

Major Cultures Of Non-Western Art

This packet contains **very** brief summaries of the major geographic areas and cultures used by art historians to classify and analyze art works in Non-Western Art. That is the art created by the civilizations and cultures in Africa, India, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, China, Japan, Oceania and Native North and South America. This information has been gathered from many sources, including “Art Beyond The West” by Michael K. O’Riley, “Art History” by Marilyn Stokstad and “Art Across Time” by Laura Schneider Adams.

Non-Western cultures created art that was admired and set aside in a special place for protection; for instance, places of worship and ruler’s palaces. Western cultures also followed this tradition and in recent centuries created art museums where many people can see great art from the past and present. But art in Non-Western cultures is more often used every day, in the household and for spiritual rituals. As you learn about Non-Western art, you will learn about many of the world’s great religions that are important to billions of people around the world.

There are many other artists, art movements, and regional art that could not be covered in this short review. You are encouraged to explore widely and learn more about the beautiful, thought provoking, and exciting artworks created in the ancient and modern Non-Western World. If you are unsure if an artist or artwork is Western or Non-Western, please consult the list of regions and countries above.

This is just a beginning reference guide. You are expected to do more research on the web as you study individual art works and artists and use books and magazines from the library.

Words that are unfamiliar to you may be in the packet in the glossary provided to all students in this course.

The Art of The Silk Road and Central Asia

The Silk Road is the term historians give to the 4,000 mile maze of trade routes that connected the area around the Mediterranean Sea with the cultures of Arabia, Persia, India, China, Southeast Asia and Japan from the 2nd century BC through the 19th century. Luxury items such as silk, spices, slaves, perfumes, animals, gold and silver were the main trade goods. Traders, merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, soldiers and urban dwellers also brought science and technology, religious and cultural ideas from East to West and West to East.

The major Silk Road land routes traveled through Central Asia, a vast area of grasslands, mountains and deserts that stretches from the Black Sea in the west to the Sea of Japan in the east. The area now contains the countries of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Mongolia, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, (“stan” means “land of”) and much of southeastern Russia and northwest China. Cities such as Merv (Turkmenistan), Kashgar (Taklamakan Desert) and Dunhuang (China) were marketplaces along the Silk Road. Buddhist missionaries came from India and established monasteries that became shelters for travelers. They sponsored large artists’ workshops that created artworks for their temples.

The sea routes connected the Roman Empire on the Red Sea with China along the Indian Ocean. Ships traded with cultures in the areas we now know as Vietnam, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. From ports on the Red Sea goods were transported overland to the Nile and then to Alexandria from where they were shipped to Rome, Constantinople and other Mediterranean ports.

Nomadic tribes inhabited Central Asia as early as 3000 BC. Their artwork was small and portable, mostly jewelry, rugs and pottery. The tribes controlled the mountain passes and caravan routes across the deserts and grasslands and extracted tribute from traders from Iran, India and western China. The Scythians (6th to the 3rd century BC) favored a bold and powerful native style based on local animals often shown fighting or leaping and Greek gods and goddesses from the workshops of Greek cities on the Black Sea but the works were made especially to the taste of the nomads – small and of gold.

In the 4th century AD, Central Asian tribes conquered the Roman Empire. They settled in Europe and their animal style artwork influenced medieval art. In the 8th century, Muslims from Iran conquered many of the tribes of Central Asia. The people converted to Islam and built magnificent mosques with bright, colorful geometric designs influenced by Persian art. Calligraphy became important for artists who created copies of the Qur’an, the sacred book of Islam.

In the 12th century, Genghis Khan united the tribes from Central Asia and began the Mongol Empire. The armies of Genghis Khan’s grandson, Kublai Khan, conquered China and established the Yuan Dynasty. They were great patrons of the arts. In the 15th century the Mongols went on to conquer the subcontinent of India and establish the Mughal Empire. The Mughals promoted both the Muslim and Hindu religions and their artists.

An enduring artistic legacy of Central Asia is its magnificent carpets. Each tribe has its own specialized patterns and color combinations. Persian or oriental carpets were valuable commodities on the Silk Road and are still prized the world over for their unique designs.

African Art

In many African cultures, art is an integral part of people's lives. Objects are lavishly and beautifully decorated to satisfy the owners and because the object is fundamental to the community. These artworks, which are used in everyday and ceremonial settings, address individual and community needs and serve social, religious and political purposes. Artworks are an essential part of initiation rituals, planting prayers, harvest festivals, divination ceremonies and funerals. Humans and animals, the primary subjects in African art, depict desirable and undesirable aspects of human behavior.

Many African cultures believe in the power and importance of the spirit world. Ancestors and other spirits affect the way things happen in the daily world. By contacting these spiritual beings through rituals that include dance, music, prayer and displays of art, people can communicate with the other world and work with it to control the world around them. Masks, offering bowls, clothing, and ritual sculptures are all examples of this type of ceremonial art.

The earliest known African paintings are in caves in South Africa and are estimated to be over 25,000 years old. The same types of rock paintings are still created by some tribes in South Africa. Based on current practices, historians believe that rock paintings were part of community rituals to communicate with the spirits of dead ancestors and to ask for health, good weather, crops and peace.

The majority of African art was made of perishable materials – wood, clay, plant fibers and fabric. Most has not survived over the centuries. The Nok peoples (500 BC – 200 AD) of West Africa are one of the earliest cultures whose clay sculptures of the human figure still exist. The heads of the sculptures are large suggesting that culture may be the source of the later, widespread African belief that the head, as the site of one's individuality, is the spiritual essence of the body.

Later the Ile-Ife and Benin cultures developed in West Africa (1200 – 1800 AD). They were experts at lost wax casting to create idealistic portraits of their kings. Olorum, their High God and Creator, was the source of all beauty. True beauty, they believed, is inner beauty, the person's character and morality. Ideal art was symmetrical, balanced, had clear lines and forms and used decorations that enhanced its beauty. Today the Yoruba culture continues many of these artistic traditions.

Beginning in the 5th century BC northern Africa traded with the Greeks and Romans then later the Muslims. The great city of Djenne at the edge of the Sahara Desert was a powerful trading center in the 9th through 15th centuries AD. The Muslim influence, with its emphasis on geometric patterns and abstracted images of plants and animals was strong here. Ethiopia in Northeastern Africa converted to Christianity and created its own beautiful interpretations of the stories from the Bible.

Each cultural group in Africa has interesting traditions and beliefs and a rich story telling tradition. There are many different artistic traditions across the continent. As you do your research you will learn how each culture's artists incorporated their unique spiritual beliefs and their social values into their artworks.

Indian Art

The Indian subcontinent is surrounded on three sides by water and on the north side by the world's tallest mountains, the Himalayas. Before modern times it was not a country but a collection of regional kingdoms, which produced and shared common forms of art, religion and culture. From 1000 BC to the 15th century AD, artists served the great religions, producing sculptures, paintings and architecture of great beauty.

A great urban civilization developed in northwest India in the Indus valley from 2700 – 1200 BC. They built well-planned cities with walled neighborhoods, broad avenues, granaries and baths. No royal tombs, palaces or large public art have been discovered yet. Images of powerful bulls and humans in yoga positions carried over from the Indus Valley civilization to later Buddhist and Hindu art.

The great religions of India - Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism – developed around 1000 BC and have many common ideas. They all believe the world around us is an illusion and everyone should strive to reach the eternal spiritual reality that is everlasting. All three religions use meditation to reach spiritual enlightenment. Visualizing their gods helps meditation and religious leaders commissioned artists to produce images of gods in easily recognizable forms as humans and animals. Indian places of worship are built to be a map of the world of the gods and to help their followers ascend to heaven. Religiously inspired art and architecture were created to bridge the gap between the seen (unreal) and unseen (but real) worlds.

Early Buddhism artists showed only symbols of the Buddha – the wheel of eight laws or the footprint of Buddha. About the first century AD, artists began to show the human form of the Buddha, as a powerful man and the supreme meditator. His features are often smooth and idealized to show human perfection and spiritual purity. The pose of the statue and the gestures of the hands show different aspects of the Buddha, as teacher, healer or compassionate granter of prayers. Buddhist monasteries were great centers of learning.

The Hindus and Jains have many gods, but each is a manifestation of an important aspect of the supreme god. They show the body as a symbol of repose and detachment from the world. The Indian sense of beauty is based on sensuous figures, rich ornamentation, pronounced textures and intense colors that delight in the world as a gift from the gods – filled with the energy of the gods themselves.

Muslim invaders from the west conquered India in the 12th century. Then Mongol tribes from the north conquered the Muslims and converted to their religion. They adopted the artistic traditions of the Persian court and the Islamic religion. Artists in the Mughal royal workshops created art for the kings, nobles and wealthy merchants that celebrated the life of the court and the achievements of the king as well as stories from the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an. Paintings were brightly colored and extremely detailed, showing magnificent palaces with rich rugs and hangings, lush landscapes and elaborate clothes and jewels of the court.

In the 19th century the British conquered India and made it part of their empire. Indian artists learned the Western artistic traditions. In the 20th century many Indian artists are looking back to their own artistic heritage for inspiration.

The Art of China

Chinese culture is extremely ancient. The first societies began about 7000 BC and by 2200 BC the country was united under its first dynasty. Over its long history, ruling dynasties built and lost great empires, often stretching into Central Asia. Trade along the Silk Road and invasions from the north constantly brought new ideas from many lands to the artists of China. There were periods of peace and prosperity that alternated with periods of war. Styles of art changed over thousands of years, influenced by China's contacts with many other cultures.

The earliest cultures practiced ancestor worship and believed in an afterlife. By 2000 BC wealthy people buried luxurious grave goods with their dead, including food, furniture and ritual vessels. We know much about early Chinese life and art from these "homes" for the dead.

By the 6th century BC the Chinese developed Daoism, a system of principles to direct their private spiritual lives. Daoism stressed the importance of mediation and living in harmony with nature. Buddhism arrived in China during the 1st century AD. Early Buddhism brought the artistic traditions of India for sculpture and painting. Daoist and Buddhist religious officials commissioned art for their temples and rituals.

Chinese artworks are organized by the dynasty or time period when they were created. The Shang Dynasty (1700-1045 BC) tombs are known for their extremely skillful bronze castings and the first surviving examples of silk weaving. The Zhou Dynasty (1045 – 480 BC) developed an urban feudal society and jade carvings were highly prized. In 221 BC China was united under Emperor Qin Shihuangdi of the Qin Dynasty (221-209 BC). The Emperor was buried with an army of over 10,000 realistic, life-size terra-cotta warriors, chariots and horses.

During the Han Dynasty (206 BC –220 AD) the Silk Road was established and connected China to India, Iran and the Mediterranean Sea. Carved reliefs on tombs were packed with figures and highly complex. The Wei Dynasty (388 – 535 AD) controlled parts of northern China and commissioned Buddhist monks and artists to create monumental sculptures and religious centers in cave-temples. During this time, calligraphy became an accepted art form.

China was unified again under the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). Traders from the Silk Road brought Greek, Roman, Indian and Iranian artistic ideas. A vibrant urban culture developed and visual arts were highly prized. The Dunhuang cave shrines show Buddha and bodhisattvas in an opulent, courtly manner. During the Song Dynasties (960-1279) the merchant class grew and they began to collect art. Literati artists could be independent of the imperial court. Ink painting developed further into a highly regarded art form that showed solitary individuals in rugged landscapes, reflecting not realism, but spirituality.

Mongols from the north invaded China and established the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). Artists aimed to capture the spirit of the subjects they painted. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) distinctive blue and white ceramics developed to a high art form. Poetry was now an important part of landscape compositions. Manchurians from the north established the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). They supported and encouraged the traditional forms of Chinese art. Some artists studied and adapted European technique as contacts with modern Europe increased after 1500.

The Art of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a large peninsula east of India and south of China that includes the modern countries of Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Thousands of islands south of the peninsula comprise the modern nations of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.

Not much is known about the people who lived in this area before 2,000 BC because very little archeological work has been done. No ancient cities have been found or monumental architecture. The climate is hot and humid and only stone and metal sculptures have survived. It is believed that there was a rich tradition of woodcarving, considering the skills needed for the intricate and delicate work that remains.

About 200 BC Southeast Asia became involved with India and China because of the trade in luxury goods along the sea routes of the Silk Road, the time of the Roman Empire in the West and the Han Dynasty in the East in China. The sea routes required many stopovers in Southeast Asia as the ships traveled between the two empires.

The area was strongly influenced by India. Indian merchants stayed in the area and married into the local kingdoms, forming states with divine kings. They brought Hinduism with them and the traditions of great temple architecture and sculpture. Buddhist missionaries also came and brought their religion, social structures, the Sanskrit alphabet and Indian literature. Leaders of both religions were great patrons of the arts. The identifying attributes and gestures of their gods were the same as in India. They were shown with straight posture, balanced forms, and serene expressions, emphasizing compassion, purity and introspection. Artists created physical perfection but now the gods had distinctly Southeast Asian facial types and their bodies showed natural muscles and bones.

The Kingdom of Java protected the sea-lanes from 770-855 AD. Large numbers of Hindu and Buddhist temples were built including Borobudur in Indonesia. The Khmer Empire of Cambodia was founded in 802 AD and lasted until the 1400s, expanding into Thailand, Northern Vietnam and Malaysia. Angkor was the capital of the Khmer court and it was a vast royal city. There were thousands of temples; the most famous is now known as Angkor Wat built in the 12th century.

The royal courts of Java and Khmer commissioned narratives for temple walls to educate worshippers. Sculptures and reliefs showed events of Buddha's life and scenes from Hindu legends and mythology. However, the artists showed the dance, music and customs of the court and local life. There was less emphasis on jewelry; smooth areas contrasted with patterns in dress and hairstyle. Gods and kings were represented as superhuman; less spiritual beings were shown smaller.

The Khmer empire declined about 1190. Tribal people from south China invaded the northern area and the Thai empire grew. They became Buddhists and ruled for the next four centuries. Chinese artistic traditions influenced the arts, especially ceramics. In the early 16th century Southeast Asia came under the influence of Muslim and European traders. The great classical sculptural traditions of Southeast Asia came to an end. Indonesia became Muslim and only Thailand remained independent.

The Art of Japan

Japan is a nation of islands off the east coast of Asia. The Sea of Japan separates it from its nearest neighbors, China and Korea. Those two cultures influenced Japan during key periods of its development. But Japan blended those ideas with its native artistic aesthetic that stressed unspoiled nature, natural materials like clay and wood, asymmetry rather than symmetry and simple handmade forms.

The earliest culture in Japan is the Jomon (10,000 – 300 BC), a hunter-gather society that is the only one in the world to create pottery. Jomon pottery is distinguished by complex coiled clay designs that are asymmetrical and sculptural. The Yayoi culture (300 BC – 300 AD) began cultivating rice and developed a complex society that led to the imperial family. The Kofun culture (300 – 710 AD) built large hill-shaped tombs that were guarded by clay figures of warriors, singers and horses. The great Shinto shrine at Ise, built in the 4th century, shows a unique Japanese style of wooden architecture. Buddhism was introduced into Japan in the 6th century when formal contact with Korea and China began. New forms of art, government, Chinese writing, medicine, music and city planning changed Japan.

During the Nara period (710-794), Japanese traveled freely to Tang Dynasty China. Buddhist temples were built using Chinese architectural traditions. The Todaiji temple in the city of Nara was built on a grand scale to impress everyone that a strong government ruled Japan. The Heian era (794-1185) was the great flowering of court culture in the capital city of Kyoto. In 838 Japan closed her doors to China and made a determined effort to develop native forms of art and culture. Lady Murasaki wrote the world's first novel "The Tale of Genji." New styles of painting and calligraphy developed.

During the Muromachi Period (1392-1573) powerful clans outside of Kyoto rebelled against the taxes imposed by the emperors. A military shogun controlled Japan from Kamakura. The samurai warrior was now the hero. Daimyo, clan rulers, commissioned artists to decorate their castles and commemorate their military victories. The samurai adopted Zen Buddhism, which stressed mental and physical discipline and self-denial. Zenga, the art of Zen monks, aided meditation. During the Momoyama Period (1573-1615) Japan was unified after many battles. The Momoyama generals were great patrons of the arts. In public their artists built grand audience halls in elaborate castles, such as Himeji, but in private they preferred the rustic Shinto aesthetic and the tea ceremony.

The Tokugawa Shogunate brought peace to Japan during the Edo Era (1615-1868). The traditional arts, pottery, painted screens and religious art continued in Kyoto and Osaka, but new art forms developed in the new capital, Edo (Tokyo). Literacy was more widespread and illustrated novels, romances, travel guides and tales of the supernatural were published. Woodblock prints quickly developed into a fine art. Colorful prints of fashionable women and famous male Kabuki actors replaced traditional images of Buddha, samurai, Zen masters and misty landscapes. Peace brought prosperity and more people traveled. The new middle class eagerly collected views of popular landscapes. America and Europe forced Japan to reopen its door to international commerce in the late 1850's. Japanese art became very popular in the West and Japanese artists began adopting western artistic techniques.

The Art of Oceania

Oceania covers a huge geographic area across the central and southern Pacific Ocean. Melanesia (black islands) is the continent of Australia and the nearby islands of Papua New Guinea and the Solomons. Micronesia (small islands) includes the island groups of Marianna and Carolina. Polynesia (many islands) stretches from Hawaii in the north to the Easter Islands in the east and New Zealand in the south.

Each island group developed its own cultural and artistic traditions. But two ideas are central to the majority of the people of Oceania: *mana*, sacred power in individuals, works of art and a wide variety of objects and *marae*, locations that have unusually large quantities of *mana*. The *mana* in works of art made in the service of the gods come from the materials from which they are made, the *mana* of the artist and the correctness of the rituals when they are used. Sacred places with *marae* were focal points for rituals dedicated to the gods and ancestors.

Australia was settled about 40,000 BC. We now call the native peoples Aboriginals. Aboriginal art and rituals link them with their ancestors who created the land and remain in its rocks, plants and animals. Aboriginal artists do not create art – the Ancestor spirits give the art to the artists who copy them for others to see. They call their spiritual world *Jukurrpa* that we roughly translate as “Dreaming.” Shapes and patterns that look abstract to us have complex cultural meanings, reflecting the spiritual powers of the Ancestors.

The Lapita culture in Melanesia created very intricate pottery designs, using many concentric circles, spirals and parallel lines. Elements of these designs can still be seen in the arts of Melanesia and Polynesia. In Papua New Guinea important village rituals took place in large communal men’s houses that had tall peaked roofs. Inside were elaborate altars with sculptures, paintings and feathered crests. In New Ireland, artists carve highly ornate poles, figures and boats for funeral rituals. Many are painted with contrasting colors and mix bird and fish designs.

Micronesia was settled about 4,000 BC. “Bai-ra-Irrai” is a communal meetinghouse built in 1700. The carvings on its soaring roof illustrate the clan history. Textiles, baskets and pottery were given as gifts to strengthen family ties or diplomatic bonds. The women who created these “portable arts” used geometric patterns, symmetrically arranged with straight edged forms.

Different island groups in Polynesia were settled from about 200 - 900 AD. They had a highly stratified society with many gods, legendary heroes, deified ancestors and spirits. In Tahiti, tattooing is an art form. The practice developed out of body painting, one of the oldest art forms in the world. Tattoos enhance the status, beauty and *mana* of their owners. In Hawaii feathers were signs of high rank. Sculptures of gods may have feathered headdresses in the sacred colors, red and yellow. Women adapted *tifai fai*, traditional Polynesian designs and colors, to quilting to create a bold new form for artistic expression.

From 1000 – 1500 AD Easter Island artists carved monumental stone gods, known as *moai*, and placed them on platforms near the seashore. The largest *moai* were as high as seven story buildings and the focus of ancestor rituals. “Te Hau-ki-Turanga” Meetinghouse shows that the Maori of New Zealand were excellent wood carvers and engineers. Its walls, ceilings, and rafters are covered with complex imagery of their spiritual world. Unfortunately Christian missionaries influenced the peoples of Oceania to destroy much of their artistic heritage in the 19th century but now they are working hard to revive their traditional art forms.

The Art of Native North America

Native North Americans lived in what are now modern Canada and the United States. Their many diverse cultures developed because of the wide range of landforms and resources available to them – from the forests of the coasts to the plains in the center of the continent and the deserts of the southwest. Many cultures shared the religious idea that their leaders (sometimes called shamans) could travel to another world, communicate with the powers there and return with messages and assistance. Shamans used their powers to heal the sick, assist hunters or warriors, and control weather. They often wore masks and used beautiful ritual objects. Frequently artists were considered noble and held in high respect.

Two major cultures occupied the eastern woodlands of North America. The Adena (1100 – 750 BC) made objects from stone, copper and bones that they buried with their rulers. The Hopewell (100 BC – 500 AD) spread over most of the eastern U. S. They created sacred areas of complex earthen mounds. The largest earth ramparts are near Newark, Ohio and cover four square miles. A sixty-mile processional way connected it with another religious center.

After the Hopewell disappeared artistic activity moved to the south and west. The Mississippian culture had large cities across the area. Cahokia (near present day St. Louis, MO), which housed 20,000 people, was the largest city in North America about 1600. Monk's Mound in Cahokia was a religious center with large pyramids and ceremonial plazas. Artists engraved stylized images of animals and ritual performers on pottery and copper.

The northwest coast Haida, Tlingit, and Kwakiutl cultures were expert woodcarvers. They created totem poles with stylized animals to identify their clan houses and record their history. Artists selected characteristic forms, such as eyes, claws and fins then created bold interlocking, broadly rounded contours and lines. Their artists were considered to have supernatural gifts and received commissions from distant villages.

Before 1300 AD the Anasazi lived in what is now the southwest U. S. and are known for their *pueblos*, large apartment buildings around great courtyards with *kivas*, round buildings for religious ceremonies. Later the Hopi and Navajo cultures developed. They were part of a great trading network that connected Mexico with the Great Plains. As part of Navajo rituals to restore harmony to the community, male artists create sand painting using many traditional symbols. Women artists create dynamic weavings to imitate the transformations of Mother Earth as she creates the ever-changing form of the world.

The original Plains Indians were the Hidatsa. Later tribes included the Sioux, Crow, Cheyenne, Apache and Arapaho. Their chiefs wore great theatrical headdresses and ceremonial garments. Women artists belonged to art guilds and passed their skills to their daughters. After contact with Europeans small glass beads replaced traditional porcupine quills for ornamental patterns on clothing and personal articles. The Plains Indians believed the colorful reflective beads came from the spirit world and used them on animal skins, baskets and boxes. Women wove baskets with designs they believed the spirits communicated to them in dreams.

The Art of Native Central and South America

Native Central Americans lived in the areas that are now the modern nations of Mexico, Honduras, Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama; native South Americans lived in what is now Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Argentina. Although there was very little contact between Central and North America, many of these southern cultures also shared the religious idea that their leaders (sometimes called shamans) could travel to another world, communicate with the powers there and return with messages and assistance.

Ancient peoples began farming and raising animals thousands of years ago in Central America. Then the Olmec culture (2250 – 300 BC) developed in the area of Mexico along the lower Gulf Coast. The Olmecs carved great portrait sculptures of their leaders with broadly curved features and simple forms. The portraits, some over 10 feet tall, were placed near public buildings. The Mayans (200 – 1000 AD) built great city-states in eastern Mexico and Honduras. They developed a writing system used on monumental buildings to record the great deeds of their rulers who directed trade, politics, war, religion and the production of art for rituals and recording the rulers' glorious achievements.

At the same time in the valley that is now Mexico City, the Teotihuacan culture (1 – 650 AD) erected the great Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. Through those temples, priests entered the other world and returned with messages from the gods. Their capital city in the 5th century had over 500 workshops where painters, potters and sculptors created trade goods found throughout Central America. The Mixtecs (1200-1400 AD) were greatly influenced by the Mayans and Teotihuacans. They were very skilled metalworkers, stone carvers and painters. They created books illustrating their mythology and historical events. When the Spanish discovered America, the Aztecs (1325 – 1520) ruled central Mexico. Their capital was a well-planned city with public art, plazas, gardens and temples. In 1519 the Spanish destroyed the city and all its artworks.

The west coast of South America saw the first cultures develop about 3000 BC. The Chavin culture (900 – 200 BC) used many animals in their artworks – jaguars, eagles and serpents surrounded by abstract patterns and complex stories. The Nazca (200 BC – 600 AD) inhabited the deserts of southern Peru. They carved fantastic images of birds and animals into the earth, sometimes the length of four football fields. Nearby the Paracas (700 BC – 1 AD) had elaborate rituals for funerals. Great artworks, including headdresses and clothing, were buried with high-ranking persons. The Tiahuanaco and Huari (600 – 1200 AD) created a great religious and cultural center that controlled what is now southern Peru and northern Bolivia. Their artists created animal images of great variety using varied colors, placement and repetition.

The Moche (200 – 600 AD) of Northern Peru are best known for their naturalistic portrait ceramics that showed a wide range of face types, figures and figure groups. The Chimú Empire (1150 – 1460 AD) took over the coastal desert area after the Moche. They built roads, canals, and many public buildings. Their capital, Chanchán, had ten large palace compounds. The Incan Empire (1300 – 1530 AD) extended from the coasts to the mountains of Peru, Chile and Ecuador. Major roadways radiated out from their capital, Cuzco, and connected all the sacred places of their culture. The Incans believed that stones had spiritual powers and they became great stoneworkers. Machu Picchu, their royal retreat in the mountains, is testament to their great skills. Its isolation saved the Incan temples from destruction by the Spanish in 1530.

Colonial and Contemporary Non-Western Art

The visual arts have always changed, sometimes slowly over centuries and sometimes swiftly in just a few years. The arts change because there are changes within the culture, as we saw in Edo Japan in the 1600's when a growing middle class became enthusiastic patrons of the woodblock print and Kabuki Theater. The arts also change because of influences from outside the culture. When the Mongols conquered India and then converted to Islam, paintings of historical events and court life became more important than the religious sculptures of Buddhism and Hinduism.

From 1492 until the 1960's the Non-Western cultures changed tremendously because of outside influences. The major nations of Europe conquered many areas of Africa, India, China, Oceania, Southeast Asia, and North and South America. The Europeans carved up the continents into colonies. They exploited each area's natural resources and used the colonies as markets for their manufactured goods. During the colonial period, traditional Non-Western arts were judged to be primitive oddities and Christian missionaries convinced many people to destroy their own artistic heritage. Frequently artworks of precious metals and jewels were confiscated then melted down for the Treasuries of the colonial powers.

Most Non-Western countries have regained their freedom through non-violent and violent means. Many post-colonial countries use their arts to unite the diverse ethnic groups within a country. They are reviving traditional forms of art, dance, music and literature; establishing art schools, museums and libraries. Non-Western artists are going three ways in the modern world: 1) traditional artists – reviving and preserving earlier forms; 2) cross cultural artists – new forms of expression that combine the arts of the ancestors with Western forms of art to create a new synthesis; 3) contemporary artists – following the major trends in art from Europe and America, such as cubism, expressionism, graphic design, abstract art or realism and bringing a fresh interpretation to these styles.

A new international art is developing. Artists can draw strength and inspiration from every and any source of ideas they find around the world. There are multiple and rich sources of media, styles and materials. Artists have flexibility of thought and imagination, an ability to move between cultures and ideas in order to appreciate and understand new images as they emerge. Ideas move between local, regional, national, international, continental and global artists. It is easier to transmit images among cultures and communicate instantly across the world, so contemporary art is not limited by geography or one visual tradition. As the standard of living rises around the world, the market for traditional and contemporary art expands. More people enjoy the arts of their own culture and of cultures around the world.

The artists of the Non-Western world have challenged and broadened the Western world's ideas of what art is, why it is created and how it is used by each culture. We are all the richer because of them. Each of the geographic areas that are studied in this course has exciting artists who express their ideas, values and beliefs in traditional, blended and new forms. Enjoy your research.