

**Reading Art**  
**From and For Ourselves**

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The cover picture is a detail from Sandro Botticelli's painting, "Adoration of the Magi," 1475-1476, housed in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

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## Introduction

Often, while observing works of art, we hear people claim that they do not “**understand**” art. This claim reflects the common belief that visual arts – such as sculpture, painting, architecture, and so on – are a language separate from our daily lives, understandable only to a select few. On the surface, in a world of ever-growing professional specialization, it seems logical that visual art would be clear only to those who study and engage in it. However, as we will demonstrate in the pages to follow, this is not the case.

This book, focusing on Western Art from the late Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, was written to allow you, the readers, to reclaim the personal experience of art, rather than perceive it through external mediation.<sup>1</sup> To achieve this, the book offers tools and means for interpreting works from Western Art, especially from the mentioned time periods, with a special emphasis on painting and sculpture.<sup>2</sup> Even for those who have no basic knowledge or background in art, using these tools, many of which are innate, might deepen the enjoyment derived from it.<sup>3</sup>

For you to get the most from this book and its objectives, I will provide some guidance on how it should be used. It's important to read in the order of the chapters presented, as this establishes a broad foundation, enabling a deeper understanding of the tools and means, including exceptions. I also recommend exploring additional artworks not mentioned in this book, but from the periods discussed, to apply and test the tools described. By doing this, you can further and independently deepen your understanding of various works with confidence. Throughout this journey, the appendices included will serve as reminders of what has been discussed, to be revisited once you're more acquainted with the finer points.

And so, we will set out to achieve the goals of this book through the following stages:

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<sup>1</sup> Those interested in broadening their understanding and delving deeper into the study and research of art history can refer to essential sources listed in both the footnotes and bibliography. These references can serve as a gateway to the expansive and captivating field of art history. For this reason, the bibliography includes additional books beyond those mentioned in the footnotes, providing access to a richer array of information sources for further exploration.

<sup>2</sup> To keep this book within a reasonable scope and volume, architecture receives limited discussion. However, you'll find that many of the tools and methods introduced here are also applicable to understanding architectural works. You're encouraged to independently assess their relevance and apply the relevant tools accordingly. Additionally, certain periods and schools of art, even from the range of centuries discussed here, are not included to maintain a manageable amount of content.

<sup>3</sup> Examples in this book are consistently drawn from Western Culture, spanning from the fifth century BC to the seventeenth century. In some cases, the same works are used to illustrate and demonstrate various concepts and principles.

**In the first chapter**, we will emphasize the importance of two fundamental principles: Observation and Critical Thinking. Given that art is not an exact science, its interpretation and the answers it prompts can vary yet remain valid simultaneously. Observation and Critical Thinking are essential for us to delve deeper into art than what is merely presented and explained.<sup>4</sup>

Unless we rely on our own observation, we might only perceive things through the understanding, experiences, and worldviews of others.

Without critical thinking, we risk being bound to others' interpretations and viewpoints, potentially perpetuating their errors, assuming they made any. All the while, we might overlook the unique perspectives we can offer.

By embracing these two principles, we can pose fresh questions, offer novel insights, and expand our experiences, granting more freedom to our individual feelings without solely relying on intellectual understanding.<sup>5</sup>

**The second chapter** serves as an introduction for the reader and presents a broad overview of the various periods in the history of Western Art, from which the works discussed in this book are drawn. In this chapter, we'll traverse art history chronologically – from the fifth century BC to the seventeenth century in Europe – highlighting their defining artistic traits.

**The third chapter** emphasizes the idea that words can carry judgmental connotations.<sup>6</sup> Stemming from this understanding, we detail ten tools designed to enrich our reading of artworks and help us more fully appreciate them, even without a background in art. These tools, largely intuitive, can be applied even to artworks not covered in this book.

**The fourth chapter** introduces ten means to consider when observing art, beyond the ten tools discussed in the previous chapter. Employing these will further deepen our independent experience, moving beyond mere mediation.

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<sup>4</sup> While this book focuses on art, many of the concepts discussed here are also valid and applicable to other areas of our lives.

<sup>5</sup> At this point, we should mention art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945). In his book, Wölfflin outlines five principles, derived from observation, that distinguish works from the Renaissance period from those of the Baroque period. See: Heinrich Wölfflin, "*Principles of Art History*," trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Courier Corporation, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Even when the actual meanings they hold often contradict what we assume, as will be clarified in the subsequent pages.

**The final chapter** will provide a summary of all the tools and means discussed in the previous chapters.

To enhance the usability of this book, even after your initial reading, several appendices have been included:

**Appendix 1** briefly revisits the chronological order of time periods.

**Appendix 2 and Appendix 3** recap the various tools and means, making them more accessible and underscoring the discussions in chapters three and four.

**Appendix 4** presents a list of painters, sculptors, and architects mentioned in this book by name or alias, with one list sorted by first names and another by birth year.

**Appendix 5** lists all the artworks mentioned in the book in order of their appearance, providing their various details to aid in locating them. For each piece, the details include: artist's name (unless unknown), the commonly known name of the work (as it's recognized today), the estimated year of its creation, and its location at the time of writing.

The majority of artworks presented here were deliberately selected as they represent common subjects in art, primarily from Greek and Roman mythology and from the Christian Catholic tradition.<sup>7</sup> The rationale for their selection is that, in future, even after reading this book, you're likely to encounter various representations of these subjects in art. Once familiar and comfortable with known subjects, your motivation to explore less familiar artworks may increase, enriching your overall art experience and enjoyment.

And so, let us embark on this fascinating journey where we'll delve into the tools necessary for interpreting Western artworks – from and for ourselves.

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<sup>7</sup> We reference various figures by their names and aliases within the context of their respective faiths. Figures from mythology are primarily referred to by their Roman names, rather than their ancient Greek counterparts, unless otherwise specified. Figures from the Christian world are named according to their designation in that faith. For instance, when the name "Saint John the Baptist" is mentioned, the title "saint" is used out of respect for Christian culture and the art presented here, not as a judgment or an intent to elevate one faith over another.

## Chapter 1

**“Not what man knows but what man feels, concerns art. All else is science.”**

-Bernard Berenson<sup>8</sup>

With this statement, Berenson, himself an art historian, does not mean to downplay the importance of research and examination.<sup>9</sup> He emphasizes that our experience of art is subjective and individual; there are no definitive 'rights' or 'wrongs' concerning it. Much like the tools and means we'll introduce in the following pages, Berenson wants to grant viewers the freedom of personal enjoyment of art, without conditioning it strictly on external knowledge and interpretation.

Every so often, it's precisely that fresh, unprejudiced look of a viewer, and the absence of previous knowledge, that allows one to notice details and messages in an artwork that even an expert—perhaps confined to certain theories and mindsets—might overlook.

As our main objective is to bring art back to everyone, before we dive into the history of art and outline the tools for understanding artworks, we'll focus on two basic principles: observation and critical thinking. Without these, all other tools become secondary. We risk becoming mere spectators, echoing others' words and experiences, without contributing our unique perspective and with limited involvement. It's crucial to listen to and respect various opinions and explanations. Yet, simultaneously, we should consider our personal feelings and thoughts about the artwork.<sup>10</sup> I'll delve into each principle:

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Berenson (1865-1959) an American art historian considered an authority in the field of Renaissance art.

<sup>9</sup> In contrast, it's worth noting the efforts of Leonardo da Vinci and his contemporaries to equate the art of painting with science. For a discussion on this topic, refer to Anthony Blunt's book: Anthony Blunt, "Leonardo", in *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 23-38. For a deeper analysis of artists' efforts to liken their craft to poetry and music, as well as the debate among painters and sculptors of the era about which art form was superior, see: Robert Klein and Henri Zerner, "Comparative Merits of the Arts," in *Italian Art 1500-1600: Sources and Documents* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 4-16. To learn more about Leonardo da Vinci's perspectives on the art of painting, consult: Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, trans. and annotated by A. Philip McMahon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956).

<sup>10</sup> This is an opportune moment to highlight the significant method developed by Dr. Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine during the latter's tenure as the education department manager at the MOMA – The Museum of Modern Art in New York. This method, called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS as defined on their website), is a guiding approach that utilizes discussions about artworks to foster critical and creative thinking skills, observation, diagnosis, and communication. See: <https://vtshome.org/>. While this method is applied to various fields beyond art, its foundation lies in engaging with a facilitator who poses three guiding questions, spurring participants to deepen their observations and make independent discoveries. For a detailed overview of the method, refer to: Philip Yenawine, *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2013).

The author of this book has long valued the principles of observation and critical thinking, emphasizing them in various trainings and lectures. After personally engaging with the VTS method, the significance of these principles was further reinforced, independent of a viewer's prior art education.

Observation - In today's fast-paced world, there's a prevailing idea that if something isn't immediately and fully accessible, it might soon become irrelevant. Ask yourself: how much time do we truly spend viewing videos, images, messages, and so on, especially on social media? Often, not much, unless it's critically important or immediately intriguing. As observation demands time, it occupies less of our daily lives. Consequently, artworks that aren't well-known or have unfamiliar subjects might get little attention. But to glance at a work of art without truly observing it is like having a delicacy's taste described without tasting it, or a perfume's scent explained without smelling it. In essence, without observation, the experience loses its depth.

Critical thinking - Just as observation is important, so too is the subsequent stage: critical thinking (which is distinct from 'judgmentalism'). Critical thinking, which consciously avoids judgmentalism, helps us perceive things in a way that is pertinent to the artwork itself. The real pitfall in lacking critical thinking isn't so much the risk of attributing an incorrect meaning to a work of art, but rather initially confining our interpretation to a specific, potentially irrelevant direction. Without critical thinking, we might persist in seeking interpretations that align with an external, perhaps inaccurate explanation, while overlooking the myriad thoughts and ideas arising from our individual perceptions.

Through the following two examples, we will illuminate the importance of the two foundational principles required for appreciating works of art: observation and critical thinking.

### An Examination of Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus"<sup>11</sup> Through Observation and Critical Thinking

Let's first explore the tale of Aphrodite's birth as depicted in one of the Ancient Greek versions.<sup>12</sup> Uranus, the sky, approached his spouse, Gaia, the earth. Just before consummating his desire, his

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In light of this personal approach and the reinforcement through the VTS experience, this book aims to re-engage its readers and viewers, regardless of their background, with the core principles of observation and critical thinking, especially when interpreting artworks from the periods discussed. Unlike the VTS method, the process and practice proposed here enable the viewer to guide themselves using the tools provided, aiming to uncover answers and insights that unveil new horizons. The hope is that by applying observation and critical thinking in conjunction with the tools introduced in chapter 3 and the means discussed in chapter 4, readers will enrich their personal experience with art, focusing on the eras addressed. The eventual aspiration is that readers will also apply these principles to various other fields.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald W. Lightbown, "*Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work*" (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> In her Hebrew-written book, Maayan Mazor references two sources from ancient Greece, each offering a distinct version of Aphrodite's birth: Maayan Mazor, "*Gods, Heroes and Myths in Ancient Greece*" (Ben-Shemen: Modan Publishing, 2014), 143-151. The source referenced here is "The Theogony," translated as the "Birth of the Gods," written at the end of the eighth century BC by Hesiod.

son, Chronos castrated his father and tossed the severed genitalia into the sea! Foam formed around the severed member. The Greek word for foam is “aphros”. From this 'aphros' emerged the goddess of love and beauty, known as “Aphrodite” in Greece and “Venus” in Rome, a name that persisted in Italy in subsequent centuries.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most renowned works of Renaissance art is “The Birth of Venus” (image 1), crafted by Sandro Botticelli around 1485, and now housed in the Uffizi Gallery (Galleria degli Uffizi) in Florence. At the painting's center stands Venus (or so it's widely believed), with a shell beneath her, flanked by three other figures. The backdrop reveals sea waves, airborne flowers, a stretch of land, and trees.

Image 1 – Sandro Botticelli, “The Birth of Venus”, circa 1485, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Link to the image of the painting located in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence:

<https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/birth-of-venus>

In the sixteenth century, well after the painting's completion, Giorgio Vasari, deemed the first art historian,<sup>14</sup> briefly mentioned the piece. He succinctly notes Venus's birth and appearance in it.<sup>15</sup> From that point onward, that title has been the reference for this painting. But let's pause, closely observe the work, and consider – is that truly the narrative depicted here?...

If this depicts the moment of her birth, the foam from which Venus emerged should be evident. Do the ripples and soft waves on the sea's surface represent that foam? Or is the foam simply absent from this painting? The myth indicates Venus was born in the sea, yet in the painting, in addition to the sea, land and trees are depicted. The myth doesn't mention other characters beside her during Venus' birth, making the presence of the two women and man in the painting somewhat unclear in the context of the story. So, could this be a case of mistaken identification of the painting's subject, despite Vasari's assertion and the widespread belief for years that it depicts Venus' birth?

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<sup>13</sup> Each goddess and god of the Greek pantheon had a corresponding name in the ancient Roman world. For example, Zeus was known as Jupiter in ancient Rome, Hera as Juno, and so on.

<sup>14</sup> Vasari (1511-1574) is renowned, among other accomplishments, for his significant book "Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects", which he wrote in two editions: the first in 1550 and the second in 1568. Vasari's book remains a foundation for modern research in the field of art history. See: Giorgio Vasari, "La Vita di Sandro Botticello," in *Le Vite dei Più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architetti* (Roma: Newton Compton editori s.r.l, 2005), 492-496. For a deeper discussion on Vasari, his importance, and his era, see: David Cast, "The Delight of Art: Giorgio Vasari and the Traditions of Humanist Discourse" (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Vasari, "Le Vite dei Più Eccellenti Pittori," 493.



As surprising as it may seem, it appears the subject depicted here isn't the birth of Venus. Through observation and critical thinking, new theories about the painting's subject arose. Subsequent research revealed the painting aligns with the content of a poem written by Agnolo Poliziano, a Florentine from the fifteenth century (1454-1494), whom Botticelli knew personally.<sup>16</sup> In his poem, Poliziano describes Venus being carried on a shell after her birth, propelled towards Cyprus by Zephyrus, the god of the West wind, and accompanied by female figures. Unlike the traditional story of Venus' birth, the content of Poliziano's poem seems to align more closely with the painting. Given this, it's plausible that the painting depicts Venus' arrival on the island of Cyprus rather than her birth, as initially thought. Moreover, even with this newfound clarity, the identities of the figures surrounding Venus remain debated. So, what is the most accurate interpretation of this painting, and what were the intentions of the artist and the patron who commissioned it? Unless an original document from that era surfaces (assuming such a document exists), we can only continue to propose theories and interpretations. Thus, this painting exemplifies how an interpretation, once universally accepted, can later become disputed.

If we continue to prioritize observation and critical thinking, we uncover more about this artwork: Despite Venus being the goddess of love and beauty, embodying what should be perfect physical attributes, her anatomy differs from what's typical. The posture of Venus' head and neck appears impossible, as does the shape of her left shoulder and the positioning of her chest. Did Botticelli make an anatomical mistake? Comparing this work with Botticelli's other paintings reveals that the tilted neck and portrayal of figures as elongated and slender are consistent with his artistic style. In this painting, Botticelli seems to align Venus' entire body with an imaginary wave. It starts with her head, curves at the neck, and continues curling toward the left shoulder. This wave then extends to the pelvis, hips, and finally tilts toward the left foot. Venus' wavy form is highlighted and framed by her reddish hair. Essentially, through these tilts and curves, Botticelli evokes a sense of softness and grace, even if it compromises anatomical accuracy.

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<sup>16</sup> Below are several research sources that discuss the issue of identifying the subject of the work: Ernst H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8, no. 1 (1945): 53-57; Jane C. Long, "Botticelli's Birth of Venus as Wedding Painting," *Aurora: The Journal of the History of Art* 9 (Nov. 2008): 1-27; Gloria Fossi, *The Uffizi Gallery: Art History Collections* (Florence: Giunti, 2006), 132-133.

By closely examining this renowned artwork and emphasizing observation and critical thinking, we discern two key insights:

First, we've seen how a painting's title, and subsequently its perceived content, can be erroneous. This misinterpretation was challenged by those who truly observed the work (rather than just glancing at it) and did not take its title at face value. They recognized that the narrative implied by the title did not match the actual depictions in the artwork.

The second insight – an understanding that what might have been initially perceived as perfect, namely the image of the goddess, was found to be imprecise. This realization prompted further inquiry, leading to additional discoveries.

In essence, an independent examination prompted new questions that might have remained unasked if we had solely relied on external guidance and explanations. The answers to these new questions, in turn, led to further revelations, thereby enriching our experience.

### An Examination of Giambologna's "Rape of the Sabines" Through observation and critical thinking<sup>17</sup>

Roughly a century after Botticelli's creation, Giambologna crafted the work titled "Rape of the Sabines" (image 2) between 1583-1584. This sculpture now stands in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence.

Image 2 – Giambologna, "Rape of the Sabines", 1583-1584, Loggia dei Lanzi, Piazza della Signoria, Florence.

Link to the image of the preparatory work located in the Gallery Academy in Florence:

<https://www.galleriaaccademiafirenze.it/en/artworks/ratto-delle-sabine/>

Titus Livius, who lived about two thousand years ago during the reign of Augustus Caesar, penned a monumental history of Rome titled "From the Founding of the City".<sup>18</sup> In its first book, he narrates the tale of twins born after the god Mars violated the virgin Rhea Silvia. Following their birth, the twins were left to perish by the Tiber River but were rescued by a she-wolf that nurtured them. Later, a shepherd found and raised them. As adults, the twins sought to establish a settlement

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<sup>17</sup> For a book offering an in-depth discussion of the artist and his works: Charles Avery, "*Giambologna: The Complete Sculpture*", (Oxford: Phaidon, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> Titus Livius (59 BC – 17 AD) - Roman historian.

for their tribe. However, a territorial disagreement between them resulted in Romulus killing his brother, Remus. Romulus then proceeded to build a new city with his followers. With the majority of Romulus' followers being male, they needed women to ensure their lineage. Romulus proposed intermarriage with neighboring tribes, but his offers were dismissively declined. Devising a crafty and forceful plan, Romulus invited various tribes to celebrate in his territory in honor of the god of the sea. When the Sabine tribe attended these festivities, at a predetermined signal, the Romans seized the young Sabine women, while the remaining Sabines fled the city in panic.<sup>19</sup>

This story, known as “The Abduction of the Sabine Women,” as is also reflected in the current title of the sculpture crafted by Giambologna (image 2). Using the title of Giambologna’s work – “Rape of the Sabines” – as a guide for analysis, we can observe, at first glance, an older Sabine man below, nearly crushed beneath the Roman man above him. This Roman seems wholly intent on his objective, aggressively holding the Sabine woman. She, in turn, struggles to free herself from his grasp, but without success.

This interpretation might have been similar to what Raffaello Borghini, a sixteenth-century Florentine scholar, thought when he saw the piece. He suggested to the artist, who crafted his creation without a specific theme in mind, that the depicted subject was the rape of a Sabine woman. From then on, and still today, the sculpture is commonly known by that name.<sup>20</sup> Anyone unaware that this title was given to the sculpture retrospectively might interpret the work based on the above explanation. On its face, this seems acceptable, but it's essential to realize that such interpretations might limit viewers from exploring other personal, equally valid interpretations and experiences of the piece.<sup>21</sup>

Through the two showcased works here, “The Birth of Venus” (image 1) and “The Rape of the Sabines” (image 2), we see that even when names and explanations are provided, things aren't always as definitive as they may seem. While information can enrich and deepen our understanding of a work of art, it doesn't replace the need for personal observation and critical thinking.

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<sup>19</sup> For an insightful comparison of the various versions of the Sabine women's abduction story from ancient Rome and the motives behind their abduction, see Robert Brown, "Livy's Sabine Women and the Idea of Concordia," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 125 (1995): 291-319.

<sup>20</sup> For a book addressing Borghini and his work that elaborates on the subject under discussion, see “*Raffaello Borghini, Il Riposo*,” Trans. and Ed. Lloyd H. Ellis Jr. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 70-71. For a further in-depth discussion on the sculpture and its retrospective naming, refer to Michael Cole's article: Michael Cole, "Giambologna and the Sculpture with No Name," *Oxford Art Journal* 31, no. 3 (2008): 337-342.

<sup>21</sup> After all, as mentioned, the work was not created with a specific story in mind.

Based on the discussions and examples provided, we can conclude that utilizing the principles of observation and critical thinking enhances our personal engagement with art, allowing for a richer and more profound experience.

In this chapter, we have explored this process together. However, the ultimate goal is that, through observation and critical thinking, combined with the tools and means to be explained in the subsequent chapters, you will be able to appreciate various artworks independently as well.

But before diving into that, the next chapter will provide an overview of the various periods of Western art, using them as reference points for the artworks, categorized by year and distinct characteristics.

## Chapter 2

### Exploring Periods in Western Art History in Chronological Order<sup>22</sup>

Observation and critical thinking are, as established above, both essential and necessary. This approach is obviously also relevant to the division of art into various periods. In other words, we must understand that their division, locations, and names could also affect the manner in which we conceive and view them today, and are not necessarily a single absolute truth. I will explain my meaning according to the following three points of emphasis:

#### A. The Meaning of Art Period Division – From What Time to What Time, Exactly?

The first point of emphasis is that the division of various art periods according to specific and clearly defined years is both artificial and schematic. In practice, these are historical and artistic processes spreading across years, decades, and sometimes even centuries, rather than sharp and immediate changes taking place from one year to the next. This means that when it is noted, for example, that the Classical Period of Greek art took place from 480 B.C.E to 400 B.C.E, we must remind ourselves that this does not mean the period started exactly at 480 B.C.E and ceased to exist precisely on 400 B.C.E. In practice, this simply means that during that range of years, the artistic style we currently refer to as “Classical” was the most dominant.

Yet, despite that, this artificial and schematic way of period divisions is performed due to the necessity of framing a specific time in history, which most relates to the particular art style in question. Therefore, for example, it is common practice to date the end of Antiquity and the start of the Middle Ages to 476 C.E. – the year in which Rome was conquered by barbarian tribes.<sup>23</sup> Yet, obviously, this does not mean that the attitudes and concepts prevailing in the Middle Ages began in that exact year, but rather that it marks a significant historical event, one that allows us to mark our artificial timeline with the passage from one period to another.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For an extensive reading and overview of art periods from prehistoric to postmodern times, while referencing numerous additional sources, see: Horst W. Janson, *History of Art* (5th ed.), New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995.

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<sup>24</sup> In the same context, the terms 'B.C.E' (Before the Common Era) and 'B.C' (Before Christ) reflect their adoption into common use at a specific time. These designations were related to the counting of years in connection with the birth of Christ. Naturally, people living in these earlier times did not consider themselves as living "before Christ or the Common Era."

## **B. The Meaning of Transitions from Period to Period – Everywhere and All at Once?**

The second point of emphasis is that the transition from one art period to another did not necessarily occur everywhere in a total, simultaneous fashion. The change was location- and time-dependent, and it may very well be that in one place, art was created according to the principles of the new prevalent style, while in another, it was still created according to the previous one. For example, in the early fifteenth century, we can see that while the Gothic style of the late Middle Ages thrived in France, the Renaissance was already taking form in Florence. Therefore, whenever a particular artistic style is referred to, it is important to pay mind to the location discussed, and not just to the question of the years in which it was created.

## **C. Who Named the Period?**

A third point of emphasis is that the various periods, including their names, were mostly defined in retrospect and not by those who lived in them or personally experienced them. The people of those periods never defined themselves with the names being used today, the range of dates, or the characteristics.<sup>25</sup> The people of Ancient Rome, for example, never referred to themselves in their own era as ‘the people of ancient Rome’.<sup>26</sup> The same goes for the people of ‘The Middle Ages’ who certainly did not refer to themselves as such, but were later labeled with this unflattering name by the people of the Renaissance period who followed and derided them.

It is important to be aware of this because the specific name assigned to a certain period can also influence our perception of it, beyond the fact that it does not necessarily represent an absolute truth.

Now that we have raised and discussed these three points of emphasis, we may turn to the order of the various periods in the history of Western Art. The overview presented here is very general, and its goal is merely to make it easier for us to use and refer to the various period names in the chapters to follow, while already knowing the acceptable, commonly used time ranges and the sequences of said periods, along with their basic characteristics. In order to preserve the range of discussion contained in this book, the following overview is limited only to the periods from which artworks are showcased in these pages, and does not

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<sup>25</sup> The Renaissance period did not refer to itself as such; however, unlike other periods – as will be explained later in this chapter – it definitely viewed itself as distinct from those that preceded it. See: Julia C. Bondanella, "Introduction: The Cultural Rebirth," in *The Italian Renaissance Reader: An Introduction to the Major Italian Writers and Influential Thinkers of the Renaissance*, eds. Julia C. Bondanella and Mark Musa (New York: Plume, 1987), p. xiv.

<sup>26</sup> One of the methods of dating years in ancient Rome was according to the year of the Consul's rule, as noted by Suetonius. For instance, when mentioning Gaius Caligula's birth, he states that Caligula was born on August 31 in the year his father served as Consul alongside Gaius Fonteius Capito. This information allows us to identify it as the year 12 C.E. See: Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, "Divus Augustus," *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 148, 361-362. Another method was counting years in relation to the year in which, according to tradition, Rome was founded – referred to by the Romans as "Ab Urbe Condita," the year 753 B.C.E. Thus, the year Rome was believed to be founded would be considered the first year. For more information, see [Treccani Italian Encyclopedia: Ab Urbe Condita](#). Consequently, Octavianus's declaration as 'Augustus' in 27 B.C. would be calculated by the ancient Romans as the 727th year since the founding of the city.

include periods that preceded or succeeded them, in the same way that it does not deal with various additional artistic styles practiced in the same era in other locations.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, we will begin our overview from the period of Classical Greece of the fifth century B.C.E, more specifically – from about 480 B.C.E, and end it with the seventeenth century Baroque period, meaning: from circa 1600 to 1750 in the rest of Western Europe.<sup>28</sup>

## **Antiquity<sup>29</sup>**

### **Ancient Greece**

#### **The Classical Period – 480 – 400 B.C.E**

One of the main characteristics of Classical period art is the striving for perfection, or, using a different word, “idealization.” This artistic language was a conscious and deliberate choice made by the people of this era rather than indicating their incapability of doing something different. It is important to emphasize and clarify that in this period, same as in others – the use of a particular artistic language is a matter of choice and not one of lack of talent or creativity.

A particularly famous statue of the Classical period is the “Discobolus”, the discus-thrower, by Myron (image 3) created between 450-460 B.C.E. An ancient Roman reproduction of this statue is currently located at the Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome. It is interesting to observe that despite the fact the statue depicts the moment in which the thrower strains to hurl the discus as far as possible, his face seems calm and tranquil, betraying no sign of

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, this overview will not cover Byzantine art or the art style known as 'International Gothic.' Including these and other additional periods would require expanding the scope and length of this text, potentially diverting the discussion from its primary objective: introducing various means for reading artworks taken from the art movements dealt with here in a focused manner.

<sup>28</sup> There were artistic periods even before Classical Greece, in Assyria, Babylonia, Ancient Egypt, and even in Greece itself – such as the Geometric and Archaic Periods. These have not been referred to in this text, not because they are unimportant or lack influence; in fact, the opposite is true. After all, the Classical Period itself was not born in a vacuum but was formed and based on the foundations of the arts that preceded and surrounded it. However, due to the necessity of delineating the scope of the periods we are dealing with in this book, and considering that the styles that followed the Classical Period often refer back to it, I chose to begin with the Classical Period rather than those that preceded it.

<sup>29</sup> From this point on, I will use the term “Antiquity” to refer to the period including Ancient Greece from the fifth century B.C.E. to the fall of Rome in 476 C.E.

effort. As noted earlier, such a portrayal stems from choice and according to the artistic norms of the era, and not out of the artist's inability to display expressivity on the figure's face.

### **The Fourth Century B.C.E**

Following the Classical era came the one called "Fourth Century B.C.E", which still leans towards the ideal. Unlike its predecessor, this period is typified by elongating the figures' proportions and by more naturalistic and realistic depictions, of the sort we currently call "Naturalism." An example of that style is the statue "Apoxyomenos" (image 4), meaning – the scraper, sculpted circa 330 B.C.E by Lysippus. A Roman-era marble reproduction currently displayed at the Vatican Museums (Musei Vaticani) depicts an athlete after his athletic activity had ended, while scraping from himself the oil he previously anointed himself with.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Hellenistic Period – 323 – 31 B.C.E**

The timeframe starting from 323 B.C.E – the year of Alexander the Great's death, and ending towards the end of the first century B.C.E is referred to as: "The Hellenistic Period." This period is typified by realistic, occasionally even brutal and disturbing, depictions. An example of a periodic sculpture is "The Terme Boxer" (image 5) signed under the name of Apollonius son of Nestor. One of the possibilities for dating this bronze sculpture, currently at the Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome – is to the first century B.C.E. The fact that it depicts a boxer emphasizes that this is no god or celestial being. The statue depicts a specific terrestrial man, depicted in a realistic moment of rest following a wrestling match. It is fascinating to see the marks and scars on his face and the wounds, some still seen bleeding after the boxing match he has just finished moments before.

## **Ancient Rome**

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<sup>30</sup> Like the Apoxyomenos, many original Greek sculptures have not survived to our times. We have the privilege of knowing what they looked like through surviving copies sculpted during the Roman era.



From Ancient Greece, the political and cultural center shifts to Ancient Rome. According to tradition, the city of Rome was founded in 753 B.C.E and began its history as a kingdom.<sup>31</sup> In 509 B.C.E, it turned into a republic, and in 27 B.C.E, the imperial era began.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Republican Period – 509 – 27 B.C.E**

In the late Republican period, the Romans, mainly, looked back in time at the Greeks, whose civilization they admired. With the Romans, just like with the Greeks, an essential change in their artistic language occurred throughout the years. When we compare the “Discobolus” statue (image 3) from the fifth century B.C.E mentioned above, to the portrait statue of a Roman man from the first century B.C.E, we are able to see the transition from an idealistic approach to a realistic approach.<sup>33</sup> Displayed in the Musei Capitolini in Rome is a bronze sculpture called “Capitoline Brutus” (image 6). Among the range of the sculpture’s proposed creation dates is the suggestion of it being dated from the first century B.C.E, and therefore, from the Republican period. By juxtaposing this sculpture’s image with that of the “Discus Thrower”, or, in other words, by comparing a Roman Republican statue with a statue from the Classical period, it appears that there is no room for discussion about ‘better’ or ‘worse’, or ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, but merely about two different artistic approaches. Therefore, we must emphasize in advance that refraining from judgmentalism and using terms of ‘better’ or ‘worse’ is critical if we seek to view artworks in their cultural context. If we judge (as opposed to the meaning of critical thinking) – we run the risk of committing the sin of crowning artworks on the basis of values that are irrelevant to their periods and perspectives.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Imperial Period – 27 B.C.E – 476 C.E**

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<sup>31</sup> Commonly accepted data, as also presented in the book dealing with the history of ancient Rome from the second millennium B.C. to the end of the fifth century A.D: Marcel Le Glay, Jean-Louis Voisin, Yann Le Bohec, David Cherry, Donald G. Kyle, and Eleni Manolaraki, *A History of Rome* (4th ed.), Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 21, 25.

<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to observe similar processes occurring simultaneously in different locations. In 510 B.C.E., the city-state of Athens transitioned into a democracy, just a single year before Rome became a republic.

<sup>33</sup> Clearly, the term “realistic” as used here is an anachronism, applied retrospectively to an earlier period when this concept was not yet in use.

<sup>34</sup> In light of the significant risks associated with judgmentalism, special emphasis will be placed on this topic in the following pages.

In 27 B.C.E, with the coronation of Octavianus as “Augustus”, imperial rule began, and would come to its end in the city of Rome in 476 C.E.<sup>35</sup>

One of that period’s artistic characteristics had to do with the attempt to glorify the image of the ruler in the eyes of his subjects. An example of that is evident in the various statues of Augustus, currently scattered in various locations worldwide. Augustus lived to the ripe old age of 77, yet not a single one of his statues depicts him as elderly.<sup>36</sup> All his statues depict Augustus as a young man, handsome and admirable. A typical example may be seen in his famous statue “Augustus of Prima Porta” (image 7) currently located at the Vatican Museums and dated to 14 C.E – the year of Augustus’ death.

## **The Middle Ages**

Following “Antiquity,” a new period of approximately a thousand more years begins in Europe and will later be called “The Middle Ages.” For our purposes, we will refer to the Middle Ages as starting from 476 C.E. and ending at the start of the fifteenth century, when a new artistic period begins in Florence.<sup>37</sup>

In general, one can claim that during the Middle Ages, the prevalent concept in the Christian world viewed life as a corridor, a passage from birth to death. Based on this approach, the manner in which a person conducted themselves in this world determined the fate of their soul after their death for all eternity. For that reason, life was not an objective in itself, but merely a preparation for the afterlife. Therefore, there was no interest or importance in the perpetuation of the human figure according to their physical, naturalistic appearance, but rather to showcase it in a way that merely communicated its essence. This is also one of the reasons why the images of rulers, or any other person of the era, were not presented with their realistic physiognomy, but according to a set of agreed-upon signs.

According to the same concept, it is sufficient for us to observe Middle Ages artistic creations displaying Mary and baby Jesus seated on a throne, or what is called a Maestà. In most instances, such pieces depict the baby Jesus with an adult’s face. We can see an example of that in

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that from a historical perspective, when the city of Rome fell, it was no longer the center of the empire. Starting in 330, the city of Constantinople, now known as Istanbul, assumed the role as the capital of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the "Holy Roman Empire," which was Christian rather than pagan, in fact continued to exist until the conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

<sup>36</sup> This is likely due to the simple reason that such renditions were probably never sculpted.

<sup>37</sup> The thousand-year period known as the "Middle Ages" is divided into various sub-periods. However, for simplicity, it will be treated here, for the most part, as a single entity. For an overview of the sub-periods, the concept of art during this time, and its purpose, see:

Cimabue's panel painting "Maestà di Santa Trinità" (image 8), currently located at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and dated 1290-1300.

Detail from image 8

Maestà di Santa Trinità, Cimabue, circa 1290-1300, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

A viewer educated with the concept that an exact replication of reality is good and proper might form the wrong impression about the artistic capabilities of people from the Middle Ages. As far as such a viewer is concerned, the depiction of Jesus as a baby with an adult's face, and performing actions no baby could do, such as blessing others, could serve as proof of the so-called ignorance of Middle Ages people. But, as noted, the explanation for all these stems from a different reason:

In the same way that when comparing the Classical statue (image 3) with the Republican one (image 6), we discussed a change of approach rather than of quality, here too, the depiction of the baby as an adult merely stems from a different conceptual viewpoint prevalent in the period in which he was painted. Jesus, according to Christian faith, is the Messiah, the redeeming savior of humanity. Therefore, his depiction through a natural physiognomy of a baby could have caused two problems, at least according to the values of that era. The first: his appearance as any other earthly baby would have meant that at a certain stage of his life he still did not know anything. Therefore, his presentation as an adult baby blessing those around him relays the message that he has "skipped" the stage called "childhood" and began to reign over the world the very moment he materialized in the flesh. The second problem was the risk of a possible parallel being made between him and a particular baby which might have harmed the message of Jesus' celestial qualities and uniqueness. Therefore, we can summarize and say that during the Middle Ages, the depiction of reality in general, in an unrealistic manner, was also done as a matter of approach and different choice, and not due to some artistic inability.<sup>38</sup>

## **The Italian Renaissance<sup>39</sup>**

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<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that the approach of not directly replicating reality reemerges in modern art. Here, too, this shift does not occur due to a deterioration of artistic ability, but rather due to a change in perception.

<sup>39</sup> John R. Hale, *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of the Italian Renaissance* (London: Thames & Hudson, .1985); Stephen J. Campbell and Michael Cole, *Italian Renaissance Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012)

The conventional view is that a new artistic period began in the city of Florence at the start of the fifteenth century and lasted for a relatively short time: until about 1520.<sup>40</sup> This period is globally referred to by the French word Renaissance, which means “rebirth.” This term was coined in the middle of the nineteenth century by French historian Jules Michelet.<sup>41</sup>

But a rebirth of what? What has died and then was resurrected?

The Renaissance was the first to experience and define itself as a ‘period.’ The people of that period longingly looked back at “Antiquity” (meaning Ancient Greece and Rome) and viewed themselves as those who brought about its ‘rebirth.’ The Italian word for “Renaissance” is Rinascimento, and for “Antiquity” – Antichità. Therefore, the full Italian sentence for describing the Renaissance would be Rinascimento dell’antichità, meaning ‘A rebirth of antiquity.’

In general and simplistic terms, having clarified the meaning of the word “Renaissance,” we can begin to understand the art of that era, albeit in broad strokes. Let us begin with one of the world’s most famous statues, currently at the Galleria dell’Accademia in Florence, created by Michelangelo Buonarroti.<sup>42</sup> Michelangelo sculpted “David” (image 9) between 1501 and 1504 in full nude.<sup>43</sup> Looking at the statue while comparing it to the way in which David is described in the biblical source arouses a problem: while the Bible does mention David taking off his armor because he was not used to its weight, there is no mention of him being nude while facing Goliath.<sup>44</sup> If so, what was the reason for this depiction, despite it having no biblical justification? The fact that this statue was sculpted during the Renaissance – a period that admired Antiquity, and both periods

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<sup>40</sup> Italy became a unified state only in 1861. See: Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

<sup>41</sup> Julia Conaway, in her introduction to a book discussing the Renaissance, provides insight into the rebirth of civilization, highlighting the various processes that facilitated it. She emphasizes the significance of three key figures: The poet and humanist Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), who saw himself as bridging the past and future, demonstrated through the writings of ancient times that one could embody diverse roles and interests, leading to a richer life. Another pivotal figure, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), author of "The Decameron" in the mid-fourteenth century, also perceived their era as distinct from previous ones. In reference to the visual arts, Boccaccio highlights Giotto, who died in 1337, and whom we will discuss later in this book. According to Boccaccio, Giotto single-handedly revived the art of painting, which had been 'buried' for years due to the errors of preceding artists. Another key individual Conaway discusses is Giorgio Vasari, who in his book *Le Vite* blames early Christianity for the decline of classical art and credits the Renaissance's reawakening to a renewed interest in classical art, culminating in the transcendent work of Michelangelo. Vasari is also credited with first using the term "Rinascita," meaning 'rebirth,' in the context of art. See: Bondanella, "Introduction," pp. xiv-xviii.

<sup>42</sup> Here are several books dealing with Michelangelo and his work: Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (London: Arrow Books, 2001); Leonard Barkan, *Michelangelo: A Life on Paper* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); William E. Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> This statue, originally located in Florence's 'Piazza della Signoria' (where a replica stands today), is now housed in the 'Galleria dell'Accademia' in the city.

<sup>44</sup> 1 Samuel 17:38-39

together – the human body, provides the answer: presenting David in the nude depicts him in the image of many sculptures of Antiquity, and by doing so, Michelangelo creates in the spirit of that era.

While the people of the Renaissance viewed Antiquity as an object of their admiration, they viewed the period that preceded theirs – the Middle Ages – as one of ignorance, obliviousness, and darkness. As far as the chronological order of the periods, according to: Antiquity > The Middle Ages > The Renaissance – the Middle Ages are sandwiched between the two periods. In other words, the term “Middle Ages” was coined in retrospect by the people of the Renaissance, and as noted, in a negative context.<sup>45</sup>

If we wish to delve a little deeper into the essence of the Renaissance, we ought to mention what was considered, for the people of the era, an undisputed truth.

Until 1492, the existence of only three continents was known: Asia, Africa, and Europe.<sup>46</sup> Also, the common prevalent belief was that Jerusalem was the center of the earth, as evident in some of the Middle Ages maps. For a Christian of the era, the fact of it being the center point of the world was more than reasonable, seeing as, according to their belief, it was the place where Jesus was crucified and resurrected.

Another known fact for the Catholic Christians of the time was the possibility of being redeemed of their sins with money. Any sin committed by an individual was translated to the number of years their soul would later have to suffer postmortem in a place called 'Purgatory' – literally coming from a Late Latin verb meaning “to cleanse”. The bigger the sin, the more time the sinner would need to spend in that horrific place to be cleansed of it, until their soul would be free of sin and allowed to enter heaven. To narrow the duration and lessen the suffering, a method gradually formed for using monetary payment for various sins, so the earthly payment would cancel the celestial punishment and shorten one’s stay in “Purgatory.” In return for such payment, the church provided believers with a “Certificate of Indulgence”. To a large extent, this implies that, according to the concept of that time, man could influence and change God's will through his earthly possessions.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Another example of a definition given in retrospect, though not from the field of art, is “World War I.” Originally, it was referred to as “The Great War.” It was only with the outbreak of a subsequent global conflict that it began to be called “World War I,” in recognition of the fact that another global war had occurred.

<sup>46</sup> That being said, Europeans only realized in 1503 that a new continent had been discovered, rather than a new route to India.

<sup>47</sup> For an in-depth explanation of ‘indulgences,’ including the motivations behind them and their characteristics, see:

Beyond these two concepts, another prevalent belief was that the Earth was the center of the universe and the sun orbited around it.<sup>48</sup> To that is added the belief in a distinct hierarchy in the world, with the Creator at the top of the pyramid and below him – the angels. Next came Man, and beneath him, in descending order, animals, followed by plants, and at the very bottom – the various minerals.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to the above, and as explained in regards to Michelangelo’s “David” (image 9), the people of the Renaissance also had a clear reference point: Antiquity. Not just in sculpting, but in building their homes, their churches, and more – the art of Antiquity served as a clear reference point from which one could quote, or, at the very least, be inspired by.

The meaning is that until a late stage of the Renaissance period – which ends, at least by definition, in 1520 – it appears that people lived with the feeling that reality and the world could be explained and comprehended, and therefore – controlled.

If that was the prevalent notion, it only makes sense that this approach would also be manifested in the art of the time. One of the world’s most famous works of art is Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper” (image 10), which belongs to the Renaissance period. Leonardo painted this mural between the years 1494-1498 at the dining hall of the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan.<sup>50</sup> Through this work, we will be able to clearly see some of the distinct characteristics of the art of the Renaissance that embody a perception of a clearly defined, wholesome world that can be controlled, as we will now demonstrate.<sup>51</sup>

**Symmetry** – The most important figure in the mural, Jesus, is located at its exact center. His twelve disciples are divided into two equal groups, each sitting to one side – six disciples to his left and six to his right. The same applies to the three windows behind Jesus, with him located exactly beneath the center one, and four additional openings on each side. And so, despite the motional qualities of

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<sup>48</sup> This approach is known as geocentric, i.e., the Earth being at the center while the sun orbits it, as opposed to the heliocentric approach that emerged later, i.e., the sun being at the center with the Earth orbiting it. It is interesting to note that to this day, we customarily say the sun rises and sets. In other words, even though it is now understood that the sun is at the center and not the Earth, the terminology of the earlier geocentric approach, which places the Earth at the center, is still widely used.

<sup>49</sup> Each of these groups has its own internal hierarchy. For an important source from that era, dealing with the importance of man, see: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. A. Robert Gaponigri (Washington, D.C.: Gateway Editions, 1996). For further engagement with humanism: Albert Rabil, *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> For a focused examination of this work, see: Jack Wasserman, “Rethinking Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper,” *Artibus et Historiae* 28, no. 55 (2007): 23-35.

<sup>51</sup> As noted, only some of the characteristics are outlined here, not all. Our objective is not to detail every characteristic, but merely to exemplify how the concept prevalent in the Renaissance, that of controlling reality as explained here, is also manifested through art.

the disciples' figures, the viewer, to a large extent, faces a balanced work, assuring the understanding of what appears in it, and thus even creating the feeling of control.

**Proportion** – One of the means used in the art of the Middle Ages to emphasize a figure's importance was to present it as larger in size, while those less important were shown as smaller. This means of relaying a message of hierarchy disregarded realistic proportions. In contrast, during the Renaissance, as is evident in this work by Leonardo da Vinci, the approach is that of presenting figures and objects in accordance with natural proportions. Jesus is not presented as larger in size than the figures of his disciples, which leaves the proportion unhindered. Leonardo found a different way of emphasizing Jesus' figure compared to the others – by placing him in the center of the mural, positioning the large open window behind him, and using various other artistic means which draw the viewer's attention to the figure of Jesus.

**Perspective** – Despite the mural being painted on a two-dimensional surface, with height and width only, it still gives the illusion of a three-dimensional view, including height, depth, and width. One of the means the artist uses to create this illusion is enlarging certain figures and objects, as opposed to reducing others in relation to the rest, causing the viewer to perceive them as far or near. In other words, the use of perspective also enables a presentation that is close to the views of familiar, day-to-day reality, providing the viewer the illusion that they are faced with a room owning depth, and the characters in it are indeed located in different positions in that space.

Therefore, if in the Renaissance the prevailing concept is that reality is explainable, then art also presents it in a clear and understandable way, while often beautifying it as well.

At the height of the Renaissance, between 1500-1520 approximately, it appeared that art had managed to reach the loftiest heights, achieving all objectives it strove for and even transcending them. During most of those years, three artists worked simultaneously, even if not collaboratively – Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, and Raphael Sanzio. Until 1519 – the year of Leonardo's death, and Raphael's death during the following year, each of the three had gained fame, created important artworks, and accomplished various breakthroughs.<sup>52</sup> The two decades between 1500 and 1520 are mainly referred to, and for good reason, not just as “The Renaissance,” but “The High Renaissance.” During that time, Western civilization experienced the world as

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<sup>52</sup> Here are several books about these three artists and others: Antonio Forcellino, *Raphael: A Passionate Life*, trans. Lucinda Byatt (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2012); David Franklin, *Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and the Renaissance in Florence* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press, 2005); Rona Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

sensible, logical, and explicable, and art – as being at an unprecedented peak typified by ‘Decorum’, a term we will immediately explain here.

An example of one of these creations embodying the level of perfection reached by the art of that era is the “Sistine Chapel ceiling” murals (image 11), located in the Vatican and painted by Michelangelo between the years 1508-1512. The central ceiling presents scenes from the Book of Genesis, with the most famous of these being “Creation of Adam” (image 12), on which Michelangelo worked for about two weeks. Despite God’s sense of determined purpose upon reaching the reclined Adam, the image still maintains a sense of peaceful serenity. The anatomical description of Adam’s body is perfect, and the entire visual scene conveys serenity and beauty. And so, this work embodies the word used to define the “High Renaissance”: Decorum – a term incorporating in it the meaning of grace, balance, restraint, and harmony.

And yet, upon reaching such a level of perfection in the creation of artworks, an important turn took place as well.

## **Mannerism<sup>53</sup>**

If we observe the historical events that took place during those years, we will see that just as those artistic heights were reached, chaos also began, followed by a crisis in the arts. Much of what was assumed and viewed until that point as certain and absolute underwent a deep upheaval and was soon questioned and doubted. While in 1492, Columbus thought he had discovered a new sailing route to India, in 1503, Florentine Amerigo Vespucci claimed that this route actually led to a new continent.<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, the commonly held view that was prevalent until that time, that the world has only three continents, with Jerusalem at its center, was proven wrong.

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<sup>53</sup> For further exploration and understanding of Mannerism and its characteristics, please refer to the following books: Walter Friedlander, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism* (2nd ed.), New York: Columbia University Press, 1990; Linda Murray, “Mannerism,” in *The High Renaissance and Mannerism: Italy, the North, and Spain 1500-1600*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2003, pp. 124-143. In her book, Linda Murray states, “During the Baroque period, unlike the Renaissance, Mannerism cannot be compared as a period and as a medium to all the works made in this time period. In fact, Mannerism only refers to various artists and their specific works created between 1520 and 1590 in certain parts of Italy” (p. 124). She further adds, “It is quite clear that this definition cannot encompass all the works created during the sixteenth century, not even in Rome and Florence, which are the true homes of Mannerism” (p. 125).

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this discussion, we intentionally treat Mannerism as a distinct period to maintain a certain chronological sequence that illustrates the stylistic transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque.

<sup>54</sup> Hence the name of the new continent, ‘America,’ which is the feminine Latin version of Amerigo Vespucci's name, ‘Americus.’ Amerigo Vespucci was born in Florence in 1454 and died in 1512.



The letters of 'Indulgence', commonly used for the remission of penance and absolution of sins, were sharply criticized by Martin Luther, who, in 1517, published his "Ninety-five Theses or Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences."<sup>55</sup> This publication marks the start of a rift within the Catholic Church, from which the Protestant Reformation movement would eventually develop, those who sought to bring about change and institute reforms in the church's conduct.<sup>56</sup>

If all that wasn't enough, in the mid-sixteenth century, Nicolaus Copernicus claimed that the sun is in the center with the earth orbiting it, and not the other way around. This claim would later be supported and affirmed by Galileo Galilei at the start of the seventeenth century.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond all those, man's role as a mediator between God and nature in the hierarchy he defined for himself underwent an upheaval. During the 'Council of Trent' (1545-1563) initiated by the Catholic Church, it declared that "there is no salvation outside the Church." In other words, the mediation between God and nature became a role that was the church's exclusive property.

And what happened on the artistic plane of that era? As for the three geniuses: Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael – it appeared that following their work, other artists had nothing left to strive for, add, or even innovate, as the trio had already achieved and even surpassed all objectives. For example, one could sculpt a statue imitating Michelangelo's "David", but certainly not hope to outdo it. Therefore, if you cannot imitate and cannot improve or exceed, then perhaps the medium of art should be given up, and new creations should be generally avoided? But it appears that none of these options was reasonable.<sup>58</sup>

And so, it appears that even during the High Renaissance and its continuation into the sixteenth century, the roots of crises were beginning to be felt in almost every possible sphere, including the earthly, the religious, and the artistic. On the earthly and religious plane, it is a direct result of the negative discoveries and criticism about the church, which meant the undermining of all existing world orders and an uncertainty regarding the redemption of the soul. In the artistic sphere, the artists were in a state of frustration as they felt they had nothing left to strive for, and that their art had become, to a large extent, stagnant, unlike the changing approach of the church. And indeed, just as in previous periods, art also reacted to what was transpiring around it. This art,

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<sup>55</sup> Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk born in Germany, lived between the years 1483-1546.

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<sup>57</sup> Copernicus lived from 1473 to 1543, and Galileo from 1564 to 1642.

<sup>58</sup> In his book, Antony Blunt addresses the subject of the 'Council of Trent' (1545-1563) and its influence on religious art. He explores the background of the council and the church's response to the crisis instigated by Martin Luther's words. Additionally, he examines the crisis faced by artists in light of the changing perceptions of the church and its practices. See: Anthony Blunt, *"The Council of Trent and Religious Art," in Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 103-136. Another source discussing this period is Alexandra Bamji, Geert H. Janssen, and Mary Laven's *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter-Reformation*, Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013.

dated to the period spanning the years 1520-1600, would later be named “Mannerism.” It was initially based in central Italy, and from there continued to spread to the rest of Europe.<sup>59</sup>

In order to more clearly discuss some of Mannerism's characteristics, we will compare Michelangelo’s Renaissance-style statue of “David” (image 9) with the Mannerism-style statue discussed here earlier, Giambologna’s “Rape of the Sabines” (image 2).

The Renaissance-style “David” (image 9) is depicted as ready for battle, his stance alert and steady, and one does not need to walk around it to understand what is taking place. Unlike him, in the Mannerist-style statue “Rape of the Sabines” (image 2), the situation is different: three figures are depicted here, coiling into one another, thus creating what is called in Italian *Figura serpentina*, a serpentine figure. Also, each of the three is looking in a different direction. In other words, to fully understand what is transpiring, the viewer is required to walk around the statue, meaning they have shifted from the passive state they were in during the Renaissance to an active one during the time of Mannerism. This transformation of the viewer into an active participant reflects the new reality in which they live, where the known and familiar is absent.

## The Baroque<sup>60</sup>

The end of Mannerism sees the start of a new period, one that also received its name only in retrospect. This period, dated to the years 1600-1750, is called “Baroque.” One of the explanations for this name is that eighteenth-century French critics, who came after it, viewed the style of this art as deformed. In Spanish and Portuguese, a deformed or irregularly shaped pearl is called “Barrueco” and “Barocco”, hence the unflattering name given in retrospect to that same period – a name used until this very day, but without the negative subtext.<sup>61</sup>

To observe some of the Baroque’s characteristics, we will once again use the Renaissance-style “David” (image 9). This time we will compare it to another sculpted depiction of “David” (image 13), created by Gianlorenzo Bernini in 1623-1624 and currently located at the Galleria

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<sup>59</sup> The following book presents an important source from that era, defining the nature of art as it was perceived at the time: Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, trans. William McCuaig, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> In the introduction to his book, Bruce Boucher discusses the negative attitudes towards Baroque art that gradually formed from the middle of the eighteenth century and prevailed until the mid-twentieth century. The book also includes a background survey of Baroque art, with a focus on Baroque sculpture. See: Bruce Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998, pp. 9-56.

<sup>61</sup> In her article, Dr. Esperança Camara provides a survey of Baroque Art and discusses the origin of its name in "Baroque Art in Europe, an Introduction." See: [Khan Academy](#).

Borghese in Rome.<sup>62</sup> One fundamental difference can already be seen when comparing the face Michelangelo sculpted for “David” with the face Bernini sculpted for the same biblical figure. While with Michelangelo, David appears determined and alert, in Bernini’s Baroque-style rendition, David is depicted at the moment of throwing the stone and in a rotational body motion. Additionally, David’s fluttering hair and his facial expression are accompanied by marked physical strain, and with his rotational motion, he invades the viewer’s personal space, thus bringing about their involvement in the scene unfolding before them.

This rendition by Bernini embodies the spirit of the Baroque Period and arises from the attempt to surprise the viewer, move them, and involve them in the action of the piece. But despite the motion qualities of this statue, the viewer is no longer required to move around the statue to understand what is transpiring before their eyes, and it is enough for them to stand in one point. In other words, unlike Mannerism – in Baroque we witness a situation in which the artwork is active, while the viewer returns to being a passive spectator, as they were in the Renaissance.

And so, to sum up, in very broad terms, what transpired from the Renaissance period to the Baroque, we can define it in the following way: During the Renaissance, both the art and the viewers were passive, since the world and its governing reality were generally viewed as clear and determined. In Mannerism, during a time of chaos, the new situation is embodied through the art that turns active, as do the viewers, because now it is their role to explain what is transpiring. In the Baroque, since man returned to dwell under the patronage of the mediating church, it alone will care for the believer’s redemption, while they are merely required to follow. The viewer also returned to being passive, while the art became again active.

**You will find a concentrated account of the periods discussed here, in chronological order, in Appendix 1.**

Now, following this survey, the next chapters will make use of and further explain the various tools and means for reading works of art through various examples, so that these will ultimately aid you in independently reading art.

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<sup>62</sup> From this point on, we will refer to this artist solely by his last name: Bernini. For a book discussing the artist and his works, see: Howard Hibbard, *Bernini*, London: Penguin Books, 1990. For a book focusing on Bernini’s portrait sculptures, see: Andrea Bacchi, Catherine Hess, and Jennifer Montagu, *Bernini and the Birth of Baroque Portrait Sculpture*, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2009.

## Appendix 1 – Chronological Order of Periods in Western Art History<sup>63</sup>

- **Antiquity (Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome) –**

Fifth Century B.C.E – Fifth Century C.E.

- **The Middle Ages –**

Fifth Century C.E – Fifteenth Century

- **Italian Renaissance –**

Start of Fifteenth Century – 1520

- **Mannerism –**

1520 – 1600

- **The Baroque –**

1600 – 1750

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<sup>63</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 2, to maintain a reasonable scope for this book's discussion, the survey here is general and limited to the periods from which the showcased works originate. It does not cover the periods that preceded or followed them, nor does it address different artistic styles that existed concurrently in other locations. Additionally, please refer to notes 27 and 28 in this book.

## **Back Cover Text**

**“Not what man knows but what man feels, concerns art. All else is science.”**

-Bernard Berenson

The language of art is an integral part of our culture and belongs to all of us. This book, which delves into artworks primarily from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance to the Baroque period, aims to empower you, the reader, with the freedom to interpret art for yourself.

Through Observation and Critical Thinking, a rich and captivating world of diverse and enthralling language is unveiled. Alongside these, the use of ten intuitive (though not automatic) tools, and ten additional means (all grounded in logic and life experience), can enrich and elevate your engagement with art.

Being versed in these will enable us to deepen our personal experiences and explore new and captivating realms within ourselves while appreciating art from across the globe.

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Lior Aviv is a doctoral student in art history, a guide, and lecturer in Western art history. Through his global lectures, guided tours in various Italian locales, and now this book, he strives to make art accessible to both novices and those with a background in the subject. Lior claims that art resonates with the individual nuances in each of us, continually unveiling both external and internal worlds.