

# Art and Time



Art and Time

By

Derek Allan

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P U B L I S H I N G

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“A work of art is an object, but it is also an encounter with time.”

—André Malraux, 1935



# CONTENTS

List of Illustrations .....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	xi
Prologue.....	xiii
Chapter One.....	1
Groundwork	
Chapter Two.....	11
Eternity	
Chapter Three.....	27
History	
Chapter Four.....	51
Metamorphosis	
Chapter Five.....	121
Distractions	
Conclusion.....	153
Appendix: Works by Malraux .....	165
Bibliography.....	167
Index.....	175



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1	<i>Victory of Samothrace</i> . 3rd-2nd century BC .....	3
Fig. 2	Bertram of Minden. <i>Expulsion from Paradise</i> . 1379-83 .....	14
Fig. 3	Botticelli. <i>Birth of Venus</i> . c.1484 .....	14
Fig. 4	Titian. <i>Entombment of Christ</i> . c.1520 .....	16
Fig. 5	<i>Christ in Majesty</i> . Autun, France. c.1130.....	49
Fig. 6	Relief panels, Borobudur. 9th century.....	76
Fig. 7	<i>Gudea as architect</i> . c.2150 BC .....	133
Fig. 8	Alberto Giacometti. <i>Cubist Composition I</i> . c.1926-27 .....	133
Fig. 9	Pharaoh Djoser. c. 2630 BC .....	156



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## PROLOGUE

In my first year of secondary school, the English curriculum included one of Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* as it happened. Some of us were rather daunted by the prospect of studying Shakespeare, and our English master, no doubt suspecting this, did his best to lift our spirits. Shakespeare's plays, he assured us, had been enjoyed by generations of readers and playgoers for some four hundred years. Many works by his contemporaries had fallen by the wayside and were now virtually forgotten but Shakespeare had "lived on". He was a writer whose works had endured.

The comment set me wondering. What interested me was not simply the idea that Shakespeare's plays had endured: even at that age I had often heard the commonplace observation that outstanding or "great" works of art endure across the ages. The phrase that caught my attention was "lived on". What exactly did it imply? A play, after all, was not alive like a human being. How could it "live"? What special power did certain works possess that enabled them to remain vital and alive when so much else that was contemporaneous with their creation had been overtaken by time? The Elizabethan era makes us think of galleons and Spanish gold, battles with swords and muskets, bitter quarrels about religion that seem remote and unimportant today, and the first European footholds in North America – in short, an era past and gone. What inner power did a work like *The Merchant of Venice* possess that enabled it to survive the tides of historical change and, in my English master's phrase, "live on"? By what means does a work like this remain a living presence after the passage of some four centuries, when the world from which it came is known to us, if at all, only in the pages of history books?

Needless to say, I found no answers to this question at that young age but it continued to intrigue me in the years that followed, as it has no doubt intrigued others; and my puzzlement only increased as I became familiar with the world of visual art which contains so many works from early civilizations such as ancient Egypt, Pre-Columbian America, and the Buddhist cultures of Gandhara and India. If Shakespeare makes us wonder why and how art endures, this vast array of works from the more distant past, which we encounter so frequently in today's art museums, poses the

question even more acutely. The point at issue, once again, is not just the obvious, well-known fact *that* great works endure. Still less is it an attempt to turn the fact of endurance into a criterion that might distinguish great works from others – to institute what is sometimes called a “test of time”. The question at stake is the nature of this capacity to endure. What specific *power* do certain works possess that allows them to defy the tides of history and speak to us across the centuries with the immediacy and vitality of something that might have been created yesterday, while all else falls gradually into oblivion?

This book is about that power: the power of art to defy, or “transcend”, time. In terms of academic fields of study, the topic falls within the discipline of aesthetics or the philosophy of art (the terms are more or less interchangeable) and, naturally enough, it was to writers in this field that I first turned in search of answers. Unfortunately, however, disappointment awaited me. To my considerable surprise, I discovered that contemporary writers in the philosophy of art have almost nothing to say about the power of art to transcend time, and that what little they do say barely skims the surface of the topic. There are reasons for this state of affairs, I believe, and in later chapters I suggest what they might be. It is unhappily the case, nevertheless, that a philosopher of art who ventures into this field today is obliged to navigate his or her own way with little guidance from others. To a large extent, therefore, the chapters that follow break new ground and extend contemporary aesthetics into areas that have been overlooked and allowed to languish for a long period of time.

There would, of course, be little point in writing a book such as this if I had not progressed beyond my initial stage of wonderment – if I were still just asking questions and had no solutions to propose. Fortunately, this is not the case. My aim in this study is not simply to highlight the power of art to transcend time but also to provide an explanation of that power – to describe the nature of the transcendence and explain why it operates the way it does. My explanation, I should say clearly at the outset, is based on the thinking of the twentieth century French writer, André Malraux, who published a series of major works on the theory of art, the best known of which are *The Voices of Silence* and *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*.<sup>1</sup> Malraux is a conspicuous and important exception to the situation I have just described. Unlike most modern philosophers of art, he not only rec-

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<sup>1</sup> A list of the major works by Malraux cited in this book is provided in the Appendix with English translations of the titles. See page 165. The first section of *The Voices of Silence* has been published separately as *The Museum without Walls*.

ognises the need to address the question of how and why art transcends time but he also provides a coherent and persuasive answer. The subject matter of this book is not limited to an exposition of Malraux's ideas because there are other important issues to cover as well; but without those ideas, it could never have been written.

I have devoted part of this work – mainly Chapters Two and Three – to the intellectual history of my topic and it is important to say why. Despite its neglect in modern aesthetics, the power of art to transcend time, or, in more general terms, the temporal nature of art, was a prominent theme in Western thought over the centuries following the Renaissance. The present study argues that the answers we have inherited from this period are no longer adequate, but they have, nevertheless, left a deep imprint on the way we think about art, and even, ironically enough, on the discipline of aesthetics itself. If we wish to develop an understanding of the temporal nature of art that makes sense of the world of art as we know it today, an important first step is therefore to reflect on this intellectual heritage, recognise its influence on our thinking, and see why it is no longer adequate.

The epigraph to this study is a statement by Malraux in a speech in 1935 that “A work of art is an object, but it is also an encounter with time”.<sup>2</sup> I have chosen this comment very deliberately. Modern philosophers of art focus heavily, indeed almost exclusively, on those aspects of works of art that relate to their condition as objects – how, for example, one might distinguish art from objects thought not to be art, the so-called “aesthetic properties” of works of art such as beauty or gracefulness, whether the essential function of art is to “represent the world”, and a series of other questions to which, like these, the passing of time has no *intrinsic* relevance. While not necessarily wishing to deny the value of such questions, the present study argues that the temporal nature of art – its significance as “an encounter with time” – is of at least equal importance and that to overlook this aspect of art is to miss something crucial.

Finally, I should stress that this study is a contribution to the general theory (or philosophy) of art, not to art criticism. Thus, while I mention individual works of art quite frequently to help explain my argument, and have included a number of reproductions for the same reason, my chief

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<sup>2</sup> André Malraux, “Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘L’Œuvre d’art,’” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 1188-1191, 1190. All quotations from Malraux are from the original French. Unless otherwise stated, translations from French sources are my own.

purpose is to achieve a better understanding of the general nature of art, not to assess the merits or demerits of this or that particular work, or provide a basis for doing so. Accordingly, I do not attempt to explain why *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, has lived on through the centuries while the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, once very popular, are now the preserve of specialists, or why many of Goya's works continue to affect us very powerfully while his mentor Bayeu is little more than a footnote in the history of art. My aim, nonetheless, is an ambitious one. This book seeks to explain a capacity to defy time – the seemingly miraculous power of certain works of art to survive as living presences across hundreds, or even thousands, of years of human history. It attempts to explain a power to be, in André Malraux words, “the presence in life of what should belong to death”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Intemporel, Ecrits sur l'art (II)*, ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 778.

# CHAPTER ONE

## GROUNDWORK

Contemporary philosophers of art, as mentioned in the Prologue, have written very little about the capacity of art to transcend time; and even more surprisingly, they have rarely attempted to identify the key questions the subject poses. Our inquiry therefore needs to begin at the beginning. The first step is to bring the issues at stake into clear focus and, in doing so, identify a number of points that have the potential to breed confusion and lead us astray.

In response to my claim that the topic I am addressing has been neglected, some might perhaps object that modern aesthetics has had more to say about the relationship between art and time than I acknowledge. “In fact,” someone might say, “the topic has received quite substantial attention. Some philosophers of art have examined ways in which the passing of time is represented in film or in the novel. Others have discussed what are sometimes called ‘temporal arts’, such as music, dance, and poetry, distinguishing them from art forms such as painting and sculpture in which time seems to play a lesser role. And some writers have explored the ways in which even painting or sculpture can be said to convey a sense of time.<sup>1</sup> How, therefore, could one sensibly claim that the relationship between art and time has been neglected?”

In the sense in which it is cast, the objection is reasonable enough. As foreshadowed in the Prologue, however, the issue at stake in the present study is of a quite different nature. Questions such as the way in which the passing of time is represented in film or the novel, or the function of time in music, concern the significance of time *within* individual works of art. They are questions about the nature of particular works or art forms, not dissimilar in kind to questions one might ask, for example, about the role of representation in this or that work, or perhaps in painting as compared with music. The present study is concerned with the “external” relation-

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<sup>1</sup> This, for example, is the main concern in Philip Rawson, *Art and Time* (Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses, 2005).

ship between art and time: the effect of the passing of time – of history, in the broadest sense of the term – on those objects, whether created in our own times or in the distant past, that we today call “works of art”. In other words, the issue here is the capacity of works of art to endure over time – to “live on” – including, importantly, the way they endure. This question has certainly been neglected in modern aesthetics, and also, one should add, in the neighbouring discipline of art history. Not only has very little been written about the topic but what has been written, as we shall see later, has failed to engage with the key issues at stake. In the fundamental sense at stake in the present study, it is not too much to say that time is the forgotten dimension of art.

Another preliminary issue that merits attention is the meaning of “lasting” or “enduring” in the present context. In a book entitled *What Good are the Arts?*, which attracted considerable interest at the time of its publication in 2005, the author John Carey writes that

No art is immortal, and no sensible person could believe it was. Neither the human race, nor the planet we inhabit, nor the solar system to which it belongs, will last forever. From the viewpoint of geological time, the afterlife of any artwork is an eyeblink.<sup>2</sup>

Comments of this kind are quite beside the point. The belief that a true work of art endures, whether or not we use the term “immortal”, has nothing to do with the idea that it might somehow be able to resist damage or destruction or, still less, escape the effects of “geological time”. When we visit a major art museum today and see the works of earlier civilizations, such as the *Victory of Samothrace* (Fig. 1) or a Sumerian sculpture such as the four-thousand-year-old *Gudea of Lagash* (Fig. 7), we are well aware that such objects represent only a tiny remnant of what once was, and often bear the obvious scars of time themselves. The past has reached us via a prolonged holocaust of accidental and deliberate damage. How many hundreds, if not thousands, of important works of painting or sculpture from previous centuries have been destroyed by wars, natural disasters, iconoclasm, recycling for other purposes, or simple neglect?<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the very fragility of many such works may well have made them

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<sup>2</sup> John Carey, *What Good are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2005), 148.

<sup>3</sup> Of ancient Rome, for instance, one scholar writes: “Ever since the last centuries of the Empire, Rome had been turned into the largest quarry of marble that the world had ever seen...” Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 8.

*more* vulnerable than others to the ravages of time. Music and literature have suffered even more drastically. Musically, most of the civilizations of the past are buried in permanent silence, the performers we sometimes see depicted on frescos and bas-reliefs playing compositions never to be heard again. And the fragments of literature that have reached us only do so through the filter of translation – a major impediment when so much of it is



Fig. 1 *Victory of Samothrace*. 3rd-2nd century BC

Louvre. De Agostini Picture Library/G. Dagli Orti/Bridgeman Art Library

poetic in nature. In short, the question before us when we speak of art's capacity to endure has nothing to do with physical durability. It has to do with meaning and significance: the capacity of certain works – Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Mozart's *Magic Flute*, or Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel, for instance – not only to impress their contemporaries but also to exert a fascination on subsequent ages, while so many other works from the same periods have ceased to arouse interest and faded into oblivion. It has to do with a power of certain works to defy time in the sense that, unlike so many other aspects of human culture, from the latest fad to beliefs about the nature of the gods and the universe, they continue to seem alive and important, and escape consignment to what André Malraux vividly, but very aptly, terms “the charnel house of dead values”.<sup>4</sup> The suggestion in John Carey's statement that the “afterlife of an artwork” is a question of physical durability can only mislead us and deflect attention from the kind of afterlife that really matters.<sup>5</sup>

The important questions we need to consider can be brought into focus by reflecting briefly on our everyday, common knowledge. It is common knowledge, as we have said, that those objects regarded as great works of art seem to have a special capacity to survive across time. It is common knowledge, for instance, that of the thousands of novels published in the eighteenth century, only a tiny fraction holds our interest today, and that for every *Tom Jones* or *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, there are large numbers of works by contemporaries of Richardson and Laclos that have sunk into oblivion, probably permanently. And if we go a step further and draw comparisons with objects outside the realm of art, the point is equally obvious. We do not ask, for example, if a map of the world drawn by a cartographer of the Elizabethan era is still a reliable navigational tool, and we know that a ship's captain today who relied on such a map would be acting very foolishly. But we might quite sensibly ask if Shakespeare's plays, written at the same time the map was drawn, is still pertinent to life today, and we might well want to answer yes. The map has survived as an object of what we term “historical interest” but it is no longer applicable to the world we live in. Shakespeare's plays, by contrast, are not just part of history (even though one might *also* view them in that light); they have endured in a way the map has not.

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<sup>4</sup> André Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l'art (I)*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 890.

<sup>5</sup> Carey is a literary critic and Emeritus Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford.

There are endless examples of this point and it is doubtless unnecessary to provide more. Stated in general terms, the proposition is simply that those objects from the past that we today regard as works of art, whether they be (for instance) Shakespeare's plays, the music of Monteverdi, or superlative examples of ancient Egyptian or Buddhist sculpture, seem to possess a special power to endure, a power to defy or "transcend" time, which many other works created at the same time have lacked. This statement tells us nothing about the nature of that power – about the way art endures and why – which are crucial matters to be examined in the following chapters. The proposition for the present is simply the broad observation that one of the characteristics of art, or at least great art, is a power to endure over time.

It is important, however, to avoid misunderstandings. As noted in the Prologue, the issue at stake has nothing to do with the familiar, indeed rather hackneyed, idea of a "test of time" – the claim occasionally advanced by philosophers of art, that art can be distinguished from non-art, or art of lesser quality, by its capacity to endure. This proposition (which is discussed briefly in a later chapter) concerns the merits of individual works and putative criteria for separating them into categories: it is an attempt to construct a rule separating art from non-art, or at least establish an order of merit. The focus of the present discussion is quite different. It is an investigation into the general nature of art and, specifically, the nature of its power to speak to us across the centuries and millennia as if it were still a living presence. In effect, the present discussion begins by accepting the existence of art as a given and moves on from there. It says: *given that* we recognise the existence of certain objects that we are happy to call works of art – *Hamlet*, the *Mona Lisa*, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, to name some familiar examples – do such works have a particular *temporal* nature, a special power to endure in a particular way, and if so, what is the nature of that power? Our inquiry, in short, is not about ways of identifying the merits of this or that work; it is an attempt to analyse one of the specific characteristics of art, one of its distinctive features as a form of human endeavour. In the same sense that one might ask if art is essentially a manifestation of beauty, or a form of representation (two questions often asked by philosophers about the nature of art), in this case one is asking: does art have a temporal nature, a specific way of existing through time, and if so what is it?

The point can be expressed in a slightly different way. Let us suppose that, faced with the question of why and how art transcends time, someone replies: "It's really very simple, isn't it? There are certain works of art that

(for example) deal with profound subject matter, offer deep insights into human nature, are very innovative, are skilfully executed, can be said to be beautiful in some way, and so on. Works of that kind live on. Those without such characteristics don't. So where's the problem?" This response would misunderstand the issue at stake. Even if one were to accept the criteria listed (and overlooked their vagueness and worryingly subjective nature), they would not necessarily explain specifically why art *endures*. They could equally plausibly be answers to questions such as: Why is one work of art good/great, and another not? Or: Why does one work give us "aesthetic pleasure" (assuming one accepted that notion) and another doesn't? Or: Why do some works sustain repeat viewings or readings, and others don't? And so on. In other words, the criteria do not self-evidently help us understand why a work *transcends time*. And *a fortiori*, they throw no light on the equally important question of *how* this happens – the way in which a work "lives on". An inquiry into the temporal nature of art is an attempt to address this particular issue: it is an attempt to explain the nature of a specific power possessed by art.

Another important point, and one that will be a recurring theme in this study, relates to the history of art. Most of the works of art mentioned so far, such as Shakespeare's plays, *Tom Jones*, and *The Magic Flute*, belong to Renaissance Europe or the centuries that followed, and I chose these examples because they provided convenient, familiar illustrations of the points being made. If, however, our analysis is to do justice to the scope and variety of our modern world of art, it will need to go well beyond these relatively narrow historical and geographical limits. As we quickly realize from a visit to any major art museum, or even from perusing the visual art sections of good bookshops, the category "art" today takes in works from a wide range of non-European cultures past and present as well as from periods of pre-Renaissance European history such as the Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic.<sup>6</sup> This, of course, was not always the case. Even as late as the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the limits of the concept "art" (or "fine art") did not extend beyond European art from the Renaissance onwards (beginning roughly with Raphael or

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<sup>6</sup> In the main, the present study concentrates on visual art. As we have noted, the music of past civilizations is mostly lost, and surviving fragments of literature are usually only accessible through translation. Visual art is the most fruitful focus for a discussion of the temporal nature of art because it provides a much greater range of evidence over much longer periods. The general principles we shall discuss are, nevertheless, applicable to art in all its forms.

perhaps a little earlier) plus selected Graeco-Roman works. Anything outside these boundaries was not “bad art”: it was simply not art at all and belonged to an outer darkness of painting and sculpture that was routinely ignored. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, for reasons we shall consider later, the scope of the rubric art began to expand rapidly, and today, as we know, the world of art welcomes Sumerian statuettes, Pacific Island masks, and Byzantine religious mosaics (for example) as readily as a Raphael, a Poussin, or a Watteau. If, therefore, our discussion of the capacity of art to endure is to be attuned to present realities, it needs to take account of this situation and acknowledge the full extent of our modern world of art and the time scales involved, which can in some cases stretch back thousands of years, or tens of thousands if we include pre-historic art. The point merits emphasis because modern aesthetics frequently adopts a much narrower view and focuses principally on modern and contemporary art,<sup>7</sup> a tendency that can readily foster a foreshortened perception of the history of art in which the capacity of art to endure can appear to be of marginal importance. Needless to say, of course, there is no question of an endurance “competition” among works of art. A Shakespearean play that captivates its audiences four hundred years after its composition is no less admirable on that score than a Sumerian sculpture that fascinates us across a gap of four thousand years. A satisfactory understanding of art’s capacity to endure is, nonetheless, much easier to achieve if one bears in mind the lengthy time spans involved for many of the works that form part of our modern world of art.

There is also an important matter of priorities. To the very limited extent that modern aesthetics has turned its attention to the capacity of art to endure over time, its first (and often only) question has usually been: *why* does art endure? – that is, what attributes might it possess that give it this capacity? This is certainly an important question and one we shall examine carefully at a later stage, but as a point of departure for an analysis of the temporal nature of art, it can easily lead us astray. The essential first step is to define the nature of the problem to be addressed which in this case is to establish what “enduring” *means* in the case of art (once, that is, we have recognised that it has nothing to do with physical endurance). As we shall discuss in more detail later, art might conceivably

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase “modern and contemporary art” is used here for convenience. Whether, as some claim, there is a discernible break between the two, and if so where that break might be, are not matters of major importance for the purposes of the present study.

endure in a number of ways, each quite different from the other, and it is only when the particular manner of its enduring has been established that the question of why it endures (in the way it does) can be posed in a precise and sensible way. To reverse the order of these inquiries is to risk looking for an answer to the wrong question – that is, to a question that has not been correctly formulated to begin with.<sup>8</sup> The argument in the following chapters is organised accordingly. Attention focuses firstly on how art endures, a question which, as we shall see, turns out to be much less straightforward than it might initially seem.

Finally, it is important to stress the importance of the issues at stake. In his book *Art in its Time*, the philosopher Paul Mattick writes that

Art, in the first place, is supposed to transcend its historical moment: the category unites products from all epochs and areas, a unity represented physically by museum collections and intellectually by art history as a study of products from every human society.<sup>9</sup>

While the remark is commendable for its recognition of the power of art to transcend time, it does not do the subject justice. It is worth reminding ourselves first that, as already noted, it is only since the late nineteenth century that the category art began to “[unite] products from all epochs and areas”. Such an idea would have been unthinkable at any time prior to this, Asian art and traditional African art, for example, only entering art museums in significant numbers towards the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Second, the power to “transcend [the] historical moment” is an

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Paul Crowther, *The Transhistorical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Crowther attempts to explain why certain kinds of works achieve what he terms “tranhistorical significance”, which means, in effect, why they endure. There is no discussion of the prior question of *how* they endure.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Mattick, *Art in its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.

<sup>10</sup> A representative case for Asian art is the Asiatic art collection in the Rijksmuseum. From the seventeenth century onwards, Dutch traders had brought large numbers of Asian artefacts back to Europe but it was not until 1918 that a “Society of Friends of Asiatic Art” was founded in Holland with the purpose of building a collection of items chosen for artistic value rather than decorative appeal, ethnographic significance, or curiosity value. By 1932, the work of the Society had led to the establishment of a Museum of Asiatic Art in Amsterdam, and this collection eventually became the nucleus of the Rijksmuseum’s collection of Asiatic art, first established in 1952. See Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, ed. *Asiatic Art in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1985),

attribute possessed by only a very small minority of “products” from human societies. Few people today would withhold the name “art” from the paintings in the Lascaux caves but prehistoric hand-axes are very unlikely to find their way into an art museum. Or, to choose a more recent example, the paintings of the nineteenth century “Academic” school could doubtless be described as “products” of the social context in which they were created but few are now regarded as more than historical evidence of that context: as art they are dead. Third, and most importantly for present purposes, the power of art to transcend time signifies much more than a capacity to generate a “united category”. The hand-axe and the forgettable Academic painting give us evidence of the age in which they were created: like the discarded bones of a prehistoric meal or a nineteenth century legal document, they belong to times gone by and circumstances that no longer exist, worthwhile though it may be for historical purposes to attempt to describe those times and circumstances. But Lascaux or the paintings of Delacroix do not belong *only* to the times in which they were created. They are, if we respond to them as works of art, part of our experience today as living presences, like *King Lear*, *Crime and Punishment*, or *La Traviata*. The power of art to transcend time signifies much more, in short, than a power to “[unite] products from all epochs and areas”. It is an exceptional power, possessed by a relatively small number of objects, to escape the times in which they came into being and “live on” while so much else has simply become part of history. It is a power to transcend time in a quite literal sense of the word “transcend”: to escape and go beyond, an emancipation from the inexorable processes of change and forgetfulness. To miss this point is to misunderstand the magnitude of the issues at stake. The power in question is something quite out of the ordinary, something that, as mentioned earlier, might well be said to border on the miraculous.

This discussion has sought to clarify certain fundamental aspects of our inquiry and identify issues likely to cause misunderstandings, among

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7-22. A representative case for African art is the Art Institute of Chicago. The Institute began collecting African artefacts in the mid-1920s, but prior to the 1950s they were displayed only in the Children’s Museum. In the late 1950s the Institute created a Department of Primitive Art, later renamed the Department of African, Oceanic and Amerindian art, and only then did African art, along with that of the other cultures mentioned, take its place in the museum’s general collection. See Kathleen Bickford Berzock, “African Art at the Art Institute of Chicago,” *African Arts* 32, no. 4 (1999), 19-93.

which John Carey's suggestion that art's power to endure simply means physical durability is perhaps the most readily apparent. Books and articles by contemporary philosophers of art advance a number of other propositions that tend to foster confusion about the relationship between art and time but these have been deferred to subsequent chapters when we shall be in a better position to examine them. The next step in our analysis is to consider one specific response to the basic question of *how* art endures, a response that has, without doubt, provided the most influential explanation of the temporal nature of art in European history and which still lingers on in attenuated forms today. This is the claim that art endures by being *exempt* from time: by being "timeless", "eternal", or "immortal".

## CHAPTER TWO

### ETERNITY

Thus far, the terms “endure”, “last”, “live on”, and “survive” have been used in a loose and general way without any attempt to give them an exact meaning. It is crucial to see, however, that while imprecise usages of these terms may suffice in preliminary discussions of the temporal nature of art, or in informal contexts, they are no longer adequate once one embarks on a serious philosophical analysis. As mentioned in the previous chapter, something – a work of art for instance – might in principle endure in a number of possible ways. For example: It might endure for a certain predetermined period, perhaps even a lengthy one, but then disappear definitively into obscurity. It might endure for a time, disappear, and then return with its original significance, in a cyclical way. It might endure just as it is without any change. And, as we shall see later, there is at least one other important possibility. By itself, therefore, the simple proposition that art has a special capacity to endure, crucial though that is, leaves us with a major unanswered question, an explanatory gap, so to speak. *How*, we need to know, does art endure? What is the particular nature of its relationship with time?

Although neglected in modern aesthetics, this question is by no means new to Western intellectual history. It has been asked before and answered before, and without doubt, the most influential response has been the third alternative above: the view that art (or at least great art) is immune from change and that, to use the conventional terms (normally used interchangeably) it is “timeless”, “eternal”, or “immortal”. This view, which took its rise with the Renaissance,<sup>1</sup> and held undisputed sway for some four hundred years, is the subject of the present chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> The idea also seems to have been present in Greek and Roman literature. See, for example, the discussion in J.B. Leishman, *Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Hutchison & Co., 1961).

In our pragmatic, technologically-driven, modern world in which little, if anything, seems exempt from change, the proposition that a certain kind of human creation might be *changeless* – “eternal” – can easily strike us as quaint and passé, like a slightly embarrassing hangover from a former age that believed in things “supernatural”. And as we shall see shortly, there are, indeed, very good reasons for thinking that, at least where art is concerned, this belief has ceased to be viable today. Before dismissing the idea out of hand, however, we do well to pause and reflect on it a little.

It is important to note, first, that the proposition that art is timeless (or eternal or immortal) at least provides a complete response to the question of how art endures. Once we accept this proposition, we are not restricted simply to saying that art endures by persisting in time in some unknown, unspecified way; we are now able to describe the manner of its enduring. Art endures, we can now say, because it is, by its nature, *impervious* to time, “time-less”, unaffected by the passing parade of history, its significance, from its moment of creation onwards, always remaining the same. Whatever one may think about this idea, it is at least a complete solution. It does not merely claim that great art lasts or survives, leaving us with an explanatory gap. It explains the manner of survival, and the explanatory gap is closed.

Second, we need to bear in mind the lengthy history of this idea and its profound impact on European culture, including, interestingly enough, on the discipline of aesthetics itself. A detailed examination of this matter is beyond the scope of the present study, but certain key points merit our attention. To do so, however, we need to make a brief detour into art history.

For Byzantium and medieval Europe, God alone was eternal, and man’s only hope of sharing in eternity lay in the life to come. Sculptors and painters played an important (if at times contested) part in evoking the world of the Everlasting God but there was never the slightest suggestion that the images *themselves* were embodiments of a timeless power, an idea that would doubtless have bordered on idolatry and sacrilege. The sculptures and stained glass images in medieval cathedrals<sup>2</sup> had one purpose and one purpose only: they were not there to be admired as “artistic” achievements catering to a sense of “aesthetic taste”; they were there to

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<sup>2</sup> Sculptures such as the one on the cover of the present work at Notre-Dame de Chartres.

bear witness to a sacred Other World and bring the faithful into a closer relationship with their God. Any suggestion to the contrary was roundly condemned, and even the devout and conscientious Abbot Suger, adviser to kings, was obliged to defend his pious embellishments of the Abbey of Saint-Denis when questioned by contemporary religious leaders such as Bernard of Clairvaux. The improvements were for a holy purpose, Suger explained; they were made in a spirit of “constant reverence and deep devotion” to pay due homage “to Him who has not stinted to provide us with everything we need”.<sup>3</sup>

From the Renaissance onwards, however, a very different view began to take hold. Painting and sculpture (as well as poetry, music, and architecture) came to be seen as bearers of a privileged power uniquely their own, a power to embody a transcendent world of harmony and beauty brought into being by the work of art itself.<sup>4</sup> Art historians have sometimes obscured this point by describing Renaissance stylistic innovations as essentially a triumph of naturalism over the “stiff” Byzantine manner that preceded them. But the true source of the changes lay elsewhere. The gulf separating medieval man from his God had been deep and wide: fallen humanity inhabited the “here-below”, a transitory realm of trial and suffering far removed from God’s eternal kingdom. Medieval man is the vulnerable, all-too-human figure we encounter in so many paintings and illuminations of the time, whose only hope lies in God’s infinite grace and mercy (Fig. 2). Renaissance Italy saw the dawn of something very different. With Giotto as point of departure, painting and sculpture embarked on a gradual rapprochement between man and God, and – revolution indeed! – discovered a vision of the world in which man himself seemed to share in the qualities of the divine.<sup>5</sup> In stylistic terms, this certainly did call for a greater degree of naturalism because the gap between the human and divine had narrowed, and as Malraux puts it, “For the first time, sacred scenes

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Bur, *Suger: abbé de Saint-Denis, régent de France* (Paris: Perrin, 1991), 265.

<sup>4</sup> I trace these developments in greater detail in Derek Allan, *Art and the Human Adventure: André Malraux’s Theory of Art* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009). See especially Chapter Five, “The Emergence and Transformation of ‘Art’”.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Cassirer makes the point well. Explaining the thinking of Nicolas de Cusa (1401-1464), he writes: “The earth is no longer the leaven of the world, the spectacle of human misery and sin; it now becomes the ‘*stella nobilis*’, harmoniously adapting itself to the cosmos and the divine order of the world.” Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove (New York: Gordian Press, 1970), 104.



Fig. 2 Bertram of Minden. *Expulsion from Paradise*. 1379-83

Hamburger Kunsthalle/Bridgeman Art Library



Fig. 3 Botticelli. *Birth of Venus*. c.1484

De Agostini Picture Library/A. Dagli Orti/Bridgeman Art Library

related no less to the world of God's creatures than to the world of God".<sup>6</sup> But naturalism was a means to an end not an end in itself. "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done," wrote Sir Philip Sidney in 1580; "Her world is brazen, and the poets only deliver a golden".<sup>7</sup> And the same was true of painting, which was in any case becoming what Leonardo aptly termed "visual poetry". The ambition of the Renaissance painter or sculptor was not simply to better mimic the world of appearances – Nature's "brazen" world – but to evoke a new vision of transcendence whose inspiration, even when depicting sacred scenes, no longer stemmed from religious belief but from an imagined "golden" world in which humanity itself was touched by a spark of the divine. And,

<sup>6</sup> André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l'art (II)*, ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 318.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 85.