). But from the Renaissance to the 18th century only careful coordination between written descriptions and surviving sculptures made identification possible. How engaging and enigmatic these anonymous fragments of the past must have seemed, not unlike the prehistoric art that we speculate about today.

Pliny also paid attention to the biographical details of the lives of artists. Most famously, his account of the painter Apelles was very influential for the formation of artistic values in the Renaissance period. The emergence of the artist as someone with status and an intellectual approach to their craft was an important part of the Renaissance period in art. This also helped ensure the continuance of the classical tradition, as artistic status was enhanced by knowledge of the art of ancient Greece and Rome.

Pliny was an important influence on one of the most enduring and influential writers about art, Giorgio Vasari (1511–74). He was a Florentine painter and architect who is often seen as the first historian of art and his work the *Lives of the Artists* is still in print today and is an important source book for our knowledge about Renaissance artists. Vasari was aware of the precedents for this kind of enterprise, including Pliny's *Natural History*, as he states:

> I left out many things from Pliny and other authors which I could have used had I not wanted, perhaps in a controversial way, to leave everyone free to discover other people's ideas for himself in the original sources.

But his biographies proved equal to their antique sources, as Vasari's *Lives* was first translated into English in 1685, so becoming a model for how to write about art in the

post-classical world.

Vasari's *Lives*, as they are often known, comprise three parts. The first of these covers artists Cimabue and Giotto, who were working in what Vasari sees as the 'rebirth' of the arts after the Dark Ages. The second part discusses the period we now call the Early Renaissance and includes the artists Masaccio and Botticelli, the architect Brunelleschi, and the art theorist and architect Alberti. It is important to remember that there was little differentiation between the practices of architecture, painting, and sculpture at this time and many 'artists' practised all three. (Vasari, for instance, designed the building that is now the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.) The final part of the *Lives* begins with Leonardo da Vinci and covers what we now regard as High Renaissance artists.

Vasari's choices about how to arrange his material have had a resounding effect on art history. By placing so much emphasis on the 'genius' and achievements of an individual artist, Vasari laid the foundations for the kind of connoisseurial approach to art history I discussed in Chapter 1. Vasari was one of the first historians to make qualitative judgements about art in order to create a canon of great artists and within this great works by these practitioners. For Vasari, quality was based on the artist's skill in the illusion of naturalism and the technical ability required for this degree of idealized 'beauty'. Moreover, as I have already pointed out, this kind of approach to art history encourages the attribution of works of art to an artist, or the influence of one artist on another, on the basis of stylistic similarities – if two things look alike, they must be related.

Firstly, it's important to consider the idea of writing a history based solely on the lives of artists and whether this is really a history of artists rather than art history. There is the obvious problem that Vasari probably knew a lot more about some artists than others. And, like all of us, he had his personal favourites. In the case of the *Lives* this had a resounding effect on how it was written and how it has influenced art history. Vasari's first edition of the *Lives*, published in 1550, was intended to be a celebration of the genius of Michelangelo Buonarroti – the temperamental sculptor and painter who had stunned early 16th-century Italy with his painted decoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508–12) and his giant marble sculpture of David (1501–4). Indeed, Michelangelo is the only living artist whose biography appears in the first edition of the *Lives*. Michelangelo died in 1564 and the second, much better known edition of the *Lives* appeared in 1568.

The problem with Vasari's trajectory of art history is the simple question of what happened to art after Michelangelo. Did it stop or go into decline? Once the pinnacle of perfection had been reached, where could art go? You can see from this that setting up the idea of artistic progress, whether it be towards the superlative art of one individual, as here, or a more abstract idea of the re-creation of classical forms or the flawless representation of the human subject, implies that there is an end to art history. This point raises an important issue about ways of writing any kind of history. Histories are written with the benefit of hindsight; we know what came before and after the events being discussed. The idea that events unfold towards an identified outcome is known as teleology. But history continues beyond the moment at which the historian is writing; we are, then, capable of reconfiguring the processes and narratives of art history. But I am getting ahead of myself here.

The second point about Vasari is that the way he divided up the development of art in Italy from *c.*1270 to 1570 has never really been challenged. We still see the artists he places in Part Two of the *Lives* as belonging to the Early Renaissance, showing only the beginning of what Vasari saw as the important aspects of art – that is the re-use and re-interpretation of the art of antiquity. But we know that Vasari's contemporaries did not see such divisions between Early and High Renaissance artists. Moreover, Vasari had neither interest in nor appreciation of the art of earlier periods which are now known as Gothic or Byzantine. But there is overlap as well as disagreement between Vasari's division of art history into specific periods and those set up by later historians. For instance, Giotto is included in the *Lives* as the *prima luce* ('first light') of the Renaissance as in his work Vasari saw the first signs of an interest in nature, whereas more recently Giotto has been presented as working in the Gothic tradition because of his interest in the stylized poses and compositional formulae of that period.

Although Vasari did not see any relationship between art, society, and politics, he did set up criteria that could be used to judge the quality of a work of art. These five aspects of art have done much to underpin the way in which the story of art has been put together by subsequent generations. A brief discussion of these also enables me to outline one of the major influences on the philosophy of art, Neoplatonism, and how it interacted with artistic practice in the Renaissance period. Vasari's criteria include *Disegno* – the art of good draughtsmanship or design. Here, Vasari is using the Neoplatonic idea that the artist has the *Idea* of the object he is trying to reproduce planted in his mind by God. The artwork, whether painting or sculpture, relates both to the object the artist sees and the perfect form that exists only in the mind. The second criterion is *Natura* – art as an imitation of nature was a new concept in the 15th century. Here again, Vasari brings in the Platonic idea of the artists being able to improve on nature through the knowledge of

perfect forms. Thirdly, *Grazia*, or grace, is an essential quality of art as evident in the softness of the works of artists like Michelangelo. Fourthly, *Decoro* refers to artistic decorum or appropriateness – for instance, a saint should look like a holy man or woman. This also came to mean a form of modesty that demanded that the genitals of sculpted or painted nudes were covered up – sometimes after the work was finished. Vasari's final category was *Maniera*, which refers either to an artist's personal style or to that of a specific school of artists. These criteria still have a great deal of currency today as part of the continuing interest in the naturalism of classical art as refracted through the Renaissance and beyond.

Vasari's method of writing about art history remained focused on the works themselves and relied on close observation of detail together with biographical fragments from the artist's life. I think it is useful here to compare Vasari's discussion of a given work with that of a different art historian. Ernst Gombrich is one of the best-known cultural historians from the 20th century. His work centred mainly on the Renaissance, and he wanted to examine works of 'high' culture (or art) as evidence of the broader intellectual climate of the time. Gombrich was also interested in anthropology and psychoanalysis as ways of getting to the cultural meaning of art. As a scholar of the Renaissance, Gombrich has been accused of conservatism and reinforcing canonical art history. But his work also covers the psychology of art, using cartoons and advertisements as his evidence. Whether he is discussing high art or popular culture, Gombrich's awareness of the changing functions of images and the importance of their social and cultural context imbues his analysis with a layering of meaning and nuances, so that I find it hard to see him as a traditionalist. That said, I must here raise my hand and state my objections to Gombrich's best-selling book *The Story of Art*, first published in 1950 and still in print today. This sets up a linear development of art, focusing on canonical artists with little regard to the broader contexts or theoretical approaches manifest in his other writings. Like Vasari's *Lives*, *The Story of Art* is all about 'great *men*' and 'style'. If not by now, then certainly by the end of this book, you will see all the reasons behind my negative position on the 'caveman to Picasso' linear, teleological narrative of art.

A comparison between how Gombrich and Vasari write about the same work of art demonstrates the differences in their approaches to art history. Raphael's *School of Athens* (Fig. 9) is a useful example for this exercise as it is a complex image with enduring appeal. Raphael, alongside other artists, was employed by Pope Julius II to decorate a series of rooms in the Vatican palace – these are often referred to as the Vatican *Stanze*. The wall paintings, known as frescoes, in the Stanza della Segnatura, the Stanza dell' Incendio, and the Sala di Constantino were worked on by Raphael and

his workshop assistants from about 1509 onwards. The Stanza della Segnatura is usually considered to be the most important of these rooms as Raphael was most involved with the execution of the work there. The two main frescoes in this room were the *School of Athens* and the *Disputa* concerning the Blessed Sacrament – their subject matter showing an interesting juxtaposition between the secular and the sacred, or the pagan and Christian. Pope Julius II was a very keen patron of the arts – his sculpture collection at the Vatican, which included the *Apollo Belvedere*, was discussed in the previous chapter.

Vasari's account of these important commissions is as follows:

> At that time Bramante of Urbino, who was working for Julius II [told Raphael] that he had persuaded the Pope to build some new apartments where Raphael would have the chance to show what he could do.

***9. School of Athens* by Raphael (*c.*1509–11/12), one of the frescoes adorning the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican, Rome.**

> [A]fter he had been welcomed very affectionately by Pope Julius, Raphael started to paint in the Stanza della Segnatura a fresco showing the theologians reconciling

> Philosophy and Astrology with Theology, in which there are portraits of all the sages of the world shown disputing among themselves in various ways. Standing apart are some astrologers who have drawn various kinds of figures and characters relating to geomancy and astrology on some little tablets which, by the hands of some very beautiful angels, they are sending to the evangelists to expound. Among them is Diogenes with his cup, lying deep in thought on the steps: this is a finely conceived figure which deserves high praise for its beauty and the appropriate negligence of its clothing. There, also, are Aristotle and Plato, one holding the Timaeus, the other with the Ethics; and round them in a circle is a great school of philosophers. The astrologers and geometers are using compasses to draw innumerable figures and characters on their tablets; and it is hardly possible to describe how splendid they look.

In his 1972 book, *Symbolic Images*, Ernst Gombrich challenges and corrects Vasari's account:

> On his arrival in Rome . . . Raphael 'began in the Camera [Stanza] della Segnatura a painting of how theologians harmonize Philosophy and Astrology with Theology, where all the sages of the world are shown discussing in various ways.' These opening words of Vasari's account . . . naturally set the key for the interpretation of these frescoes for centuries to come. Not only did Vasari establish the conviction that the subject of this cycle was meant to be of profound philosophical import, he also enforced the interpretation by isolating the individual frescoes from their intellectual and decorative context . . . . We now know the source of this error: Vasari worked from engravings after the frescoes [and as a result] placed Evangelists among the Greek philosophers . . . [and] this tendency persisted . . . and though scholars failed to agree on any one interpretation the conviction persisted that there was a key to these frescoes which must be in accord with the humanistic ideas of the sixteenth century.

Gombrich blames the misunderstandings of the iconography of the *Stanza* as a whole on Vasari's misleading account and the way in which subsequent historians looked at the individual components of the room – the ceiling and walls – instead of the composition as a whole. He argues that, if read in this way, the room, with its mixture of pagan and Christian subjects, 'should not have caused any surprise to anyone who knew the habits of medieval moralists or indeed of St Augustine.' The ceiling comprises enthroned personifications that relate to the representations underneath; these in turn amplify these ideas. *The School of Athens* is coupled with *Philosophy*, which together with the other

ceiling figures of *Law*, *Theology* and *Poetry* represented the Liberal Arts as taught in Italian universities at that time.

Vasari's approach to art history, as we have seen, still has currency, but challenges to it – or more accurately a different way of thinking about the subject – came about in the 18th century. Johann Joachim Winckelmann was one of the first historians to put art in its context using as many different sources as possible. Placing art in its cultural context was a revolutionary idea as it meant that the art became more important than the artist. Indeed, Winckelmann stated that individual artists had little to do with his project, which was to come up with a more systematic way of organizing knowledge about art. That said, Winckelmann still emphasized that a detailed examination of the work of art was necessary, and like Vasari he adhered to the connoisseurial preoccupation with identifying ideal beauty or perfection. But where Vasari got into difficulties over the problem of the 'decline of art' after the death of Michelangelo, Winckelmann confined his interests to the art of antiquity. For Winckelmann, ancient Greek art from the 5th century BCE, known as the classical period, constituted the pinnacle of artistic achievement in terms of the representation of beauty and perfection. The biographical details of the artists who produced these works are very scant, but this was of little concern to Winckelmann who saw art history as being about the aesthetic rather than the artist. Winckelmann introduced a systematic, chronological study of art history. The artistic remains of antiquity were seen as coherent survivors of the classical age that could at once determine and augment the human condition (although unbeknown to Winckelmann many sculptures were Roman copies of Greek originals). The 'invention' of ancient Greece, or at least its establishment as a high point in human civilization, was an essential element of this Eurocentric concept of an ideal or classical tradition. In turn this had relevance for modern times. In his *Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755), Winckelmann states:

> [there] is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled, . . . by imitating the ancients . . . . It is not only nature which the votaries of the Greeks find in their works, but still more, something superior to nature; ideal beauties, brain born images.

Winckelmann's ideas draw heavily on mid-18th-century theories of language, which was seen as having developed its resources to allow a clear knowledge of things, but excesses in style and rhetoric led to its degeneration. He traced a similar path through art, seeing classical Greek art as the pinnacle and the subsequent movement and vigour of the Hellenistic period as the 'excess' and 'degeneration'. This idea of development and decline in the art of the ancient world has remained the standard chronology for art

history. Winckelmann's analysis, or system of history as he preferred to call it, is firmly rooted in the verbal tradition – the critical apparatus of language was transposed onto art. Winckelmann relied on textual descriptions of objects to identify works in order to write his verbal history. It is important to remember here that neither Winckelmann nor Vasari had access to good, accurate illustrations of the works they were discussing – something we take for granted today. They had to rely on prints and engravings of varying quality that could be misleading. This point is implicit in Gombrich's critique of Vasari's analysis of *School of Athens*. But the absence of good visual records has much wider importance, as it was not until the middle decades of the 20th century that photographic techniques became sufficiently refined to enable the close study of art objects other than *in situ*. Clearly, the use of photography brings with it a new set of problems, but it does make us think carefully about the relationship between verbal and visual systems of recording art, a point that is developed further in Chapter 5.

The idea of cultural history as developed by Winckelmann had as much resonance in the writing of art history as Vasari's biographical approach. For instance, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt adopted a similar approach to Winckelmann in his two-volume *The Civilisation of Renaissance Italy*, which first appeared in German in 1860, but was quickly translated into English. Burckhardt placed the art of the Italian Renaissance firmly in its cultural context to explain its 'civilizing' and 'civic' qualities. *The Civilisation of Renaissance Italy* remains a standard work and did much to prompt a revival of interest in this period as well as endorsing the predominant position given to the survival of the classical tradition in Western art.

Winckelmann also had influence in the way in which the art object attained an autonomous status. His emphasis on the work rather than the artist may well have helped open up a new way of thinking about art history. In 19th-century Germany one of the most influential philosophers in the history of Western thought, G. W. F. Hegel, proposed that the shape of history was not one of linear progression of inevitable decline and fall – which had been one of the problems that faced Vasari and Winckelmann. Instead, he believed that history was the result of the workings of a 'world spirit' and that art was one of the ways in which this spirit manifested itself. The term *Zeitgeist* ('the spirit of the age'), now familiar in English, comes from Hegel's philosophy of history. His system is a way of explaining not just works of art but all cultural production from a given moment in time. As such the actions of individuals, that is to say artists in our case, have little importance, and nor did the social context of the production of a work of art matter – something I pick up on in Chapter 4. The preoccupation with style from an Hegelian perspective is different from Vasari's connoisseurial approach. Here, style has a kind of autonomy as it develops over time

and transcends human activity, so playing down the idea of genius so crucial to other ways of writing art history. Ernst Gombrich's idea of cultural history was influenced by Hegel, but Gombrich attributed art or images with changing functions that react with their context – something Gombrich called an 'ecology of art'. This is a term borrowed from sociology that means the relationship between art and its environments.

It is really only in the 20th century that we see any break with these two principal preoccupations with author (artist) and form (style). We have seen how the art of antiquity dominated artistic thinking and practice, and how the very term 'classic' came to denote both an historical period and a favourable value-judgement on the production of that time. Later art historians were almost apologetic, convinced that the art of their own time did not match up to that of the ancients. The work of Gombrich and his contemporaries, such as Rudolf Wittkower and Fritz Saxl, is a rich melange of philosophy, history, and theology that gives us a *Kulturgeschichte*, or a cultural history of art – but this is primarily concerned with the art of the Renaissance and its derivatives.

New ways of writing about art did emerge in the 20th century, when historians focused far more on the art of their own time, rather than concentrating on its relationship, favourable or otherwise, to that from the past. So far in this book I have talked mainly about art as being a representation of the world we think we see. And this chapter has shown us that art history developed partly out of a concern to order art according to its competence as a means of representation, whether realistic, naturalistic, or idealized. At the beginning of the 20th century a tradition of non-figurative art emerged – that is to say, art that does not portray the world as we think we see it.

Judy Chicago's installation is a useful stepping stone into this kind of art, which some find off-putting or unappealing – 'but is it art?' is a frequently asked question. When we looked carefully at *The Dinner Party* (Fig. 8) in the previous chapter, I was discussing the idea of biography – not just of the artist but also women's lives represented through place settings and text – and I spent some time explaining the concept behind the work. My point here is to show that *The Dinner Party* is about an idea – a sociopolitical statement about women. In this way it is quite different from the other works I discuss in Chapter 1. Chicago's installation comes out of the shift in attitude in the 20th century to what art can do and how it can do it. It was no longer bound by the forces of the Hegelian spirit or the cyclical peaks of Vasari's classical age, which came to prominence again in the Renaissance. The emergence of Modernism at the beginning of the 20th century made art historians think for the first time about a movement that was not the result of years of evolution and repetitive tradition. Instead, Modernism burst

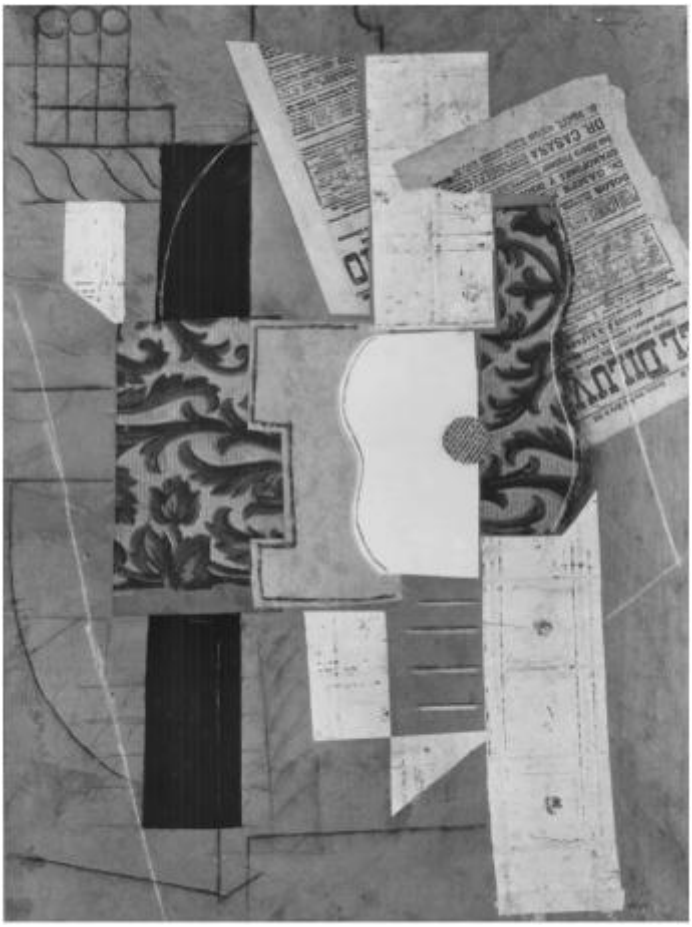
onto the scene and presented a completely different set of values and aesthetics that demanded new responses.

From the end of the Second World War up until the late 1960s, Clement Greenberg was one of the foremost critics of modern art. Greenberg dispensed with the need to consider the social determinants of art – both its production and interpretation (of history). The Avant-Garde – what we might now call the Modern Movement – was the focus of Greenberg's enquiries. This had emerged in France in the mid-19th century as part of an increasingly autonomous tradition in the production and interpretation of art, and this carried through into the 20th century with the work of abstract artists such as Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, and Joan Miró. Greenberg believed that this kind of 'avant-garde' art was necessary to keep culture alive. His firmly held socialist beliefs underpinned his ideas that a new culture was needed that would replace that of the past.

Later, Greenberg's position developed into the view that visual art must concern itself only with what is given in visual expression and not, therefore, make any reference to any other kinds of experience. His insistence on the autonomy of art was understood as a shift in his thinking towards a political point of view that supported rather than challenged the *status quo*. Instead of calling for a fundamental shift in art practice and appreciation, Greenberg now worked to exclude from the privileged domain of high art – the canon by another name – the work of women artists, minority groups, and elements of popular culture. Partly through Greenberg's efforts, Modernism became a bastion of male conservative values produced by and for white men to the exclusion of other groups.

According to Greenberg, the essence of art lay in its purity and self-definition and the necessity for it to be true to its medium (as opposed to being expressed through other means, such as the verbal). As such, Modernism must exclude any element of representation and instead provide an abstract optical experience. This is evident, for instance, in Picasso's 1913 Cubist collage *Guitar* (Fig. 10). We can make out fragments or suggestions of a guitar, but the image is really a set of abstract forms and shapes with different materials to give variations in texture. These abstractions provide a set of references to the scene Picasso may have been looking at – including the guitar, the wallpaper, which we see has a heavy pattern, and a newspaper. Greenberg does offer a way of viewing this piece of abstract art, but it is only one way of thinking about Cubist collage – we might also want to consider the way space is flattened and reconfigured in an attempt to show more than one view of the object. This is not quite the way Greenberg would want to write about art, as the 'abstraction' is related back to the subject matter of Picasso's work. The Greenbergian model of writing about art history

and art practice stood in complete opposition to what Chicago was trying to do in *The Dinner Party*. Chicago's handmade installation using 'feminine crafts and techniques' directly confronted the boundaries of art as defined by Modernism.



10. Pablo Picasso's Cubist collage, *Guitar*, was created in 1913.

Gendered art histories

I now want to consider the bias in writing art history towards a male interpretation of the subject – even though many patrons and subjects were/are female. Complementary to this is the impact of the writing of women art historians such as Griselda Pollock and Linda Nochlin. It is now over a generation ago that the first feminist writings began to appear, mapping out a different way of seeing and understanding cultural production and the social relationships expressed therein. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker identify

the crucial paradox about attitudes to women in the writing of histories, specifically here those concerned with creativity:

> Women are represented negatively, as lacking in creativity, with nothing significant to contribute, and as having no influence on the course of art. Paradoxically, to negate them women have to be acknowledged; they are mentioned in order to be categorised, set apart and marginalised. [This is] one of the major elements in the construction of the hegemony of men in cultural practices in art.
>
> Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses* (1981)

Alongside Pollock and Parker, Linda Nochlin has made a significant contribution to our understanding of this issue and her essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' remains a standard text on the question even though it was written in 1971. It is worth remembering that Nochlin was writing at the time that the women's liberation movement was at its peak – around the same time as Judy Chicago produced *The Dinner Party*. Nochlin's essay relies on a set of assumptions about what 'great art' is and the historical and gendered assumptions behind the idea of the artist. Nochlin argues that art is not an autonomous activity of a 'super-endowed' individual. Instead, 'art-making' occurs in a social situation and is an integral element of that social structure mediated by things like art academies, systems of patronage, and the artist as 'he-man' or outcast. In other words, society creates its own myths around the idea of art and the artist that endorse the *status quo* within that society. Art history, up until the interventions by feminists, was part of that myth, or what we might call discourse. By asking different questions about the conditions for production of art we may well come up with a new set of ideas about the nature of art, artistic practice, and 'great artists'.

Although principally concerned with women, feminist art history has brought attention to issues of difference whether it be sexual, social, or cultural. And as a result we now look at and write about artworks and their modes of representation from different historical and aesthetic perspectives. There is no doubt about the tendency to accept whatever is seen as natural, whether in regard to academic enquiry or our social systems. But feminist art history made us think, for the first time, about the canon of art history and provided the means for us to think about artworks in different ways. I pick up this issue again in Chapter 4.

In recent years a number of studies have broadened the question of the control of visual material to include not only the relationship between men and women but also the relationship of homosexuality to art, sometimes called 'queer theory', and the relationship between colonizer and colonized in a post-colonial world. This opening up or questioning of the different power relationships existing between art and its users and producers is an essential part of the discipline.

The place of non-Western art in history

The 1960s and 1970s were certainly the decades during which the way we write about art was re-evaluated. We have already seen how Linda Nochlin and Clement Greenberg presented completely different views on this subject. And it is clear that writing art history is as much a process of exclusion as inclusion, and these choices are usually formulated on the canon of Western art. I want to stay with the idea of exclusion and think about how, alongside women, artists and art from other cultures or groups have been omitted from art history. How can their work be placed within the field of enquiry?

But perhaps I am asking the wrong question. For instance, both African and Chinese art have histories that go back around 5,000 years – far longer than the art of the West. Western narratives usually begin with the ancient Greek world so, although reference is sometimes made to ancient Egypt and earlier periods, the main focus is on the last 2,500 years. But do we think of the art of China or of Africa as having a history in the same way as Western art? I am afraid not, as centuries of misconceptions about the sophisticated nature of African art show – African art is often described as 'primitive' or 'naïve', especially in relation to canonical art. We tend to forget that Egypt is part of the African continent, as the art of ancient Egypt is usually discussed in isolation. Sub-Saharan Africa has strong indigenous traditions that continue to the present day – the carved female figure from the Ivory Coast dates from the 19th century (Fig. 11). And it is important not only to acknowledge the appeal of African art, but also to restore it to its original social and historical context. This helps us understand more about the ways in which this art was produced, used, and received. In other words, we need to write (and think) about it in quite a different way.

The art of China includes an enormous variety of images, objects, and materials – jade objects (Fig. 12), painted silk handscrolls and fans, ink and lacquer painting, porcelain,

sculptures, and calligraphy. Here again, our Western prejudices are brought to bear on surveys and histories of Chinese art. We tend to give prominence to sculpture at the expense of other art forms. And it is hard not to be impressed by the vast 'terracotta army' with its 7,000 or so life-size figures, recently unearthed. Equally, the delicacy of a piece of carved jade, in terms of the artist's skill and the quality of the material, can capture our attention. But it is important to take into account traditional Chinese definitions of what art is. Perhaps appropriately for a chapter on writing about art history, the Chinese consider calligraphy as one of the most important art forms.

11. A Baule female figure from the Ivory Coast. This is a 19th-century artwork.

12. The Chinese camel in yellow-green jade dates from the Tang or early Sung dynasty (8th to 10th century CE).

As in Western cultures, art in China had a variety of functions in society to do with death, court life, and religion, as well as being a signifier of wealth and pre-eminence and a tradable commodity. The essential thing to remember here is that the values that we may place on a certain object may be different from those applied by the society that produced it. The same is true for the hierarchy of importance we might accord certain media over others.

This leads me on to my third area of consideration in this chapter. I want to think about the canon and its influence on writing art history. The idea of the canon has already been mentioned in our consideration of feminist and non-Western art history, particularly in terms of the prejudices and preferences we are inclined to bring to these art forms. My focus here is on how we write about what is described as primitive or naïve art. There are two main ways to look at and write about 'primitive' art. The first is Primitivism as a style of art that refers to the re-use and re-interpretation of non-Western forms by Western artists. We can trace the historical evolution of the notion of 'primitive' and the associated Primitivist phenomena from their first appearance in Western art as early as the 18th century right up to the present day. The second is 'primitive' as a value judgement applied to non-Western art, which can be seen as pejorative. In response to this, we can try to establish a theoretical definition of primitive art, conceived as an autonomous manifestation of art not linked to Western cultural constructs. I am interested here in the contradictions implicit in the imposition of our values onto non-Western art when these art forms have longer-standing traditions. In fact, the art of

China or Africa shows us that there are histories of art that exist independently of the Western canon.

Western views on the primitive have come from both artists and historians. Perhaps most famous amongst these are Matisse, Picasso, and Roger Fry, who did much to promote Primitivism as an artistic style in the early part of the 20th century. The encounter between Western artists and writers and what has historically been called primitive art – the traditional, indigenous arts of Africa, Oceania, and North America – began with the 'discovery' of that art by European artists and writers early in the 20th century. These art forms were a vital catalyst that made artists rethink their relationship to the world. We can compare it to the discovery of perspective in the Renaissance, when artists developed the technical ability to accurately represent space. It is hard to overestimate the profound effect of primitive art. But we must remember that there was an intrinsic interest in primitivizing representations in modern art itself, as artists sought to break with the academic, canonical norms of artistic practice. There are many reasons why works by non-Western artists attracted modern painters and sculptors. And it is important to identify the different strands within Primitivism. First there is the romanticism of Paul Gauguin, whose images of life on Tahiti present a vision of an idyllic non-industrial society. There is also what might be termed emotional primitivism, exemplified by the *Brücke* and *Blaue Reiter* groups in Germany, in which abstract forms are used to express mood. By contrast, the primitivism of Picasso and Modigliani draws on direct quotations from non-Western art. In his *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), which is often seen as the beginning of modern art, Picasso paints the faces of the *demoiselles* as African masks. Finally, there is the idea of the primitivism of the subconscious that we see in Surrealism. Here, basic human impulses are associated with the notion of our primitive selves, reinforcing my point about the pejorative connotations of the term.

Primitivism is, then, a notion crucial to 20th-century art and modern thinking rather than a specific movement or group of artists. But is Primitivism one more example of Western colonial appropriation – or is there evidence of cross-cultural influence? It is true that the encounter between the West and primitive art took place at the height of Western colonialism. As a result, we must be aware that a number of racial and political questions come into play, either overtly or implicitly, in writings about both the art and the people who produced it. Recently, the notion of primitivism in the arts has troubled art historians, who have begun to question the formal, anthropological, political, and historical issues that have influenced the study of the arts of Oceania, Africa, and North and South America. But this does not necessarily result in a group of

societies stripped of meaning; instead the interactions between these cultures and Western traditions have created entirely new identities.

Until recently, the tendency in the West has been to view the art of Oceania as primitive. But it is important to consider the meaning and significance of art for the people of the Pacific. These art forms are part of the social rituals and cultural practices of these peoples, for instance the ancestral carvings of Maori and Sepik ceremonial houses, or body art in Polynesia; and women's art forms, such as bark cloth. And here we see the close connection between art history and anthropology – indeed some anthropologists see the word 'art' as too much of a Western term.

If we move out of the European arena to countries such as Australia to which large numbers of Europeans migrated, resulting in the dislocation of native peoples, we see that indigenous art traditions have been used to assert the presence of native peoples and their prior claim to the land. The interaction between First Australians and European Australians includes art forms from bark art to photography, rock art to sculpture, all of which show the rich texture of Australian art traditions.

Let's now turn the question of cross-cultural influence on its head and think about the impact of migration and diaspora where non-Western traditions have been brought to Western societies. Here I am thinking about slavery and African-American art. African-American art has made an increasingly vital contribution to the art of the United States from the time of its origins in early 18th-century slave communities. It includes folk and decorative arts, such as ceramics, furniture, and quilts, alongside fine art – sculptures, paintings, and photography – produced by African-Americans, both enslaved and free, throughout the 19th century. African-American art shows that in its cultural diversity and synthesis of cultures it mirrors American society as a whole. We need to think about the influence of galleries and museums, and of the New Negro Movement of the 1920s, the Era of Civil Rights and Black Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, and the emergence of new black artists and theorists in the latter part of the 20th century.

We need to look closely at the canonical works of those who built the empire and see how colonial subjects have been treated, whether they be slaves, descendants of slaves, or those whose lands were taken. Like women, these groups had largely been dismissed in the writing of art history as having no influence on or importance in 'mainstream' European art. This endorsed the idea that high art was the presence of artists practising in the Western tradition with its accompanying notion of genius. As we have seen, this comprises an orthodoxy of material, subject matter, and approach – and of course it

requires a white male artist. Non-Western art has largely been judged by a Western yardstick – it is 'primitive' but becomes Primitivism when adopted and adapted by Western artists.

But in recent years there has been a shift in attitude and an awareness of the colonial frame placed on non-Western art. This is evident in the way non-Western art is now being written about as having its own history – although this history is written by Westerners. Africans and First Australians, for instance, see their modern art as having evolved out of their own traditions and being 'given ' to them by Westerners. Indeed, is it not possible that Western art, whether modern or not, possesses its own ethnic peculiarities? This is the case not just in form but also in subject matter. Right at the beginning of this book we looked at Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration* (Fig. 5) as an example of Christian art. This is a benign image, but many Christian images are of the violent deaths or martyrdoms of saints, or indeed Christ's own crucifixion. To those who stand outside the Western Christian culture, these images can appear really quite shocking. Inevitably writing about art will always be influenced by the cultural circumstances of the historian, as well as the producer and viewer of the work. It is also important to think about the politics and aesthetics of the major museum exhibitions that gained acceptance for art that had been both ridiculed and marginalized – an issue I discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 3
Presenting art history

What do we expect when we enter an art gallery or museum? I think most of us are looking for history as well as art. It is quite usual to be confronted by a linear chronological sequence of artefacts, starting usually with Egyptian and/or Graeco-Roman times and working its way through to the present day. This varies, of course, on the specialization of the museum. But it is fair to say that chronology is one of the principal tools in organizing the display of works of art, and as we have already seen it is also one of the principal methods of writing art history.

For most of us, our first encounter with art is in a gallery or museum. Quite often these are large institutions belonging to the nation or the city where they are located. Their presence adds a certain cachet of cultural respectability to their location. The National Gallery in London or the British Museum are publicly owned and funded institutions. Other well-known national galleries are the result of a donation by private owners, which has since been augmented with public money. For instance, the Tate Gallery began as the sugar magnate Sir Henry Tate's personal art collection which he donated to the nation. Since then Tate, as it is now known, has grown into a series of galleries – two in London, Tate Britain and Tate Modern, and other venues in Liverpool and St Ives – all of which has been made possible by the use of public funds for the public good.

National collections and the museums in which they are housed are important focal points in the urban landscape. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, The Prado in Madrid, or the Louvre in Paris hold some of the finest works of art in the world and all are impressive buildings. The displays in these European institutions centre on national schools of painting, but also reflect past trends in the history of collecting and so include works from antiquity, the Renaissance, and more latterly non-Western art from Asia, Africa, and Oceania.