

Signposts and semaphores: Art of the western world

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A new PBS series explores the role of art in western society.

Works of art are the signposts and semaphores of culture; that is, they can both mark or reflect the tenor of a society and act as a signal or catalyst for a culture still evolving. Art shapes and is shaped by the times in which it is made, be it in accordance or contradiction with its prevailing milieu. That art is not an isolated activity is a key premise of *Art of the Western World*, a nine-part Annenberg/CPB series which will air this fall on PBS television stations. It will ask: Why is the universal urge to go on pilgrimages, as well as the cult of saints in the Middle Ages, responsible for many of the forms in a Romanesque church? How did the Protestant Reformation affect the style of Caravaggio and other Catholic Baroque painters? What is the connection between early 20th-century discoveries in physics and chemistry and the development of Cubism?¹

Art of the Western World approaches its topic from the point of view that art must be studied against the backdrop of its social and historical contexts and that the works of art must be seen in their actual physical settings. As explained by Perry Miller Adato, the Emmy-winning producer of this series, "We filmed over 150 locations in eight different countries. Our philosophy in producing these films was that a work of art cannot be completely

understood until it is seen in its context. And not only its physical and geographical context, but also its historical, and perhaps more importantly, its social context...The idea that we are trying to convey is that the works we are examining are the artifacts of vibrant living times, no less vital than our own."

Hosting the series is historian and journalist Michael Wood who takes the role of a fellow traveler as he walks among the monuments, observes the works of art, and stops to share his commentary. In addition, over twenty renowned art historians appear on-screen to discuss specific works at hand. These experts range from the British Museum's John Boardman on Classical Greek art to Rosalind Krauss of the City University of New York on contemporary art. The series advisory panel consists of James Ackerman of Harvard University, Richard Brilliant of Columbia University, Linda Nochlin at the City University of New York, and Leo Steinberg at the University of Pennsylvania.

The nine one-hour programs chronicling nearly 3,000 years of art are entitled:

The Classical Period, 600 B.C.-350 A.D.;
A White Garment of Churches: Romanesque and Gothic;
The Early Renaissance in Italy and the North;
The High Renaissance: Rome and Venice;
Images of Authority in Seventeenth Century Art;
The Age of Revolution, 1770-1830;
Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism;

¹*Art of the Western World Preview Book* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 9.



Michael Wood, host of Art of the Western World, takes viewers to Sounion, Greece, in the first program, "The Classical Tradition."

*Twentieth Century Art Before World War II;
Twentieth Century Art After World War II.*

Although it has limited itself to only western art, the series still has an incredible span of achievements to cover in a very short period of time. To add to this difficulty, the programs were developed not only to teach art history at an introductory level but to be of interest to the more knowledgeable viewer as well. A solution was arrived at by creating programs which clarify major themes and milestones in the history of art. Rather than overwhelm the viewer with a barrage of names, dates, and styles, each of the programs focuses on several representative works that can serve as paradigms for the most salient concepts of the period in question. The treatment of each period focuses on several works that are generally agreed to be seminal, both as embodiments of the achievements of their time and as hallmarks of the future.² In taking this approach each work of art becomes a signifier for the greater body of work which constitutes its style or era. Sometimes the works and artists chosen are the obvious and famous ones; at other times, however, they might be lesser-known representatives which can more clearly demonstrate the relationship between the art and its social/historical context.

Understanding the function of art in its society is perhaps the most important lesson which this or

²*Art of the Western World Preview Book* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 6.

any other program might have to offer. Art is like literature which can document history, express sensibilities, critique, affirm, be frivolous or serious, propound new theories or debase old ones, reflect on the past or muse about the future. Where freedom of expression has been realized, the validity of all forms of the printed word are accepted or at least tolerated. Art, however, has not always been afforded this safeguard. Recently the American Library Association under the initiation of the Intellectual Freedom Committee adopted a "Resolution on the Intimidation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)." This resolution was occasioned by the cancellation of an exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and by efforts to suppress support for the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art which exhibited a photograph by Andres Serrano. In the case of the Mapplethorpe works, the Corcoran Gallery perceived that the exhibition might provoke controversy and thus jeopardize continued funding of the NEA through Congressional appropriations. It therefore felt obliged to cancel the show and thus deprive the late-artist of the right to be exhibited as well as the right of the public to view the art. Some of Mapplethorpe's work deals with homosexuality and also depicts scenes of so-called deviant sexual practices. Serrano's work caused outrage by its depiction of a plastic crucifix submerged in a jar of the artist's urine. Serrano was reported as describing his photograph as a protest against the commercialization of sacred imagery. Objections to this work arose after the exhibition

had closed when a reproduction in the exhibition's catalog brought letters of complaint to the NEA which had funded the Southeastern Center exhibit. Those who oppose these photographs say that taxpayers' money should not pay for the exhibit of pornographic and blasphemous art. Others, whether they approve of the art or not, feel that government funding should not be denied on account of particular points of view as to what constitutes acceptable art. The American Library Association resolution specifies its disapproval of denial based on "a potential politicization of the grants-making process." In short, the controversy deals with patronage, the integrity and autonomy of the artist, and the free expression of art.

Programs such as *Art of the Western World* can help us to understand these issues as ongoing concerns in the development of our cultural tradition. While not all of the themes explored relate to patronage, the status of the artist, and the expression of art, it is perhaps a little surprising to see how pervasive these issues have actually been.

Rather than beginning the story of western art with Egypt or Persia or the Altamira cave paintings, the series begins with ancient Greece where certain ideals of freedom and humanism first take shape in the democratic city-states. According to the program, the autonomy of these cities gave the Greeks a sense of individuality which was reflected in their ideas about the stature of man which was in turn expressed in their art. Andrew Stewart of the University of California at Berkeley explains how the *kouros* was emblematic: the nudity of this type of statue showed man fully accepted as the measure of all things; being free-standing and poised as if walking forward portrayed its autonomy; and its beautiful and youthful depiction showed an idealism that claimed that the Greeks were beholden to no one. This program also describes an early patronage problem in the opposition which Perikles encountered in trying to fund the rebuilding of the Akropolis in the 5th century B.C. Whereas the series views Greece as the source of western tradition, Roman art was to embody that which is the western tradition. Here we see programmatic architectural works created for the good of the populace as well as to reflect the power of the imperial government.

The theme of patronage arises again in both the Romanesque and Gothic periods. In the early Middle Ages, churches built to accommodate pilgrimages and designed to provide crowd control became the physical manifestation of the monastic empires which had come into power following the fall of the Roman empire. In the 12th century, the importance of cities was renewed due to a population boom which in turn caused trade and industry to flourish. Gothic cathedrals grew taller and taller as symbols of the sponsoring cities' rivalries. More-

over, the beauty, light, and magnificent spaces of the Gothic cathedrals functioned as a panacea to the squalid conditions under which the masses of the peasant class lived.

As the merchant class continued to grow in the early Renaissance, the secular sector became a more important force in the field of art. The armorers guild commissioned Donatello's *St. George*; the Medici family commissioned his *David*; the bankers guild sponsored Ghiberti's *St. Matthew*. Here the great skill which these craftsmen exhibited caused the status of the artist to rise. According to the program, the famous and sought after artist Brunelleschi had begun to resent the restrictions which the craft guilds could place on the design of his art. This development in the artists' sense of self can also be seen in Durer's series of self portraits.

In the high Renaissance the idea of artist as genius grew to mythic proportions in the person of Raphael. In his own time many thought that his art was so perfect that further advancement was not possible. At his request, Raphael was buried in the Pantheon, temple to both Christian and pagan gods. Artists of this time were often compared with princes, and their private lives were investigated in works such as Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. Of similar fame was Michelangelo whose *David* was called a miracle of art. This work became a metaphor for the Florentine body politic, a symbol of right over might. Nevertheless, Michelangelo's art was not only a reflection of his external world but also of his own internal, personal struggle with his thoughts and ideas. In further illustration of the growing individualism and independence of the artist, this program chooses to discuss a somewhat less famous work by Veronese. His *Last Supper* was called into question by the Inquisition in 1573 because of extra figures such as German soldiers, dwarfs, and Moorish slaves which did not appear in traditional depictions of this scene. When instructed to amend the painting, Veronese instead changed the name to *Feast in the House of Levi*. He justified his actions by saying, "We painters take the same license that poets and jesters take...If in a picture there is some space to spare, I enrich it with figures...I was commissioned to decorate the pictures as I see fit."

In response to the heights reached by Renaissance artists, the 17th century saw the establishment of academies to carry on this tradition. "With academic art came all the intellectual baggage such institutions embody: theories of art, theories of style, hierarchies of value, and systems of teaching."³ This did not stop the innovative artist Caravaggio, however, from painting works which were

³*Art of the Western World Study Guide* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 123.

called vulgar or rejected for their originality.

While the academy system continued to dictate popular taste in the 18th century, some artists began to employ their art as covert or overt political statements. An example of the former is the *Oath of the Horatii* by Jacques-Louis David which may have served as an inspiration for those on the tennis courts in 1789. A less obscured statement is Goya's *Third of May, 1808* execution scene.

Art as a critique of society became more prevalent in the 19th century. As "paintings of modern life," Manet's *Olympia* and *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* are famous for the scandal surrounding their reception. While both depict nude women, this was not so much the problem as that these nude women were interpreted as real, contemporary figures, not classical, idealized goddesses. It appeared to be an affront to genteel sensibilities.

In discussing the beginning of the 20th century, host Michael Wood emphasizes a "deliberate and sweeping break with the past" or what we might call the idea of the avant-garde. Dada art such as Duchamp's *Urinal* questioned not only the function of art but the very concept of what art was to be. In architecture the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright worked to create art that could shape or better society. The program notes, however, that many considered modern art to be too decadent, elitist, or ambiguous. Those who opposed it included Hitler and Stalin. In the United States, even realistic art could be met with opposition; Diego Rivera's mural for the Rockefeller Center was destroyed in 1934 because its advocacy of workers' control via socialism was deemed unacceptable for such a capitalistically oriented edifice.

Modern art continued to develop, however, and when work by Jackson Pollock and other abstract expressionist painters did become accepted, it was met with great acclaim. For the most part, art of the latter 20th century has been accepted, understood, and appreciated in all of its many forms, and there have been a plethora of them. The last program includes Yves Klein's body painting, Nikki de St. Phalle's pop sculptures, James Turrell's crater earthwork, and Jenny Holzer's electronic signboard art.

Art of the Western World shows that art can take many forms, for many purposes, and for many reasons. The particular examples related here attempt to show that the tradition of western art includes the idea that artists create because they are independent human beings in spite of the need to be supported by patronage. Their work is created in the context of their society though it may be either in affirmation or contradiction. The key is that all such work is valid as a representation of the culture whatever it may be. As executive producer Perry Miller Adato has said of this series, "If we can foster a new appreciation for art, I think we will

have succeeded."

As part of its educational function, libraries can help to create an awareness of the importance of the tradition of western art and its impact on today's world by tying into this television series. The American Library Association has prepared an information kit that will be sent to public, high school, college, and art museum libraries which can be used to help publicize the programs. The free package includes a poster, bibliography, video filmography, clip art for ads and bookmarks, and display and programming ideas. A few of these ideas are to sponsor talks or demonstrations by local artists; to build a display of books about art featured in the series; and to host a program on "The Wages of Art," inviting a variety of professionals working in the visual arts to discuss how they make a living, including the non-monetary "wages" exacted from art.

Art of the Western World has been produced by WNET/New York in association with TV South/Great Britain, OFRF/Austria, and Television Espanola, S.A. The series is also being offered as part of a television course through the Annenberg/CPB Project. Major funding for the series and its accompanying television course was provided by the Annenberg/CPB Project created in 1981 to support projects that use telecommunications technologies to enhance the quality of higher education. ■ ■

Annenberg Research Institute Library wins architectural award

The Philadelphia architectural firm of Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham was selected by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for their 1989 Award for Excellence for Library Architecture in the design of the Annenberg Research Institute Library, located at 420 Walnut Street in Philadelphia. The library was designed by George Qualls.

The Institute library was one of seven selected for the award from 141 entrants. The award was presented to Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham during the AIA annual conference in Dallas on June 24.

The Annenberg Research Institute is a post-doctoral research institution for the scientific study of the history, culture, literature, and religion of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle East. The library comprises more than 150,000 volumes, including many ancient and medieval rare manuscripts and books, plus a unique collection of ancient artifacts.