

ARTS

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Overview Artistic expression emerged early in the human experience. Cave paintings, in many different parts of Africa, Eurasia, and the Americas, suggest the importance of the artistic impulse, and of course music and dance figured strongly as well. At the same time, well into human history, most art remained local or regional. There were few crosscutting influences. This meant that artistic emphases, as well as styles, varied widely, and often served as expressions of identity for many regions. This pattern obviously complicates any generalizations about the arts on a global basis, at least until more recent times and to some extent still today.

Early Civilizations and the Classical Period Each major civilization established its own artistic pattern. Egyptian emphasis on large temples and tombs contrasted with the ziggurats, or temples, built in Mesopotamia. Pyramids in central America served for religious ceremonies and sacrifices, along with other temple buildings. Greece and Rome established a characteristic monumental architectural style, expressed in many public buildings including temples. Mediterranean culture also featured great attention to drama, generating “rules” about what tragedies and comedies should contain. Painting and particularly sculpture and vase design advanced as well. Chinese architecture was on the whole less monumental. Painting stress restrained, evocative scenes from nature. Hindu architecture and statuary was more florid, reflecting beliefs about religious figures and, often, considerable sensuality. All the classical civilizations emphasized poetry, probably because this facilitated memorization in a largely oral tradition; but many poems and epics were ultimately written down. A few points of contact developed across regional boundaries. Greek architects clearly learned from monumental Egyptian patterns, though their specific styles were different. Alexander the Great’s conquests brought contact between Greek artistic styles and artists in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent (parts of present day Pakistan). For over a century, Buddhist artists in this region featured Greek styles and fashions. In turn – though the mechanisms are not entirely clear – the Buddhist tradition of surrounding the heads of holy figures with haloes, in paintings and frescoes, would ultimately spread to early Christian art. Late in the classical period the spread of Buddhism to China brought artistic styles in its wake. The pagoda, introduced in the 3rd century BCE to house holy relics and writings, was brought to China by a Nepalese architect, and it spread widely in various parts of east and southeast Asia. Regional styles predominated still, but examples of mutual influence were important.

The Postclassical Period Religion dominated art in this period, throughout much of Afro-Eurasia. Christian themes defined not only architecture, with the emphasis on great churches and the introduction of the Gothic style in Western Europe, but also paintings and much literature. The same held true, though with more persistence of classical styles, in eastern Europe. Islam warned against representation of humans and animals in art, with fear of idolatry, but imaginative geometric designs, particularly in tile work, spread widely in the Islamic world, along with the graceful minarets of the mosques. Buddhism influenced art and architecture in Japan and elsewhere. Along with religion, regional expansion of artistic styles provided an important theme. Japan brought styles of poetry and carefully-sculpted gardens from China, adapting the former to the very different language. Russia imported church styles from Byzantium, and also imported the religious icon, which became a major form of artistic expression. A few other regional themes warrant attention. West African sculpture featured distinctive styles, in woodwork and metals. Japan – indeed, some Japanese women – introduced the novel, ironically tolerated because men were more focused on the more prestigious Chinese styles. Along with the predominant religious interests, significant secular literature and stories arose both in the Middle East and in Western Europe, often emphasizing more earthy subjects. The expansion of cities in China supported new urban themes in drama and music.

The Early Modern Period Interaction of regional styles with some broader contacts continued. European colonialism brought European styles to the Americas, where they intermingled with often more colorful native traditions. Architecture both for churches and major public buildings reflected European traditions particularly. Russia began to import Western high culture as well, particularly from Peter the Great onward. This included wide interest in the ballet, but also the Western styles that dominated construction of the new capital city of St. Petersburg. A Western artistic zone was thus expanding, though Western Europe continued to generate most of the creativity. Ottoman architecture incorporated earlier Islamic styles with some of the features of Byzantine church buildings; the great St. Sophia church, in Constantinople, was directly converted to a mosque. The Mughal empire also highlighted openness to various artistic traditions – including some influence from Western styles of painting

and women's fashion. Persian themes, including representations of human figures, helped shape painting styles. In Western Europe, the Renaissance, beginning in 14th and 15th century Italy, revived classical styles and encouraged more secular themes in art and literature, and these themes would continue in the monumental art of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The Long 19th Century The two most important artistic themes of this period involved the growing intermingling of artistic traditions in various parts of the world, and the complex artistic reactions to industrialization – particularly of course in the West. Western artists benefited greatly from new contacts with Japanese and African artistic traditions, which inspired important stylistic innovation, particularly in painting, in the later 19th century. Western styles were directly imported into many new colonial settings, for missionary churches and government buildings alike. While Europe remained the artistic center, painters and writers in Russia, the United States and Latin America began to contribute directly to a larger Western artistic current, blending local themes with larger transatlantic styles. In music, Russian composers were surpassed only by Germans in range and creativity; and symphony orchestras, from Moscow to Paris to Chicago to Buenos Aires, began playing a common corpus of work. By the late 19th century European styles began to have some impact on Ottoman urban architecture as well. Department stores in Japan and China, also by the later 19th century, began offering some Western-style music as part of the effort to lure customers. New technology inevitably influenced art. The rise of photography encouraged some painters to move away from literal representation, toward experimentation with more abstract styles. The same sense of innovation inspired new styles in music and literature as well, sometimes defying older conventions. New building materials affected architecture, allowing more use of glass and the construction of new monuments like the Eiffel tower or, shortly after 1900, the skyscraper. Finally, though particularly in the West, growing prosperity created new opportunities for artists to support themselves without patronage from princes and aristocrats. Leading novelists, like Dickens, sold directly to the public – some were paid by the word, which encouraged length. Big businessmen from Europe and North America alike eagerly bought art, particularly in more classical styles but in some cases with interest in modern expressions as well.

The Contemporary Period Transnational art expanded steadily, around common styles in painting and sculpture – with primary emphasis on more abstract themes. Every city in the world, also, began to introduce some common architectural styles, including the skyscraper. Novelists probably reflected more regional themes – Latin American novelists, for example, often tried to write about problems of regional identity in a society strongly influenced by Western consumerism – but there was some shared interest as well. East Asia, along with Latin America, the West, and parts of Africa, eagerly embraced Western musical traditions, contributing many orchestral artists; while also retaining interest in more regional instruments and styles. International trade and tourism affected other artistic production, for example in Africa, as artists modified regional traditions to generate marketable products. But along with internationalism came resistance. Fascist leaders bitterly objected to modern art, urging more classical styles. The Soviet Union, and in its wake other communist countries, also condemned modern art, emphasizing Socialist Realism in its stead, with massive pictures and statues of heroic workers and peasants; some of these themes also affected art in revolutionary Mexico. Art in many parts of south Asia and the Middle East continued to emphasize regional themes, with relatively low levels of participation in international currents. Some Islamic fundamentalists raised new objections to any art that was not strictly in the Islamic tradition, destroying Roman or Buddhist monuments in several cases. A final, obvious tension in the arts in the contemporary period, affecting many societies, involved the interactions between popular taste and artistic expression. New genres, like film, were mainly defined by commercial standards and wide international sales, seeking common denominators in romance and violence; but artists contributed to the film industry as well, and different kinds of audiences emerged in the process. Many artists and writers continued to be able to support themselves without the traditional kinds of patronage, but for some this could involve an interest in participating in more popular styles.

Sources

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7. "The Other Network: The Havana Biennale and the Global South." By Miguel Rojas-Sotelo. From *The Global South*. Volume 5, Number 1 (Spring, 2011). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/globalsouth.5.1>.

Primary Sources

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"African Art." http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/te_index.asp?i=Africa

"Ancient Near Eastern Art." http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/te_index.asp?i=7

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"Art of the Americas." http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/te_index.asp?i=8

Listen to music online at *Isabella Stewart Museum Garden*.

http://www.gardnermuseum.org/music/listen/music_library

1. "Piano Trio No. 3 in B-flat Major, K. 502." Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.
2. "Trio Sonata in C minor for flute, violin, and continuo from The Musical Offering." Johann Sebastian Bach.
3. "Piano Trio in E-flat Major, Op. 70, No. 2." Ludwig van Beethoven.

4. "Etudes Nos. 8 and 9, Op. 39." Sergei Rachmaninoff.

Suggested Reading:

Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition (8th Edition). By Penelope J.E. Davies, Walter B. Denny, Frima Fox Hofrichter, Joseph F. Jacobs, Ann S. Roberts, and David L. Simon (Pearson, 2010).

National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance. By John Charles Chasteen (University of New Mexico, 2004).

Discussion

1. What are characteristics of Greek drama? How have these ideas changed from ancient to modern Greece?
2. Are art forms, such as drama, universal? What differences are there across different regions?
3. Using the Liao as an example, how are art forms influenced by other parts of society? What transnational forces influence art?
4. What were Islam innovations in art and architecture? How did this influence spread beyond the Islamic world?
5. How is art used as social or political commentary?
6. What changes occurred in Western art during the early modern period?
7. What roles can music play in identity? How has the globalization of music impacted identities?
8. Is it possible to establish definable time periods in the world history of art? On the basis of what criteria?
9. Can a modern period in world art history be defined? What are its main features?