

What Is Art History?

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial provides an overview of what the study of art history is, as well as some important figures in the development of the field. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Defining Art History

2. Important Figures in Art History

2a. Pliny the Elder

2b. Petrarch

2c. Giorgio Vasari

2d. Johann Winckelmann

1. Defining Art History

If you look at the term “art history,” it may simply seem to mean the history of art; however, that really only explains part of it. There’s more to art history than just names and dates.

Art history can be defined as the academic study of the history and development of the visual arts. This study includes different **methods**, which are the set of rules or philosophy that informs a person’s approach to understanding art history.

The biggest part of art history involves looking at the development of the visual arts, and how what the artwork depicts is really a reflection of the cultural and social environment at the time of its production.

In other words, you can think of art history as an interesting way to learn about culture and historical context. **Art history** tends to bleed into other areas of academia, such as anthropology, archaeology, and philosophy. You’ll notice a lot of crossover between subjects.



TERMS TO KNOW

Methods

The set of rules or philosophy that informs a person’s approach to understanding art history.

2. Important Figures in Art History

Just as art history extends into many different subject areas, very few artists were simply artists; their interests extended into many different areas as well.

To understand the background of art history, you should know four very important figures:

- Pliny the Elder
- Petrarch
- Giorgio Vasari
- Johann Winckelmann

2a. Pliny the Elder

Gaius Plinius Secundus was given the moniker **Pliny the Elder** to help differentiate him from Pliny the Younger, who was his nephew and adopted son.

Pliny the Elder was born in 23 CE and died in 79 CE. He was Roman, and a contemporary of Jesus Christ, to put him into a historical context. This doesn't mean he knew Jesus; in fact, he probably never heard of him. Their lifespans simply crossed each other.



Pliny the Elder wrote a book called *Natural History* that included a section devoted to art history. This was the first time that somebody actually documented important works of art.

The book became so influential that it was considered the reference for art history well into the Middle Ages, over 1,000 years after it was written.

2b. Petrarch

The man known simply as **Petrarch** was born in 1304 and died in 1374. He was an Italian author and philologist, which is a person who studies literature.



To put him in historical context, he lived during the time of the “Black Death,” or bubonic plague, that killed about a third of Europe’s population.

Petrarch was known as the “Father of Humanism,” but his most important contribution to art history is arguably how his work led to the conceptual awareness of distinct artistic periods.

This idea is common practice now—people look for common threads in order to categorize things. Periods such as the Renaissance, the Baroque, Romanticism, etc., are categories of artwork that share commonalities.

The problem with his particular approach is that there is a slippery slope with any kind of generalizing. For Petrarch, it led him toward making broad assumptions that nothing happened during what he pejoratively referred to as the “Dark Ages,” when, in fact, lots of things happened during this time.

Petrarch’s work revealed unconscious **bias** in the way that it favored naturalistic styles, such as those of classical Greece and Rome, and characterized them as better than the art of the Middle Ages. Today, we recognize that different artistic styles result from different cultures and values. We use art history to understand these differences, without describing them as good or bad.

2c. Giorgio Vasari

Giorgio Vasari was an Italian architect and artist.

He was born in 1511 and died in 1574, and was a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I, ruler of England, and Michelangelo, the artist. In fact, he actually knew Michelangelo.



His book, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, was the first biographical model of art history. It was the first book that was written from the perspective of the artist, and it’s still very influential today. If you take any kind of art history class at the college level, you are likely to use it.

Giorgio Vasari was the first to use the term “Renaissance,” and he tended to have a bias toward Florentine artists. He also had a tendency to include a lot of anecdotal bits in his work, which were interesting, but strayed from the facts at times.

2d. Johann Winckelmann

Johann Winckelmann was a German author born in 1717. He died in 1768, about 8 years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.



Winckelmann proposed the idea of the cultural and chronological impact on art production, and was actually the first to suggest that there was a regional or national style to art. His work even led to the formal adoption of art history and archaeology as true academic disciplines.

Additionally, Johann Winckelmann had the classical idea that the goal of a true artist is to produce beauty, and that this is achieved by adhering to certain principles and ideals, often at the expense of individual characteristics or realism.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that when **defining art history**, you should think of it as more than just the history of art; the subject also covers the cultural and social environment at the time the artwork was produced.

You also learned about four **important figures in art history**: **Pliny the Elder** was the first to formally

document artistic works, starting the idea of art history; **Petrarch** had a strong bias for the classical arts, and his ideas led to the conceptual awareness of distinct artistic periods; **Giorgio Vasari** was an Italian artist and architect whose book on the biographies of artists was the first one written from the perspective of an artist; and **Johann Winckelmann** was the first to identify the existence of a regional or national style of art, and his work ultimately led to art history becoming an academic discipline.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Art History

The academic study of the history and development of the visual arts.

Bias

Favoring a person or an idea or point of view in a way that is unfair.

Methods

The set of rules or philosophy that informs one's approach to understanding art history.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Giorgio Vasari

An architect and artist whose book, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, was the most influential text of the Italian Renaissance.

Johann Winckelmann

An 18th-century German scholar who was the first to propose that works of art be analyzed as the products of the culture and time in which they were produced.

Petrarch

Influential poet and scholar known for favoring classical learning, and dismissing the medieval period as the "Dark Ages."

Pliny the Elder

A Roman author and natural historian who included some of the earliest recorded historical descriptions of works of art in his writings.