



Art History: Past and Present

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the difference between the traditional approach to analyzing art and the revisionist approach, or new art history. The specific areas of focus include:

- [1. Traditional Art History](#)
- [2. Transition to New Art History](#)
- [3. Art History Canon](#)
- [4. Impact of New Art History](#)

1. Traditional Art History

The traditional art history approach emphasized connoisseurship and formal analysis when evaluating artwork. **Connoisseurship** is an art historical method that relies on the recognition of elements of an artist's personal style—identifying those little idiosyncrasies that make an artist's oeuvre unique and original.

☞ **EXAMPLE** A connoisseur of Alessandro Botticelli's work would be able to identify certain elements that can be found throughout Botticelli's oeuvre, or body of work.

Formal analysis refers to evaluating a piece of art based solely on its physical characteristics, without taking into account outside context. This process involves taking a look at the physical object itself, whether it's a painting, sculpture, or other piece of art, and evaluating it strictly on its physical aspects. In this way, the traditional approach of connoisseurship and formal analysis overemphasized the importance of beauty and the classical ideals that Johann Winckelmann latched onto, as well as the identity of the artist.

That emphasis created two problems:

- The approach didn't account for situations where the artist was unknown.
- The approach didn't translate well into 20th-century artistic movements.



TERM TO KNOW

Connoisseurship

An art historical method that relies on the recognition of elements of an artist's personal style.

2. Transition to New Art History

New art history is a revisionist approach to art history that emerged during the 1970s and questions earlier methodologies or approaches to art history.

Several factors influenced the emergence of new approaches to art history, including the independence of former European colonies in Africa and Asia after World War II, the civil rights movement, and the feminist movement in the United States. They generated a growing awareness that earlier approaches to art history had tended to exclude artists and movements that were not exclusively male and of European descent.

In addition, art historians began to analyze works of art as products of their cultures and time periods, including factors such as social class, historical events, and economic factors. This approach began to move beyond connoisseurship and traditional notions of genius and masterpiece.

IN CONTEXT

Consider this cubist painting by Pablo Picasso:



Pablo Picasso (1881 - 1973)

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon

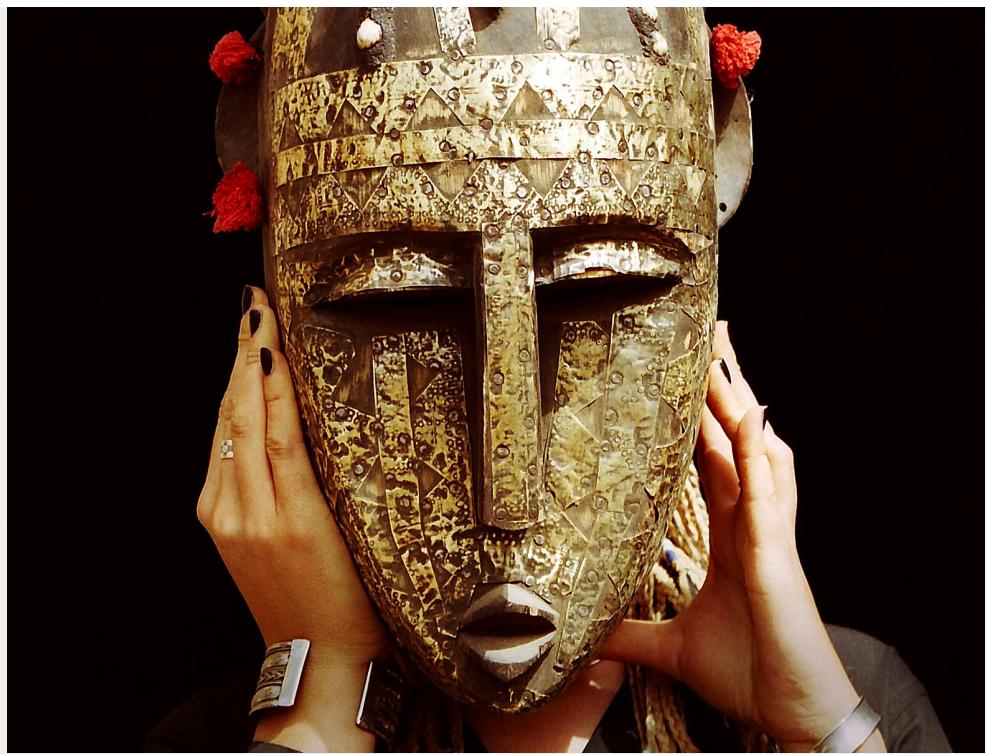
New York, New York, U.S.A

1907

Oil on canvas

Art history survey classes often frame this work, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* by Pablo Picasso, as a masterpiece that initiated the cubist movement, using formal analysis to identify the elements of cubism in this early work.

New art history approaches consider this work below within the context of colonialism and the arrival of masks from Africa in museums in Paris and how these works influenced Picasso's work.



Artist unknown

Dogon Mask

Bandiagara, Mali, Africa

Early 20th century

Wood

In this way, we come to view Picasso as an artist who responded to works of art and artifacts that he viewed in museums and galleries, instead of as a genius whose work was completely original.

New art history allows us to view works of art in a more complex way, relating them to historical events and to specific cultural values. It also includes works of art and artistic traditions that older approaches to art history had excluded.



TERM TO KNOW

New Art History

A revisionist approach to art history that emerged during the 1970s that questions earlier methodologies or approaches to art history.

3. Art History Canon

The **canon** of art history is the collection of artwork that is considered to be the most important and is usually covered in an art history survey class like this. Where music has its standards, art history has its canon.

Over time, the canon has increased to include more non-Western examples—areas such as:

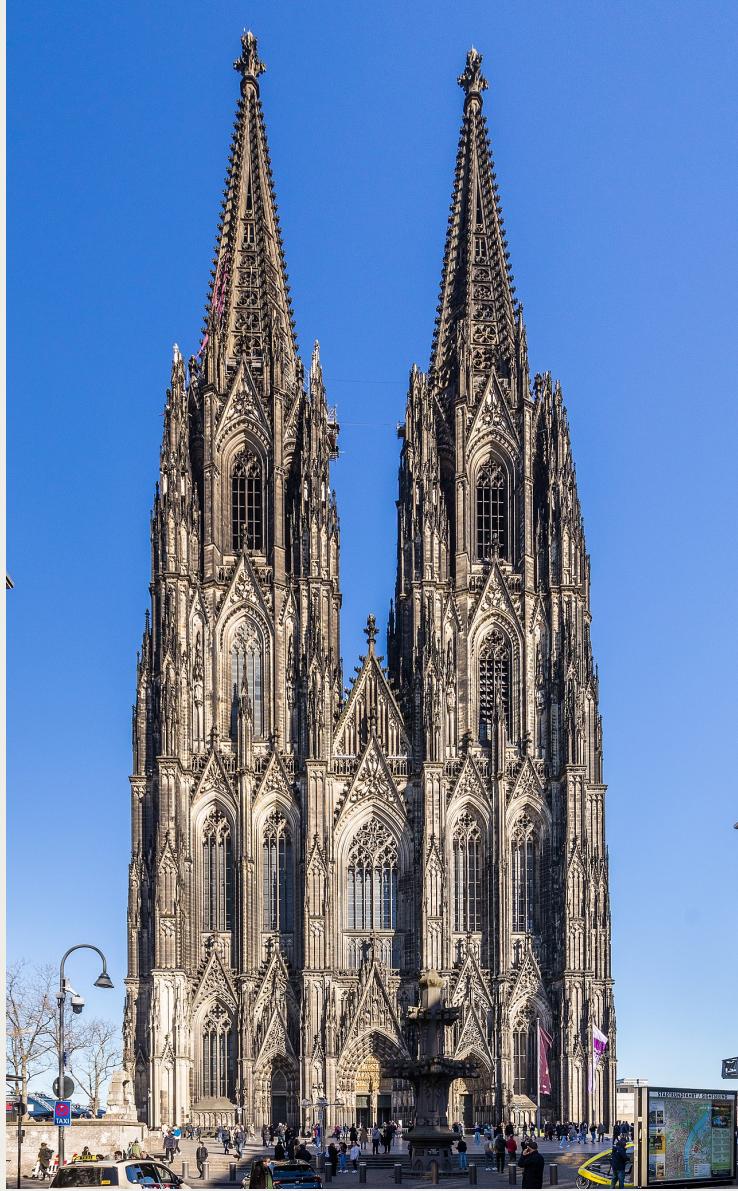
- Asian art
- East Indian art
- Native American art
- Mesoamerican art

These are areas that weren't represented before in the traditional canon of art history, but now are. And these four aren't the only ones; more and more areas have continued to be added to the canon of art history.

IN CONTEXT

To envision how the canon has progressed to include a wider variety of art, you can consider the following examples:

First, the Cologne Cathedral is an example of architecture that was part of the traditional art canon or art history canon, and is still considered a part of that:



Master Gerhard (initial construction)

Hohe Domkirche Sankt Petrus

(Cathedral Church of Saint Peter)

Cologne, Germany

1248–1560 1842–1880, 1950s–present (restoration)

Here is an example of Greek sculpture:



Artist unknown

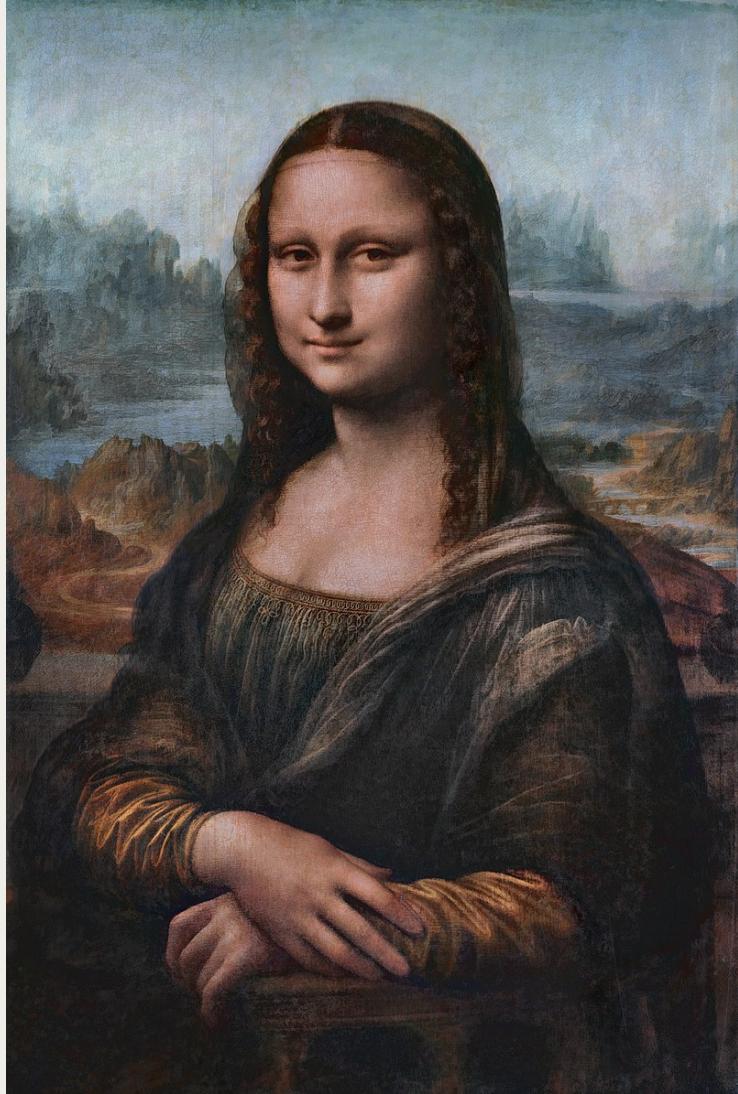
Laocoön and His Sons

Vatican City, Italy

approx. 27 BC to 68 AD

Marble

The *Mona Lisa*, with which you're familiar:



Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519)

Mona Lisa

Paris, France

1503 -1506

Oil on poplar panel

Venus de Milo, which is also probably familiar to you:



Alexandros

Venus de Milo

Paris, France

c. 150 BCE

Marble

Now you'll be getting into non-Western examples, such as Mesoamerican art:



Artist unknown

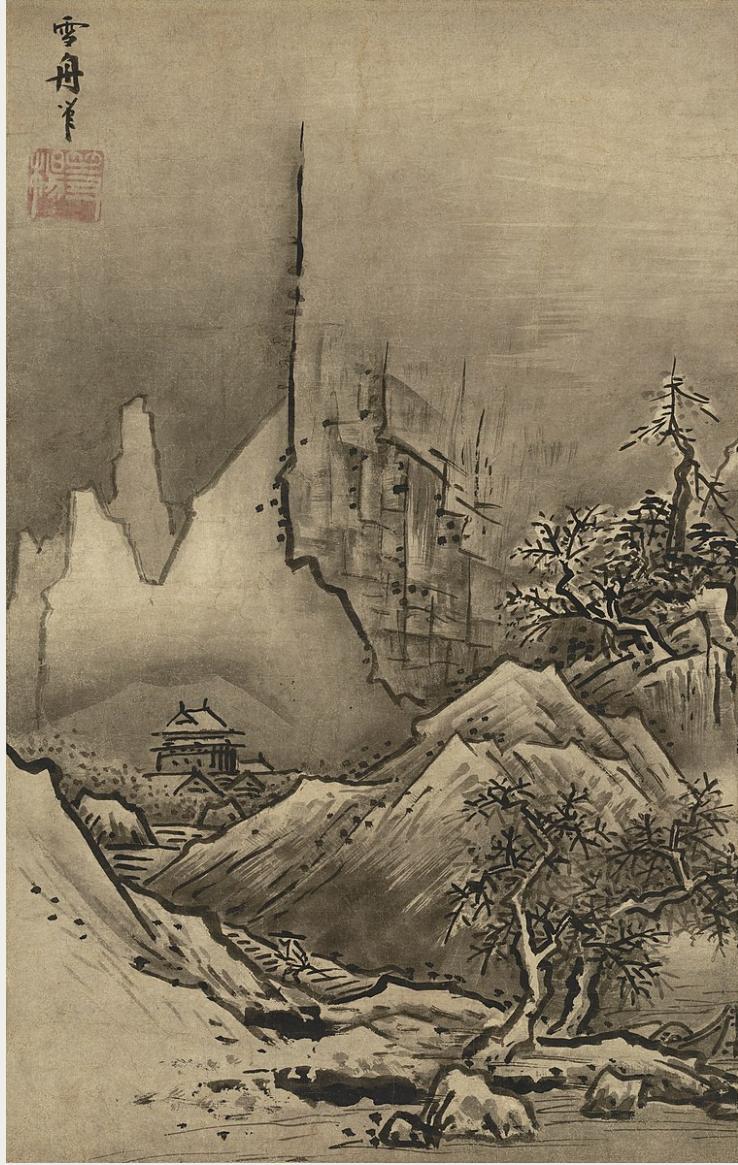
Dresden Codex (Codex Dresdensis)

Dresden, Germany

1200 to 1250

Chalk on amatl

Japanese art, such as this ink drawing:



Sesshu Toyo
Winter Landscape
Tokyo, Japan
c. 1470
Ink on paper

East Indian art:



Artist unknown

Dancing Celestial

Uttar Pradesh, India

Early 12th century

Sandstone

Chinese art, such as this Ming vase:



Artist unknown

Jar with Dragon

China

16th century, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhengde mark and period (1506–1621)

Porcelain with incised decoration under colored glazes



TERM TO KNOW

Canon

Those works of art considered to be most important, usually those studied in art history survey classes.

4. Impact of New Art History

The impact of new art history is important because the revised approach to evaluating artwork allowed for other areas of artistic production to become open to discussion and evaluation. The feminist art movement of the 1970s critiqued the exclusion of women artists from exhibitions at museums and galleries. In 1971, the art historian **Linda Nochlin** published an essay entitled *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* Nochlin argues that it is not sufficient to find examples of “great” women artists. Instead, asking this question starts a chain reaction that questions all of the categories, definitions, and even jobs related to art history.





Judy Chicago (1939 -)

The Dinner Party

Brooklyn, New York, USA

1974–1979

Mixed media (ceramic, porcelain, textile)



BIG IDEA

The artist **Judy Chicago** created a work entitled *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), which consists of a triangular table with thirteen place settings on each side assigned to women who were influential as artists, writers, and historical figures. Guests include Sojourner Truth, Boudica, Virginia Woolf, Georgia O'Keeffe, and many others. The place settings involve the use of embroidery and ceramics, artistic media often defined as craft by art historians and distinguished from painting and sculpture. By referencing the exclusion of women from exhibitions and gallery shows and including hundreds of women in one fell swoop, Chicago created an important work of feminist art.



Art history has really helped broaden the discussion of feminism, non-Western art, and the influence of popular culture in everyday life on artistic production, something that wouldn't have been possible with the traditional focus on formal analysis and connoisseurship only.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Linda Nochlin

An art historian who became famous for questioning the exclusion of woman artists from museum exhibitions and from art history.

Judy Chicago

An artist whose work *The Dinner Party* called attention to the exclusion of women artists and people of historical and cultural importance.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned how the approach to art history has changed over time. **Traditional art history** focused on connoisseurship and formal analysis, placing a great amount of emphasis on the identity of the artist and the physical characteristics of the work. The **transition to new art history** has occurred in the past 40 to 50 years, as art historians and curators have grown increasingly aware of the many cultures and artists that older models of art history had excluded. Stemming from new art history was the evolution of the **art history canon**. This comprises those works of art considered to be most important, usually those studied in art history survey classes. Over time, the canon has expanded to include more and more non-Western art.

Finally, you learned that the **impact of new art history** lies in the way this revised approach helped broaden the discussion of feminism, non-Western art, and the influence of popular culture in everyday life on artistic production, all of which the traditional approach did not allow for.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Canon

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Connoisseurship

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New Art History

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