

Survey of Western Art 1: Prehistoric to Gothic

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This curriculum guide covers a comprehensive introduction to early western art (approximately 30,000 BCE through 1300 CE), presenting the iconic monuments of European and Mediterranean culture, including architecture and the built environment, paintings and sculpture, manuscripts and the decorative arts, as well as archeological sites and materials. The extensive range – both geographic and historic – coupled with a focus on key works, will establish a foundation in art history and a point of departure for further study (assuming this course is followed by its companion – “[Survey of Western Art 2: Renaissance to Postmodern](#)”). Students will learn to interpret works within their cultural contexts, developing both visual acuity and descriptive vocabularies. Readings will center on the standard texts with a sampling of specialist articles.



Magdalenian, Bison licking its back, 15th to 10th millennium BCE. Image and original data provided by Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.; artres.com

Section 1: Prehistoric: Paleolithic to Bronze Age

The Prehistoric Era (about 30,000 BCE through 200 CE) is documented across continental Europe, into Asia and throughout the United Kingdom from the Paleolithic period through the Iron Age. The selection includes the earliest enigmatic carved human and animal figures such as the Venus of Willendorf, cave paintings from Lascaux, Altamira, and other locations, the earthworks and megaliths of Stonehenge, as well as other sites, and culminates with the refined tools and objects of the Celto-Galic Iron Age.

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Section 2: Ancient Near-Eastern: Mesopotamia to Persepolis

The ancient history and culture of the Near East from Mesopotamia to Persepolis (8000 BCE – ca. 330 BCE) are illustrated through images of the settlements at Ur and beyond – from architectural monuments and artifacts, to diminutive Neolithic plaster figures and coveted golden objects, to the basalt stele of Hammurabi and the glazed brick reliefs of the Ishtar Gates.

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Section 3: Egyptian: Predynastic to Ptolemaic

Egyptian art and civilization are presented from the early dynastic period of ca. 3000 BCE until the decline of the New Kingdom, around 1200 BCE. Tomb complexes like the Great Pyramids at Giza and the burial site at Deir

el-Bahri are among the monuments surveyed, along with accompanying objects and artworks, including wall paintings, relief sculpture, and free-standing statuary in a variety of materials.

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Section 4: Aegean: Cycladic to Mycenaean

The arts of the Aegean are illustrated from the early Cycladic to Mycenaean periods (6000 BCE to 1100 BCE), including views of a diminutive ivory sculpture, frescoes from Thera, and Mycenaean gold. The Minoan period is revealed through the study of the palace at Knossos and associated objects – wall paintings, statuary, and ceramics.

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Section 5: Ancient Greek: Geometric to Hellenistic

The artistic heritage of Greece from the Geometric period to high Classicism and Hellenism (1000 CE -100 CE) is represented by the architectural complexes at Paestum, the Acropolis and Pergamon, as well as sculpture, including the kouros and kore figures, and classics like the Kritios Boy, the bronze Boxer, the Victory of Samothrace, the Dying Gaul, and the Venus de Milo. Vase painting, mosaic, and metalwork are also presented.

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Section 6: Etruscan: Villanovan to Classical

The arts of the Etruscans, who occupied modern day Tuscany and surroundings from about 700 BCE- 200 BCE, are predominantly represented by funerary artifacts – wall paintings, sarcophagi, relief sculptures, as well as statuary and sophisticated objects of daily life.

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Section 7: Roman: Republican to Late Empire

The Romans dominated territory from Africa and the Middle East to the British Isles from about 27 BCE through 500 CE. Their innovations in engineering and architecture are presented in views of aqueducts, the Colosseum, the Pantheon, various fora, and triumphal arches, among other monuments. Their adherence to the sculptural tradition of the Greeks is traced in masterworks like the Farnese Hercules, while innovations in portrait busts are documented alongside developments in wall painting, notably at Pompeii.

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Section 8: Early Jewish: Solomonic to Imperial

The traditions of early Jewish art are documented beginning with tribal times through the Roman period (ca. 1000 BCE – ca. 400 CE). Architecture includes Solomonic and Herodian sites. Wall paintings from the synagogue at Dura-Europos are featured along with sculpture and decorative arts.

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Section 9: Early Christian: Pre-Constantinian to Imperial

The emergence of early Christian iconography is traced from about 300 CE to 500 CE, when pagan motifs of previous cultures were adapted to new purposes. The selection includes architecture – the basilica churches of St. Peter’s and Sant’Apollinare – sarcophagi and relief carvings, ivories, mosaics, and illumination.

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Section 10: Early Byzantine: Constantinople to Kiev

Byzantine art is chronicled from the earliest time when classical influences prevailed to the rise of Constantinople under Justinian and its conquest by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 (500 CE to ca. 1450 CE). Churches and monasteries are featured – Hagia Sophia, San Vitale (Ravenna), St. Mark’s (Venice), Hosios Lukas (Boeotia), and Santa Sophia (Kiev) – including views of their dazzling mosaics. Ivories, manuscripts, and icon paintings are also illustrated.

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Section 11: Early Islamic: Umayyad to Ottoman

This image group documents the creative output of monasteries and other circles throughout Medieval Europe from the Hiberno Saxons up to the time of Charlemagne and later, to the Ottonian dynasty (650 CE – ca. 1000 CE). The ecclesiastical complexes at Aachen and Hildesheim are shown, along with the output of the Christian communities: manuscripts – The Book of Kells and the Gospel of Ebbo, among others – ivories, and reliquaries.

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Section 12: Romanesque: Monastic Europe 1050-1300 CE

The churches and cathedrals at Compostela, Cluny, Pisa, Speyer, Durham, and Autun provide material witness to the prolific output of Europe’s Christian communities along with their production in the allied arts: relief sculpture as, for example, that of Giselbertus; illumination; the crafting of reliquaries; wall painting and needlework, exemplified here by the extraordinary Bayeux Tapestry.

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Section 13: Gothic: Paris to Padua

The Gothic era is captured in architectural images beginning with Saint Denis in Paris, taking flight at Chartres and Sainte-Chapelle, and spreading across Europe to Italy, Germany, and Great Britain. Architectural sculpture and stained glass are documented along with ivories and reliquaries. The associated arts – illumination, as practiced by Jean Pucelle – and tapestry – the Angers Apocalypse by Nicolas Bataille – are also included. The seminal developments of Italian painting, innovations of Cimabue, Duccio, Giotto, and Lorenzetti provide the foundation for Renaissance artists.

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