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LOOK!

The Fundamentals of Art History

Third Edition

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Chapter 1

Introducing art history

Art is long, life is short.

Proverb attributed to Hippocrates (c. 460–357 BCE)

This chapter will introduce you to art history as an academic discipline. It distinguishes the aims and methods of art history from related disciplines like anthropology and aesthetics. It also attempts to answer two questions that are more complicated than they appear at first glance: What is art? and What is history?

What do art historians do? The object of art history

Art historians do art. But we don't make it, we study it. We try to understand what artists are expressing in their work, and what viewers perceive in it. We try to understand why something was made at the time it was made, how it reflected the world it was made in, and how it affected that world. We talk about individual artists and their goals and intentions, but also about patrons (the people who commission artworks), viewers, and the kinds of institutions, places, and social groups in which art is made and circulates—whether that's an art school, temple, or government agency.

What is "art"?

"Art" is one of those words that people use all the time but that is hard to define. All sorts of cultural and political values determine what gets included or not included under this term, which makes it difficult for people to agree on precisely

what art is. However, it's important to make the attempt as a first step in discussing what art history, as a discipline, actually does.

This process of definition is complicated for two reasons: first, the term "art" has not been around very long in Western culture; and second, there is rarely an exactly corresponding term in other cultures. In Europe, the term "art" as we commonly understand it today emerged in the Renaissance—earlier periods had no direct equivalent for it. The Greek philosopher Plato (c. 428–c. 348 BCE), for example, used the term *mimesis*, which means imitation, to talk about painting and sculpture. In ancient Greek, *demiourgos*, "one who works for the people," can refer to a cook as well as a sculptor or painter. Similarly, more than a thousand languages are spoken in Africa, and more than six hundred in Papua New Guinea, but none of them includes a precise translation for the term "art."

In defining this term, many people today would start from an essentially post-Renaissance definition of art as a painting, sculpture, drawing, print, or building made with unusual skill and inspiration by a person with specialized training to produce such works. Most people would agree, according to this definition, that the decoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling by Michelangelo (1475–1564) is art (even if they don't particularly like it themselves). What belongs in this category of "art" does shift over time. It often happens that objects excluded from this category at one time now easily qualify as art. In the nineteenth century, for example, people commonly excluded the sculpture, paintings, and architecture of Africa, the Pacific, and other regions of the world because they (wrongly) regarded these arts as "primitive" or inferior to Western art, not simply different from them.

One problem with this definition of "art" is that it consistently leaves out a lot of other things that people make and do. For example, it excludes useful objects like baskets or ceramic pots made by people with craft skills but with no professional training as artists. This kind of work is sometimes called "folk art" or "low art," to distinguish it from "high art" such as the Sistine Chapel. From this perspective, the category "art" doesn't include many things historically made by women in Europe and North America, including embroidery, quilts, and

hand-woven textiles. At the same time, people sometimes use this definition of "art" to exclude a lot of modern art, which they don't think is characterized by sufficient skill, seriousness, or conceptual complexity. (Maybe you've had the experience of being in a modern art gallery and hearing someone say—or even saying yourself—"A child could make that! That's not art.")

Although some people are perfectly happy to exclude anything from the category "art" that doesn't fit a fairly narrow definition, that's not a productive attitude for a scholar to take. Excluding things from a category is often a way to devalue them and to justify not engaging with them in a serious way. As I see it, "art" should be a flexible, inclusive category—a term and idea that get us looking at and thinking critically about all the different kinds of things people make and do creatively.

A working definition of art

For the purposes of this book, I'll define art as potentially any material or visual thing that is made by a person or persons and that is invested with social, political, spiritual, and/or aesthetic value by the creator, user, viewer, and/or patron. My definition of art includes the Sistine Chapel ceiling, but it also includes such things as a wood figure from Papua New Guinea, a quilt, an Ottoman ceramic pitcher, and an advertising poster. It includes ephemeral (non-permanent) things such as a masquerade costume made from leaves by the Bwa people of Burkina Faso in west Africa. Using the word "thing" here doesn't mean that a work of art has to be a concrete object like a marble sculpture—a film or a performance can also be art in this sense. All these things are made with special skills and with great attention to their appearance, although most would be excluded from the traditional category of "high art." In my definition, art may have economic value but not economic value alone. A pile of pine logs on a flatbed truck has economic value but isn't in the category of art—unless, of course, the loggers deliberately arranged the logs in a certain way that carries social/political/spiritual/aesthetic meaning.

Remember that I'm not using the term "art" because it's universal or inherent to the objects of our study, or because I

want to create hierarchies or make value judgements. Many artists and art historians today reject the idea that a work of art is, by definition, an inherently "higher" or privileged type of object. This is the idea that Barbara Kruger (b. 1945) critiques when she tells her viewers "You invest in the divinity of the masterpiece" (Figure 1.1). Rather, I use a broad definition of art because regarding things as "art"—putting them in that category—helps me ask better questions and opens up certain ways of thinking about them.

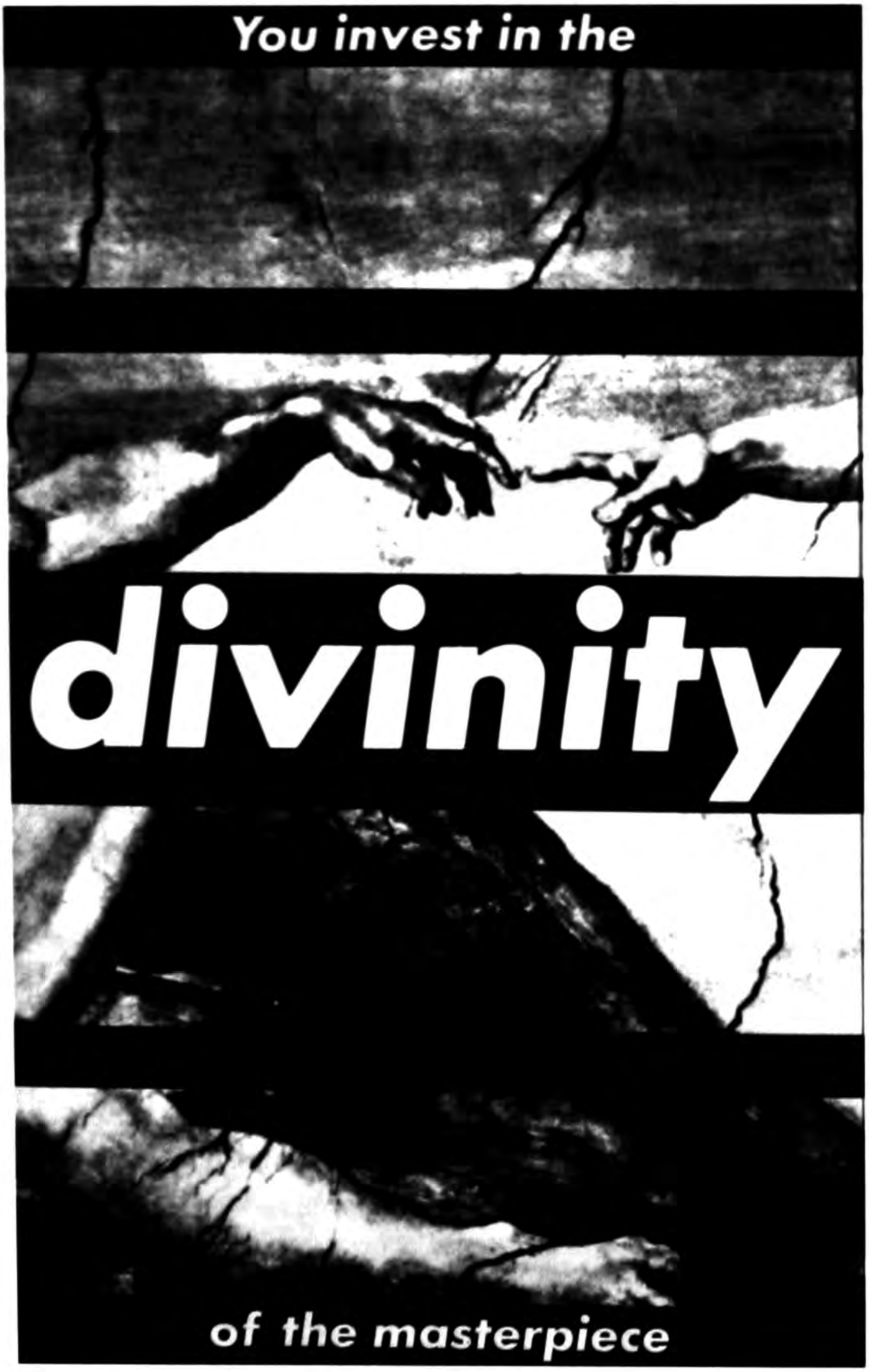
Though you may find the concept of art that I've outlined here challenging, you probably won't find it particularly hard to categorize the images included in this book as art. Most of the illustrations come from the major art-history textbooks, which focus primarily on well-known artworks that have been studied and considered important for some time.

What is "history"?

Our word "history" comes directly from the Latin *historia*, which means "inquiry" as well as "history." The *Webster's Dictionary* definition goes like this:

1. TALE, STORY
2. a: a chronological record of significant events (as affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes b: a treatise presenting systematically related natural phenomena c: an account of a patient's medical background d: an established record [a prisoner with a history of violence]
3. a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events [medieval history]

So how do we put these bits and pieces together into the practice that we call history? History is telling tales about the past—it is making stories. These stories are not fictions (although sometimes fiction can tell history). But histories are grounded in the events that happened—they have to be "true" in the sense that they are based on verifiable historical evidence. And yet all historians must confront the challenge of the gaps, omissions, misrepresentations, and inconsistencies in the various documents, objects, texts, and memories comprising the historical record. This is why writing or



1.1 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (You Invest in the Divinity of the Masterpiece)*, 1982. Photostat, 71¾ x 45½ in (182 x 116 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Kruger's words frame a detail of the Sistine Chapel ceiling (the ultimate masterpiece) that represents God reaching out to endow Adam with life (the ultimate act of creation). Her work critiques the ways that masterpieces are "made:" we as a culture decide to invest aesthetic and other kinds of value in certain works even as we devalue others.

telling history is an act of interpretation, creative as well as scholarly. Sometimes I think that being a historian is like being a weaver—history isn't a blanket already woven for us, but instead starts from the scraps of yarn that are the remains of a tattered old blanket. We take those bits and pieces of yarn and weave them again into a blanket. It's a new blanket, but if we're skilled weavers, it will tell us something of what the old blanket was like.

On top of all this, the chronological range of art history sometimes confuses students. How far in the past does art have to be for it to be history? Why is it that some art historians write about contemporary art? As I see it, art historians write about the art of the past, which both is history and tells history. They also write about art of the present that will be the history of this time: it is art that will tell people in the future about this present moment. Of course, contemporary art often has something to tell us, too, about the moment we live in. It can be a risky business, because the winnowing process of history hasn't taken place—artworks of enduring significance have yet to emerge as such. What if the art historian makes a mistake? What if her subject doesn't turn out to be as significant as she thought? There's no easy answer, except to say that, along with this risk, there's excitement, too, in telling the history of contemporary art, precisely because that winnowing process hasn't yet taken place.

Why is art history important?

It is the glory and good of Art
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth—to mouths like mine, at least.
Robert Browning (1812–89),
The Ring and the Book, *lines 842–4*

Why is art history important? This is one of those questions that you tend to ask yourself as you're working late into the night to prepare for an exam or write a paper. Why, you may ask, am I torturing myself with this course ...

Considered in the cold light of day, there are several possible answers to that question. Lots of undergraduates

take art history simply to fulfill a general education requirement for their degrees. For them it's a completely utilitarian undertaking. Other people study art history to become more cultivated, to possess some of the knowledge—and polish—that they feel an educated person ought to have. These are both legitimate reasons, as far as they go, but I think there are other answers to the question that are much more interesting.

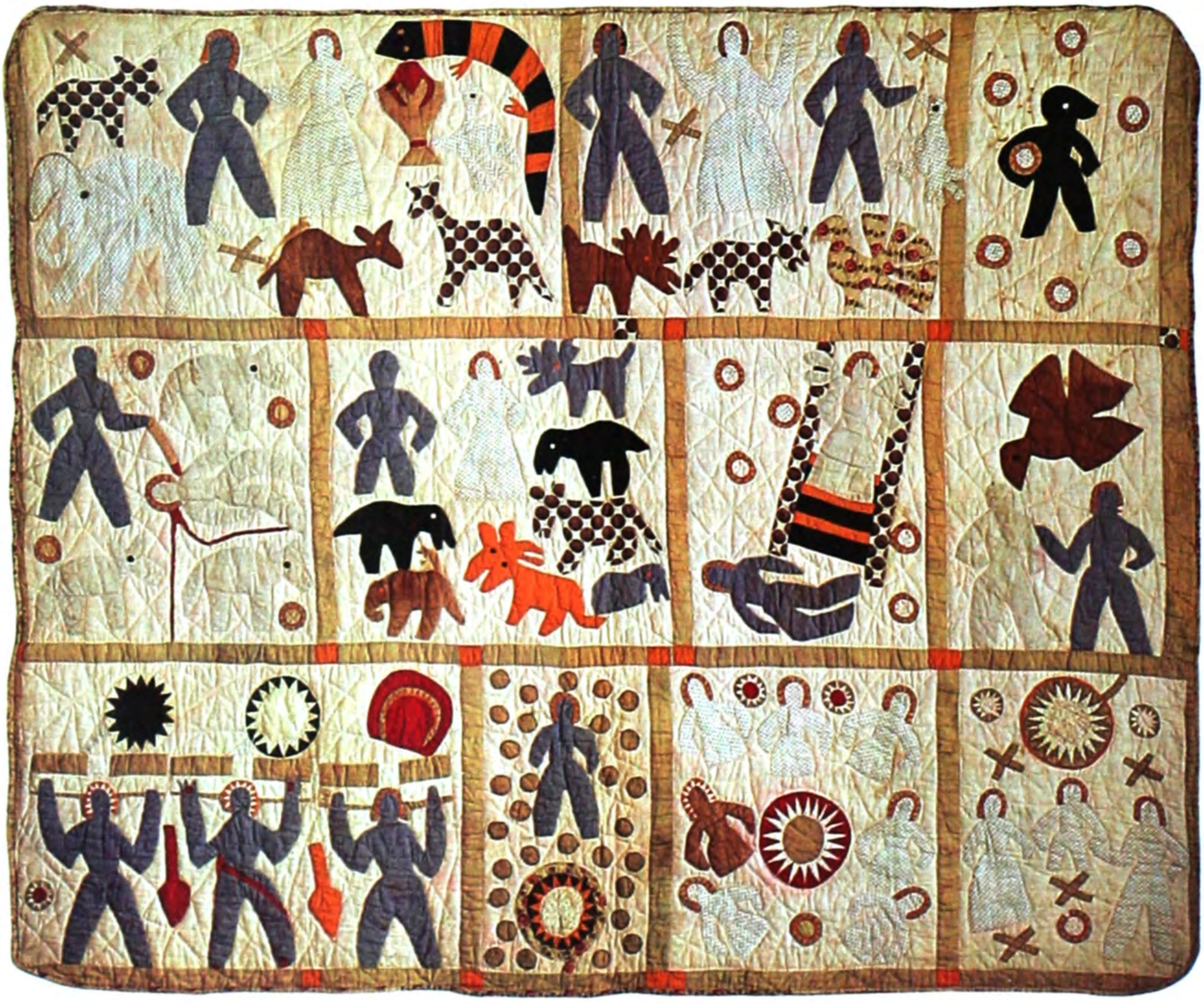
The first is that art history teaches you to think differently. It teaches you to ask interesting questions, to reject standard answers and conventional wisdom, to look beyond surfaces and obvious appearances, to see the nuances in things. Art history will help you develop skills in visual analysis and critical reading; you will learn to build solid arguments and to express your ideas effectively, both verbally and in writing. This training will not only help you if you want to become an art historian; it will also enhance your ability to practice a lot of different professions.

The second answer is that art history gives us unique access to the past, because history cannot be told only through documents, texts, and words. Human lives are short, but the things people make are enduring, and they give us a sense of what those past lives were like. As the poet Robert Browning said, art is a way of "speaking truth"—of expressing ideas, emotions, viewpoints that sometimes can't be expressed in any other way. If you want to know a culture's "truths," then look at its art.

I think there's another good reason to study art history, although people don't talk about it much. And that is pleasure. The joy of it. Taking a course is hard work, and there's always the grind of exams and paper deadlines. But I hope that at some point in your study of art history you'll experience the sheer joy of being totally absorbed in a work of art, of feeling that you "get" what Michelangelo or Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) or a Native American beadworker was trying to do. That you'll experience the excitement of art-history "detective work" as you piece together an interpretation, creating a narrative about a work or an artist or culture. That you'll feel awed by a great example of human creativity—and that you'll be stirred to happiness or anger or sorrow by it. Or that you'll be touched by the sense of humanity conveyed in the

trace of an artist's hand in a chisel mark on a stone surface or the stitches on a quilt (Figure 1.2).

Now maybe I'm a hopeless romantic, but I believe in the value of such experiences both intellectually and emotionally. As a teacher, I want my courses to change the way students see themselves and see the world—what's the point of studying art together if you leave my course with the same ideas, knowledge, and skills going out that you brought into it? I hope you will be open to the possibility of all that your engagement with art history can offer.



1.2 Harriet Powers, *Bible quilt*, c. 1886. 75 x 89 in (191 x 227 cm). National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Harriet Powers (1837–1910) was an ex-slave from Athens, Georgia, whose two surviving works are masterpieces of the quilting art and the best surviving early examples of this rich artistic tradition in the southern United States.

Art history's toolbox: formal and contextual analysis

When starting out in art history, you may find it helpful to group the different approaches to interpreting works of art under two broad categories: "formal analysis" and "contextual analysis." These approaches are dependent on each other. Often, art-historical interpretation requires us to do both at the same time.

Formal analysis includes those methods and questions that mostly concern the visual and physical aspects of a work of art. In formal analysis, you seek the answers to your questions in the work of art itself, usually without referring extensively to outside sources. You're exploring the visual effect of the work of art, looking at what the artist is trying to accomplish through visual means.

In contrast, contextual analysis often requires you to go outside the work of art for your answers. What you're trying to do in contextual analysis is understand how a work of art expresses or shapes the experiences, ideas, and values of the individuals and groups that make, use, view, or own it. To develop a contextual analysis, you might look at such evidence as documents, other images, books from the period, the artist's writings, and histories.

Although these terms may be unfamiliar, you already practice the basics of formal and contextual analysis—for example, when you take the time to look closely at an advertisement. Responding to an advertisement engages many of the same processes as art-history analysis. You interpret a visual image (and often an accompanying text) to decipher its message and evaluate this message in context. The context is usually a targeted consumer group, people who exhibit certain

Reading captions for information

Artist's name

A caption usually gives you the artist's name first. If the artist's (or architect's) name isn't known, then it may say something like "artist unknown" or list nothing at all. An expression like "After Polykleitos" means that the work is a copy by an unknown artist of an original by a known artist, in this case the ancient Greek sculptor Polykleitos. An expression like "Circle of Rembrandt" or "School of Rembrandt" indicates an unknown artist who is thought to have worked closely with, or been a student of, a known artist.

Title

The title of the work usually follows the artist's name. Sometimes a work is titled by the artist, as in sculptor Audrey Flack's (b. 1931) *Marilyn (Vanitas)* (see Figure 2.3). Sometimes the title is a descriptive one that the artist didn't give to the work but that is used as a convenient way to refer to it, for example the *Arnolfini Portrait* (see Figure 3.6). The practice of giving titles to artworks hasn't been used in all time periods and cultures, so many are named in this way. Sometimes a title refers to a patron or collector—for example, Velásquez's painting *Venus and Cupid* is also known as the *Rokeby Venus* after a famous collector who once owned it. In English-language titles, the first word and other main words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) usually start with a capital letter, while conjunctions (such as *and*) and prepositions (such as *by*, *from*) are lower-case. In other languages there are different conventions.

Date

The date for a work may be precise, as when it's signed and dated by the artist, or it may be an approximate date determined by scholars. In this case, a range may be given (for example, "460–450 BC" or "9th–10th century AD") or the Latin word *circa* ("around") may be used (*circa* is often abbreviated as "c."). BC means "before Christ" and is equivalent to BCE, "before the common era." AD means *anno domini* ("in the year of our Lord," or after the birth of Christ). It is equivalent to CE, or "common era."

Medium

A caption will usually also list the materials used in the work because photographs often cannot give a truly accurate impression of what materials make up a work.

Size

The measurements are important because they give you a sense of the work's scale. Size and scale are often hard to judge from photographs, especially in a textbook, which can picture a miniature portrait and a palace on the same page.

Period or culture

This tells you the work's original time period or culture (as in Edo Period, Japan, or a particular dynasty for Egyptian art). In art-history textbooks where the chapters are organized by period or culture, this reference may be omitted from the caption.

Collection and location

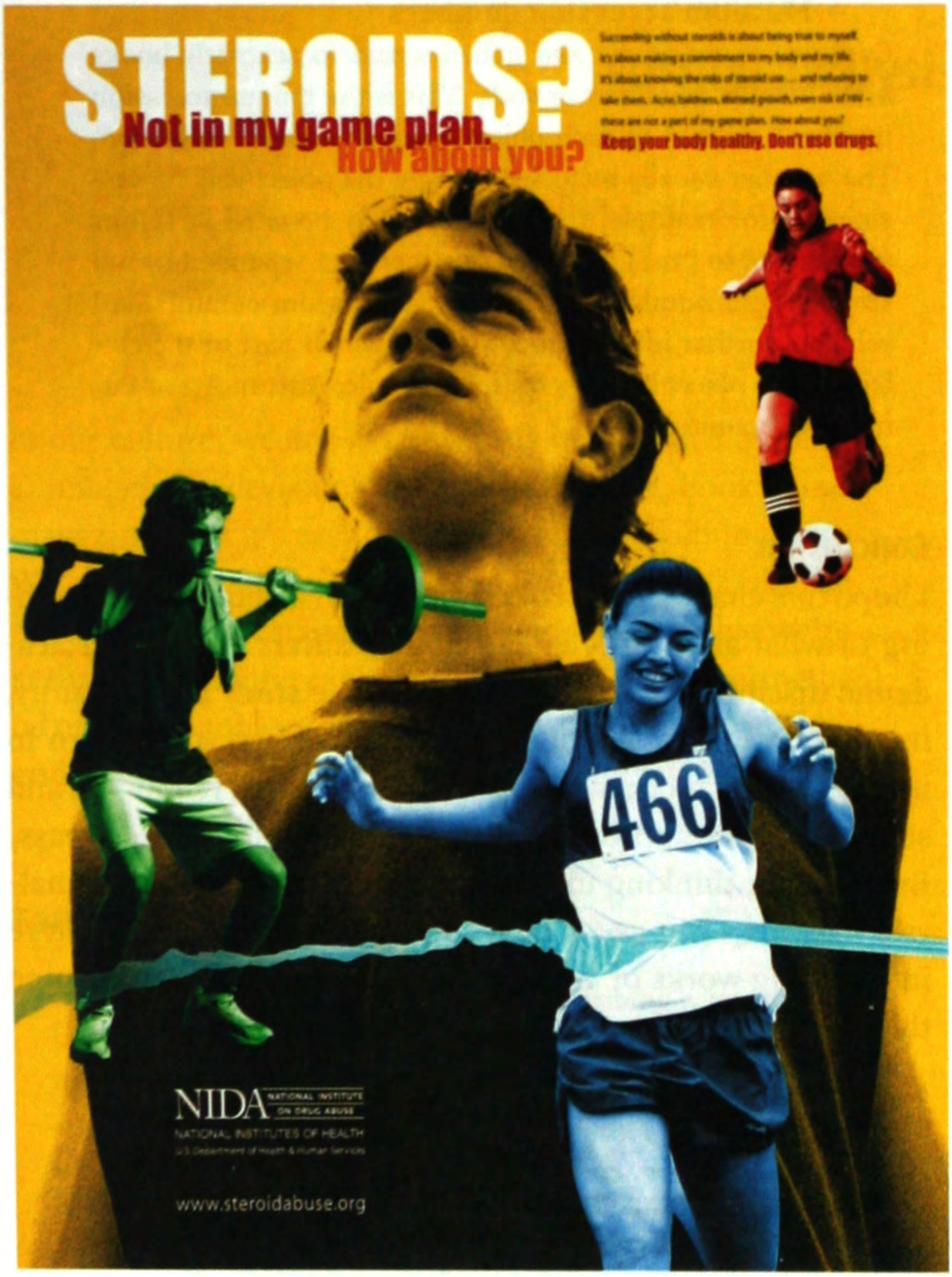
This tells you where the work is now. It is often the name and location of a museum or gallery, or the name of the collection that owns the work but that may not necessarily display it in public (such as the Government Art Collection in Britain). Where the work belongs to a private collector, the location may simply be given as "Private Collection," abbreviated to "Priv. Coll."

desirable characteristics. The ad is trying to persuade these consumers to purchase a product or, in the case of public service announcements, to inform them of something or persuade them to act in a particular way.

Let's take an example from a US National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) magazine ad campaign, which combines text and images to counter steroid use among high school athletes (Figure 1.3). Looking at the ad's formal qualities you note that the word "steroids" appears in large, bold type in the upper left corner of the ad; it attracts attention, yet is immediately undermined by the question mark that follows it. The message would shift dramatically if, say, the word "steroids" were followed by an exclamation mark. The message is underscored by the image of the athlete, whose appearance is clearly calculated to appeal to teenage readers. Note that he is very good-looking, with strong features and sexy, tousled hair, and is the same age as the target audience. He is pictured twice: in a close-up that lets the viewer see how good-looking he is, and also in action, lifting a large dumbbell, which suggests that he is a strong, successful athlete, even though he doesn't have the oversized muscles of someone on steroids.

The ad's visual message is enhanced by knowledge of its context. It targets high school athletes, and the text lists as the negative side effects of steroids: acne, baldness, stunted growth, and the risk of HIV. Three of these focus on physical appearance, about which high school students typically have a lot of anxiety. The list does not include some of the more serious long-term effects of steroid use, including liver tumors, heart attacks, strokes, and kidney failure, perhaps because these might seem too abstract or remote to young people, who often see themselves as invincible or immune to death. The brief, punchy text is written as if spoken by the teenage athlete depicted and not the National Institute on Drug Abuse. In other words, this isn't the preachy argument of some government bureaucrat, but the direct statement of an equal.

In the first paragraph, I analyzed the formal elements, focusing on design and the interaction of image and text to decipher the ad's message. In the second paragraph, I pursued a contextual analysis, relying on outside knowledge to try to understand the ad. You can take any advertisement and



1.3 Poster from a public information campaign by NIDA against steroid use, 2005

interpret its formal and contextual elements in a similar way. When you're browsing through a magazine, although you may not stop to work systematically through the process of formal and contextual analysis, your process of interpretation is related in many ways to art-historical methods.

Museum accession numbers

Captions in museums and galleries and in scholarly books often include a number or code. This is the unique accession number assigned to each object when it enters a collection. The number usually includes the date the object was "accessioned" (for example, the year 1977 may be cited in full or abbreviated to "77"), followed by other data separated by full stops. These numbers or letters give museum curators and scholars further information, such as which part of the collection the object belongs to (for example, African Art or European Ceramics).

Conclusion

I hope this chapter has provided you with a better understanding of what art history is and how it differs from other academic disciplines. As you advance in the study of art history, in addition to formal and contextual analysis, you'll learn to use theoretical models, such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and semiotics, that approach interpretation in specialized ways. But for now, thinking in terms of formal and contextual analysis may help you ask a full range of questions when you're interpreting works of art. The next two chapters will examine these fundamental methods of art history in more depth.