



# THE CONTINUOUS CREATIVITY OF WESTERN VISUAL ARTS

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The white students [you have seen recently vandalizing](#) cherished Western paintings likely never read a book about the history of Western art. In academia today, the West is rarely a subject of praise and almost always a subject of derision. Anyone who approaches the history of visual arts from an impartial perspective—concerned only with aesthetics, creativity, and originality—can't help but realize, as I am about to explain in this article, that Western art stands on a league of its own. Making this claim goes against the relentless promotion of immigrant multiculturalism across the West today, which necessarily comes along with the notion that the art of the diverse peoples of the world is equally good.

Not long ago the celebrated historian [Felipe Fernández-Armesto called](#) Kenneth Clark's [judgement that Greek art](#) undoubtedly "embodies a higher state of civilization" than African art a "warped perspective," "a crude perversion of prejudice." No civilization can be said to be "better," Fernández-Armesto insisted, since each culture, from the most primitive to the most advanced, is adapted to a specific environment. We must abandon, in our increasingly diverse West, the "delusions of self-flattery" by Europeans. Charles Murray's book, [Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences 800 BC to 1950](#) (2003) has no such qualms: it enumerates the outstanding contributions of individuals to the arts and sciences of countries across the world from ancient times to the mid-twentieth century, by calculating the amount of space allocated to these individuals in reference works, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. Murray concludes that "whether measured in people or events, 97 percent of accomplishments in the scientific inventories occurred in Europe and North America." He estimates that the absolute number of great visual artists in the West is far higher than the *combined* number of the other civilizations: 479 for the West as compared to 192 for China and Japan combined (with no significant figures listed for India and the Arab World). Murray relies on the judgments of the knowledge community in his statistical inventories. He defines excellence in the sciences in a pragmatic and objective manner in relation to whether the scientific idea empirically reflects significant aspects of "reality" according to the methodologies now accepted cross-culturally in the world.

But what about excellence in the arts, where different peoples don't rely on cross-culturally accepted standards? Murray defines "high aesthetic quality" differently. While acknowledging that it is difficult to apply a uniform standard of excellence, he adds that the ability to appreciate the quality of a work of art "varies with the level of knowledge that a person brings to it." Those who know most about an artistic field have a deeper understanding of the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of the works produced. The consensus one finds among art critics, notwithstanding some variations in individual judgements, reflect qualities that are inherent in the work of art. There is a strong degree of consensus about the

greatest paintings and painters. The compilation of encyclopedias, dictionaries, and reference books about the best art and artists reflects this consensus within each respective civilization.

My disagreement with Murray is that the numbers of 479 and 192 leave out a most peculiar characteristic of Western art: its exhibition of a continuous proliferation of highly original artists with new artistic styles, new ways of projecting images on a flat surface, new conceptions of light, new standards of excellence, and new conceptions about nature and man—in contrast to a nonwestern world where aesthetic norms barely changed or where artists were invariably inclined to follow an established convention without breaking new aesthetic paths. To appreciate the achievement of the West it is not enough to have separate lists comparing great artists across civilizations. Among the 479 great painters compiled for the West one will find a much higher number of original artists than among the 192 artists compiled for China and Japan.

I don't need to be an expert to know this. Reading some of the best histories of art has been enough to convey to me this startling contrast between the West and the Rest. This article compares the artistic greatness of civilizations in painting by examining great books in the history of art. I have in mind four of the most widely read and authoritative books: H. W. Janson's [\*History of Art\*](#), E.H. Gombrich's [\*The Story of Art\*](#), Arnold Hauser's four-volume book, [\*The Social History of Art\*](#), and Kenneth Clark's [\*Civilization\*](#). I also examine the highly regarded book, [\*The Arts of China\*](#), by Michael Sullivan, in partial combination with James Cahill's [\*Chinese Painting\*](#) (1960), to get the perspective of admirers of Chinese art. The focus will be on whether China really saw new "isms" or merely continuous refinements and slight alterations within an unbroken tradition set in the past. For the purposes of this article, China is the one civilization that can be compared to the West in having exhibited the highest number of great painters as well as some noticeable changes in artistic styles. This article will then try to convey the novelties of Western art by citing the judgements of Gombrich, Clark and, to a lesser extent, Hauser. Unless one is very knowledgeable about the aesthetics of painting, it is very difficult to express exactly what makes a particular painting or painter truly great and original. Time consuming as it has been, I have thus decided to rely on the aesthetic judgments of these authors, citing their words regularly.

## **H.W. Janson**

H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, first published in 1962, with a sixteenth printing in 1971, which I am using, and numerous new editions thereafter, is an encyclopedic treatment of the history of art, with millions of copies sold in fifteen languages. Janson came from a Lutheran family of Baltic German stock. His

criterion for choice of great art is "ORIGINALITY." "Uniqueness, novelty, freshness" are the "yardstick of artistic greatness." "An original work must not be a copy, reproduction, imitation, or translation." But be careful: Janson warns against a flimsy understanding of what "originality" entails, making the key point that "without TRADITION...no originality would be possible." Absorbing "the artistic tradition" of one's time, learning the "established ways of drawing, painting, carving, designing" and the "established ways of seeing," is a precondition for creativity (pp. 12-15) .

This criterion underpins Janson's magisterial book. This book has three opening chapters on "The Art of Prehistoric Man," "Egyptian Art," and "The Ancient Near East." The rest of the book, with the exception of a short chapter on "Islamic Art" and a short "Postscript" with the title "The Meeting of East and West," is entirely about Western art. These traditions really interest him insofar as they "contributed to the growth of the Western artistic tradition" (p. 569). He ignored China, Japan, and India until the end because they were not a "vital source of inspiration for Western art" except in contemporary times. New styles of art, new techniques and schools, was a uniquely Western phenomenon. Short sections on Egyptian, Near Eastern, and Islamic art are sufficient to convey the aesthetic qualities of these traditions, with their ceremonial forms and eventual repetitiveness after a period of creativity. The East Asian tradition had a "refined style" characterized by "many centuries of *continuous* development" (p. 569).

It can't be denied, however, that this marginal treatment of Chinese art is a limitation of Janson's book. We will see that there were some variations in artistic styles in China, and truly great painters. But Janson had to make choices. It is a large size book of 600+ pages in small print because the originality of the West is persistently great. Conveying this originality required full separate chapters on Greek Art, Roman Art, Early Christian and Byzantine Art, Romanesque Art, Gothic Art, Late Gothic Painting and Sculpture, The Early Renaissance in Italy, The High Renaissance in Italy, Mannerism and Other Trends, The Renaissance in the North, The Baroque in Italy and Germany, The Baroque in Flanders, Holland, and Spain, The Baroque in France and England, Neoclassicism and Romanticism, Realism and Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture. *History of Art* was determined to convey to students precisely what stood out about the Western tradition: its continuous freshness and ability to generate one artistic epoch after another, rather than a relatively continuous and monotonous tradition.

**Arnold Hauser**

Arnold Hauser (1892-1978) was a Hungarian Marxist with Jewish ancestry, an admirer of bourgeois norms and sensibilities, writing at a time when students were educated without diversity and equity mandates. *The Social History of Art*, first published in 1951, the product of thirty years of labor, opens with eight short chapters on prehistoric, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian art, covering less than fifty pages in a four-volume book that is close to 1000 pages long. This rightfully valued book argues that art became more realistic and naturalistic as Europe became less aristocratic and hierarchical, more bourgeois, urbane and cosmopolitan. A "naturalistic style" actually prevailed through to the end of the Paleolithic Age in the way animals were depicted in a realistic way, although the art was concerned as well with the performance of magical rituals. This naturalistic attitude, which was "open to the full range of experience," gave way in the Neolithic Age to a "narrowly geometric stylization" in which the "artist tended to shut himself off from the wealth of empirical reality." This "formalistic" and "ornamental style" persisted through the history of Egypt and Mesopotamia, with minor variations (Vol 1: pp. 8-21).

The profound changes that accompanied the rise of these civilizations did not occasion fundamental changes to the Neolithic geometrical and formalistic style other than the addition of a monumental quality. We should not "underestimate the spirit of conservatism" of Egyptian art. In Egyptian art, "the person of the artist himself disappeared almost entirely behind his work." Painters and sculptors remained "anonymous" and "undistinguished" craftsmen, "in no way obtruding their own personalities" (Vol. 1: p. 27). The art of the early period of Egyptian history was "stereotyped" and "stylized" in the Middle Kingdom (2040 -1782 BC), characterized by "conservatism and conventionalism." "Ancient-Oriental art...is an art which both demands and shows public respect. Its approach to the beholder is an act of reverence, of courtesy and etiquette" (Vol. 1: p. 31-35).

There was a bit of naturalism during the reign of Akhenaton (1351-1334 BC), known as the "first prophet" and the "discoverer of monotheism." But while one sees representations of everyday scenes and some aversion from the old monumental style, the art remained "thoroughly ceremonial and formal." The civilizations of Mesopotamia, Babylonian and Assyrian, despite their more dynamic trade, industry and finance, were "more rigidly disciplined, less changeable" in their art than Egypt. One would have expected the higher urbanity of the Babylonians to have encouraged less rigid forms of art, but Hauser infers that the persistency of despotic rule and "the more intolerant spirit of religion" likely countered any individualistic and naturalistic impulses (Vol. 1: pp. 42-43).

It is only in ancient Crete that Hauser finally encounters a "colorful, unrestrained, exuberant life" in art. Hauser's argument is not that from this point on Western art is persistently creative, never rigid and

traditionalist. New artistic epochs emerge (Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo, Classicism, Romanticism, Naturalism, Impressionism) in opposition to prevailing conventions with increasing acceleration from the Renaissance onwards, led by artists who purposely wanted to break away from the prejudices of their age, innovate and experiment, and demonstrate thereby their own artistic genius. Hauser's heavy focus on social history and literature is the reason why I will be citing him less than Gombrich and Clark.

## **E.H. Gombrich**

*The Story of Art*, originally published in 1950, is currently in its 16th edition. Wikipedia says that "over seven million copies" of this book "have been sold, making it the best-selling art book of all time." It "has been translated into approximately 30 languages." Unlike Hauser, who follows a Marxist conception of progress in the arts, Gombrich, born in Vienna into an assimilated family of Jewish origin, carefully rejects the idea of progress, believing that "each gain or progress in one direction entails a loss in another, and that this subjective progress, in spite of its importance, does not correspond to an objective increase in artistic value" (p. 3). Achieving originality in one age usually entails sacrificing aesthetic qualities emphasized by preceding generations. At the same time, Gombrich thinks it is possible, much like Charles Murray, to make judgements about the quality of art, as long as it is a critic with aesthetic sensibilities developed through years of education.

*The Story of Art* is a history of art from the beginnings to the present. Gombrich estimates that three chapters, out of twenty five, are enough to cover the achievements of primitive and nonwestern art. His reason for doing this is simple:

Western Europe always differed profoundly from the East. In the East [artistic] styles lasted for thousands of years, and there seemed no reason why they should ever change. The West never knew this immobility. It was always restless, groping for new solutions and new ideas (p. 131).

Among European painters there was an "urge to be different," do something new, find a new way to enhance the aesthetic effect of the work, convey something different about the world, new life experiences along with permanent aspects of human nature. Using originality and restless creativity as his central criterion, Gombrich could not but pay far less attention to an Eastern artistic tradition that remained continuously the same through the centuries. He writes about Egypt's "art of eternity."

No one wanted anything different, no one asked him to be "original." On the contrary, he was probably considered the best artist who could make his statues most like the admired monuments of the past. So it happened that in the course of three thousand years or more Egyptian art changed very little...True, new fashions appeared, and new subjects were demanded of the artists, but their mode of representing man and nature remained essentially the same (p. 42).

About Chinese and Japanese art, he observes:

The standards of painting remained very high...but art became more and more like a graceful and elaborate game which has lost much of its interest as so many of its moves are known. It was only after a new contact with the achievements of Western art in the eighteenth century that the Japanese dared to apply the Eastern methods to new subjects (p. 108).

Gombrich has a keen eye for what was distinctive about each epoch of Western art and what was original about each of the major painters. And so does Kenneth Clark. What I will do next is make a few introductory remarks about Clark's book *Civilisation*, then write about the historical essentials of Chinese painting, before I return to what Gombrich, Clark, and Hauser say about Western originality.

### **Kenneth Clark**

Clark's book, as he says in the Foreword, "is made up of the scripts of a series of television programmes given in the spring of 1969." The series, produced by the BBC under the same name as the book's title, consisted of thirteen programmes, each fifty minutes long, singularly focused on European art from the end of the Dark Ages to the early twentieth century. Many were surprised by the "unprecedented viewing figures for a high art series: 2.5 million viewers in Britain and 5 million in the US." Everyone was impressed. *Civilisation* was "the first magnum opus attempted and realised in terms of TV"—"setting the standard for later documentary series."

But complaints were inevitable in the thoroughly multicultural and feminist Britain of recent times. Overtly the objections came down to Clark's "all men" and "all European" cast of great painters. They were upset as well by Clark's identification of the word "Civilisation" with the creation of great art, combined with his belief that the West produced the greatest art. This may explain why the BBC

announced in 2015 a new ten-episode sequel to Clark's series to be called *Civilisations* (plural), with three presenters: "the committed feminist and anti-racist" [Mary Beard](#), the Nigerian immigrant [David Olusoga](#), and the Jew [Simon Schama](#). This new series would emphasize "non-European cultures" to "convey a message of globalism" by "revelling in the variety of our species' ingenuity on an international scale."

Couldn't these resentful conformists produce a series with a different title on the artistic achievements of women and nonwhites? No. The aim of equity and inclusion is to undermine the greatness of European culture by mixing it up with other cultures. Although Clark does not compare Western to non-Western art, and starts with the Dark Ages rather than ancient Greece, the following words in the beginning of *Civilisation* would have disqualified him today from any public appearance:

Whatever its merits as a work of art, I don't think there is any doubt that the Apollo embodies a higher state of Civilisation than the mask. They both represent spirits, messengers from another world — that is to say, from a world of our own imagining. To the Negro imagination it is a world of fear and darkness, ready to inflict horrible punishment for the smallest infringement of a taboo. To the Hellenistic imagination it is a world of light and confidence, in which the gods are like ourselves, only more beautiful, and descend to earth in order to teach men reason and the laws of harmony... There was plenty of superstition and cruelty in the Graeco-Roman world. But, all the same, the contrast between these images means something. It means that at certain epochs man has felt conscious of something about himself—body and spirit—which was outside the day-to-day struggle for existence and the night-to-night struggle with fear; and he has felt the need to develop these qualities of thought and feeling so that they might approach nearly as possible to an ideal of perfection—reason, justice, physical beauty, all of them in equilibrium... Western Europe inherited such an ideal. It had been invented in ancient Greece in the fifth century before Christ and was without doubt the most extraordinary creation in the whole of history, so complete, so convincing, so satisfying to the mind and the eye, that it lasted unchanged for six hundred years.

It is this conviction that Western art expresses the highest man has achieved in aesthetics that irks the new diversity-controlled Britain. *Civilisation* is a joy to read for its high minded learning and its enthusiastic appreciation of the sublime originality of Western art in its incessant striving for new forms of aesthetic perfection. Other civilizations remained content with reenacting the perfection they had



achieved in the past. The West was different:

The great, indeed the unique, merit of European Civilisation has been that it has never ceased to develop and change. It has not been based on a stationary perfection, but on ideas and inspiration (p. 74).

### **What about Chinese Painting?**

To assess Chinese painting I will rely on Michael Sullivan's *The Arts of China*, a comprehensive study of Chinese art and a long standing text for university students, now in its sixth edition. I will make some references to James Cahill's beautiful book, *Chinese Painting* (1960), with its numerous color transparencies of paintings in plates. I can't disagree with Cahill that "the Chinese tradition of painting [is] the richest and most diversified in world art outside Europe" (p. 5). Sullivan is also a keen admirer of Chinese art. The claim that Chinese art was relatively observant of tradition, or attached to old ways, is an interpretation Sullivan would deny as a matter of principle. Cahill less so. Yet, the overall message I take from Sullivan's *The Arts of China* is that this art was very traditional. Much of Chinese "art," it should be said, consisted of bronze casting, ceramics, and jade carving. This "art" was highly sophisticated in technique and decoration, but I hesitate to call it art. It should be categorized as applied art, the work of highly skilled craftsmen. As H.W. Janson writes, "originality is what distinguishes art from craft."

While paintings with human figures were common from the [Han dynasty](#) (202 BC–220 AD) until the end of the [Tang](#) (618 to 907), by the eleventh century landscape painting was the characteristic product until the end of dynastic rule in the twentieth century. Both the human figure and landscape painting operated within a stable craft-like tradition, occasionally exhibiting interesting variations, without epoch-making redirections. There is less individuality and self-consciousness in Chinese portraits. As Cahill observes about the painting below, which is a 12th century remake of an earlier 8th century original, the characters are conscious in their sidelong glances, their postures, the way the hands are poised and the heads tilted, but the picture "tells us nothing about the participants beyond defining their roles in this particular scene... nor is there any of the extraneous overlay—humor, drama, pathos, sentiment—that is so often present in Occidental genre art" (pp. 20-21).

Landscape painting occurred within a cultural matrix that encouraged standardization and regularity, rather than unpredictability and freshness. Sullivan tells us that the "Six principles of Chinese painting," which the painter and art critic [Xie He](#) wrote in the 6th century, "*remained the pivot around which all*

*subsequent art criticism in China has resolved*" (p. 95, my italics). These six elements were: "spirit harmony," the way of using the brush, "fidelity to the object in portraying forms," "conformity to kind in applying colors," "proper planning in placing of elements," and "transmission by copying." The sixth principle "indicates reverence for the tradition itself, of which every painter felt himself to be a custodian" (p. 96). Overall this manual told prospective painters that:

Making exact copies of ancient, worn masterpieces was a way of preserving them, just as, at a later date, working "in the manner of" great painters of the past, while adding something of oneself, was a way of putting new life into the traditions (p. 96).

This passage sums up the underlying nature of Chinese creativity. New trends consisted in breaking from the regimented traditions of one's age by reviving and putting new life into early traditions. Of course, within any tradition, painters were expected to add something of their own, otherwise they would have produced mere replicas. Not just in art but in philosophy, as I have [argued elsewhere](#), every "new" philosophical outlook in China's history occurred "within a revitalized Confucianism" or through different mixtures of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Sullivan mentions Daoist painters who deviated somewhat from "the rigidly traditional way of art and literature" and painters who were influenced by Buddhism late in the Tang dynasty (618 to 907), who nurtured a "new" tradition in Chinese sculpture that "contained a rich mixture of native and foreign elements" (133).

According to Sullivan, the "great masters of the tenth and eleventh centuries are sometimes called classical because they established an ideal in monumental landscape painting to which later painters were to return again and again for inspiration" (p. 169). Likewise, [Zhao Mengfu](#) (1254-1322) "occupies a pivotal position in the history of Chinese landscape painting" because "he united a direct, spontaneous expression of feeling with a deep reverence for the antique" (203). He is said to have gone "beyond the orthodox Song styles" by rediscovering "the brushwork of the long neglected southern manner of [the painters] [Dong Yuan](#) and [Juran](#)" from the earlier Southern Tang dynasty (937-975). In doing this, Mengfu, "opened the way...for almost all subsequent scholarly landscape painting up to the present day" (203). The "urge to penetrate the unknown," identified by H. W. Janson as a hallmark of Western originality, was lacking in Chinese painting.

Sullivan indeed tells us that "up until the [Yuan](#), each painter had built upon the achievement of his predecessors in enriching his pictorial vocabulary and drawing closer to nature." But after Mengfu this "succession was broken, as artists began to range back over the whole tradition, reviving, playing

variations upon, and painting in the manner of the great masters, particularly those of the tenth and eleventh centuries" (207). Sullivan calls this "a new and indeed revolutionary attitude to painting"—yet it was just a return to an older tradition. Again, we observe this same type of "revolutionary attitude" in Chinese intellectual history: breaking from a stultified Neo-Confucian tradition by going back to the original Confucian tradition, or by integrating Daoist elements into the Confucian tradition.

With continuous generations perfecting landscape painting, refining and elaborating different variations, Chinese painting could not but be masterful. Since landscapes are inherently diverse, there was always room to paint different things, pictures of flowers, birds, insects and animals. We find Bian Wenjin (1400-1440) specializing in painting birds in fresh ways. Chinese painters also portrayed scholars seated on mountain ledges gazing at some landscape or meditating. All in all, however, these variations occurred within an established tradition. In his *Qingbian Mountains* of 1617, *Dong Qichang* affirmed his philosophy that "the great Southern tradition must be not only revived and preserved, but creatively reinterpreted, for only thus could it live" (p. 229). A new generation would go back to an older tradition to find ways to express it in new ways. Once the "new" way became a tradition, stultification would set in. "The most characteristic intellectual achievement of the Qing dynasty was, like of *the Ming*, not creative as much as synthetic." *The Qing* age was "an antiquarian age," and not just in painting but in its overall obsession with the collection of classic books as well as paintings, porcelain, and archaic bronzes" (246).

## **Western Originality: From Ancient to Gothic Times**

If you asked someone what exactly makes Greek art great, what was original about the art of Giotto, Michelangelo, Raphael, Velazquez, or Rembrandt, or what's the difference between Renaissance and Baroque painting, or what's new about Mannerism, Rococo, Naturalism, Impressionism, and Surrealism—you will invariably get answers full of generalities without proper distinctions. It is for this reason that I have decided to go through the very time-consuming task of distilling some of the best passages from Gombrich and Clark (and a few ones from Hauser) that, in my estimation, bring out what was novel and truly great about particular Western artists and particular works of art.

Gombrich sees a "*great awakening*" in Greece:

It was here, above all, that the greatest and most astonishing revolution in the whole history of art bore fruit...in the sixth century BC. We know that before that time the artists of the old

Oriental empires had striven for a peculiar kind of perfection. They had tried to emulate the art of their forefathers as faithfully as possible, and to adhere strictly to the sacred rules they had learned...[With the Greeks] it was no longer a question of learning a ready-made formula for representing the human body. Every Greek sculptor wanted to know how *he* was to represent a particular body. (p. 52, his italics).

One of the greatest artistic accomplishments of the ancient Greeks was "the discovery of foreshortening," which relates to the way we perceive [an object in space](#) depending on the angle from which we see it. It was in Greece that "artists dared for the first time in all history to paint a foot as seen from in front."

It may seem exaggerated to dwell for long on such a small detail, but it really meant that the old art was dead and buried. It meant that the artist no longer aimed at including everything in the picture in its most clearly visible form, but took account of the angle from which he saw an object (pp. 53-4).

Then came [Hellenistic art](#) with its realistic portrayals of particular characters.

It is a strange fact...that the Greek artists...avoided giving the faces a particular expression...Greek statues, of course, are not expressionless in the sense of looking dull and blank, but their faces never seem to betray any definite feeling...It was in the generation after Praxiteles, towards the end of the fourth century, that this further great discovery was made in art. By the time of Alexander the Great...the heads of the statues usually look much more animated and alive than the beautiful faces of earlier works. Together with this mastery of expression, artists also learned to seize the individual character of a physiognomy and to make portraits in our sense of the word. It was in the time of Alexander that people started to discuss this new art of portraiture (p. 72).

This was perhaps the greatest innovation of the Hellenistic period. Ancient Oriental art had no use for landscapes except as settings for their scenes of human life...For Greek art at the time of...Praxiteles, man remained the subject of the artist's interest. In the Hellenistic period, the time when poets like Theocritus discovered the charm of simple life among shepherds, artists also tried to conjure up the pleasures of the countryside for sophisticated town-dwellers (p. 77).

One should not presume, however, that the creativity of Hellenistic art was bound to continue. "The Hellenistics," as Arnold Hauser observes, eventually "reached a dead end and simply went on repeating worn-out formulas" (97). Similarly, after Byzantine art expressed its own original style in the fourth century AD, it became rigid and inflexible, and while it experienced a "second golden age" in the ninth and tenth centuries, with some magnificent mosaic paintings, it became "formally stereotyped again...so conservative in fact that in essentials the icons of the Greek Orthodox monasteries were still being painted in the same manner in the seventeenth as in the eleventh century" (p. 128).

Gombrich—who starts with ancient Greece, in contrast to Clark who starts with the "Dark Ages"—ignores the contributions of [Roman art](#), particularly the way in which Roman portraiture raised to a higher level the portrayal of the "real" personality of individuals. But it can't be denied that this art, too, became stereotyped and conventional, including Rome's unique architectural forms of the arch, vault, and dome, although through the passage of time the potential of these forms were fully exploited in the construction of a wide range of engineering structures, theatres, aqueducts, bridges, circuses, and temples.

The term "[Dark Ages](#)" is restricted to the period from about AD 400 to AD 1000, rather than covering the full Middle Ages. The Germanic tribes, the Goths, the Vandals, the Franks, who brought Rome down, and later the Northmen or Vikings who raided and pillaged Christian villages and monasteries, included highly skilled craftsmen capable of finely wrought metalwork and excellent wood carvings with intricately beautiful patterns. At the court of Charlemagne the tradition of Roman architecture was resurrected in the [Palatine Chapel](#) built in Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) around AD 800, a copy of the famous the Basilica of San Vitale that had been built in Ravenna 300 years before. The notion of creating something different or original was still absent. Gombrich senses, however, an emerging disposition among medieval Christian artists "to express" what they "felt, beyond the Egyptian predilection to express ceremonial and stereotypical images, and the Greek-Roman predilection for a style that alternately emphasized realistic and idealizing elements." While the painter of the figure of St. Matthew writing the gospel ([dated AD 800](#)) expressed his talent by copying an original copy as "faithfully as possible," the painter of the same figure ([dated AD 830](#)), Gombrich thinks, "must have aimed at a different interpretation."

Perhaps he did not want to represent the evangelist like any serene scholar, sitting quietly in his study. To him St Matthew was an inspired man, writing down the Word of God. It was an immensely important and immensely exciting event in the history of mankind that he wanted

to portray, and he succeeded in conveying something of his own sense of awe and excitement in this figure of a writing man (114-15).

The Romanesque period did not simply resurrect the Roman art of vaulting large heavy buildings but through the eleventh and twelfth centuries was characterized by "ceaseless experiment" and the realization that "it was not really necessary to make the whole roof so heavy." It was possible to fill the intervals between a number of firm arches with lighter materials, "arches or ribs crosswise between the pillars." This revolutionary idea in architecture can be traced as far back as the Norman cathedral of Durham (p. 123).

Among the great works of art Kenneth Clark includes from the Dark Ages is [the Cross of Lothair](#) (about AD 1000), "one of the most moving objects that has come down to us from the distant past... an image of worldly imperium at its most civilized" (p. 19). It was "about the year 1100" that western Europe saw "an extraordinary outpouring of energy, an intensification of existence" with the "triumph of the Church" playing a major role. The [Chartres Cathedral](#) was a "masterpiece of harmonious proportion." The main portal of the Chartres "is one of the most beautiful congregations of carved figures in the world. The longer you look at it, the more moving incidents, the more vivid details you discover" (p. 55). "One must remember," Clark continues, "that to medieval man geometry was a divine activity. The Chartres, indeed, "was the centre of a school of philosophy devoted to Plato, and in particular to his mysterious book called the [Timaeus](#), from which it was thought that the whole universe could be interpreted in the form of measurable harmony" (p. 52). God created the universe after geometric and harmonic principles.

For Gombrich, the [Gothic style](#) further revolutionized the Romanesque vaulting method by means of crosswise arches "much more consistently and to much greater purpose." For Clark, Gothic vaulting and the device known as flying buttresses "remains one of the most remarkable of human achievements."

Since the first expression of civilised life in architecture, say the pyramid of Sakara, man had thought of buildings as a weight on the ground. He had accepted their material nature and although he had tried to make them transcend it by means of proportion or by the colors of precious marbles, he had always found himself limited by problems of stability and weight. In the end it kept him down to the earth. Now by the devices of the Gothic style...he could make stone seem weightless: the weightless expression of his spirit (59-60).

For Hauser, "the rise of Gothic style marks the most fundamental change in the history of modern art."

The interior of the Romanesque church is a self-contained stationary space that permits the eye of the spectator to rest and remain in perfect passivity. A Gothic church, on the contrary, seems to be in process of development, as if it were rising up before our very eyes; it expresses a process, not a result (Vol. 1: pp. 175, 220).

The Gothic sculptor, writes Gombrich, "approached his task in a new spirit," imbuing his statues with "an individual dignity" beyond portraying individuals as representatives of "sacred symbols" copied from religious texts. Gothic statues "look immensely energetic and vigorous." Gothic "knowledge of the human body...was infinitely greater than that of the painter of the twelfth century miniature" (pp. 137, 139). Clark connects the Gothic world to a new world of chivalry, chastity, and courtly love.

Of the two or three faculties that have been added to the European mind since the Civilisation of Greece and Rome, none seems to me stranger and more inexplicable than the sentiment of ideal or courtly love. It was entirely unknown in antiquity. Passion, yes; desire, yes of course; steady affection, yes. But this state of utter subjection to the will of an almost unapproachable woman; this belief that no sacrifice was too great, that a whole lifetime might be spent paying court to some exacting lady or suffering on her behalf, this would seem to the Romans or to the Vikings not only absurd but unbelievable; and yet for hundreds of years it passed unquestioned. It inspired a vast literature—from Chrétien the Troyes to Shelley (p. 64).

The "cult of ideal love" found expression in the "ravishing beauty and delicacy that one finds in the madonnas of the thirteenth century" identified as "[the Gothic Virgin and Child in ivory](#)." Clark notes that Gothic artists also took pleasure in leaves, flowers, and, most of all, birds in manuscript illustrations; "artists drew them with such obsessive accuracy, and I think the reason is that they had become symbols of freedom...Birds were cheerful, hopeful, impudent, and mobile."

Gombrich says that the painting *Faith* (1306) by Giotto, born near Florence in about 1265,

gives the illusion of a statue in the round...[E]arly Christian art had reverted to the old Oriental idea that to tell a story clearly every figure had to be shown completely, almost as was done in Egyptian art. Giotto abandoned these ideas...He shows us so convincingly how each figure reflects the grief of the tragic scene...Giotto begins an entirely new chapter in the history of art. From this day onwards the history of art, first in Italy and then in other countries also, is



the history of the great artists (pp. 144-148).

Clark thinks that before Giotto "Italian painting was really only a less polished form of Byzantine painting. It was flat, flowing linear style based on traditional concepts which had changed very little for five hundred years. For Giotto to break away from it and evolve this solid, space-conscious style was one of the feats of inspired originality that have occurred only two or three times in the history of art" (p. 80).

## Italian Renaissance

What was new about the [Italian Renaissance](#)? According to Clark:

Medieval architects had designed on a mathematical basis, but it seems to have been of immense complexity, as elaborate as scholastic philosophy. The Renaissance architects used much simpler geometrical figures - the square, the circle, forms which they believed to have some ultimate perfection - and they entertained the idea that these forms must be applicable to the human body: that each, so to say, guaranteed the perfection of the other...The same approach was applied to painting, in the system known as perspective, by which it was through that with mathematical calculation one could render on a flat surface the precise position of a figure in space. This too seems to have been invented by Brunelleschi, but we can see it best in the works of his two friends, Ghiberti and Donatello...The belief that one could represent a man in a real setting and calculate his position and arrange figures in a demonstrably harmonious order, expressed symbolically a new idea about man's place in the scheme of things and man's control over his own destiny (p. 96-99).

Gombrich says that with [Filippo Brunelleschi](#) (1377-1446)

we see at once that it [the [Capella Pazzi](#)] has little in common with any classical temple, but even less with the forms used by Gothic builders. Brunelleschi has combined columns, pilasters and arches in his own way to achieve an effect of lightness and grace which is different from anything that had gone before...To him, it seems, is due another momentous discovery in the field of art...that of perspective. We have seen that even the Greeks, who understood foreshortening, and the Hellenistic painters who were skilled in creating the



illusion of depth, did not know the mathematical laws by which objects diminish in size as they recede into the background (pp. 163-5).

For Clark, "the invention of the individual" was the source of the Renaissance's creativity. In medieval art, "people were presented to the eye as figures that symbolised their status" but in Renaissance portraits the personalities of individuals are revealed with details of their daily lives. [Giorgione](#), "the passionate lover of physical beauty," painted (1500-1510) [a picture of an old woman](#) with extreme realism, titled *Col tempo*, "with time," of a woman who "must have once been a beauty," her face ravaged by time.

Hauser makes an important observation about the "individualism" of the Renaissance: while "strong personalities already existed in the Middle Ages, yet to think and act individually is one thing and to be conscious of one's individuality, to affirm and deliberately to intensify it, is another" (Vol. 2: p. 62). For Gombrich, it was [Masaccio](#) (1401-1428) who "brought about a complete revolution in painting."

This revolution did not consist only in the technical trick of perspective painting... We can imagine how amazed the Florentine's must have been when this wall painting was unveiled and seemed to have made a hole in the wall through which they could look into a new chapel in Brunelleschi's modern style (p. 165).

There was something "entirely new" in the painter [Jan van Eyck](#) (1390-1441), says Gombrich.

He was the inventor of oil painting... What he achieved was a new preparation of paints before they were put on the panel... For the first time in history the artist became the perfect eye-witness in the truest sense of the term (pp. 170-4).

In [Piero della Francesca](#), Gombrich continues, "light not only helps to model the forms of the figures, but is equal in importance to perspective in creating the illusion of depth" (p. 189). In the equestrian statue which Andrea del Verrocchio made in 1488 of the condottiere [Bartolomeo Colleoni](#),

we see how minutely he studied the anatomy of the horse, and how clearly he observed the position of the muscles and veins. But most admirable of all is the posture of the horseman, who seems to be riding ahead of his troops with an expression of bold defiance (p. 213).

It is said that this statue was not a portrait of Colleoni but of the idea of a strong and ruthless military commander "bursting with titanic power and energy."

In Leonardo da Vinci,

there was nothing in nature which did not arouse his curiosity and challenge his ingenuity. He explored the secrets of the human body by dissecting more than thirty corpses. He was one of the first to probe the mysteries of the growth of [the child in the womb](#); he investigated the laws of waves and currents; he spent years observing and analysing the flight of insects and birds...Never before had the sacred episode [The Last Supper] appeared so close and so lifelike. (pp. 214, 216-17).

Clark believes that Leonardo "belongs to no epoch, he fits into no category, and the more you know about him, the more mysterious he becomes...he was the most relentlessly curious man in history...Reading the thousands of words in Leonardo's note-books, one is absolutely worn out by this energy" (135). According to Gombrich, what stands out about [Mona Lisa](#), the most famous painting in history,

is the amazing degree to which Lisa looks alive. She really seems to look at us and to have a mind of her own. Like a living being, she seems to change before our eyes and to look a little different every time we come back to her...Sometimes she seems to mock us, and then again we seem to catch something like sadness in her smile. All this sounds rather mysterious, and so it is; that is the effect of every great work of art (p. 218-19).

No artist before [Michelangelo](#), adds Gombrich

had even come near expressing the greatness of the mystery of creation with such simplicity and force...It is one of the greatest miracles in art how Michelangelo has contrived thus to make the touch of the Divine hand the centre and focus of the picture, and how he has made us see the idea of omnipotence by the ease and power of this gesture of creation (pp. 224-7).

In stark contrast to most current academics who agree with Fernández-Armesto's dogma that survival and woke politics are the qualities that define a civilisation, Clark sees "the emergence of Michelangelo

as one of the great events in the history of western man" for having extended in his art the "powers of mind and spirit to the utmost." For Hauser,

Michelangelo rises to absolutely unprecedented heights...He is the first example of the modern, lonely, demonically impelled artist—the first to be completely possessed by his idea and for whom nothing exists but his idea—who feels a deep sense of responsibility towards his gift and sees a higher and superhuman power in his own artistic genius (Volume 2: p. 60).

Raphael, says Gombrich, possessed a unique artistic capacity to achieve

constant movement throughout the picture, without letting it become restless or unbalanced. It is for this supreme mastery of arranging his figures, this consummate skill in composition, that artists have admired Raphael ever since...Raphael was seen to have accomplished what the older generation had striven so hard to achieve: the perfect and harmonious composition of freely moving figures (p. 234).

Clark devotes considerable attention to Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) a "very strange character," "intensively self-conscious and inordinately vain." "No man has ever described natural objects, flowers and grasses and animals, more minutely; and yet, to my mind, something is missing - the inner life" (151).

But if Dürer did not try to peer so deeply into the inner life of nature, as Leonardo did, nor feel its appalling independence, he was deeply engaged by the mystery of the human psyche. His obsession with his own personality was part of a passionate interest in psychology in general, and this led him to produce one of the great prophetic documents of western man, the engraving he entitled Melancholia...The figure is humanity at its most evolved with wings to carry her upwards...holds in her hands the compasses, symbols of measurement by which science will conquer the world. Around her are all the emblems of constructive action: a saw, a plane, pincers, scales, a hammer, a melting pot, and two elements in solid geometry, a polyhedron and sphere. Yet all these aids to construction are discarded and she sits there brooding on the futility of human effort. Her obsessive stare reflects some deep psychic disturbance (152-55).

In *The Holy Night* (1530), says Gombrich, we can see how [Correggio](#) (1489-1534), more so than [Titian](#),

exploited the discovery that colour and light can be used to balance forms and to direct our eyes along certain lines. It is we who rush to the scene with the shepherd and who are made to see what he sees — the miracle of the Light that shone in darkness of which the Gospel of St. John speaks (p. 247).

## Catholic Baroque and Mannerism

As you read the following passages, think about Leonardo da Vinci's remark about the indomitable desire of the "wretched pupil" to "surpass his master." This attitude is singularly European, completely absent in China, where the aim was to imitate, reproduce the perfection already believed to have been attained in the past. Clark sees the Baroque as a product of the Catholic revival of the sixteenth century, the counter-Reformation movement that, in the realm of art, "gave ordinary people a means of satisfying, through ritual images and symbols, their deepest impulses, so that their minds were at peace." The Catholic Church, in its portrayal of the Virgin, unlike the Protestant North, gave "the female principle of creation at least as much importance as the male." It also had "another strength which one may say was part of the Mediterranean Civilisation—or at any rate a legacy from the pagan Renaissance: it was not afraid of the human body."

Clark writes that "late Baroque artists delighted in emotive close-ups with open lips and glistening tears. The huge scale, the restless movement, the shifting lights and dissolves—all these devices were to be rediscovered in the movies. The extraordinary thing is that Baroque artists did it in bronze and marble, not on celluloid." He says of [Bernini](#) that "was dazzlingly precocious," "the work of Bernini is ideal and eternal... He not only gave Baroque Rome its character, but he was the chief source of an international style that spread all over Europe, as Gothic had done, and as the Renaissance style never did" (182). *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* "is one of the most deeply moving works in European art. Bernini's gift of sympathetic imagination...is used to convey the rarest and most precious of all emotional states, that of religious ecstasy" (191). Similarly, Gombrich judges that Bernini achieved an intensity of facial expression which until then was never attempted in art" (328).

There are so many great painters—[Holbein](#), [Tintoretto](#), [Titian](#), [Bosch](#), [van Dyck](#), [Grünewald](#)—and countless works of art one could spend countless hours thinking about. Hauser groups "late Baroque" artists under the label "[Mannerism](#)," which retained the "passionately expressionistic aims of baroque,

while showing "bodies struggling to give expression to the mind...turning and twisting, bending and writhing under the pressure of the mind." Within Mannerism, he sees "two opposed currents—the mystical spiritualism of [El Greco](#) and the pantheistic naturalism of [Brueghel](#)" (Vol. 2: p. 92).

Gombrich says that [Caravaggio](#) (1571-1610), whom Clark views as "the greatest Italian painter of the period,"

was of a wild and irascible temper, quick to take offence...He had no liking for classical models, nor any respect for 'ideal beauty'. He wanted to do away with convention and to think about art afresh... Consider his painting of St. Thomas: the three apostles staring at Jesus, one of them poking with his finger into the wound in His side, look unconventional enough. One can imagine that such a painting struck devout people as being irreverent and even outrageous. They were accustomed to seeing the apostles as dignified figures draped in beautiful folds—here they looked like common labourers, with weathered faces and wrinkled brows. But, Caravaggio would have answered, they were old labourers, common people (pp. 290-292).

One drawback in Clark's book is that he ignores Spanish painters including one of the greatest ever, [Diego Velázquez](#) (1599-1660), about whom Gombrich says that he "devoted his art to the dispassionate observation of nature regardless of conventions." Of [The Water-seller of Seville](#), he says:

No one who stands before this picture feels inclined to ask whether the objects represented are beautiful or ugly, or whether it is important or trivial. Not even the colours are strictly beautiful by themselves. Brown, grey, greenish tones prevail. And yet, the whole is joined together in such a rich and mellow harmony that the picture remains unforgettable to anyone who has ever paused in front of it (306).

In Rubens's [Head of a Child](#), Gombrich says,

there are no tricks of composition here, no splendid robes or streams of light, but a simple en face portrait of a child. And yet it seems to breathe and palpitate like living flesh. Compared with this, the portraits of earlier centuries seem somehow remote and unreal —

however great they may be as works of art [...] joy in exuberant and almost boisterous life in all its manifestations saved Rubens (1577-1640) from becoming a mere virtuoso of his art. It turned his paintings from mere Baroque decorations of festive halls into masterpieces which retain their vitality within the chilling atmosphere of museums (pp. 299, 302).

## Dutch "Bourgeois" Painting

The seventeenth century, according to Clark, "saw a revolutionary change in thought" most visibly in the Netherlands "that replaced Divine Authority by experience, experiment and observation" (p. 194). "Amsterdam was the first centre of bourgeois capitalism" with the "first visual evidence of bourgeois democracy." Unlike the art produced in the past, which was feudal, aristocratic, and at the service of a Church that was rich and powerful, the "numerous group-portraits of early seventeenth-century Holland" are of individuals "who are prepared to join in a corporate effort for the public good" of their cities. While excessive capitalist wealth can produce a "defensive smugness and sentimentality" in art, it generated for some time a society in Holland where leading citizens came together to take "corporate responsibility" because they could "afford to do so" because they had "leisure" because they had "money in the bank." Clark sees these new bourgeois individuals in such portraits as Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* (1662).

Clark believes that "almost everything of value which has happened in the world has been due to individuals" who are "to some extent a kind of summation of their times." He includes Rembrandt among "the supremely great figures in history—Dante, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Newton, Goethe." "Rembrandt was the great poet of that need for truth and that appeal to experience which had begun with the Reformation...Rembrandt, although in fact he was a profound student of the classical tradition, wanted to look at every episode [in the Bible] as if it had never been depicted before, and to try to find an equivalent for it in his own experience" (p. 203). Among the seven paintings he shows of Rembrandt is *Bathsheba at her Bath* (1654). He writes:

The psychological truth in Rembrandt's paintings goes beyond that of any other artists who has ever lived. Of course they are masterpieces of sheer-picture making. In the Bathsheba he makes use of studies from nature and from antique reliefs to achieve a perfectly balanced design. We may think we admire it as pure painting, but in the end we come back to the head. Bathsheba's thoughts and feelings as she ponders on David's letter are rendered with a subtlety and a human sympathy which a great novelist could scarcely achieve in

many pages (p. 205).

Gombrich agrees,

Rembrandt (1606-69)...one of the greatest painters who ever lived...Other portraits by great masters may look alive, they may reveal the character of their sitter through a characteristic expression or a striking attitude. Creations such as Mona Lisa...are convincing and impressive, but we feel that they can only represent one side of a complex human being. Not even Mona Lisa can always have smiled. But in Rembrandt's portraits we feel fact to fact with real human beings with all their tragic failings and all their sufferings (p. 313, 315).

Included among other great Dutch painters are [Frans Hals](#), [Paulus Potter](#), who painted animals within landscapes with "[uncanny realism](#)," Jacob van Ruisdael, "[a master in the painting](#) of dark and sombre clouds, of evening light when the shadows grow, of ruined castles and rushing brooks," and [Vermeer](#) of Delft. "With Vermeer," writes Gombrich,

genre painting has lost the last trace of humorous illustration. His paintings are really still lives with human beings. It is hard to argue the reasons that make such a simple and unassuming picture picture [[The Milkmaid](#)] one of the greatest masterpieces of all time. But few who have been lucky enough to see the original will disagree with me that it is something of a miracle (p. 324).

Clark prefers Vermeer's landscape painting, "[View of Delft](#)," about which he says:

His work is without a single parti pris, or a prejudice arising from knowledge, or the convenience of a style. It's really quite a shock to see a picture that has so little stylistic artifice as his View of Delft. It looks like a coloured photograph, and yet we know that it is a work of extreme intellectual distinction. It not only shows the light of Holland, but what Descartes called "the natural light of mind" (209).

**Rococo, Naturalism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism**

[Rococo](#) "represented a real gain in sensibility...and captured new and more delicate shades of feeling," "an art of elegance rather than greatness," writes Clark. For Gombrich, it reflected "the taste of the French aristocracy of the early eighteenth century...The fashion for dainty colours and delicate decoration...which expressed itself in gay frivolity." The paintings of [Watteau](#), a sick man who died of consumption at the age of 37, is seen as the best expression of this new style, with his "visions of a life divorced from hardship...a dream life of gay picnics in fairy parks where it never rains, of musical parties where all ladies are beautiful and all lovers graceful in which all are dressed in sparkling silk without looking showy," in the words of Gombrich (341).

With [Naturalism](#) the painter "lost all consciousness of an independent self" by immersing himself into the totality of nature to gain "thereby a more intense consciousness of being," writes Clark as he examines Rousseau, the poets Coleridge and Wordsworth, and the painters [Turner](#) and [Constable](#) (272, 291). He admires Turner above everyone else.

He was a genius of the first order—far the greatest painter that England has ever produced... No one has ever known more about natural appearances, and he was able to fit into his encyclopedic knowledge memories of the most fleeting effects of light—sunrises, passing storms, dissolving mists, none of which had ever been seen on canvas before... [Turner's] new approach to painting... consisted of transforming everything into pure colour, light rendered as colour, feelings about life rendered as colour. It's quite difficult for us to realise what a revolutionary procedure this was. One must remember that for centuries objects were thought to be real because they were solid. You proved their reality by touching or tapping them...And all respectable art aimed at defining this solidity...Turner declared the independence of colour and thereby added a new faculty to the human mind (284-5).

To sustain their originality, and find new ways of conveying our perception of reality, and surpass Turner, the "three great lovers of nature" of the late nineteenth century, [Monet](#), [Cézanne](#), and [van Gogh](#), "had to make a more radical transformation"—giving way to a new ism: Impressionism. "An impression of what?"—asks Clark. "Of light." Monet, for Clark, was the "original unswerving Impressionist," with his view that all a painting can do is give an impression of light. In Monet's words: "light is the principal person in the picture." He shows Monet's [Water Lilies](#), 1919, painted from his garden grounds.

Gombrich is fascinated by Impressionism. He believes it was [Manet](#) (with an "a") and his followers who "brought about a revolution in the rendering of colours which is almost comparable with the revolution



in the representation of forms brought about by the Greeks. They discovered that, if we look at nature in the open, we do not see individual objects each with its own colour but rather a bright medley of tones which blend in our eye or really in our mind" (p. 388). The painting *The Balcony* illustrates Manet's intentions. Compared with earlier paintings, say Ruben's *Head of a Child*, or Velazquez's *Infant Prince*, "Manet's heads look flat." "But the fact is," adds Gombrich, "that in the open air, and in the full light of day, round forms sometimes do look flat, like mere coloured patches. It was this effect which Manet wanted to explore. The consequence is that as we stand before one of his pictures it looks more immediately real than any old master" (388).

A novelty about Monet (with an "o") that Gombrich brings up is the "idea that all painting of nature must actually be finished 'on the spot'" which "demanded a change of habits and a disregard of comfort." "Nature" or "the motif" changes from minute to minute as a cloud passes over the sun or the wind breaks the reflection in the water. The painter who hopes to catch a *characteristic aspect* has no leisure to mix and match his colours...He must fix them straight on to his canvas in rapid strokes, caring less for detail than for the general effect of the whole" (392).

For Hauser, perspective painting reaches its culmination in Impressionism, in "the reproduction of the subjective act instead of the objective substratum of seeing." "Everything stable and coherent is dissolved...and assumes the character of the unfinished and fragmentary." Impressionism was indeed an "urban art," a reaction to "external impressions with the overstrained nerves of modern technical man...it describes the always ephemeral impressions of city life...it implies an enormous expansion of sensual perception" (Vol. 4: p. 158).

[T]he quivering, trembling dots and the happy, loose and abrupt strokes of the brush, the whole improvised technique with its rapid and rough sketching, the fleeting, seemingly careless perception of the object, and the brilliant execution merely express...that feeling of a stirring, dynamic, constantly changing reality" (Vol. 4: p. 159-60).

Renoir's *A Dance at the Moulin de la Galette*, 1876, shows an open-air dance, which appears 'sketchy' and unfinished but the intention, according to Gombrich, was "to conjure up the gay medley of bright colours and to study the effect of sunlight on the whirling throng." The figures remain the focus, however—how the "forms are increasingly dissolved in sunlight and air." "We realize without difficulty that the apparent sketchiness has nothing whatever to do with carelessness but is the outcome of great artistic wisdom" (394-5).

Where do we fit [Goya](#)? As Gombrich writes:

The most striking fact about Goya's prints is that they are not illustrations of any known subject, either biblical, historical, or genre. Most of them are fantastic visions of witches and uncanny apparitions. Some are meant as accusations against the powers of stupidity and reaction, of cruelty and oppression, which Goya had witnessed in Spain, others seem to just give shape to the artist's nightmares (p. 366).

Clark seems to associate Goya with a new Romantic "pessimism" that emerge in the early 1800s, showing Goya's famous painting of a firing squad called [The Third of May 1808](#), and pointing to the poet Byron as the main spokesman of this new feeling, which he contrasts to the romantic naturalism or sentimentalism of Rousseau, his "belief in the beauty and innocence of nature," and Wordsworth's "daisies and daffodils," found in such painters as Constable. Romantic pessimism eulogized the "great forces of nature," the roaring of lions, cataracts, and colossal storms—with the sublime. "Consciousness of the sublime was a faculty that the Romantic movement added to the European imagination," says Clark (307). He pays respect to [Théodore Géricault](#), whose most famous painting, [The Raft of the Medusa](#), was of a disaster at sea he had read about in the newspapers, prompting him to study corpses from the local morgue.

Hauser, from a perspective that includes the study of literature, thinks that [Romanticism](#) "represented one of the most decisive turning points in the history of the European mind." With Romanticism "all individual expression is unique, irreplaceable and bears its own laws and standards within itself." The "intellectual atmosphere created by the [French] Revolution" nurtured an image of the artist as "the lonely human being...who feels himself to be different, either tragically or blessedly different, from his fellows" and the idea that art is "an activity of self-expression creating its own standards" (Vol. 3: p. 144). Were the Romantics, then, responsible for starting a dynamic that would eventually undermine (in the twentieth century) the standards of art, with their excessive subjectivism and preoccupation with their own feelings, with "everything dark and ambiguous, chaotic and ecstatic"? It has to be acknowledged that Romanticism was one of the most creative movements in Western history, combining the seemingly contradictory motivations of losing oneself in the unknown, the mysterious natural forces that overwhelm the confidence of the rational self, which Clark also saw in Naturalism, and an individual artist who feels, in the words of Hauser, that sincerity and creativity only comes through the creation of one's standards "against the very principle of tradition, authority, and rule" (Vol. 3: p. 142).

[Delacroix](#) is the "pessimistic" painter Clark most admires. Delacroix "had the utmost contempt for the age in which he lived, for its crass materialism and complacent belief in progress; and his art is almost entirely an attempt to escape from it" (313). "The abyss did not horrify Delacroix: on the contrary, he gloried in it." To escape from European Civilisation, he went to Morocco; and despite "many sordid and grotesque incidents in his life there," he made us believe in the "nobility, dignity, and timelessness" of life in Morocco, with his painting, [Women of Algiers in their Apartment](#).

After Delacroix, the one artist Clark holds in the highest esteem is the sculptor [Rodin](#), "the last great Romantic artist," with "abundant animal spirits, creator of the greatest piece of sculpture "since Michelangelo." Before the Romantic pessimists, he mentions the French painter [Jacques-Louis David](#), as an artist already living, in the midst of the Revolutionary Reign of Terror, at a time that would "darken the optimism of the early Romantics." He shows his famous painting, [La Mort de Marat](#), 1793. [Marat](#) was one of the leaders of the [Montagnards](#), a radical faction during the Reign of Terror. "Few propaganda pictures made such an impact as a work of art" (300). What he says about David's [Napoleon Crossing the Alps](#) reveals much about what Clark really thinks about "Civilisation":

With the appearance of General Bonaparte the liberated energies of the revolution take a new direction—the insatiable urge to conquer and explore. But what has this to do with Civilisation? War and imperialism, so long the most admired of human activities, have fallen into disrepute, and I am enough a child of my time to hate them both. But I recognize that, together with much that is destructive, they are symptoms of a life-giving force (300).

Ruskin's sentence—"No great art ever yet rose on earth but among a nation of soldiers"—strikes Clark as "historically irrefutable." He mentions a few more impressionists, Renoir, for painting "two of the most beautiful pictures of the period," and, "the greatest of them," Paul Cézanne, as well as van Gogh, showing a painting from each; and Georges Seurat for one of the "greatest pictures of the nineteenth century," [Baigneurs](#), "for the way it unites the monumental stillness of a Renaissance fresco with the vibrating light of the Impressionists" (341). He writes a bit about the "social realism" of [Gustave Courbet](#) and [Jean Francois Millet](#), and says that Courbet's [Burial at Ornans](#) is "an impressive example of sympathy with ordinary people...By abandoning all pictorial artifice, which must inevitably involve a certain amount of hierarchy and subordination, and standing his figures in a row, Courbet achieves a feeling of equality in the presence of death" (339).

Clearly, for Clark, artistic greatness and originality were still visible in some works of the nineteenth

century, although the art of this century, he also says, can be written "in terms of tunnels, bridges, and other feats of engineering." A new age of machines had arrived, dedicated to the "glory of mammon," money and gain, to which was eventually added a humanitarian feeling, as industrialization brought increasing affluence. Humanitarianism was "one of the greatest civilizing achievements of the nineteenth century." This feeling that "kindness matters most in human conduct" was unprecedented in history. Tragedy and lofty subjects for painting were gone. Clark recognizes that the post-WWII decades brought us a pleasant atmosphere of "well fed" people along with many public schools and universities producing a "well read" public, though "there has been a little flattening at the top." Of great art there can be no more.

Gombrich takes his survey up to his own time, the first half of the twentieth century. The period of the "Great Revolution in France" of 1789 "put an end to so many assumptions that had been taken for granted" for centuries. Essentially, there was a decisive break with lofty, aristocratic, sublime subjects, leading to a focus on ordinary or everyday subjects. To be sure, in the past, painters like Chardin (1699-1779) had started "to look at the life of the [ordinary men and women](#) of their time" (353), and in the sixteenth century we already had the paintings of Brueghel depicting [scenes from daily life](#), and in some paintings we have shown above. At the same time, while some painters like [Joshua Reynolds](#) (1723-92) continued to exhort artists "to strive after lofty and dignified subjects," "grand and impressive" art, Goya examined the [faces of the aristocracy](#) "with a pitiless and searching eye, and revealed all their vanity and ugliness, their greed and emptiness" (365). Great paintings continued, but the "foundations on which art had rested throughout its existence" were being undermined at an accelerated speed as the Industrial Revolution was added to the French revolutionary destruction of monarchical rule, the authority of the Catholic Church—by a new middle class "which often lacked tradition" and viewed art as a "perfect means of expressing individuality against all the rules and conventions."

The history of Western art has always been characterized by individual expression and the creation of new possibilities for art. The difference now was that artists had no ideals of perfection, no sense of loyalty to their ancestors, no traditions to limit their pursuit of the truth solely through their personalities. The purpose of art was merely to express one's personality, leading to a state of "permanent revolution" as artists "contested with each other over who was the most "creative." It is in the twentieth century, however, that Gombrich sees artists who "proposed to make a clear sweep of all conventions...which ultimately led them to a rejection of the whole Western tradition" (427).

We saw his admiration for Impressionists, who "did not differ in their aims from the traditions of art that

had developed since the discovery of nature in the Renaissance...Their quarrel with the conservative masters was not so much over the aim as over the means of achieving it" (407). He values the originality of van Gogh, who "liked the technique of painting in dots and strokes of pure colour, but under his hands it became something different from what these Paris artists had meant it to be" (408).

Van Gogh liked to paint objects and scenes which gave this new means full scope — motifs in which he could draw as well as paint with his brush, and lay on the colour thick just as a writer who underlines his words. That is why he was the first painter to discover the beauty of stubbles, hedgerows and cornfields, of the gnarled branches of olive trees and the dark, flamelike shapes of the cypress (417).

He views Cézanne (1839-1906), like Clark, as one of the greatest of this period: "he was constantly engaged in a passionate struggle to achieve in his painting that ideal of artistic perfection after which he strove" (408); while adding [that Cézanne](#) "had decided to start from scratch as if no painting had been done before him. The Dutch master [\[Willem Kalf\]](#) had painted his still life to display his stupendous virtuosity."

In his tremendous effort to achieve a sense of depth without sacrificing the brightness of colours, to achieve an orderly arrangement without sacrificing the sense of depth—in all these struggles and gropings there was one thing he was prepared to sacrifice if need be—the conventional 'correctness' of outline. He was not out to distort nature; but he did not mind very much if it became distorted in some minor detail provided this helped him to obtain the desired effect (413).

Seurat "studied the scientific theory of colour vision and decided to build up his pictures by means of small regular dabs of unbroken colour like a mosaic."

This, he hoped, would lead to the colours blending in the eye (or rather in the mind) without their losing in intensity and luminosity. But this extreme technique which became known as pointillism, naturally endangered the legibility of his painting by avoiding all contours and breaking up every form into areas of multicolored dots (414).

## Conclusion

It is in the "experimental art" of the 20th century—in the quick succession or simultaneous movements of Surrealism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Cubism, and Abstract Art—that Gombrich sees a complete break with the Western tradition. The sole task of the artist was now to create "something new." Many relied on non-Western sources for inspiration, African primitivism, Zen Buddhism, Chinese calligraphy, or "Egyptian principles." Abstract and cubist painters wanted "to become as little children" in order to revitalize a spontaneity threatened by mechanization, to reproduce "the memory of childish scrawls." The disregard for harmony and beauty was justified on the grounds of "honesty" for the truth. I agree with Gombrich that there was still great talent. I would mention such painters as Edward Munch, Picasso, Matisse and Dali. Gombrich mentions Kokoschka's [\*Children Playing\*](#), 1909, as a painting that "looked at children with a deep sympathy and compassion. He has caught their witfulness and dreaminess, the awkwardness of their movements and the disharmonies of their growing bodies" (431-2). But he struggles to find real greatness, as he moves swiftly from one movement to the next, without persuading us that Nicolas de Stael's painting, [\*Plage à Agrigente\*](#) consists of "simple yet subtle brush strokes [which] often give us a sense of light and distance without making us forget the quality of the paint" (460).

I believe that Western art was bound to decline partly for the reasons Clark gives. Fundamentally this decline was a product of the culmination of the Western individualism that nurtured this greatness in the first place until it ceased to be sustained by any traditions. H.W. Janson is correct: "without tradition" the "uniqueness, novelty, and freshness" of Western art would have been impossible. Modern artists came to the conclusion that standards cannot be set by prior generations but are the self-expression of individual artists who are in a war of liberation against the very principle of tradition, authority, and standards. This very attitude has now led to the denial that Western art was "better" than the art of any other culture. We can't restore the world of the past with its standards and world views. As Spengler told us: "Of great paintings or great music there can no longer be, for Western people, any question." We can at least, however, recognize the artistic greatness of the Western past, and teach our students about the history of painting, so they realize what a horrendous crime it is to destroy great art.

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*Ricardo Duchesne has written [a number of articles](#) on Western uniqueness. He is the author of [The Uniqueness of Western Civilization](#), [Faustian Man in a Multicultural Age](#), [Canada in Decay: Mass Immigration, Diversity, and the Ethnocide of Euro-Canadians](#).*

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Featured: "Still Life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar," by Willem Kalf; painted in 1669.

