



# Art Through the Ages

*“I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say any other way—things I had no words for.”*

—Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986)

## Quick Write

**Interpreting Text.** Read the quote above. What do you think the artist means when she writes that using elements of art enabled her “to say things she had no words for”? Write your interpretation of the ideas she is expressing.



Georgia O’Keeffe. *Back of Marie’s No. 4*. 1931. Oil on canvas. 40.6 × 76.2 cm (16 × 30”). The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Gift of The Burnett Foundation © 2003 The Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



▲ **FIGURE 12.1** This complex sculpture, composed of curved forms and intricate patterns, is only 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" tall. Observe closely the precise detail and craft that went into the making of this elegant art object. Describe the type of balance that organizes this object.

Kashmir or Northern Pakistan. *Crowned Buddha Shakyamuni*. Eighth century. Brass with inlays of copper, silver, and zinc. Height: 31.1 cm (12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"). Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection. Asia Society: New York.

# Art Traditions from Around the World

Art is more than just objects and images. It is a visual story of a people and their culture. It reveals their feelings, views, and beliefs. In a sense, art history mirrors the history of the world. It is a window on the past and the many cultures that enrich our lives.

## In this chapter, you will:

- Describe general characteristics in artworks from a variety of cultures.
- Compare and contrast historical styles, identifying trends and themes.
- Describe art traditions from cultures around the world.

### Focus on Art History

**Figure 12.1** is an ancient object of worship from Kashmir or Northern Pakistan. The subject is Buddha Shakyamuni, spiritual leader of the Shakya clan of Buddhism. His hands are positioned in the gesture of teaching as he sits peacefully on a lotus flower rising above the water on a thick stem. To the right and left of the base are small female and male figures. Art historians believe that these figures represent the donors of the sculpture.

**Compare and Contrast.** Compare the Buddha Shakyamuni to a religious sculpture from another culture and time (Figure 13.5, page 354.) What similarities and differences can you find in the style and theme of the two works?

## Vocabulary

Paleolithic period  
Neolithic period  
megaliths  
cuneiform  
ziggurats  
pharaohs  
dynasty

# Art of Earliest Times

The artworks produced many thousands of years ago tell us a great deal about the earliest cultures and civilizations of our world. These ancient people left no written records. What we know of them has been learned from the objects and the art that they left behind.

## Prehistoric Art

Prehistoric means before history, or before written records were kept. The objects made by people during this period are all that remain to tell us about the people who lived long ago.

**Figure 12.2** is one of many cave paintings left by cave dwellers in Europe during the Paleolithic period. The **Paleolithic** (pay-lee-oh-lith-ik) **period**, or *Old Stone Age*, began about two million years ago, and ended with the close of the last ice age about 13,000 B.C. It was a time when people began using stone tools. In these cave paintings, the colors are so bright and the animals so realistic that, for a long time, scholars refused to believe they had been created by prehistoric people.

To this day no one knows the purpose of the paintings. Found deep inside caves, far from the entrances and living areas, they probably were not created for decoration. Some scholars believe the paintings were part of a hunting ritual. A shaman, or medicine man, may have created the image of the animal, believing that it would help hunters capture the animal. The paintings may also have been visual prayers for animals to appear during the next hunt. According to another theory, cave dwellers created the paintings to celebrate a successful hunt.

► **FIGURE 12.2** An amateur archaeologist excavated in this low-roofed cave for four years. One day his daughter, who was small enough to stand up straight in the cave and look up, discovered these paintings of sleeping, galloping, and crouching animals.

*The Hall of the Bulls. c. 15,000 B.C.  
Altamira Caves, Spain.*



## Prehistoric Builders

Eventually prehistoric people moved out of caves and began constructing their own shelters. Small communities developed, and some hunters gave up their nomadic life and settled down, becoming farmers. After some time, small tribal groups grew into organized villages surrounded by cultivated fields and domesticated animals.

During the Neolithic period, people built structures of stone. The **Neolithic** (nee-uh-lith-ik) **period**, or *New Stone Age*, is a prehistoric period stretching roughly from 7000 B.C. to 2000 B.C. During this time, humans developed agriculture, and stone tools were refined. Ancient structures from this period, called megaliths, have been found throughout Europe, Asia, and even North America. **Megaliths** (meg-uh-liths) are *large monuments created from huge stone slabs*. As early as 4000 B.C., circular arrangements of huge, rough-hewn stones were created in Western Europe. The most famous of these is Stonehenge in England. Built around 2000 B.C., it consists of a series of four concentric rings. Builders used an ancient building method that we now call *post-and-lintel construction*. Upright slabs, called posts, support horizontal slabs, called lintels. More than half of the original stones still stand. The tallest measures 17 feet and weighs more than 50 tons. Scholars are uncertain how prehistoric people, working with primitive tools, were able to cut these huge stones, transport them many miles, and then raise them into position. The purpose of Stonehenge has also baffled scholars for many centuries. In the past, people believed a great magician created it. Today, Stonehenge is thought to have served as a kind of observatory, enabling people to practice a type of astronomy and serve as an accurate calendar.

As prehistoric peoples learned to herd animals and grow crops, they also learned to live in harmony with their surroundings. This peaceful balance was upset by population growth. Small tribes began to fight over grazing land and soil suitable for growing crops. They were forced to band together into more organized groups for protection and also to be able to produce more food. By around 3000 B.C. four major civilizations had developed at different points on the globe. The ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China emerged at this time.

## Ancient River Valleys

The ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China, are referred to as river valley civilizations. Each of these civilizations was ruled by a monarchy, practiced a religion based on nature, and achieved great skill in art and architecture.

### Mesopotamia

The area of Mesopotamia included the cultures of many people within an extensive region. The region was the fertile crescent of land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Middle East. The people lived in city-states, and each city was ruled by a monarch. Today, this land is shared by Syria and Iraq.

The Sumerians were the first dominant group in the area. They were the first people to have a system of writing (using symbols to represent spoken language). **Cuneiform** (kyoo-nee-uh-form) was *the Sumerian writing system made up of wedge-shaped characters*. These characters stood for concepts and ideas. Because paper was not yet developed, clay tablets were used. Some of these still exist.

► **FIGURE 12.3** This figure was placed in the temple to represent the worshiper. The wide eyes, hands folded in prayer, and attention to detail are typical of Sumerian sculpture.

*Statua di Donna*. c. 2700–2600 B.C. Marble. The Iraq Museum, Baghdad, Iraq.



Sumerian artists depicted figures in a lifelike and realistic way. Look at **Figure 12.3**. This small sculpture shows precise details of dress and facial features.

Sumerians also built structures known as **ziggurats** (**zig-uh-rats**), or *stepped mountains made of brick-covered earth* (**Figure 12.4**). These temples had exterior staircases. A temple honoring the god of the city was placed at the top. Does it resemble other buildings that you have seen?

In time, the Sumerian civilization merged with that of Akkad, its northern neighbor, giving rise to the civilization of Babylonia (around 750 B.C.). Babylonian art and architecture resembled Sumerian to a great extent. Another Mesopotamian civilization, called Assyria, emerged after the decline of Babylonia. A distinct Assyrian artistic style began to emerge around 1500 B.C. Assyrian artists created precise, detailed stone reliefs, which they painted using many colors. They depicted royal events, hunts, wars, and animals, especially horses and lions. Human figures were given less emphasis, although they were still depicted in a realistic and detailed way.



◄ **FIGURE 12.4** A temple honoring the god of the city was placed at the top of the ziggurat. This structure was built in 2100 B.C. What other art and architecture was being created throughout the world at that time?

Ziggurat. Ur, Iraq. c. 2100 B.C.

## Egypt

The culture of ancient Egypt developed along the banks of the Nile River more than 3,000 years before the birth of Christ. Religion influenced every part of Egyptian life. The **pharaohs**, or *Egyptian rulers, were worshiped as gods and held complete authority over the kingdom*. Egyptians believed in life after death and preserved the bodies of the pharaohs in preparation for the afterlife. The famous pyramids were built as the tombs of the pharaohs.

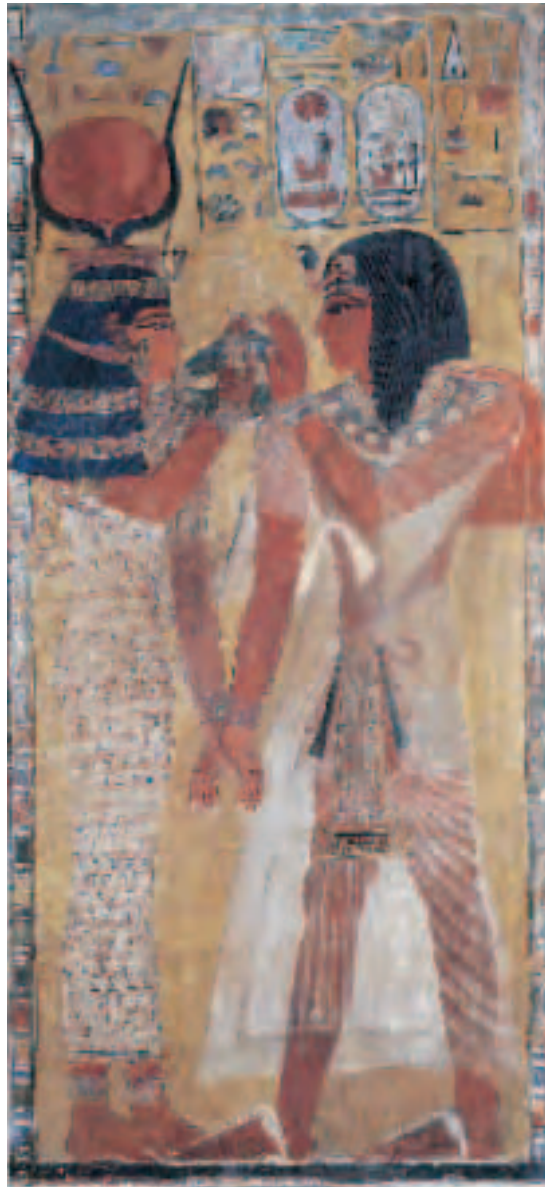
Egyptian artists decorated temples and tombs according to very strict rules set forth by the priests. The rules required that each part of the body be shown from the most visible angle. Look at **Figure 12.5**. The heads, arms, legs, and feet are shown in profile. The shoulders and eyes, however, are shown from a frontal view.

The paintings found on the walls inside the tombs reveal a great deal about life in Egypt. Scenes from the life of the person buried in the tomb were intended to remind the spirit of life on earth.

## India

In the Indus River Valley, the ancient civilization of India arose. Only in recent times have historians realized the age of Indian culture. For many centuries, no one knew that a civilization had flourished on the banks of the Indus River in northwest India. Then in 1865, railroad workers uncovered a hill of crumbling, fired-clay bricks near the city of Harappa (in present-day Pakistan). The bricks were found to be thousands of years old, dating back to 2500 B.C.

In 1922, a second city was discovered in the same area. Called Mohenjo-Daro (moh-hen-joh dahr-oh), meaning “Hill of the Dead” (**Figure 12.6**), the city was



◀ **FIGURE 12.5** What symbols or features make these figures seem important? Observe the shapes in the boxes along the top border. These are hieroglyphs, an early form of picture writing. They give information about the painted scene.

Egyptian. *The Goddess Hathor Places the Magic Collar on Sethos I*. Thebes, Nineteenth Dynasty. c. 1303–1290 B.C. Painted bas-relief. 226.5 cm (89<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>”). The Louvre, Paris, France.



▲ **FIGURE 12.6** Experts believe the city of Mohenjo-Daro was abandoned because the climate changed. The ancient Indians built with fire-baked bricks, which meant they had ready access to timber. The area is a desert today.

Mohenjo-Daro, India. c. 2500 B.C.

once home to about 35,000 people. Architectural remains indicate that it served as a major commercial center. Wide, open streets divided the city into large blocks. The city featured multi-storyed houses made from fired brick and wood, and elaborate, sophisticated drainage systems.

At this archeological site, workers discovered a number of small relief carvings in soapstone (**Figure 12.7**). These carvings are the earliest known examples of Indian art. As you can see, several unusual lines and shapes are incised above the animals. These are characters from the ancient Harappan system of writing.

Over 70 cities, towns, and villages have been discovered in the Indus valley, as well as evidence of an organized kingdom with a central government that existed about 4,500 years ago.

## China

The Yellow River valley became the site of the ancient Chinese civilization, a civilization that retains many of its ancient traditions today. Beginning 4,000 years ago, it is the oldest continuous culture in the history of the world.

As their civilization developed, the Chinese gained skill and knowledge in many different areas. They invented paper, porcelain (a type of ceramic), and



▲ **FIGURE 12.7** The designs on these seals “belonged” to their owners. Seals were pressed into soft clay to secure a container or document.

Soapstone seals from Mohenjo-Daro (Indus Valley culture). Karachi Museum, Karachi, Pakistan.



woodblock printing as well as the compass and gunpowder. Until modern times, emperors ruled China. Its historical periods were divided into dynasties, which were named after ruling families. A **dynasty** is a period of time during which a single family provided a succession of rulers. Bronze vessels found in ancient graves reveal that Chinese artisans cast bronze as early as the first imperial Chinese dynasty, the Shang dynasty, which began in 1766 B.C. The ritual wine vessel shown in **Figure 12.8** is an example of the intricate work done at that time. Abstract motifs and spirals cover the vessel. Experts believe the spirals stand for clouds, rain, or water. Such images reveal an ancient Chinese regard for nature. Many early bronze vessels show extraordinary technical mastery—evidence of the centuries of development required before such artworks could be created.



◀ **FIGURE 12.8** This vessel was used in a ceremony to ensure harmony with the spirits of deceased ancestors. Notice the large eyes and beak of an owl on the lower part of the vessel. Can you find other animals in the designs that cover this container?

Ancient China. *Ritual Wine Container*. Shang dynasty. Thirteenth century B.C. Bronze. 30.1 × 12.2 × 12.5 cm (117/8 × 43/4 × 47/8"). Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, s1987.23a-b.

## Activity

### Analyzing Ancient Art

#### Selecting and Analyzing Exhibitions.

Research exhibitions of ancient art online or at art museums in your community. Select early artworks from the cultures listed in this lesson. Analyze the exhibitions to form conclusions about formal qualities, or how these cultures used the elements and principles of art. Also, form conclusions about historical and cultural contexts. What was the role or significance of the artworks or art objects in these ancient cultures?



#### Check Your Understanding

1. For what purpose might cave paintings have been created?
2. What is a ziggurat?
3. Why and for whom were the pyramids built?
4. Define the word *dynasty*.
5. Describe general characteristics of artworks from the Paleolithic period, Ancient Egypt, and Ancient China.