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.

The holdings in galleries and museums in the United States show how important the history of collecting remains. As the USA is a relatively new country, the excellent material in many museums is as much the result of private donations as of art bought on the European market as part of an active acquisitions policy. Benefactors who have bequeathed their personal collections to the nation are often remembered through the naming of a wing or rooms in the institution in their honour. Some of the museums and galleries in the United States that might be seen as the 'establishment' are really quite new. The civilizing appeal of these institutions is apparent in the story behind the founding of the National Gallery in Washington. This opened in 1937, more than a century after Washington had been established as the capital of the United States. It was funded by a private individual, Andrew Mellon, who was Treasury Secretary under President Hoover. Mellon saw the absence of a national gallery as a cause for discomfiture – not least when being obliged to tell foreign dignitaries that no such thing existed. Whilst Andrew Mellon maintained an 'arm's length' association with the institution he founded, some collectors make their private possessions available to the general public in galleries and museums that are the equal of many national collections.

The John Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles houses an overwhelming collection of artworks as well as artists' papers and drawings, and through the bequest of its billionaire founder enjoys a huge acquisitions budget that outstrips many national institutions. The Guggenheim is another private institution, which, like Tate, has expanded to include sites in New York in Museum Mile (Fifth Avenue) and SoHo, and in Venice, Bilbao, and Las Vegas.

The Getty has two museums – a replica Roman villa based on one found at Herculaneum and a brand-new museum complex occupying the top of a hill in Brentwood, Los Angeles. Here, the sprawling range of buildings, designed by Richard Meier, all cased in striking white Travertine brought from southern Italy, rival the contents of the museum itself. Similarly, the first Guggenheim museum was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1960 – like Meier, one of the most famous architects of his generation. The unique white spiral shape of the museum made a distinct statement, sitting on one of the most expensive streets in Manhattan and only a few hundred yards from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Since then Frank Gehry's striking titanium-clad design for the Guggenheim in Bilbao has perhaps played as important a role in attracting visitors as the museum displays housed within. The point here is not to propose that the buildings are taking over from the collections, it is rather to show how much we invest in these institutions. And that the private and public art museum and gallery can play an equally important role in the display and consumption of art objects and in the cultural life of a society through its presence in the (usually) urban environment. The institutions

also play an important role in the shaping of taste and the way in which art history is presented and understood by the public at large.

A brief consideration of how collections were formed in Europe shows the ways in which art objects were historicized as a result of the activities of patrons and collectors. The beginnings of the idea of collecting objects goes back to Ancient Greece. The *Mouseion*, meaning 'home of the Muses', was a building that housed artefacts that honoured these nine goddesses who personified the arts and sciences, and the word museum comes from this religious practice.

The Romans were keen collectors and formed large collections of objects as offerings in temples and sanctuaries that were seen by ordinary members of the public. At this time the idea of private collections also emerged; some of these, for example the display of art at the Emperor Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, just outside of Rome, were really quite splendid.

The idea of amassing diverse collections of objects, some from past times, others from the present, came to the fore in the early modern period. In the 16th and 17th centuries the cabinet of curiosities – a small private collection of objects ranging from prints and drawings to scientific instruments – became the 'must have' item for those who could afford it. The collections of antiquities and great works of art owned by Italian Renaissance princes and popes were seen as signifiers of their status, wealth, and cultural worth. We have already seen how Pope Julius II founded the Vatican collection of ancient sculpture with the *Apollo Belvedere* (Fig. 7). Alongside this papal patronage was the impetus behind some of the best-known works of the 16th and 17th centuries – the Sistine Chapel ceiling by Michelangelo, the Vatican *Stanze* by Raphael (see Chapter 2), *The Baldicchino* in St Peter's by Bernini, and the cathedral itself, which was the work of many famous architects including Michelangelo and Bernini (we must remember it was not at all unusual for artists to also practise architecture at this time). This huge collection of art from antiquity and the Renaissance was a major attraction for visitors to Rome interested in art history – and this is still the case.

The idea of owning objects from the past became even more popular in the 18th century. This was partly due to the increase in travel in the period, especially the Grand Tour – an educational pursuit for young men, who travelled Europe to see the principal sites of cultural interest. Rome was a focal point of the tour, and English travellers would gather at the Caffe degli Inglesi to exchange news from home. Most of us like to buy souvenirs when we visit somewhere of interest; 18th-century tourists were no different in that they

also wanted souvenirs, and they were able to bring back paintings, sculptures, drawings, and so on to form or embellish their own personal collections. The sculptures of ancient Rome were particularly popular, many items being pieced together from fragments of different sculptures – but the eager customers did not seem to notice or to mind about this. Artworks in English country houses are testimony to this passion for collecting, and references to these collections and knowledge of the art of ancient Greece and Rome became a part of what we might call 18th-century popular culture.

Sir Joshua Reynold's 1773 portrait of the Montgomery sisters, *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen* (Fig. 13), shows how these allusions to the classical past were used to embellish the status of those who commissioned works of art and those who were their subject. The portrait was exhibited at the Royal Academy by Reynolds in 1774. Reynolds was one of the founders of the Academy in 1768 and he intended that it should be an engine for the display of art by artists. (The Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy in London remains a busy marketplace for contemporary artists to sell their work.) Reynolds' picture is an unusual combination of a portrait and a history painting, and this is important for us as it shows how closely history – or at least the fascination with the classical past – formed part of the image of 18th-century elite society. A classical sculpture is represented in the figure in the middle of the picture space – this is Hymen, the god of wedlock, making reference to the art of ancient Rome and its mythological literature. The painting also makes reference to the classical subject of nature, being adorned by the three graces (the personification of female virtues: chastity, grace, and beauty).

13. Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait of the Montgomery sisters, *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen*, was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art in London in 1774.

The Royal Academy was the main means through which artists could present their work to other artists and potential patrons, as well as where they learned their trade in the Academy school. The different subjects of painting were placed in a hierarchy and artists ranked according to their talent in relation to these. In this academic system, the best artists painted the most important kinds of pictures. History painting was seen as the pinnacle of artistic production and usually referred to ancient history or mythology (as we have seen in Reynolds' portrait). In Protestant countries such as Britain, biblical subjects were not as common in art as they were elsewhere in Europe. But representations of biblical events were considered as equal to history painting in the academic hierarchy of subjects. History painting was more prestigious than portraiture, which was followed by genre (scenes from everyday life), and landscape. The idea of the Academy is important to art history as it was one of the first locations where art was presented to a select public. Vasari, who as we have already seen was very influential in the development of writing art history, founded the first academy of fine art in Florence in 1563 under the figureheads of the Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici and Michelangelo. Vasari intended his academy as a means both to augment the social status of the artist and to offer training. Other Italian cities soon followed his example, with the Accademia di S. Luca being founded in Rome in 1593 and the Bolognese Academy in 1598.

In 1648 France founded its own academy, the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, which soon became an engine of the publicity machine of the monarchy. Like the Royal Academy in London, it offered training and graded artists according to the form of art they practised. In recognition of the enduring importance of classical and Renaissance Italian art, a French academy in Rome was established in 1666, which facilitated the direct study of important works.

The passion for collecting and travel, together with the academies of art that came into being across Europe in the 'long' 18th century (*c*.1680–1830), ensured the predominance of classical art. Sculptures were studied by art students as a way to learn how to equal the art of the ancients. Where originals were not available, or to increase students' exposure to the great works of the ancients, copies or casts of sculpture from prominent collections like that of the Vatican were available in academy schools. We have already seen the effect of the ancient world on historians like Winckelmann, and

here we see those ideas being translated into artistic practice. The importance difference is that Winckelmann studied ancient art through texts. Here it was being studied through direct experience of either the original or an accurate cast copy. This visual method of presenting art history, together with the displays of contemporary art in academies, had important implications for the development of museums and galleries.

The increase in wealth and education across Europe had an effect on the number of people interested in art. This is seen in the growth of the art market – where artefacts from past and present were traded as items that reflected the owner's status and wealth. Obviously, paintings and sculptures were the most prestigious items to purchase, and as we have seen there was a very brisk trade in antique sculpture (or sculptures made up of fragments of various works from classical times). For those who had less money, prints and drawings became very desirable possessions, and this trend was encouraged by the growth of art dealers who displayed copies such as these in their shop windows, as well as using newspaper advertisements and sales catalogues.

The Royal Academy in London and its many European counterparts, notably the Salon in Paris, organized exhibitions of their members' works, which were offered for sale – a practice that continues to the present day. But more than this there was also an interest in art becoming more publicly accessible. Up until this time, cabinets of curiosities and private collections held in family homes or royal palaces were seen only by those who were invited to do so. By the 18th century, public exhibitions and museums were in great demand; the growth in the art market had changed the relationship between art and its public. The private, amateurish collectors with their cabinets of curiosities were overtaken by an increasingly professional art market that promoted the careers of artists through exhibitions and the growth of national institutions. Donations from monarchs, princes, and the elite helped build up these collections and ensure national prestige, but alongside this their private collections became available to an increasingly broad public. This too could be seen as a form of national patrimony and good government. In the latter half of the 18th century, private princely collections were opened to the public across Europe, in Paris, Rome, Florence, Dresden, and Stockholm. It is important to understand that these were not open-access museums like the ones we are used to today. But for the first time a wide selection of art was available to a much larger audience.

One of the first public museums, as we understand the term, was the Louvre in Paris. It was founded in 1793 when the French Revolution was at its height. The opening of the royal collection of art treasures and the royal palace itself to the public was seen to represent the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity that underpinned the Revolution itself. But it was not long before the snobbery that can be associated with 'high art'

began to manifest itself. Very few people from the poorer classes visited the Louvre, and their lack of knowledge about what they were looking at and inability to respond to visual works in an appropriate way was criticized by their middle-class 'brothers'. The Louvre was a catalyst to the development of publicly accessible collections, and with it came a wish for a history or narrative of the art that was presented in these museums and galleries; moreover, national institutions were seen as a means of educating and improving the minds of the general public, so the history presented within them was an important way of doing this.

In Britain, where civil unrest was feared (as a consequence of the French Revolution and also as a result of the poverty and deprivation that attended the Industrial Revolution), visits to art galleries by the working classes were encouraged as a means of keeping the peace, by encouraging feelings of patriotism for national collections. These collections were not always of indigenous artefacts, for instance the National Gallery in London was founded on the Angerstein Collection, which comprised mostly pictures from Renaissance Italy rather than works by British artists. Similarly, the British Museum housed mostly Graeco-Roman antiquities. But these were still seen as markers of national prestige. The Victoria and Albert Museum is an important example of this trend. Founded in 1857, it contained all manner of artefacts from crafts to mass-produced goods, which were presented to the general public to try to establish good standards of taste. Alongside this, the ever-expanding collection of high art – paintings and sculptures – from the British Empire was displayed as a reminder of the prowess of Britain and the extent to which it then ruled the world. In this way we can see how the art history of non-Western cultures was subsumed into a narrative about the importance of Britain. These objects' only function was the part they played in the embellishment of the image of Britain. They had no history in their own right – an issue in art history that we have already discussed in Chapter 2.

These London institutions were indicative of a Europe-wide phenomenon. In the latter half of the 19th century, in addition to these public institutions, world fairs became an important instrument in putting art and national identity on view. These were huge events where the art and artefacts of the world were represented in such a way that they became part of some larger narrative – perhaps endorsing the idea of empire or the notion of progress in the industrial age. This deliberate ordering of objects related to Hegel's idea of history, where the spirit was manifest in art.

My discussion so far of the ways in which art history has been presented has concentrated on European traditions. It is clear that there is a link between methods of displaying art, the kind of art in these displays, and national identity. We have also seen

how American collections and art institutions were mapped onto this European model. It was only in the second half of the 20th century that American art began to emerge from its isolation and somewhat provincial position on to the world stage.

The Federal Art Project (1935–43) was set up under President Roosevelt's New Deal – a response to the Great Depression of the 1930s. This has some similarities with the academies that were established in Europe in the preceding centuries, as many artists gained vital experience and improved social status as a result of their involvement with the Project's public artworks, including murals and work in public buildings. Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning both benefited from this scheme. At the same time, the growth of private galleries in New York – art dealers who sold the work of major European figures such as Salvador Dalí and Piet Mondrian – ensured there was plenty of stimulation for these American artists. Alongside this, public collections of modern art (mostly European) were accessible in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which was founded in 1929. The national style promoted by the Project was initially rather like Soviet Socialist Realism, but the contact with the Surrealists encouraged Pollock to experiment with Abstract Expressionism – a European movement that denied the influence of canonical art through its painterly, non-figurative effects. Although this direct government funding of art ended in 1943, in the post-World War II era realism was seen as too left-wing. Instead, Abstract Expressionism – or an American version of it – was seen as the art of the free world and this continued to enjoy state support, albeit of a more covert nature. Jackson Pollock's *Echo (Number 25, 1951)* hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Fig. 14). It is an example of Pollock's drip paintings, for which paint was dripped from a brush or stick onto a canvas that was laid out on the floor. The movement of the painter's arm created patterns over the picture's surface. Although this is quite improvisatory, it also allowed Pollock control over the finished work. The technique was influenced by the Surrealist idea of 'automatism', a kind of spontaneous drawing that came straight from the artist's subconscious. The description of this technique indicates the way in which the traditional academic reliance on reason and rationality was removed from the process of art. Instead, the canvas became a record of an artist's own creative processes.

14. Jackson Pollock's drip painting, *Echo (Number 25)*, 1951, is now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Museums and galleries have also played an influential role in the endorsement of or challenge to the canon of art history. In order to understand how this has come about, it is necessary to think more generally about the relationship of museums to the past. If we reflect that history is how we refer to the past as well as the process of studying it, we begin to see that museums and galleries can act as important mediators in the relationship between people and their history. Museum displays essentially take a set of objects in order to compose or reorder them for us as we see them in the present. Gallery spaces contain exhibits that are linked by systems we have set up – whether it be the artists, style, school – and not by connections that were relevant at the time of their production. This is a key point to understanding that the act of presenting art history in these spaces is about presenting a past that relates to the present. In this way, art is commemorated in a museum and we are able to read it as we would a book, as it has a beginning, middle, and end. This kind of rational, orderly piecing together of the past does in many ways act like a novel, with the story gradually unfolding. As a consequence, museums tend to endorse our social and cultural *status quo* by projecting how we are at this moment on to the presentation of the past.

This is not just a dry and theoretical analysis of the museum. The changes there have been in the layout of displays in permanent collections are testament to the way in which

museums and galleries act as barometers of current trends in thinking about artefacts and collections. One of the most notable recent examples of this are the new hangs at Tate Modern and Tate Britain. Here, instead of the chronological display of works according to period and school, we find works hung thematically. So, for instance, there is a room that shows images of the female nude as depicted by a range of artists from across a broad period of time. The only connection between these images is the subject matter and, of course, that they are in the Tate collection. These pictures were previously displayed as part of a different 'narrative', or presentation, of art history. This new presentation is not because art history has changed, but it shows a different negotiation between us, the present-day viewer, and the past. The means of doing this – the narrative thread, to continue the analogy of the novel – tells us something about our current preoccupations. We might say, for instance, that the thematic display is indicative of the fact that we are no longer so preoccupied with who painted the picture – the artist – and breaks with the tradition of seeing artworks being very closely linked to their makers. Similarly, we might also conclude that in this case the grouping together of female subjects re-examines the role women have played in the art world. Feminists have said that women had to be naked to get into an art gallery. So is this new kind of display perhaps an acknowledgement of the preoccupation with the female nude by male artists and patrons, and the concomitant absence of women artists from the historical narrative of art history?

What I want to do now is to assemble, or if you prefer curate, a couple of 'mini exhibitions' to demonstrate the points made in this chapter.

The first 'mini exhibition' addresses the theme of 'woman'. This subject is common to art from all periods and cultures. I am selecting the following from the illustrations in this volume: Leonardo's *The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist* (Fig. 15); Vermeer's *Maid with a Milk Jug* (Fig. 16); Reynolds' *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen* (Fig. 13); and finally a 19th-century female statuette in wood from the Ivory Coast (Fig. 11). The most striking thing about this selection is the various roles women can represent. In Leonardo's image we see the maternal role of 'woman'; Christ's mother the Virgin Mary looks dotingly at her son whilst at the same time being watched by her own mother, St Anne (who is also Christ's grandmother). Vermeer shows us 'woman' as a servant doing housework – a model of feminine 'domesticity'. By contrast, Reynolds' portrait of the three Montgomery sisters tells us about 'woman' as spinster, fiancée, and bride. The sister kneeling on the ground on the left of the picture is unmarried and picks flowers for the garland that is to adorn the term of Hymen (the classical sculpture representing the god of marriage). The sister in the middle, who seems to be moving up and towards the third sister and passing the garland

to her, has recently become engaged (the painting was commissioned by her fiancé The Right Hon. Luke Gardiner), whilst the third sister on the right-hand side of the picture stands holding the garland above her head. This sister is already married; she stands on the other side of Hymen, indicating her fulfilled status as wife, and the lighting in the picture falls onto her breasts and abdomen, rather than her face, highlighting her sexuality. Our small exhibition concludes with the statuette from the Ivory Coast. We don't know if this is a portrait or a representation of the idea or ideal of woman. In either case female sexuality is most certainly of paramount concern in this work.

15. *The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist* by Leonardo da Vinci (*c.*1500).

16. *Maid with a Milk Jug* (also known as *The Milkmaid*) was painted by Jan Vermeer around 1658–60.

The second ‘mini exhibition’ is about ‘man’, once again assembled from illustrations in this book. I have selected the following images: a manuscript illustration of the *Four Evangelists* (Fig. 17); Raphael’s *School of Athens* (Fig. 9); *Apollo Belvedere* (Fig. 7); and sculptures from Easter Island (Fig. 18). The Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are the authors of the four gospels that appear in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Their writings are fundamental touchstones of Christianity, and show us the importance of men as proactive makers of religion. In the *School of Athens*, we see a large number of philosophers and thinkers from ancient times, all of whom have been celebrated for their intellectual ability and contribution to human knowledge from antiquity to the present day – and all of whom are men. The *Apollo Belvedere*, as we have seen in Chapter 1, represents the paradigm of male beauty. The physical perfection, although nude in the Greek original, is shielded by a strategically placed fig leaf. Finally, although the Easter Island statues remain enigmatic, recent theories suggest they are of tribal chiefs, warrior leaders, or gods who represent authority.

To sum up our two small exhibitions, ‘woman’ shows images of maternity, domesticity, matrimonial status, and sexuality. By contrast, ‘man’ includes images of the religious leader, thinker, secular leader, pagan deity, and warrior.

17. This 9th-century manuscript illumination of the *Four Evangelists* – (anti-clockwise from top left) Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – is from a Carolingian gospel book in Aachen Cathedral, Germany.

It is important to emphasize that this exercise is not confined or determined by the illustrations selected for this volume – or indeed the themes I chose to explore. This can easily be tested, as Internet access is possible to most of the major collections, many of which have excellent interactive websites (the web addresses of some of these museums and galleries appear at the end of this book). A search of these sites using a key word that is a theme for a possible exhibition, for instance ‘Greek mythology’ or ‘still life’, will yield a range of images. The connective tissue between these may not be anything to do with style, authorship, or the idea of the chronological progress of art.

18. Ahu Akivi, Easter Island, with its seven statues. The figures may represent tribal chiefs, warriors, or perhaps gods.

Alongside this function of the presentation of art history as representing the concerns of the present, we can also see how the museum functions as a way of legitimizing new art into the canon of the Western tradition. Tied in with this is the idea of progress – that each generation continues the process that works towards endorsing the current status quo. In this way, we can begin to identify the moment when art becomes art history and the role of the museum in effecting and presenting this. Sir John Summerson, usually associated with architectural history, gave an inaugural lecture when he became Ferens Professor of Fine Art at the University of Hull in 1960. His remarks are very helpful to us in thinking about this point:

> new art is observed as history the very moment it is seen to possess the quality of uniqueness (look at the bibliographies on Picasso and Henry Moore) and this gives the impression that art is constantly receding from modern life – is never possessed by it. It is receding, it seems, into a gigantic landscape – the landscape of ART . . . which we see through the window of an observation car, which is so like the *vitrine* of a museum. Art is behind glass – the history of glass.

This is an important issue as it is about the transition of an art object from a newly created work at the cutting edge of contemporary culture to something that begins to be part of the history of contemporary culture – no matter how recent. This also relates to the idea of art criticism as discussed in the opening chapter of this book. Contemporary art practice can be dominated by art criticism as the principal means of discussing it and evaluating its worth – in artistic and monetary terms. But once works by artists like Damien Hirst or Tracy Emin become part of an art collection, be that public or private, they transgress the boundary between art and art history.

We tend to accept that if an object has been purchased or donated to a large museum it is conferred with an aura of authority and status. The institution acts on behalf of society to recognize art or interpret the work as art and to then present it to the public. This might not always be a straightforward process. Controversies over the purchase of artworks are frequent. The minimalist artist Carl Andre is a case in point. In 1967 Andre, a sculptor, filled the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles with a layer of concrete blocks and then removed rectangles, so leaving 'negative' shapes. His sculpture was defined by this cut space, which related to the gallery. This exploration of the relationship between object and gallery was furthered by Andre in 1976 in a series of eight sculptures *Equivalent I-VIII* made out of fire bricks. The shape of these works related to the negative shapes Andre had made in Los Angeles. The Tate Gallery, as it then was, purchased *Equivalent VIII*. The public outcry over the use of funds to purchase 120 previously made, standard bricks was loud and long-lasting. In addition, the fact that the sculpture was long and low to the ground – easily missed on first glance – gave it little immediate aesthetic appeal. But Andre was making a statement about the traditional expectation of sculpture to be vertical and figurative. Moreover, his work takes its form from the spaces of the gallery, and the display of *Equivalent VIII* in the Tate confers to it the status of art.

The relationship of the museum to its public is, then, really quite complex. On the one hand museum curators and directors might expect only those who 'know' about art to attend their institutions. But can they then be called public museums? Other directors argue that the visitor needs no prior knowledge of art to understand and appreciate artworks – it is an aesthetic pastime that anyone can enjoy who likes to look at artworks. These are the two opposing opinions, and there are plenty of points of view in between. But what are the consequences of these attitudes? If a museum or gallery is to try to broaden its appeal, what strategies should it undertake?

I have already talked about the way in which the display of objects according to style or school, usually represented in chronological order, can enforce the kind of teleological

systems that have dominated art history. But there is a popularist element to this: for instance when the Musée d'Orsay opened in Paris in 1986 an historical mode of display was chosen as it was thought this would have the widest possible appeal. But this is more easily achieved where there is a distinct historical narrative of progression – in the case of Orsay from French Academic painting of the mid-19th century through to Manet and the Impressionists, and then to the Neo-Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. It all works rather well as a neat, tidy bundle, and the museum building itself is a converted former 19th-century railway station, so adding to the 'authentic' historical experience of the art of that time.

Art from the later 20th century onwards sometimes creates issues that have to be dealt with as regards accessibility for the general public and the way in which works are displayed. Displays of what I shall call here 'modern' art in museums have broken away from the traditional formula seen in the Orsay, the National Gallery in London, and a host of other large institutions, some of which I have mentioned. From about the 1980s, museums of modern art have devoted whole rooms or spaces to the work of a single artist and have broken away from linear arrangements of works to try to create a gallery experience that is primarily visual. It's possible to recognize here a distinct similarity between the methods of displaying modern art and the way in which its histories are written. In Chapter 2 I talked about Clement Greenberg and his ideas about the status of avant-garde work; here we have that kind of 'hero' worship in action in the gallery. The individual artist, who may be alive and still producing work, may find him- or herself in a gallery space where they feel their work is part of that space.

Alongside the permanent collections in museums and galleries, the special exhibition which often tours from country to country or across continents gives the general public access to an even wider range of art objects. Art history can be presented in quite a different way in these shows. Curators can pursue themes or ideas or the life of a particular artist as they can draw on the holdings in collections worldwide, provided the owner-institutions are willing to lend. These kinds of exhibitions are important ways in which art history can be presented, and they have affected the way in which we think about the subject. One of the most famous examples of the interaction between exhibitions and art history was the show organized in 1910–11 by the English art historian and critic Roger Fry, who returned to Britain after being Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for five years. The exhibition included works by Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne, all of whom worked in very different styles. Fry called the show 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists', thereby naming a 'new' artistic movement which remains today a very popular subject in art history. The new name, or category, was even adopted by the French and translated as *le post-impressionnisme*.

Unlike Impressionism or Romanticism, Post-Impressionism does not principally refer to the stylistic similarities between artists; instead, Fry wanted to group together those who were interested in a more formal conception of art and who stressed the importance of the subject. ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’ caused a great deal of controversy, but the idea of the ‘blockbuster’ exhibition grew out of events like this. These kinds of travelling or one-off exhibitions are unique experiences. The coming together of artworks from across the world enables a presentation of art history in which the subject – our primary evidence – remains centre stage.

Chapter 4
Thinking about art history

One of the most interesting aspects of art history is the way in which it enables us to think about the ideas of a range of writers and theorists and in turn how their work has interacted with the visual. I want here to show you briefly the ways in which art history can incorporate the richness of Western thought into the analysis of visual subjects. The term 'Western thought' is used purposefully only to prescribe the limitations of my discussion.

In Chapter 1 I discussed what we mean by the term art history and I distinguished it from art appreciation and art criticism. One of my main points was that for art to have a history there has to be some kind of method or approach to the way in which the narrative or story of art history is put together. In other words, putting art objects in chronological order or in stylistic groups is not enough. The way in which a range of schools of thought and philosophical ideas have been used to put together these narratives of art is an important part of art history. I am not calling here for some slavish devotion to theory at the expense of the objects themselves – to do that is as meaningless as putting art in chronological order. In Chapter 1 I suggested that the work of art is our primary evidence, and it is the interaction between that evidence and our method of enquiry that is the substance of art history. This chapter builds on the discussion in Chapter 2 where the various traditions of writing art history were considered. Here the different ways of thinking about art history – its social, cultural, and aesthetic meaning – are the focal points of discussion. Clearly, these are related topics, but Chapter 2 concentrated on selected works and writers. Here we see how art history relates to and forms part of a broader discourse around the historical formulation of issues such as class and gender.

We have already seen how writers such as Winckelmann helped found the discipline of art history. But at the time when he was writing, the status of visual experience was generally considered inferior to human thought. The fundamental problem with this