

Art Throughout History



There are various methods to explain the development of a people or a society. One of these methods consists in analyzing art as a historical trace or memory. The tool to achieve this goal is Art History.

Therefore, Art History is the discipline that studies art as a byproduct of human creativity and action —expressed through its own codes— that adds to the global vision of reality and its many manifestations.

Also, artworks as an expression of reality and a manifestation of human activity are in themselves essential and unique testimonies to know about the transformations of societies, and their study becomes truly meaningful when we also study their sociocultural context. Thus, the analysis of the diverse factors and circumstances involved in the creative process becomes essential for understanding artworks; and, at the same time, it is a way to learn to appreciate art seeing it within the context of culture at each historical moment and in relation to other fields of activity and knowledge.

Before writing existed, visual language was one the most important means for communicating and explaining the world. A consequence of this statement is that aesthetic manifestations can be traced to the origins of each civilization. Examples of it are the countless pictographic and plastic expressions found in ancient caves, rocks and temples.



However, mentioning these earlier attempts at crossing the art threshold, it wouldn't be appropriate — and it certainly is not our intention— to talk about an established art; rather, we talk about an expression of sensitivity translated into the plastic representation of an idea, an emotion, an everyday event or a natural phenomenon. However, if we try to identify the importance of art within the processes of social construction, it is necessary to take a look at works which have marked the most representative periods of human history.

In this sense, if we think about art as a historic agent, we shouldn't be surprised to realize that beyond its emotional and intellectual value —both given by its aesthetic nature— art also has a high commercial value. This aspect of art as a financial asset goes back to the Renaissance, the era when Art Collecting finds its origins.

Subsequently, with the image of power and all the excesses of European monarchies during the 17th century, art became not only a synonym of social status but also of wealth. In the 19th century, at the height of positivism and the scientific method, the Academic-Art school placed art as the epitome of intellectual contemplation.



However, it is only until the earliest stages of Modernity that the Art Market consolidates as a viable financial activity. Thus, the historic avant-garde movements marked a milestone in the way we understand the circle of art and even art itself. The Kantian aesthetic paradigms, which praised Romantic and Realistic Art, crumbled in the face of the postures held by Benjamin and Debord.

At that stage, Marcel Duchamp was the one who questioned most radically the importance of the critic and the role of the curator as infallible authorities in the world of art. Also, he unveiled and scorned the absurd snobbism around art reflected in the ridiculously-high prices imposed on the works of his contemporaries by auction houses and galleries. In other words, he destroyed the image of institutional art and mocked the system.

All of these factors, plus the constant self-criticism of Modernity, eroded the credibility of artistic institutions. Likewise, these changes in the legitimating organisms led, in the second half of the 20th century, to the creation of Art Investment Funds which, little by little, have established themselves as contemporary authorities in terms of art study, analysis, and marketing.