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30 Masterpieces of the Ancient World

Scope:

This course will take you around the world to look at and examine in depth some of the greatest masterpieces of ancient art. We will explore spectacular artworks from diverse places and times, starting with cave paintings that were made at the dawn of human creativity in the Paleolithic Age to the contents of tombs and buildings, remarkable stone sculptures, and wrought gold and textiles that were made as recently as 600 years ago. Each of the selected masterpieces is the creation of a time and culture that make it unique, and each is among the finest examples of art from its culture.

Throughout the course, we will learn a great deal about the cultural contexts of the artworks we will explore and what makes each piece important, outstanding, and beautiful. We will see how individual pieces fit into the flow of world art and what each has in common with the others. We’ll learn how each object functioned in its culture, about its technology, and what sort of message it imparted to the people of its time and place.

Whether made of marble, terra-cotta, gold, or alpaca wool, each masterpiece had a cultural role and combined both the skills and the intellect of some of the greatest artists of all time. We’ll learn which themes and purposes preoccupied the various cultures and which materials expressed their creativity and concerns the best. Each masterpiece has a story to tell; these artworks are complex, engaging, and stunning expressions of their cultures.

The masterpieces range broadly in place and time, and their selection is, to a great extent, based on what survived natural, climatic, and human destruction. Therefore, we will see many artworks that stem from cultures emphasizing stone and ceramics, such as the Greeks
and the Maya, and fewer from tropical cultures in, for instance, sub-Saharan Africa, where the vicissitudes of tropical weather left us little.

We will see fabulous objects, such as the gold earrings of a Moche lord and the gold mask of King Tutankhamun, that were found only in the last century or so in tombs. Even the cave art of Chauvet was only recently discovered.

Other tombs we’ll look at preserved rare and unusual artworks. These include the remarkably complex, colorful, and beautiful weavings of the Andean cultures, ranging from the mummy wrappings of the Paracas Peninsula to the tunic of an Inca emperor.

The objects in this course were chosen for their beauty and diversity and for how they fit together to demonstrate the concerns of ancient cultures and artists. There is no definitive list of masterpieces of the ancient world, but each one presented here has been deemed a masterpiece by other experts in the field.

We will learn about the different subjects and themes of ancient art, starting with the importance of animals as subjects, whether they appear in cave art or as images and symbols of gods, such as those found in the Royal Tombs at Ur in Mesopotamia.

We’ll see how the human body was treated in sculpture over thousands of years and explain, for instance, the reasons behind the innovations that the Greeks made in representing humans realistically or in motion and why other cultures preferred other modes of human representation.

We’ll learn how death and the drive for immortality initiated much of the creation of art, such as the Egyptians’ fantastic tomb and temple sculpture. We’ll see that the need to legitimize a ruler or impart propaganda concerning the role of the state or ruler were at the root of many other creations, such as the Assyrian reliefs.

Religious impulses and the drive for survival and fertility show up as major themes, particularly in the most ancient art, such as objects
from Mesopotamia. Sometimes, gods, goddesses, and depictions of the cosmos and religious beliefs are the main function of a monument or artwork, as we will see in the Buddhist stupa at Borobudur in Java. Shamanism and transformative experiences also show their faces in art, as in the carved lintels of the Maya.

In some instances, many different purposes are aligned in one artwork or monument, and they work together as a fabulous and profound message from the past. This is particularly true in complex and extraordinarily skilled works, such as the Aztec Calendar Stone or the sarcophagus cover of the Maya King Pakal the Great at Palenque.

While we examine and explain each piece, we will learn about practices that gave rise to, or formed a context for, the art; these practices range from human sacrifice to ritual sex and ancestor worship. We'll consider why certain cultures prefer abstract designs over natural ones, how contemporary art is different from ancient art, why some of the earliest art is the most sophisticated, and the fact that Stone Age technology does not hinder skill or sophistication in art. We'll learn about beauty, proportion, labor, and the role of death and status in producing great artworks.

This course will leave you with a sense of excitement for these masterworks, some of which will be familiar to you and others, decidedly not. You'll learn what makes these masterpieces so valuable in both ancient and modern times; how extremely labor-intensive work, virtuosity in a craft, and rarity of materials combine to produce a valued object; and how value and aesthetics intersect. In the end, you will gain a new understanding of the importance of art to the human experience—across a vast range of time, space, and cultures.
Many, if not most, of our great works of art from classical, modern, and contemporary times have roots in the earliest art that was created. In this course, we will look at some of the most compelling and immediately understandable images of ancient times, as well as some enigmatic masterpieces of art that require careful explanation. Whether it is art from ancient Egypt or the abstract weavings of the Inca, though, there are common impulses at work. We will see how humans create art that serves a purpose in their societies, and we’ll learn how that common thread winds its way down to the art of today.

*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

- The painting entitled *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* is a modern masterpiece by the post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin. To fully understanding this painting, we need to know about the civilizations that preceded our modern age.

- Gauguin drew on a knowledge of art that went far beyond the European tradition: He looked at and admired the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Oceanic, Japanese, Javanese Buddhist, and even ancient Peruvian traditions of art and spirituality. He sought to escape from an unfeeling and complex industrial age—the modern world that was unfolding in the 19th century.

- The artist created this painting to tell the deeply moving saga of human life, seen as a narrative unscrolling from the right.
  - The baby at the extreme right is guarded over by a recumbent black dog and three coyly gesturing, seated Tahitian women. A golden statue-like figure at the center reaches for the sky to pluck a fruit.
The cave of Chauvet in the Ardèche valley of France contains the earliest known art made by humans—depictions of bears, panthers, horses, and more, made 30,000 years ago. Examining this art closely gives us a great deal of information about the humans who created it—what their lives, beliefs, and environment must have been like. Because these cave paintings represent some of the earliest human artistic efforts that we know of, Chauvet also teaches us something about art itself. When we look at the location, materials used, subject matter, style, groupings, and skill, we can begin to speculate about the purpose of the art.

Overview of the Cave

- Chauvet is an extraordinarily large cave, with a complex arrangement of chambers. Cave bears lived there and left traces—their bones, claw scratchings, and even impressions of their bodies.

- The deepest, most remote recesses of the cave are where the most interesting figural art appears. The animal depictions found there are sketched mostly in charcoal black pigments, with fewer painted in red. Animals are either painted on the walls or deeply engraved on previously scraped and prepared areas.

- Some of the animals at Chauvet appear in magnificent, coherent groups, such as the so-called Panel of the Horses, which has horses, felines, rhinos, and bison. In other places, animal representations are less organized; they appear willy-nilly, sometimes with one painted or scratched over another. Handprints in red appear closest to the entrance, while the skull of a bear sits on an altar-like projection at the very back.

- About 13 species of animals—large and mostly dangerous—appear in the cave paintings. Lions, cave bears, mammoths, and rhinoceroses make up 63 percent of all the animal images. In later
The move to living in cities, sometimes called the urban revolution, took place about 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. This was an exciting time in human history, with people inventing a new way of living and working together in close companionship. New forms of art and architecture were developed, along with writing, which allowed new social systems of administration, more complex trade, and a different form of art—narrative art, art that tells a coherent story. In this lecture, we’ll look at one of the earliest and most important narrative art objects, the Uruk Vase, a large offering vessel of alabaster.

The City of Uruk

- Uruk was located in the land of Sumer, on the Euphrates River in southern Mesopotamia. Originally, it was the center of an important religious cult, one that developed surrounding the Sumerian goddess of fertility and abundance. The city gave its name to the historical period lasting from approximately 3500 to 3000 B.C.

- Uruk has both the earliest art of an urban center and the earliest literature. Gilgamesh, the famed legendary king of the Epic of Gilgamesh, was said to be ruler of the city. He supposedly built its famous walls for defense in a land that was, and still is, prone to conflict because of scarce resources.

- The famous vase from Uruk was created at the dawn of urban civilization. It is one of the most important works for understanding human ideas, rituals, and artistry. The story of the vase is put into the context of some of humanity’s most basic and important technological developments in the last few thousand years: Farming, animal husbandry, irrigation, and nucleation of population are all represented in this artwork.