Chapter 1
What is art history?

A thing of beauty is a joy forever

Keats

Can art have a history? We think about art as being timeless, the 'beauty' of its appearance having meaning, significance, and appeal to humankind across the ages. At least this usually applies to our ideas about 'high', or fine, art, in other words painting and sculpture. This kind of visual material can have an autonomous existence – we can enjoy looking at it for its own sake, independent of any knowledge of its context, although of course viewers from different time periods or cultures may see the same object in contrasting ways.

Art appreciation and criticism

When we look at a painting or sculpture, we often ask the following questions: who made it?; what is the subject?; when was it completed? These are quite valid questions that are often anticipated and answered in, for example, the captions to illustrations in art books and the labels to works displayed in museums and galleries. For many of us these pieces of information are sufficient. Our curiosity about the who, what, and when of art is satisfied and we can get on with appreciating the artwork, or just enjoying looking at it. For those of us also interested in how, information on the technique used – for instance, oil or tempera (see Chapter 6) – might help us to appreciate further the skill of the artist. The important thing to note about this kind of art appreciation is that it requires no knowledge of art history. The history of an individual work is contained within itself and can be found in the answers to the questions who, what, when, and how. These are the kinds of details that appear in catalogues of museum and gallery collections or those produced for art sales, where perhaps information about the

original patron (if relevant) might also answer the question why. Auction houses, museums, and galleries also place emphasis on the provenance of a work of art. This is the history of who has owned it and in which collections it has been held. This acts as a kind of pedigree for the work and might be used to help prove that it is an authentic work by a given artist. All this information is important in determining the monetary value of a painting or sculpture but need not necessarily be important for art history.

In this way, art appreciation requires no knowledge of the context of art; the 'I know what I like and I like what I see' approach to gallery-going is sufficient. And this is absolutely fine. We can enjoy looking at something just for what it is and art can become absorbed into what might be called popular culture.

Art appreciation can also involve the more demanding process of criticizing the art object on the basis of its aesthetic merits. Usually aspects such as style, composition, and colour are referred to, and more broadly reference is made to the artist's other work, if known, or to other artists working at the same time or within the same movement or style.

Connoisseurship

Art appreciation and criticism are also linked to connoisseurship. By its very name this implies something far more elitist than just enjoying looking at art. A connoisseur is someone who has a specialist knowledge or training in a particular field of the fine or decorative arts. The specialist connoisseur may work for an auction house – we have all seen how on television programmes such as the *Antiques Roadshow* experts are able to identify and value all manner of objects, not just paintings, on the basis of looking at them closely and asking only very few questions of the owner. This kind of art appreciation is linked to the art market and involves being able to recognize the work of individual artists as this has a direct effect on the work's monetary value.

Another aspect of connoisseurship is its relationship to our understanding of taste. A connoisseur's taste in relation to art is considered to be refined and discriminating. Our concept of taste in relation to art is quite complicated, and inevitably it is bound up in our ideas about social class. Let me take a little time to explore this more fully. I have already discussed the practice of art appreciation – art available for all and seen and enjoyed by all. By contrast, connoisseurship imposes a kind of hierarchy of taste. The

meaning of taste here is a combination of two definitions of the word: our faculty of making discerning judgements in aesthetic matters, and our sense of what is proper and socially acceptable. But by these definitions taste is both culturally and socially determined, so that what is considered aesthetically 'good' and socially 'acceptable' differs from one culture or society to another. The fact that our taste is culturally determined is something of which we have to be aware, and this crops up throughout this book. Here, though, it is important to think about the social dimension of taste as having more to do with art as a process of social exclusion – we are meant to feel intimidated if we don't know who the artist is, or worse still if we don't feel emotionally moved through the 'exquisiteness' of the work. We have all read or heard the unmistakable utterances of these connoisseurs. But luckily their world does not belong to art history. Instead, art history is an open subject available to everyone with an interest in looking at, thinking about, and understanding the visual. It is my intention in this book to describe how we can engage with art in these ways.

History as progression

For art to have a history we expect not only a timeless quality but also some kind of sequence or progression, as this is what history leads us to expect. Our history books are full of events in the past that are presented as part of either the continual movement towards improvement, or as stories about great men, or as epochs of time that stand out from others – for instance, the Italian Renaissance or the Enlightenment. In regard to these kinds of frameworks for thinking about the past, the history of art does not disappoint. In the coming together of these two separate strands, we see how history reorders visual experience, making it take a range of forms. The most popular of these include writing about the history of art from the point of view of artists – usually 'great men'. Alternatively, we find art historians have sought to define the great stylistic epochs in the history of art, for example the Renaissance, Baroque, or Post-Impressionism. Each of these traditions can be written about independently of the others and they have provided a backbone for histories of art. Here I use the plural since the results of each of these ways of writing about the history of art are different, placing different emphasis on what is important – in some cases the artist, in others the work or the movement to which the work belongs.

The problem with concentrating on formal elements such as style is that style itself becomes the subject of discussion rather than the works of art. As we become preoccupied with marking out stylistic changes, we have to use our knowledge of what

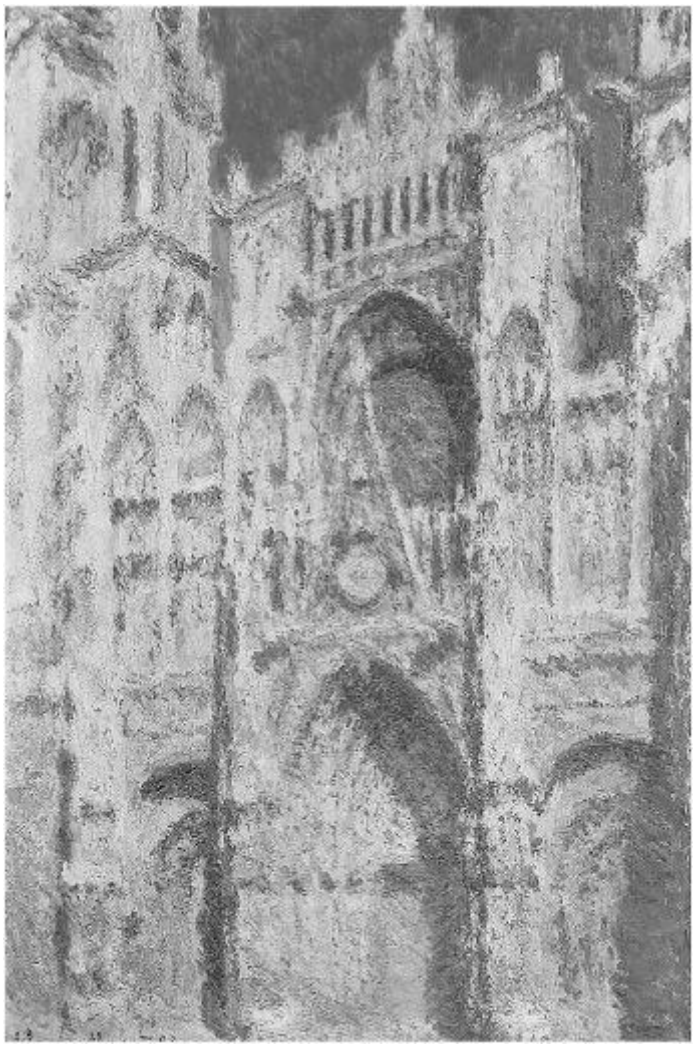
came after the work under discussion. The benefit of hindsight is essential here – how else could we know that the beginnings of an interest in nature and naturalism in the art of Early Renaissance Italy prefigured the consummate achievements of artists of the High Renaissance in this regard? Working backwards from the present imposes a line of development of which the outcome is already known. In this way, tracks or routes through the art of the past can favour certain styles – this is certainly the case with classical art and its reinterpretations.

Also, histories of art that focus solely on style can easily neglect other aspects of an artwork such as its subject matter or its function. It is possible to narrate a history of artistic style using representations of the male and female body. This might begin with the representation of physical perfection achieved in ancient times by the Greeks. By the Middle Ages, however, there was little interest in the naturalistic depiction of the human form. But by the Renaissance period increased knowledge of human anatomy and nature meant that art had become more 'life-like'. But this kind of history could also be told using representations of cats and dogs, although most would agree that domestic pets have not been a principal focus for artists over the last two millennia.

Yet style has played a significant role in the formulation of histories of art, and it is only in recent years that the notion of stylistic progress in Western art has been reassessed. Indeed, the emphasis on style leads us to expect the notion of progression and constant development in art. If we want art to represent the world we think we see, then we can impose an expectation of a continual move towards naturalism. But how do we then think about art that is not interested in naturalistic representation? This kind of abstract or conceptual art can be sidelined and deemed of secondary importance – sometimes it is labelled 'primitive' or 'naïve' art, with a pejorative air. In many ways modern art confronts this prejudice, but often provokes cries of 'is it art?'.

In the case of biographical histories, we look for evidence of youth, maturity, and old age in the work of an artist. This works quite well if the artist lived for a long time, but an untimely death does not lend itself to this kind of narrative arch. Claude Monet's (1840–1926) early work *The Poppy Field* (1873) differs from the cycles of pictures of the same object at various times of day he produced in the 1880s and 1890s, as seen in his views of *Rouen Cathedral* (1894; Fig. 1) or *Haystacks* (1891). But although we can see similar preoccupations in the interest in light, shade, and colour as a way of modelling form, these phases of Monet's career stand distinct from his late works, such as the large-scale paintings of the lily ponds at his Japanese-style garden at Giverny. This kind of biographical approach isolates the artist from their historical context. We

often forget that Monet's late works were painted in the early 20th century – at the same time as Picasso was experimenting with Cubism.



1. ***Rouen Cathedral: The Portal (in Sun)*** **by Claude Monet (1894).**

Is there then a distinction to be made between the interaction of art and history, and art history? That is to say that histories of art can have a single focus on style or the work in relation to the biography of the artist, where our expectations of a progressive history are inflicted on the visual. What I am suggesting here is that we turn the question on its head and put art in the driving seat, so to speak. By using art as our starting point we can see the complex and intertwined strands that make up art history. This implies that art history is a subject or academic field of enquiry in its own right, rather than the result of the rules of one discipline being applied to another. I return to this point on a regular basis in this book. I aim to set out how histories of art have been constructed, to

describe the ways in which we have been encouraged to think about art as a result, and also to introduce other ways of thinking about the visual in terms of its history.

Evidence and analysis in art history

It is important to discuss what kind of archive art history can draw upon, as the range of material used to construct these histories extends well beyond the works themselves. For instance, history has its documents, written records of the past; archaeology focuses on the material record, physical remains of the past; whilst anthropology looks to social rituals and cultural practices as a way of understanding past and present peoples. Art history can draw upon all these archives in addition to the primary archive of the artwork. In this way, art history is the stepping stone into various ways of interpreting and understanding the past.

In contradiction to this, what is known as the 'canon' of art regiments our understanding and interpretation of the evidence. In this instance, the canon is artwork regarded by influential individuals – not least connoisseurs – as being of the highest quality. In art history the canon has usually, but not exclusively, been associated with the 'traditional' values of art. In this way the canon plays an important role in the institutionalization of art, as new works can be judged against it. As such it is a means of imposing hierarchical relationships on groups of objects. This hierarchy usually favours the individual genius and the idea of the 'masterpiece'. Moreover, the canon promotes the idea that certain cultural objects or styles of art have more value (both historical and monetary) than others. One of my principal interests in this book is the impact of canonical works that are considered defining examples of taste and of historical significance on art history.

I have been using the words 'art' and 'visual' almost interchangeably. This raises another important question – what are the subjects of art history? Traditionally, the history of art has been concerned with 'high art'. But a range of artefacts has been included in the discipline, and these have changed over time. When talking about the Renaissance, for instance, it is quite easy to confine discussion to known artists such as Michelangelo or Raphael and to works of painting or sculpture, or their preparatory processes such as drawings. But the remains of the visual outputs of different cultures and epochs are quite varied and invite a range of interpretations. We are all familiar with the rock art of prehistoric times, but the reasons behind its production and who

produced it remain enigmatic. We look at the cave paintings at Lascaux in the Dordogne, France, and see in them hunting scenes – depictions of everyday life. But rock art also includes abstract designs and shapes. So could this kind of art have had a more mystical function? Some argue that these images are the work of shamans – members of a religious cult who used hallucinogenic drugs as part of their practice of worship – and these images come from the unconscious as a result.

A different question arises if we look at ancient Greece. The world inhabited by this civilization is seen as a high point in the history of art. But most ancient Greek sculpture is known only through Roman copies, a problem discussed in more detail later on in this volume. And we have very little knowledge of ancient Greek paintings. Partly in response to these gaps in our knowledge, attention has focused on Greek vases, which even from as early as 800 BCE were decorated. The plentiful remains of Greek vases demonstrate a range of painting styles from the geometric designs of the Archaic period through to the silhouette-like bodies on Black Figure vases and the more painterly, fluid representations of the human form on Red Figure vases. These relics from the past are everyday objects, yet, perhaps due to the paucity of specimens of high art, they are venerated examples of ancient Greek art. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their history is mapped against that of Greek sculpture and is the story of ongoing development in the pursuit of the representation of human physical perfection.

In the case of non-Western art, everyday objects, sometimes referred to as material culture, are the best evidence we have for the artistic output of a given society. A Mayan vase (Fig. 2) may well tell us something about the religious or social rituals, as well as indicate the way in which artists chose to represent their world. However, in later periods in Western art, vases – and other everyday objects – have not always enjoyed such attention. Even the exquisite designs on the soft paste porcelain of the Sèvres factory or the classical scenes on Wedgwood vases take second place to the high art of the same period – at least as far as art historians are concerned. It is important to remember, however, that ceramics and furniture were often considered more valuable and prestigious possessions at the time of their production than were painting or sculpture. So the emphasis and value we place on high art may in fact misrepresent its significance in the eyes of contemporaries. And the way in which art history can distort objects in terms of their contemporary and present-day meaning and significance is something I return to at various points in this book.

2. Mayan cylindrical vessel decorated with the image of a dignitary wearing a blossom headdress.

In recent years the term art history has itself come under question. The so-called New Art History, now a generation old, sought to reassess the way in which we think and write about histories of visual objects. New Art History was particularly influenced by theoretical ways of thinking about art to bring out its social, cultural, and historical meaning. I discuss the various ways of writing and thinking about art history in subsequent chapters; it is enough to say here that the notion of works of art having historical meaning beyond their role in the narrative of the work of great artists or of styles of art was revolutionary. So much so that the subject is still divided between 'new' and 'old' even 20 years later.

This book does not advocate either way of thinking about art history. I see the merit of both approaches, and I very much want to question the object, confront it, in order to explore its broadest possible meaning and significance. But at the same time I do not want to lose sight of the object itself – its physical properties, and in many cases its sheer aesthetic appeal. After all, I am arguing that art history is a separate discipline from history – the visual is then its primary material, the starting point for any kind of historical enquiry. Although it is important to be able to articulate the appearance of a work of art, to describe and analyse the visual using words is not an end in itself. And making this kind of visual analysis is not always as easy as it sounds. Art history has its own vocabulary, or taxonomic system, that enables us to speak precisely about the objects we see in front of us, as can be appreciated from the glossary at the end of this book. But the ability to discuss or analyse a work of art, even using a sophisticated

taxonomic system, is not art history. Certainly, it is the act of accurately describing a work, and this process may be intertwined with the practice of connoisseurship, but this satisfaction with articulating what is in front of us remains largely the preserve of art appreciation. If we compare this practice to the study of English literature, for instance, the point becomes clearer. We would neither consider reading out the text of *King Lear*, nor a synopsis of the plot of the play, the definitive analysis of this work by Shakespeare. It may be that these processes are a necessary part of the analysis, but they are not an end in themselves. Similarly, we should not accept the description of an artwork as the end of the process of study.

It is true that there is a difficulty in this relationship between the verbal and the visual; they are both discrete methods of description. This tension is further explored in the next chapter. We are perhaps more familiar with the use of words to describe art, where one system of articulation is brought to bear on the other. But we must remember that this also works the other way around – the visual can describe and represent the verbal, phenomena usually expressed in words.

Art history and 'visual culture'

More recently, the terms 'visual culture' or 'visual studies' have been used in the place of 'art history'. On the one hand this broader title acknowledges the wide range of material that can be used in historical analysis and encourages the inclusion of media like film, photography, video, and digital recording. Perhaps more importantly in this context, the field of intellectual enquiry known as visual culture takes as its subject vision and its representations. As such, visual observation and articulation is privileged over the verbal. Visual culture is partly about the physiological processes of seeing and also the nature of perception, which is to some extent culturally determined. In recent years some of these ideas have been absorbed into the discipline of art history, and I discuss these in Chapter 4.

Many of the subjects of visual culture are the same as those of art history; for instance issues of gender and a consideration of art as a system of viewing the world. The essential difference between the two disciplines arises from the fact that visual culture is concerned with the operations of the eye, and as such its archive is everything we see – the world we perceive around us; visual culture has moved beyond the scope of 'art' as traditionally conceived to incorporate the idea of movement, light, and speed in

every kind of visual phenomenon from advertising to virtual reality, with an emphasis on the everyday. I am not denying the importance of these images, nor their widespread appeal. I would even venture to suggest that Mario of *The Super Mario Brothers* (Fig. 3) is as familiar as *The Mona Lisa* – if not more so to certain generations. It is also important here to distinguish between visual culture and popular culture. Art can become popular culture – not just in the way I have already discussed, but also through its adoption into other formats. Take John Constable's *The Cornfield* (1826; Fig. 4). A recent exhibition of this work held at the National Gallery in London showed how this revered image of the English countryside has been used on a range of items such as biscuit tins and calendars, as well as for posters and prints. In this way, visual culture can be said to encompass a broad range of subject matter that stands outside the definition of high art. Indeed, although visual culture and its methods are principally associated with more recent artistic production – in the broadest sense – its approach is an equally effective way of interrogating the artefacts from earlier periods. For instance, the distinctive category of fine art cannot necessarily be used to describe many objects that were produced in the Middle Ages. So there is a resonance between those who look at visual culture in the periods that stand on either side of the dominance of fine, or high, art in Western culture.

3. Mario of *The Super Mario Brothers*, one of the characters in a video game produced by Nintendo.

There is also a political dimension to visual culture as a method of critical activity, as it is seen by many of its apologists as a way in which the forces of global capitalism can be challenged. Through the emphasis on the everyday, mass consumption, and experience visual culture does concentrate mainly on the study of modernity – in this case the world in the post-World War II era. As such, its purview is based partly on the material available. We know much less about popular culture and ways in which visual

objects were perceived in earlier historical periods, so a political reading of them is more difficult to achieve. That said, many art historians do bring a political agenda to their writing, and this is discussed later in this volume.

4. John Constable's painting of *The Cornfield* (1826) has adorned a range of products from calendars to biscuit tins.

Not all the concerns of visual culture are rooted in the later 20th century and thereafter. For instance, the concern with the way we see relates to theories of optics, which were certainly popular in the 16th and 17th centuries and were elucidated by such prominent figures as Sir Isaac Newton and René Descartes. Optical theory found its way into artistic practice through the use of the camera obscura. Also, we must not forget the discovery of perspective in the Renaissance period in northern Europe as well as in Italy (I discuss this in Chapter 5). This shows that artists had an interest in the perception of space created by the illusory properties of linear perspective and aerial perspective. As discussed in Chapter 4, the status of visual experience was a major preoccupation of 18th-century thinkers – not least Immanuel Kant. So it is partly the political agenda of visual culture, and partly the way in which it puts the aesthetic in second place to this, as well as the broad range of artistic outputs covered, that

separates this discipline from art history. Visual culture is perhaps most at home in an analysis of global capitalism as expressed in a multi-media world, and this is really the subject of a separate Very Short Introduction.

Practising art history

I want now to present some examples of the ways in which art history articulates and investigates a whole range of social and cultural issues and of the various functions art history has. In order to do this I have chosen four quite different images in terms of their subject matter and date. The first is Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 5), also known as the *Strozzi Altarpiece*. The painting is now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, but originally it was an altarpiece in the Strozzi family chapel in Santa Trinità, Florence. This relocation of the picture raises an important issue when looking at works of art – quite often they are no longer in their original location, and we see them as part of a historical sequence presented by a gallery. Usually the different rooms of a gallery follow a chronological sequence, perhaps subdivided into categories, styles, or subject matter. So our primary evidence for art history – the work itself – is presented out of its original context. Looking at a work of art in a gallery can place emphasis on the physical characteristics of the work itself, which harks back to the principles behind art connoisseurship I discussed earlier in this chapter.

5. *The Adoration of the Magi* by Gentile da Fabriano (1423) is also known as the *Strozzi Altarpiece*. It was originally located in the Strozzi family chapel in Santa Trinità, Florence.

The second issue this picture raises is the idea of the patron – the painting has two titles: one describes the subject matter, the other refers to the family who commissioned it. Interestingly, in this case the artist comes a distinct third, showing how less famous artists can be sidelined as other preoccupations in the writing of art history come to the fore. The close relationship between the patron and the painting might lead us to question what this image was for. The subject matter – the adoration of the Magi, where three kings come to pay tribute to the infant Jesus – is based on the New Testament of the Bible and is an important moment in the Christian faith. Gentile's image captures this moment, as the kings kneel to show their respect to the Christ child, which is meant to underscore their recognition of Jesus as the presence of God on earth. Indeed, most of the art produced in the West in the Middle Ages was religious – comprising altarpieces and fresco decorations in chapels, as well as intricate manuscript illustrations. Although the work dates from the Early Renaissance, Gentile shows an affinity with these older traditions in his style and materials, which implies there are not such clear breaks between one artistic period and the next.

An abundance of gold leaf and rich colours enhance the jewel-like appearance of the altarpiece. It is easy to imagine how in its ornate gilded frame it presented a magical image, lit by candlelight in the family chapel. The use of such splendid material – real gold leaf to add highlights in the picture and to cover the frame, and semi-precious stones like lapis lazuli, which were ground up to make the rich blue that is so dominant in the picture – tells us a great deal.

Firstly, the patron must have been wealthy enough to afford these expensive materials – we know that paintings such as these were seen as symbols of wealth since in the contracts between artists and patrons there were often clauses stating how much gold and semi-precious pigments were to be used. In the case of the Strozzi family, who were wealthy Florentine merchants, we know they were keen patrons across several generations. (There is another *Strozzi Altarpiece* showing Christ enthroned with the Virgin and saints by Orcagna [Andrea di Cione] dated 1357, which remains in its original setting in Santa Maria Novella in Florence.)

Secondly, the decorative effect of Gentile's painting as a whole adds much to the luxurious feel of the picture. If you look at it quickly, the background, foreground, and all the figures seem to form a rich pattern across the picture rather like a woven fabric. The pattern-like quality of the picture surface, together with the opulent materials and the flatness of the image (there are no illusions of space or depth in this painting), are all characteristics of a mode of painting known as International Gothic. Here, as in most of art history, 'International' refers only to the West, and in this particular case to Europe since America was not really known about when this work was made. This view of the world begins to tell us something about how histories of art have been written, very much from a Western perspective, based on Western ideas and placing emphasis on the kinds of values that a male-dominated society and culture wants to read about and wants to see in the works themselves. One of the aims of this book is to show that we can think about the same objects in different ways to show their richness and value as historical documents or evidence.

My second painting is known as *Las Meninas* (Fig. 6), by Diego Velázquez (*c*.1658–60). Once again, we find a work of art with more than one name. It is really a portrait of the family of King Philip IV of Spain, and it was only in a catalogue of the royal collection of pictures written in 1843 by Pedro de Madrazo that the title *Las Meninas* (which means 'The Ladies in Waiting') was given to the work.

In this painting the artist has become more dominant than his subjects, as not only do we know this work to have been one of his masterpieces, but he has actually included himself in the picture. We see him standing behind the canvas to the left of the picture, looking out at us. We can only assume that his royal patrons were happy for Velázquez to include himself in this family portrait – he is certainly one of the dominant figures, the King and Queen being seen only as reflections in the mirrors at the centre of the back wall.

6. *Las Meninas* ('The Ladies in Waiting') by Diego Velázquez (*c.* 1658–60). The artist included himself in the portrait of the family of King Philip IV of Spain.

The inclusion of such an obvious self-portrait shows the kind of status artists can come to hold, not just as court painters, as here, but more generally when they achieve an almost celebrity-like status. Their reputation can prefigure, or even overwhelm, their work. This continues to the present day, when we remember the names of artists more readily than the titles of their works – notable examples include Damien Hirst or Tracy Emin. But there is no doubt that Velázquez is seen as one of the major figures in the history of Western art. He is particularly praised for his handling of paint; there is a looseness to the brushstrokes that is slightly impressionistic. Indeed, Edouard Manet,

one of the founders of the Impressionist movement in France, went to Spain and was deeply influenced by the work of Velázquez.

Also look at the way light is handled: we feel as if light is flooding in from the windows to the right of the picture and spotlighting the little girl in the middle. See also how the open door in the background brings a different light source into the picture. *Las Meninas* also raises some important questions about pictorial space. We must always remember that the picture surface is flat – any sense of space or depth is an illusion. Some artists have little interest in trying to create the illusion of depth – or 'a window on the world' as some have called it. Another look at the Gentile reveals that there is little illusion of pictorial space, the figures are jumbled up flat against the picture surface. By contrast, Velázquez creates the illusion of a room using the standard device of linear perspective.

But there is much more to this painting. We assume what we are looking at is Velázquez's view of himself and his sitters in the mirror he was using to paint himself. This might explain why the light comes in from the right rather than the left, which is much more common in Western art – we are seeing a mirror image of the actual scene. But the King and Queen appear in the picture in the mirror at the centre of the back wall. So, who is Velázquez actually painting? We might think it is the little girl, as she is centre-stage and spotlighted, but the artist is looking beyond her, perhaps towards the figures we see only on the mirror. We, the viewers, are drawn into this complex set of spatial and compositional relationships as the artist looks out at us – as if he were painting our portrait and we look back, taking on the role of the King and Queen reflected in the mirror. This aspect of *Las Meninas* raises some important issues in art history.

In particular, there is the idea of art as illusion – what we are really looking at is brushstrokes on canvas; the rest is made up of our cognitive and intellectual processes that give the picture its meaning – in terms of recognizing it as a portrait and the ways in which it plays with our sense of perception. *The Adoration*, which is painted on panel, gives the illusion of fabrics and jewels in a flattened tableau that we stand outside; the artist's craft is hidden in the smooth picture surface and rich materials. Conversely, *Las Meninas*, painted on canvas, creates a complex illusion of three-dimensional space which both draws us in and repels us. We are very aware not only of the artist but also of how the paint has been applied to the canvas in the broad brushstrokes, creating a realistic effect.

I now want to move on to representations of the world and of ideas executed in different media, and I have chosen a classical sculpture and a recent installation work as a means of doing this.

The *Apollo Belvedere* (Fig. 7) is perhaps one of the best-known sculptures from the ancient world. This is due not least to its striking appearance – it is over 2 metres (7 feet) in height and made entirely of white marble. It is an image of the Greek god Apollo, who was one of the twelve gods of Olympus and who represented the classical Greek spirit, standing for the rational and civilized side of human nature.

Although there are many myths that narrate the episodes of Apollo's life, the title of this sculpture is taken from the place where the sculpture was displayed. It was placed in the Belvedere Courtyard (now part of the Pio-Clementine Museum) built for Pope Julius II in 1503, the first in the papal collection of ancient statues to be displayed there. This was a Roman copy of a Greek original from the 5th century BCE; the statue may have been sculpted by Leochares, one of whose works is mentioned in Pliny as being an Apollo wearing a diadem.

7. One of the best-known sculptures from the ancient world, the *Apollo Belvedere* is more than 2 metres (7 feet) high. It is a Roman copy of a 5th century BCE Greek original.

As the twin brother of Artemis, known also as Diana, Apollo was considered to represent masculine physical perfection, just as his sister represented female perfection. This sculpture certainly exploits the idea of physical perfection – the smooth finish of the marble adds to the illusion of soft flesh and muscle of the god's body and his blemishless idealized face. The contrast between the folds of the drapery and the smoothness of the flesh emphasize the texture of each and the sculptor's skill in making hard stone appear to be two quite different substances. Although this image of Apollo, like many others of men from antiquity, was meant to celebrate the physical perfection of the human body, here Apollo's modesty is presented by the addition of a fig leaf over his genitals. This is unlikely to have been there in the Greek original, but at some later

date changing attitudes towards nudity and representations of the body and sexuality demanded a fig leaf be added, and it has remained in place.

It might appear strange that amidst all this idealized human perfection, there is a rather unattractive tree trunk. The texture of the bark adds little to the image, unlike the contrast between the cloak and Apollo's flesh. Closer examination reveals that the figure's right forearm and left hand are missing. And these begin to offer us clues as to why the tree trunk is there. Sculptures rely on the tensile strength of their material. Marble is not a very good material with which to carve outstretched limbs as it breaks quite easily, as we see here. Indeed, the cape not only works as a compositional device but also has a practical application, supporting Apollo's outstretched arm. Thinking about the sculpture in terms of balance and the qualities of the material, the tree is, then, another device to support the weight of the whole. We can see how vulnerable the sculpture is as the right forearm has gone. The tree trunk jars with the rest of the composition as it, like the fig leaf, was added later. This time we can be almost certain that the Roman copyist added it, as the Greek original would have been cast in bronze – a material with far greater tensile strength, which is necessary to achieve this kind of pose. One of the consequences of the use of marble rather than bronze is that we mistakenly think of all classical sculpture as being white, so underscoring the idea of classical art as pure, simple, and as a result of enduring value.

The *Apollo Belvedere* now begins to tell us a great deal about a range of aspects of art history. Firstly, there is the question of the re-use and re-interpretation of classical forms across time. We are content to see Apollo as a fine example of Greek sculpture. Ancient Greece and Rome are often referred to as the classical world – this pinpoints a period in time. But the word 'classic' also means a pinnacle or exceptional example that conforms to a restrained and refined style and has enduring quality. The combination of the art from the classical epoch with this value judgement sets up the idea that 'classical' is best. And we can see how the interest in this style of art, in its broadest sense, has endured throughout time. The Romans copied or adapted much from Greek art and architecture. Indeed, most of our knowledge of Greek sculpture comes from Roman copies of Greek originals.

In the Renaissance, when interest in the classical world enjoyed a widespread revival, the *Apollo* was acquired by the Pope to form the beginnings of the papal sculpture collection. The interest in the artworks of antiquity was such that it was considered appropriate for Christian collections, including that owned by the Vatican, to contain images of pagan gods. The pose of Apollo, and indeed many other classical sculptures, has been copied and quoted by many artists, sculptors, painters, and engravers from

subsequent generations, and this tells us how classical forms have been re-used and re-interpreted, or even rejected, at various times. The pose is an example of classical contrapposto, where one side of the body does the opposite of the other. Apollo's left side is open with his arm outstretched whilst his right is closed, similarly his weight rests on only one foot, which also gives a feeling of movement.

The *Apollo Belvedere* also tells us something about the rise in the interest in collecting and display of art – here it has even influenced the name of the work – and how the amassing of objects gave prominence to certain types of works and made them available to artists to copy and learn from. The Vatican collections are important in this regard as artists visited Rome as part of their education from the 16th century onwards.

The further aspect of art history that the *Apollo Belvedere* introduces is iconography, an important method for understanding the meaning of art. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 5, but suffice to say here that it is the study of the subjects of stories depicted in art, whether it be religious or secular. We have already seen how this works with Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* – the story behind the image. Iconography can also include the study of certain elements of a work of art that act as clues or symbols as to what is going on or who is being depicted. In the case of the *Apollo*, if we did not already know this was an image of the Graeco-Roman god, we might be led to that conclusion because the figure wears a crown of laurel leaves, which Apollo was given in recognition of his achievements in the arts.

My fourth example is an installation work by a woman artist who was at the forefront of the feminist movement. Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (Fig. 8) was first exhibited in 1979. On the surface it seems a very laudable effort to bring famous women to the attention of the general public. And, significantly, we also have the artist talking about her work, so we know what she intended:

> My idea for *The Dinner Party* grew out of research into women's history that I had begun at the end of the 1960s . . . the prevailing attitude towards women's history can be best summed up by the following story. While an undergraduate at UCLA, I took a course titled the Intellectual History of Europe. The professor, a respected historian, promised that at the last class he would discuss women's contributions to Western thought. I waited eagerly all semester, and at the final meeting, the instructor strode in and announced: 'Women's contributions to European intellectual history: They made none.'

> I was devastated by his judgement, and when later my studies demonstrated that my professor's assessment did not stand up to intellectual scrutiny, I became convinced that the idea that women had no history – and the companion belief that there had never been any great women artists – was simply a prejudice elevated to intellectual dogma. I suspected that many people accepted these notions primarily because they had never been exposed to a different perspective.
>
> As I began to uncover what turned out to be a treasure trove of information about women's history, I became both empowered and inspired. My intense interest in sharing these discoveries through my art led me to wonder whether visual images might play a role in changing the prevailing views regarding women and women's history.
>
> Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (1996), pp. 3–4

Chicago's triangular dinner table had place settings made out of traditionally feminine 'crafts' such as embroidery and pottery, with the name of a famous woman, for instance Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing, appearing at each place. This might seem a worthy effort but – look more closely – on each of the plates the fruit and flowers, which at first glance seem innocuous enough, form models of female genitalia. This allegorical reference to the female sex alluded to in fruit and flowers typifies feminization of art as these elements are considered decorative and domestic. Chicago's work had and still does have its critics. Some feminists see it as portraying biology as destiny. My purpose in including it here is that it raises some more important questions about art history. Most obviously, it shows how art can have a distinctly political purpose and be quite a provocative means of getting across ideas. Here, Chicago uses the technique of unsettling the viewer as we look at something that appears almost twee, but soon the familiar becomes disturbing. It also raises the issue of women in art and of other minority groups. It is quite easy for women, and for those from minority ethnic groups, to became subcategories of art history. This implies that the main topic is the white Western male as subject, artist, and historian. What follows in this volume challenges that view.

8. *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago was first exhibited in 1979 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The Dinner Party also tells us about the ephemeral nature of artworks – it is an installation with no permanent home. That is a fragile enough existence, but as its message is now dated or unwelcome in the eyes of many, it remains packed away from view. And this raises the issue of fashion and taste, as well as the relationship between artists and artwork where there is no patron or gallery.

My four images have set up much of what follows in this book. All of them demonstrate in different ways that art history is not just about describing images that represent the world we think we see. The subject is far more complex and rich. It is a way of looking at the culture and society of different epochs and seeing how we think about these periods and how attitudes have changed across time. The huge range of subject matter enables us to use art history to think about these issues in relation to themes such as personal and public life, religious and secular art and practices, political activism and cultural domination. The following chapters explore these different aspects of art history. But in the final chapter I end where I began with the objects themselves,

describing how in the light of the various aspects of the discipline covered in this introduction we can ‘read’ art history starting out from artworks.

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