

# 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

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.

As the style of art changed, particularly in the early 20th century with movements such as Cubism, among

others, art historians were faced with a real problem.

### IN CONTEXT

Consider this Cubist painting by Pablo Picasso.



**Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) by Pablo Picasso**

As a traditional art historian using formal analysis, you would have a hard time critiquing this painting. Paintings such as this refute the assumption that art fit a particular mold or needed to look a particular way. If you think back to Johann Winckelmann and his classical belief that the objective of art was to evoke beauty, how would he have critiqued this? An evaluation based solely on formal analysis wouldn't be very kind.

This tendency to view art in a traditional manner is one of the reasons people looked at, and some still look at, certain forms of modern art with real disdain.

However, when viewed through a different lens, which was the point of new art history, artwork that didn't fit the traditional mold could be evaluated in a completely different and fairer way.



#### 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

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## 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.

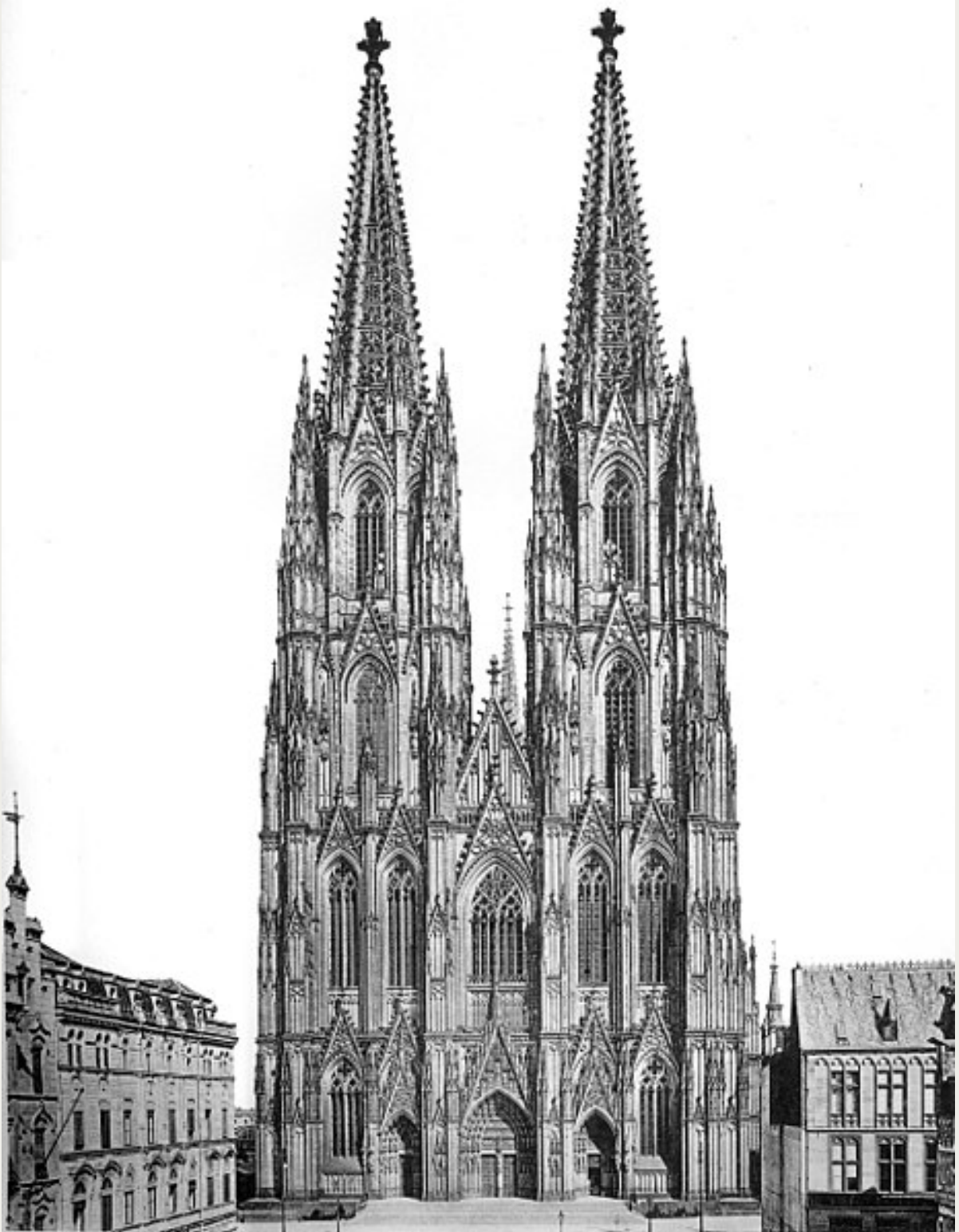
Over time, the canon has increased to include more non-Western examples—areas such as Asian art, East Indian art, Native American art, and Mesoamerican art. These are areas that weren't represented before in the traditional canon of art history, but now are.

And those 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.



Cologne Cathedral

Here is an example of Greek sculpture:



**Laocoön and His Sons**

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



**Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci**

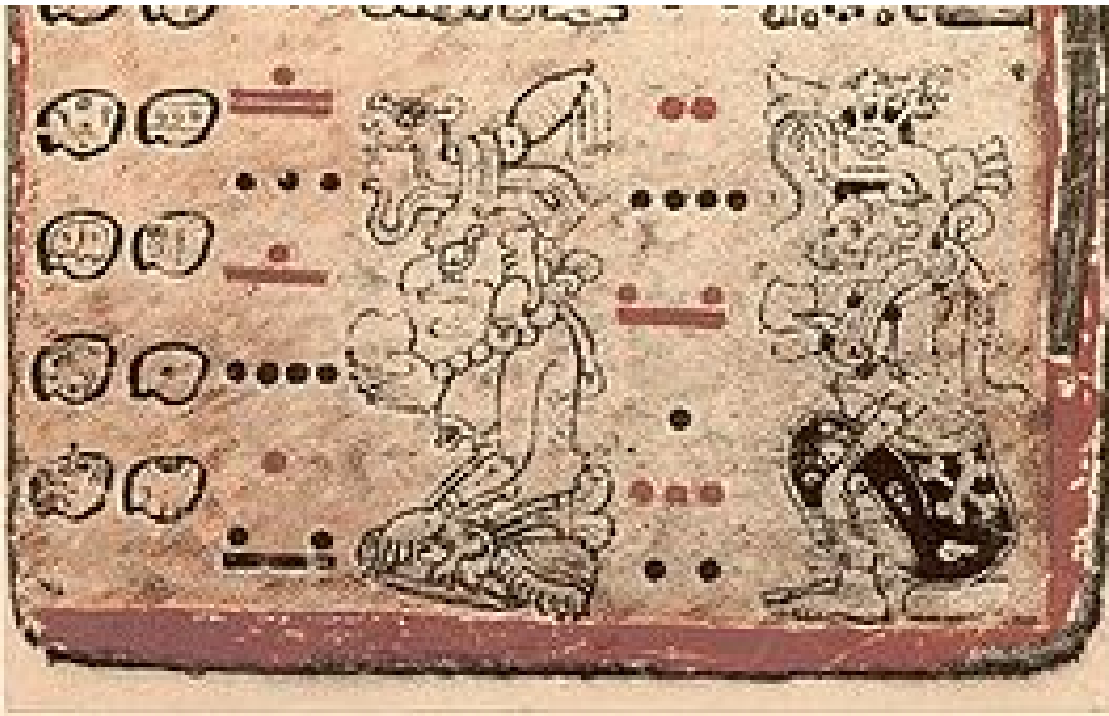
*Venus de Milo*, which is also probably familiar to you:



Venus de Milo

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





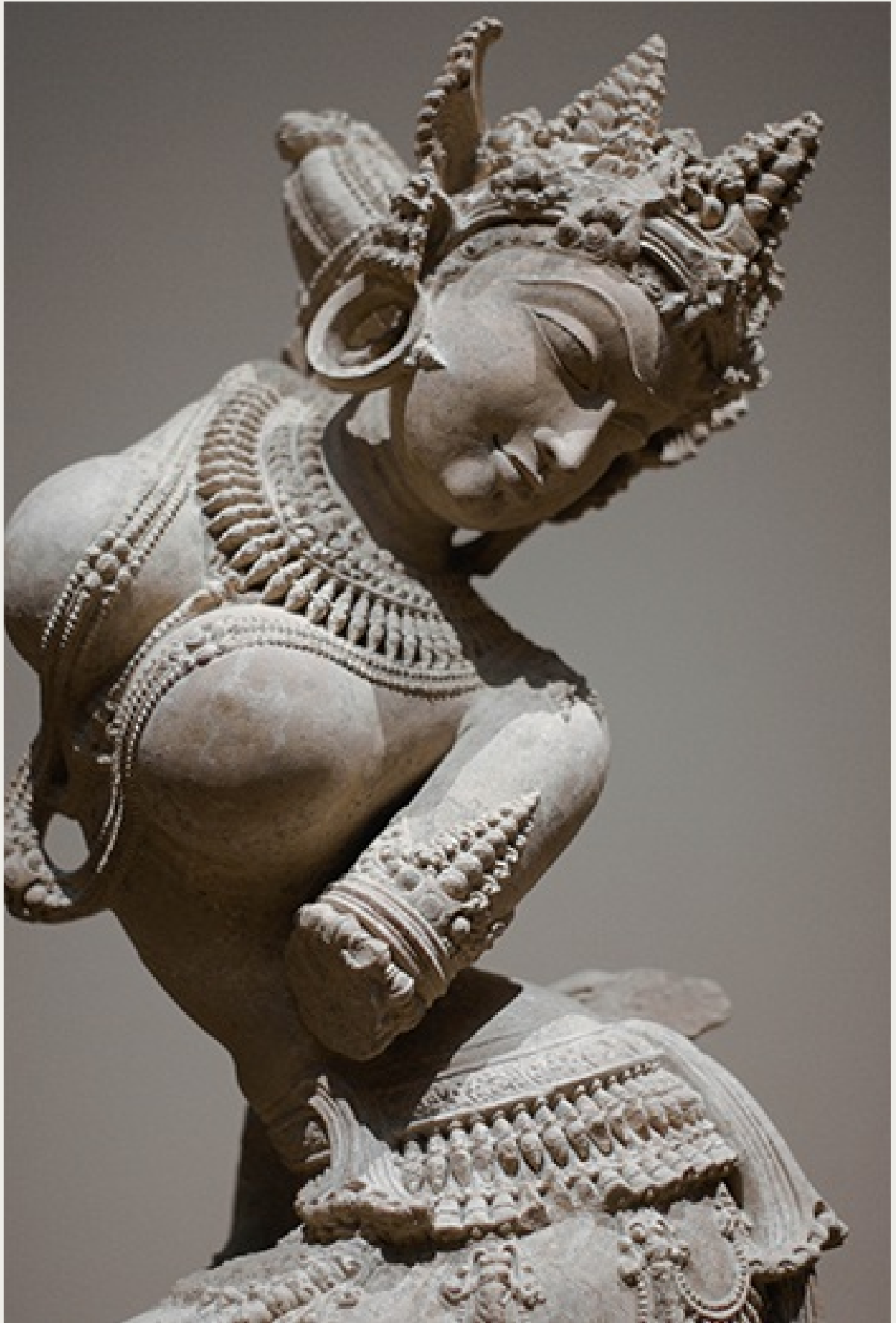
Dresden Codex

Japanese art, such as this Japanese ink drawing:



Landscape by Sesshu Toyo

East Indian art:



**Dancing Celestial sculpture**

Chinese art, such as this Ming vase:



Yellow dragon jar



## TERM TO KNOW

### Canon

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

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## 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 movement of the 20th century more or less coincided with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. An art historian named Linda Nochlin wrote an essay in 1971, titled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” It helped broaden the discussion regarding how women were historically very underrepresented in art history.

Of course, there are many great women artists. Linda Nochlin didn’t feel that there weren’t any; rather, her question was intended to move that discussion forward. Thus, feminist art materialized out of the desire to produce artwork by women and to foster the growth of the arts among women.

Another very important early activist within the feminist art movement was Judy Chicago, who established the first feminist art program in the country in the early 1970s.



### BIG IDEA

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.



## 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** occurred in the early 20th century as art forms evolved in a way that no longer fit within the confines of the traditional evaluation method. New art history allowed for artwork that didn’t fit the traditional mold to be evaluated in a completely different and fairer way.

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.

Good luck!

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Canon**

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

### **Connoisseurship**

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

### **New Art History**

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