independent and neutral world of their own, but are determined by their contexts, whether that be political and social (as it is for Marxism and feminism) or linguistic (as it is for semiotics). Second, these different methods all begin from a personal perspective. There is no authoritative vantage point from which we can, like gods, survey history and find an immanent meaning. Our own interests will always play a part in our interpretations. This means that it is not only legitimate to interpret artworks in the light of contemporary concerns, but obligatory. As we have seen, many contemporary approaches to art history can be applied in conjunction with each other. Feminist, psychoanalytic or postcolonial enquiries are often combined with Marxist and social art history, for instance. However, they can also be associated with a radical semiotic approach. In that case, the link to social art history is attenuated and the focus turns to the relationship between the image and the contemporary viewer. Most of today's art historians acknowledge that connoisseurial, biographical, Hegelian, formalist, iconographic and orthodox Marxist approaches have useful, often indispensable, contributions to make. Yet they refuse to accept that any of these analyses are fully adequate and they dispute some of their most basic assumptions about art and its history. This comes, as we argue in Chapter 7, at a price. The gain, however, is that there is no closure to the range of interpretations that can be brought to Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* – or, indeed, to whatever other images art historians turn their attention to. The one requirement, we hasten to add, is that there should be committed viewers with some sense of what constitutes a rigorous enquiry similar to, if not the same as, those encountered in the following chapters.

Hegel and the birth of art history

ART HISTORY in its modern form originated in Germany in the nineteenth century. People had thought about the art of the past before, of course, but they did so in a way which we would now say was unhistorical: namely, they looked, not for what makes particular works significant in their own right, but how far these works realised what were thought to be universal aesthetic norms. Art theory was taught in the European academies which had been established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the training of artists, and included discussion of the art of the past; but individual artists and schools (that is, works of art grouped according to their country of origin) were judged according to whether they had achieved a representation of ideal beauty.

The Italian artist, **Giorgio Vasari (1511–74)** is often called the first art historian. His *The Lives of the Artists*, first published in 1550, provided an influential model for the understanding of past art. Vasari's art history was not historical in the modern sense, however. In his view, art's development over time was cyclical, and he discussed the achievement of individual artists with respect to their place in this cyclical process. According to Vasari, art achieved its first highpoint in the golden age of ancient Greek art, declined in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, was revived by Giotto in the thirteenth century, improved by Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and Mantegna in the fifteenth, and brought to new heights by Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo in Vasari's own time. But while Vasari saw art change during each cycle, approaching ever nearer to an aesthetic ideal, he did not understand these changes as a result of particular historical or social conditions at work at the time when each artist lived. A historical understanding of art in the modern sense did not start to develop until the end of the eighteenth century; until that time, history was thought to be extrinsic to art in the way that earthquakes are extrinsic to it. Art's value lay in striving to achieve timeless aesthetic norms, norms that were elaborated systematically by such French art theorists as **André Félibien (1619–95)** and **Roger de Piles (1635–1709)** in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. When the University of Göttingen in Germany founded the first chair in art history in 1813, this was not the dawn of art history as we now know it. The man appointed, Johann Dominicus Fiorillo, was a drawing master and his lectures followed the tradition of academic art theory.

Art history emerged as a recognisable academic discipline around 1850 in Germany. Two new ideas enabled this. First, art came to be seen as the embodiment of a distinctive expression of particular societies and civilisations. The pioneer of this idea was **Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68)** in his *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764). For Winckelmann, the art of antiquity represented an unsurpassable aesthetic achievement, which he explained as the result of the conjunction of the prevailing freedom at the time of its production along with the climate, form of government, ways of thinking and perceiving, and society's understanding of the role of the artist. The consequences of giving priority to the historical context of art over the qualities of individual artists were, however, not fully worked out by Winckelmann himself. Perhaps somewhat inconsistently, he understood classical art to be an embodiment of a moral idea, an aesthetic expression of the conception of goodness and freedom that human beings aspire to at their best. Moreover this moral idea remained a universal ideal applicable to all cultures at all times. The paradox here, of course, is that if particular aesthetic and moral values are, as Winckelmann had argued, dependent on the unique cultural context of their production, how could they be realised again under different circumstances at a different time and place?

It was Winckelmann's fellow countryman, the philosopher and theologian **Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803)**, who first recognised this problem in his essay on Winckelmann (1777). He agreed that artworks were the products of particular societies with distinct cultural values. The conclusion he drew from this was that no artwork produced in a certain period and culture should be judged by the standards of another. In mounting this argument, Herder laid the foundation for a modern understanding of art history. However, there is a second element which is characteristic of art history as we practise it today. The task of art history has been widely understood to be that of tracing the changes and developments that artworks have undergone over the centuries. Herder had provided a *synchronic* understanding of art – a conception of the relationship between art and the rest of a culture – and the ways in which the latter determines the former. This provided a sense of the differences and similarities between different cultures' works of art, and so enabled an account of art as part of a systematic social process extending through time: a *diachronic* view. Only with this in place did an understanding of art as developmental emerge, one which in the full sense constituted a history. The first person to present such a view of art was not an art historian but the philosopher, **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)**, in his celebrated lectures on aesthetics, which were delivered in Berlin between 1820 and 1829 and published posthumously in 1835–38.

Hegel was born in Stuttgart and studied at the theological seminary in Tübingen. He moved to Jena in 1801 to become an unsalaried lecturer at the university and completed his first major work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in 1806. The night after he finished the manuscript, Napoleon's victory at the Battle of Jena finally brought the Holy Roman Empire to an end, and Hegel had to leave Jena because Napoleon's government closed the university. For a time, he became the editor of a newspaper in Bamberg, before moving to Nuremberg in 1808 as the headmaster of a high school. It was only at the age of 46 that he obtained his first salaried academic post as professor of philosophy at Heidelberg University. During his time in Heidelberg, Hegel got to know the important private art collection of Melchior and Sulpice Boisserée. The Boisserées' collection was remarkable for two reasons. First, it concentrated on early German and Flemish works, a period which had hitherto not been widely esteemed. Second, the collection was based on its owners' conviction that national sentiment and religious belief could be given visual form in the presentation of Old Masters. Hegel's experience of the Boisserées' collection moved him to prepare lectures on aesthetics, which he gave between 1820 and 1829.

By then he had moved to Berlin where he was a keen visitor to the Royal art collection and took part in the discussions which led to the foundation of the first national art museum in 1830, housed in what is now the *Altes Museum* in Berlin. During the time that he was giving his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel made several journeys to see works of art on public display. In 1822 he went from Berlin to Cologne and from there on to Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp, Amsterdam and Hamburg. In 1824 he travelled to Prague and Vienna, and, finally, in 1827, to Paris. He also knew well the important collection of Old Masters in Dresden, but he never went south of the Alps. Most of the Italian artists whom he greatly esteemed, like Raphael and Correggio, he had encountered in the galleries of Dresden, Berlin, Vienna and Paris.

Hegel's philosophy of art

Hegel's philosophy is notoriously difficult but, fortunately for us, his lectures on aesthetics (or as he prefers to call it in his Introduction, the Philosophy of Fine Art) are among his more accessible works. This is partly because they were published after his death, based mainly on transcripts by members of his audience, and partly because Hegel uses a wealth of artworks, ranging from ancient India to contemporary German painting, to make concrete his otherwise rather abstract account. What Hegel found when he turned to art history was on the one hand Herder's claim that art

is always specific to the age and society which produced it, and on the other hand the desire of people like the Boisserées to find a meaning in past art that was relevant to the present. But how can one understand something if one does not share the conditions which gave meaning to it in the first place? This is called the **hermeneutic problem**. It was Hegel's philosophy which provided the first solution to this problem in art history.

Hegel's philosophical premise is that reality is the product of a **Universal Spirit** (*Geist*), or, **'Absolute Idea'**, as he often calls it in the *Aesthetics*. We can think of this as being both a concept and its embodiment in reality. For Hegel, the Absolute Idea is, in a sense, both the blueprint of the world and its gradual realisation in particular expressions over the millennia. With each age the world gets closer and closer to understanding this ideal blueprint. Hegel pictures this in analogy to the human soul and body: the soul is the concept and the body is the physical form. Between the inner aspect of the soul and the outer aspect of the body there is a close relationship in which the one is expressed in the other. Similarly, the Absolute Idea articulates itself in the way that the human mind works within and upon the material world over the course of history. The Absolute Idea is continually acting in history, but its expressions are changeable and various depending on the particular stage of historical and social development.

Now, the question for us is, what is the role of art in this scheme? Art for Hegel is a portrait of the human mind. It expresses in a sensory form people's fundamental beliefs about the world and about themselves, that is, it shows mind as it attempts to understand the material realm and master it. In doing so the mind becomes increasingly aware of its own nature and art not only reveals the extent to which mind has achieved such self-consciousness, but provokes such awareness. Art for Hegel is, therefore, a necessity in the development of the Absolute Idea towards self-realisation. The Idea realises itself by working through and eventually overcoming the foreignness of the material world. Thus, art is both evidence of the progress of history, and, at various stages, crucial to the process by which progress takes place. At each stage of history, mind has related differently to the world of matter and has required a different kind of sensory articulation. In ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, and Renaissance Italy, for example, art was crucial, in Hegel's view, in revealing the Absolute Idea to individuals. At other times, however, other ways by which the human mind makes sense of the world and itself are more important. So, for example, religion, according to Hegel, was more fundamental during the Middle Ages. In modern times, philosophy plays this role, since the progress of history is towards an ever more rational and pure understanding of the Absolute Idea in the human mind and philosophy presents this in its highest form. Because the mind has become aware of itself through philosophy in the modern age it no longer needs to struggle to know itself through the world of matter.

As we explained, art history required the idea that art is always an expression of the age and society in which it is produced. Hegel, following Herder and the German Romantic writers, argued that 'just as every man is a child of his time in every activity, whether political, religious, or scientific, and just as he has the task of bringing out the essential content and the therefore necessary form of that time, so it is the vocation of art to find for the spirit of a people the artistic expression corresponding to it' (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1975, vol. 1, p. 603). Beyond this, a mechanism had to be found by which it would be possible to identify a developmental logic linking these different expressions without violating the distinctive individuality of past art forms. Hegel's postulation of the Absolute Idea established this universal, inclusive viewpoint. The Idea, according to Hegel, made possible the distinctive articulation of art at each stage of history, provided the connection between all the diverse forms by which a society expressed itself and gave the impetus to progressive development through time. Moreover, it created a vantage point from which past and present could be seen as connected. This last aspect was crucial and would continue to haunt later writers who sought to do away with Hegel's metaphysical assumptions, for once art is recognised as being historically and socially specific, the question arises how it can be appreciated by someone from a cultural vantage point outside its original context.

If one accepts Hegel's underlying assumptions about the Absolute Idea and its progressive realisation in the products of the human mind, his art history has a certain force and logic – one which has proved difficult for later art historians entirely to escape. Although nineteenth-century art historians were uncomfortable with Hegel's claims for the existence of the Absolute Idea, a metaphysical entity that could neither be verified or falsified by experiment, it was from this premise that Hegel laid the foundation of art history as we now know it. We now turn to Hegel's specific account of art and its history, which will help us clarify these rather somewhat abstract postulations.

Hegel's art history

Hegel identified three fundamental steps in the historical development of art: **the Symbolic, the Classical, the Romantic**. Each phase first makes its appearance in a specific culture: the Symbolic stage emerged in ancient India and Persia and reached its peak in ancient Egypt *c.*3000 BC; the Classical

stage emerged in ancient Greece and reached its peak in the second half of the fourth century BC; and the Romantic stage coincided with the rise of Christianity and came to a peak in the art of Leonardo Da Vinci and Raphael around AD 1500 (Romantic here does not refer to Romanticism, the art movement which emerged in the early nineteenth century). Each phase, for Hegel, was best and most fully expressed in a particular art form: the Symbolic in architecture, the Classical in sculpture, and the Romantic in painting, music and poetry.

Logically enough, given his premises, Hegel starts his account of the Symbolic age and the art form that it produces with a description of the stage of human beings' mental development to which it gives expression. At this early stage people have come to realise that there is a power inherent in nature. Objects in the world are perceived as meaningful beyond their immediate usefulness, but what this meaning is remains, as yet, obscure to the human mind. The mind has an unclear sense of the Idea and its relation to the material world.

Hegel divides the Symbolic stage into three sub-stages. First, is Unconscious Symbolism, to be found in the very earliest Oriental religions like Zoroastrianism. Here objects are fashioned by human beings in mere imitation of existing entities, like the sun, stars, fire, animals, and so on. Symbolic meaning is found in objects but there is, as yet, no sense of the difference between a spiritual idea and a material body. Gradually, however, a sense of the distinctness between symbol and thing symbolised emerges. During this period, which Hegel calls the age of Fantastic Symbolism, people take arbitrarily-chosen existing objects and endow them with symbolic significance. A clear example, according to Hegel, is the Hindu art of ancient India. For Hindus, the most important abstract entity, the one which encapsulated their notion of divinity, was the god Brahma. But Brahma was conceived in such an abstract way in their religion that his realisation in the world was difficult to express. As a result, Hindu artists, lacking a symbolic form which would encapsulate the essence of Brahma, came up with highly fanciful creations (for example, creatures with many heads and arms), in an attempt to create an object that would serve as a vehicle for conveying something other than itself as its meaning.

Unconscious and Fantastic Symbolism are, however, in Hegel's view, preliminary stages in the progress towards a more highly developed Real or Genuine Symbolism. This stage is reached when human beings become capable of finding appropriate symbols for a now more clearly defined concept of divinity. At this stage divinity, which is for Hegel a form of the Absolute Idea, becomes characterised by qualities of permanence and power, and is seen as exercising complete control of the processes of living

and dying. The best articulation of this understanding of the absolute is in architecture, which evolved to represent the divine properties of permanence and power, going beyond its function of providing space for human beings to live and die in. Architecture reached a highpoint in ancient Egypt, where its religious symbolism was more important than its practical purpose.

The process is epitomised, according to Hegel, in the figure of the sphinx (Figure 1). The sphinx, with its lower animal parts out of which a human body struggles to emerge, represents the stage that the human mind had reached at this time: 'Out of the dull strength and power of the animal the human spirit tries to push itself forward, without coming to a perfect portrayal of its own freedom and animated shape, because it must still remain confused and associated with what is other than itself' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 1, p. 361). Likewise, the Egyptian pyramids' massive and impenetrable shells indicate that they contain an 'inner meaning separated from pure nature' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 1, p. 356). The human mind has found symbols to express its sense of the Idea as distinct from the natural world, yet it has not fully managed to understand the Idea or to express it in physical reality. The forbidding physical reality of the pyramids stands as a witness to their abstract spiritual dimension.

1 Anon., *Sphinx and the Pyramids of Giza near Kairo*, steel engraving after a photograph, from *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung*, January 1889, p. 35

Hegel was fortunate that, in the wake of Napoleon's campaign into Egypt in 1798–99, many archaeological discoveries were made available to him through such richly illustrated books as D. V. Baron Denon, *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Égypte* (1802) and the nine volumes of *Déscription de L'Égypte* (1809–22). He also consulted several of the travel accounts which had just appeared, and knew at first hand the Egyptian collection at the castle Montbijou near Berlin.

The pyramids were important to Hegel for a further reason: he thought they signified a point of transition from buildings whose character is determined by their religious significance to structures created on a mathematical plan. The exterior and interior construction of the pyramids show a conscious calculation designed to accommodate the tremendous pressure exerted by their massive structures and to permit the construction of the labyrinthine corridors and passages inside. Their technical achievement pointed the way forward to the construction of strong and useful buildings and the utilitarian aspect of architecture from here now outweighs architecture's symbolic meaning. At this point architecture starts to lose its central role in the expression of the Absolute Idea. But this does not mean that architecture has lost its power of expression altogether. Proportion, symmetry and aesthetic effect are still important in ancient Greek architecture, but the Absolute Idea has now found a higher expression in another art form: sculpture, a form of art that developed originally within the sphere of architecture. Although sculpture becomes the form that expresses the Absolute Idea, Hegel does not suggest that architecture stops developing. Indeed, for him architecture reached its highest level of symbolic expressiveness in such buildings as the Gothic cathedrals of Chartres and Amiens in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Here, says Hegel, mind has overcome matter, as can be seen in the great interior spaces whose vertical emphases and huge, thin sheets of glass create the impression of a spiritual dimension beyond the material world. The Gothic cathedrals, however, also show the limitations of architecture as an expression of the Idea, because the latter is still essentially articulated only in its material aspect, rather than depicted in its spiritual dimensions.

After Egyptian architecture, the next step in the development of art in its path towards an ever-increasing awareness of the spiritual was ancient Greek sculpture. For Hegel art has now entered the classical age, and in sculpture, the spirit begins to understand itself in a bodily form, that is, the mind is able to penetrate physical matter. Hegel's discussion of ancient Greek sculpture (which he got to know through the collection of plaster casts at Montbijou) is largely indebted to Winckelmann. Like Winckelmann, what Hegel valued above all in Greek sculpture was the balance and

harmony of its depictions of the human figure. He singled out for particular praise a work which was unknown to Winckelmann, and which he himself could only have known from reproductions: the figure of *Illissus*, a river god from the west pediment of the Parthenon frieze (Figure 2). This was one of the sculptures taken and shipped to Britain by Lord Elgin; it has been on show in the British museum as part of the 'Elgin Marbles' since 1816. What Hegel saw in this fragmentary figure was an 'expression of independence, of self-repose . . . and . . . free vivacity, by the way in which the natural material is permeated and conquered by the spirit and in which the artist has softened the marble, animated it, and given it a soul' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 724). *Ilissus*, according to Hegel, was one of the most beautiful objects to have come down to us from antiquity.

In contrast to Winckelmann, however, Hegel did not believe that the high quality of ancient Greek art was to be explained by its having attained a timeless aesthetic ideal. Rather, it embodied a stage in the development of the Idea in which spirituality could express itself through the finite physical form of the human body. Greek culture saw the gods as having human traits, so artists' subject matter was the way in which human existence could come to be imbued with divine spirit, or Idea. The human form, for Hegel, is the only material body capable of capturing the expression of the spirit. In the human figure, poised yet mobile, spirit had found a way to permeate matter completely and adequately. Hegel discusses a number of the specific characteristics of Greek sculptures, such as their facial features. He believed that the artists carefully studied such features in real life but modified them in order to present a perfected and rational

2 Image of the River-God (Illissus) from the west pediment of the Parthenon, The Acropolis, Athens, Greece, *c.*438–432 BC, marble, British Museum, London

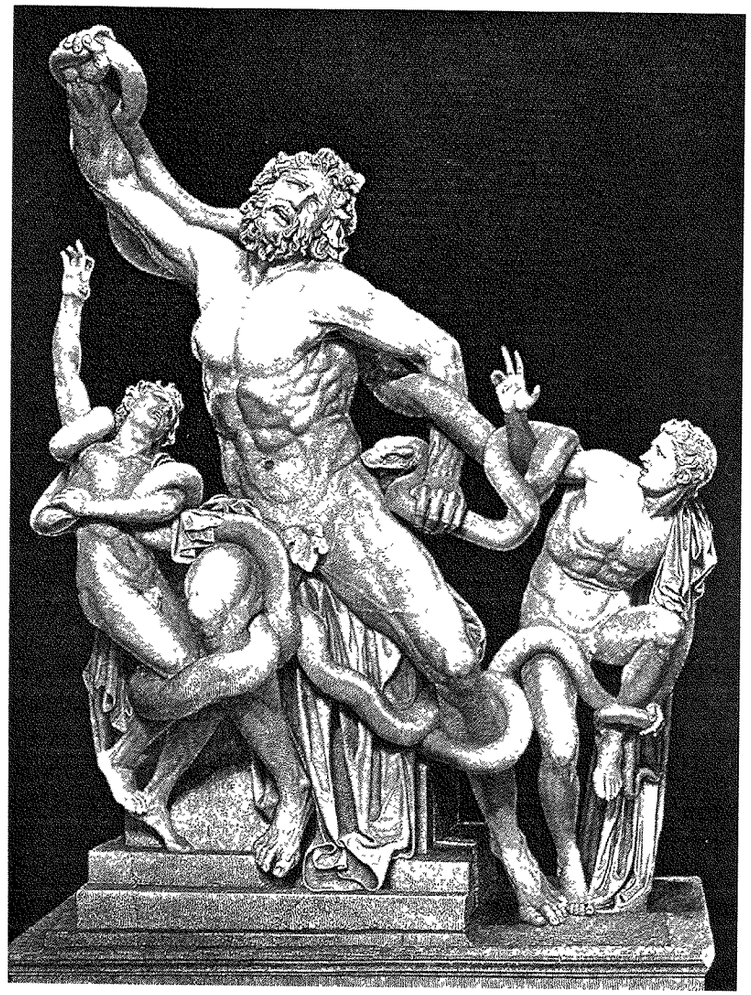
understanding of the human form in their works of art. Yet this idealisation did not come at the expense of the expression of individuality: all the Greek gods had their own characteristics, identified through subtle moulding of their features, specific hair styles and, in some cases, particular attributes.

Eventually, however, a tension appeared between the demands of individuality and the gods' unlimited, superhuman character. According to Hegel, the personality of the gods, as superhuman, exceeds the finite receptacle of the human body, however perfectly that might be rendered. The bodily form which expresses the divine becomes a limitation, and prevents the further development of the Absolute Idea. Hence, sculpture, being tied to the corporeal form, loses its privileged role as an expression of the Idea. Initially, this shows in the way that Greek sculpture starts to abandon the balance between universality and individuality in favour of the dynamic display of action, thus rendering its sculptures increasingly particular and human. Hegel already sees the beginning of this decline in the famous *Apollo Belvedere*, a work which for Winckelmann and others stood as the supreme achievement of the aesthetic ideal. It is, however, in the Laocoön group, made in about AD 50 (Figure 3), that artists' concern for humanity rather than divinity makes itself most clearly apparent in Hegel's view:

> the artificiality of the arrangement, the mathematical character of the pose, and the manner of its execution . . . aims at outstripping simple beauty and life by a deliberate display of its knowledge of the build and musculature of the human body, and tries to please by an all too subtle delicacy in its workmanship. The step from innocence and greatness of art to mannerism has here already been taken. (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 769).

There follows the realism of Roman sculpture with its particular skill in portraiture. Roman sculpture is no longer a privileged vehicle in the progress of the spirit or Idea, however. The new spiritual concepts of Christianity, the next step in the Idea's evolution, had to find other art forms, for sculpture – even Michelangelo's – was, in Hegel's view, concerned with external embodiment rather than those inner qualities of thought and feeling that are the central preoccupation of the Christian age.

At each stage in Hegel's account of art's development the artists whom he valued most highly were described as giving expression to a form of experience that was unique to their time. During the symbolic age this experience was not clearly perceived, so its artistic expression remained obscure and ambiguous, while during the classical stage it reached a height of physical clarity in the subject matter of the human form. It is important to realise that Hegel does not conceive of this as a failure on the part of



3 A. Krause, *Laokoon*, engraving, from Christian Oeser, *Briefe an eine Jungfrau über die Hauptgegenstände der Aesthetik: Ein Weihegeschenk für Frauen und Jungfrauen*, 19th edition, Leipzig: Friedrich Brandstetter, 1876, p. 161

Egyptian artists to realise more harmonious and adequate art forms. On the contrary, they were supremely able to express the highest beliefs of their age. It is the change in these beliefs themselves which requires new forms of expression. Experience of the world and intellectual enquiry into the nature of the Absolute Idea is gradual and progressive. The Greek ideal of self-containment, harmony and rational order had been adequate until the

moment that it came into conflict with the realisation that there were irrational and emotional elements in human nature. For Hegel, Christianity brings a new synthesis between these two opposing forces. Christian belief was based on the insight that the divine is to be found in the inner world of the human soul rather than located in external entities populating Mount Olympus. From now on, human self-examination becomes the most important source of information about the nature of God and the Absolute Idea. Thus artistic endeavour moves away from the task of finding the perfect external expression of the Idea in the human body towards the exploration of human beings' intellectual and emotional inner lives. Christianity prevents this new concern from becoming merely subjective because it maintains that God (and, thus, the universal) is present in every individual. With Christ, God has become human, and the events of His history incorporate profound human emotions, above all love and suffering.

The Romantic age epitomises this ideal of art as concerned with inwardness. According to Hegel, 'the Absolute is manifest as a living, actual, and therefore human subject, just as the human and finite subject in virtue of his being spiritual, makes the absolute substance and truth, the Spirit of God, living and actual in himself' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 793).

In contrast to the Classical age, this new way of manifesting the Absolute can no longer be expressed as the indissoluble unity of spirit and physical body. It requires a form which can express the spirituality of a kind of experience which discovers the nature of God in the inner mental and emotional life of human beings. In Hegel's view, the art forms most capable of giving expression to this experience were painting, music and poetry (the latter two more so than the former, although it is painting that concerns us here). Painting is particularly significant for the way in which it reduces the three-dimensional world to a two-dimensional surface and thus, he argues, asserts inwardness by deliberately withdrawing from the external world. Moreover, while sculpture is largely 'unconcerned about the spectator who can place himself wherever he likes . . . in painting the content is subjectivity, more precisely the inner life inwardly particularised'. For this reason painting clearly marks itself out 'as existing not independently on its own account but for subjective apprehension, for the spectator' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 806). As in his discussion of earlier artistic epochs, the particular techniques and materials used in the production of art are important to Hegel. In his view, painting's means of depiction – line, light and shadow, and colour – supports his contention that painting represents an abstraction from the material world that is important in the development of the Idea towards increasing awareness of its independence from sensuous material. Line in painting reduces three-dimensional bodies

to two, while light and shadow as they appear in painting do not 'exist as this abstraction in nature' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 809). Most importantly, painting's use of colour makes it capable of arousing subjective emotions which evoke the spectator's inner life in a way that sculpture cannot. Hegel was heavily influenced on this point by Goethe's *Theory of Colours* (1810), a work which laid the foundation for the investigation of subjective and emotional responses to colour. Like Goethe, Hegel believed that a universal harmony of colour existed to place limits on the tendency for individual expression to become excessively particular.

Such aspects of the art of the Romantic age were, however, secondary to the subject matter it expressed. The formal characteristics of art merely furnish the vehicle for the most adequate physical embodiment of the concepts and belief systems of the age. Thus it is the religious concepts of Christianity that are the most important feature of Romantic painting. Hegel is aware of the fact that ancient cultures, from the Chinese to the Romans, had produced excellent paintings, but in his view neither their understanding of natural objects nor their vision of human or divine affairs 'was of such a kind as to make possible in painting the expression of such a depth of spirituality as was presented in Christian painting' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 801). The artists of the Romantic age had the advantage over their predecessors that religion had progressed to a point at which it was capable of providing them with a source of inspiration that was at once both concrete and wide-ranging enough to produce great art. The highest Idea of the age is articulated in the stories of the Bible and the life of Christ, in particular: the reconciliation of individual human emotional and mental life with God. This development first made itself felt in Byzantine art which, although still displaying the stiffness and lifelessness of Greek painting, started to show a new awareness of emotions. But the real beginning of Romantic art came with Cimabue in Florence and Duccio in Siena at the end of the thirteenth century. It was Giotto, according to Hegel, who first went beyond the 'mainly mechanical type [of art] propagated by the Byzantines' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 875) through a deeper understanding of the natural world and of human emotions in the depiction of religious scenes. The 'progressive incorporation of the religious material into the living forms of the human figure and the soulful expression of human traits' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 878) continued in the fifteenth century with Masaccio and Fra Angelico.

For Hegel, painting reached a peak of expressiveness in the art of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Correggio and Titian. While their predecessors only aimed at depicting religious subjects with humanity, these artists brought the religious spirit into contact with the full range of life in the

material world. Just as their contemporaries elsewhere in society were experiencing a new self-reliance and extension of their realm of power 'with their industriousness, their trade and commerce, their freedom, their manly courage and patriotism, their well-being in enjoying life in the present' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 879), so the artists of the Renaissance extended their subject matter to include landscape backgrounds, views of cities, the surroundings of churches and palaces, contemporary portraits of people and domestic and civil life. Yet, this expansion of subject matter was not at the expense of religious feeling, Hegel argued. On the contrary, what made the painters of the sixteenth century the apogee of Romantic art, was the fact that they achieved a perfect fusion between the breadth of human beings' lived experience and inner spirituality:

> For it was now a matter of harmonizing soulful depth of feeling, the seriousness and profundity of religion, with that sense of liveliness of the physical and spiritual presence of characters and forms, so that the physical figure in its posture, movement, and colouring should not remain merely an external scaffolding but become itself full of soul and life and, thanks to the perfect expression of all the parts, appear at the same time beautiful alike physically and spiritually. (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 880)

Hegel singles out Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael in this regard. In the *Transfiguration* of 1517–20 (in the Vatican Museum in Rome) Raphael depicts Christ as going beyond his immediate existence as an individual being by creating a sharp separation between the earthly and the divine realms to which Christ now returns. Yet, according to Hegel, it is more favourable to the aims of religious art to concentrate on those religious situations which show Christ at His most human, either at the moment of His greatest suffering, in the story of the Passion, or in his childhood when he does not yet appear as perfect. Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (Figure 4), a painting which Hegel knew well from his visits to the museum in Dresden, is unequalled in this respect. It shows Christ in purely childlike innocence, yet also 'gives us an inkling of the expansion of this Divinity into an infinite revelation' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 823). The picture shows the highest form of the presence of divinity in humanity: love. Love is shown in perfect form, as an emotion in which one finds oneself by totally sacrificing oneself for another being, expressed here in the profound tenderness of the Madonna towards her child. In love, maintains Hegel, we are filled with compassion for and understanding of another. It is an emotion that leads us to fulfil our own potentialities simply in order to satisfy the other, just as the Madonna becomes saintly by virtue of fulfilling her role as the mother of Christ. Raphael, he notes, repeats this subject in a variety of

4 Raphael, *The Sistine Madonna*, c.1513–14, oil on panel, 269.5 × 201 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden

forms and contexts, thereby showing this most profound of human emotions across the full range of human life.

Hegel's admiration for Italian artists of the High Renaissance was relatively conventional for his time. Although he knew of the high esteem in which the brothers Boisserée held early German and Flemish art, and was acquainted with their collection, he did not share their enthusiasm. For

Hegel, German and Flemish painters simply did not attain the level of spirituality expressed by the Italian masters. While Jan van Eyck and Albrecht Dürer achieved a certain harmony between the soul and its external mode of expression, later German and Dutch artists increasingly concentrated on human beings' inner natures and external forms in a way that was without religious significance, he believed. Of course, painting during medieval times and the Renaissance was not exclusively concerned with religious subjects, but even when it took secular themes as its subject matter, it managed at its best – in Titian's portraits, for example – to 'give us a conception of spiritual vitality unlike what a face actually confronting us gives' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 866).

Romantic painting declines when art begins to interest itself exclusively with secular matters, as in the German and Dutch schools. Profound ideas are abandoned for everyday concerns and artists lose their importance as articulators of the highest Idea. Hegel was scathing about the art of his own time. He felt it lacked true spiritual necessity and so appeared 'without any imagination of situations, motives, or expression' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 857). Having lost the religious feeling of the High Renaissance, however, it is not open to the contemporary artist simply to attempt to revive the old religious subject matter and forms of expression. The artist is the child of his time and 'the past cannot be recalled to life' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, p. 815). Since art no longer has a serious subject, it has run its course and it is now the role of philosophy to articulate the Absolute Idea. Art was important at different historical stages for the way it allowed the Absolute Idea to realise itself in the material world. At the Symbolic stage, this awareness remained obscure since the material world was insufficiently mastered by the mind. In the Classical stage, mind found a perfect expression of itself in the physical form of the human body, but, with the arrival of the Romantic stage, painting pointed beyond the material world towards pure spirituality. Thus, art displays increasing inwardness as mind becomes more and more aware of itself. In modern times, the human mind does not need the articulation of the Idea in sensuous form any longer; the Idea has become fully aware of itself and is now best expressed in the purely mental constructs of philosophy. This was Hegel's answer to the hermeneutic problem. The different stages asserted that art was always specific to its historical context, but the universal process of the Absolute Idea tied them together and to the present. It provided both an explanation of why art changes, and how the art of the past can be interpreted from another historical vantage point.

Hegel's contention that art has come to an end has become famous. Yet, this does not mean that Hegel believes that no art should or could be produced in modern times. In fact, all he says is that, although we 'may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection,' art 'has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit' (Hegel, 1975, vol. 1, p. 103). On one interpretation this might mean that at some unknown future point art might become important again. On another, art's liberation from the task of articulating the highest forms of consciousness allows it to address neglected aspects of life which might otherwise be forgotten. Either way, Hegel's *Aesthetics* is not the funeral oration for art that it has sometimes been thought to be.

Critical appraisal

Hegel's lectures on aesthetics are important for the two questions about art's history it raises: (1) What makes art historically and socially specific? (2) What motivates changes in art over time? These are fundamental questions art history still attempts to answer. Yet Hegel's own solutions were unacceptable to the majority of art historians during his own lifetime and have remained so ever since.

The first objection came from those more empirically-oriented scholars whom we encounter in Chapter 4. As we have seen, Hegel assumes that art's evolution through its various stages is ultimately caused by a metaphysical force, the Absolute Idea. For many art historians this is problematic on three counts. First, it is unverifiable. The Idea is supposed to necessitate the development of art in the way that Hegel describes, but we have no way of proving or disproving the Idea's own existence. Second, people have argued that Hegel's belief in a single metaphysical driving force leads him to give an excessively generalised account of art which does not do justice to the particularities of artworks, especially not to their unique formal characteristics.

This objection was raised during Hegel's time and formed the core of a competing approach that underlay much of art history as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as we see in Chapter 4. Hegel's contemporary, Karl Friedrich von Rumohr (on whose history of Italian Renaissance art Hegel relied heavily) argued that the significance of art lay in its unique ability to articulate visual knowledge as opposed to abstract conceptual understanding. This knowledge, far from having only one expression, was as manifold in any one period as there were manifold individuals. What gives art its characteristic forms in each age is that such individuals worked within a precise set of technical and social constraints – for instance, the artistic materials at their disposal, contemporary commercial practices and the requirements of patrons. While this line of

objection to Hegel may lead to art-historical narratives which are more attuned to the particular characteristics, and historical contingencies which contribute to the production of individual works of art, it is less able to give a bird's-eye view of why art changes over time. As Chapter 4 makes clear, however, those who followed this approach did provide an answer to this question – one which differed significantly from Hegel's conception.

The privilege that Hegel gives to thought and subject matter over form in his account of the development of art was to become the focus of criticism of his art history. Hegel's main nineteenth-century disciple, Karl Schnaase, tried to modify this aspect of Hegel's theory. He describes the transformation of ancient architecture into medieval Christian church building, for example, as part of a developing argument between earlier and later forms. At some historical moments, Schnaase suggests, it is art's autonomous development that contributes to human beings' spiritual progress; at others, it is religion. While Schnaase retained Hegel's assumption of spirit as the driving force behind historical development, later authors interested in charting the history of art as a series of changes in formal expressions found a way of doing without recourse to a metaphysical cause. As we see in Chapter 5, on formalism, such authors followed one of Hegel's rivals, Johann Friedrich Herbart. Herbart rejected Hegel's view that the importance of art lies in the way it articulates religious or philosophical ideas. Instead, he argued that the search for the meaning of a work of art is superfluous. Each work consists, in essence, of a unique set of formal relations: lines, tones, planes, colours and so on. In Alois Riegl's and Heinrich Wölfflin's art histories, transformations in the formal characteristics of art replaced Hegel's emphasis on changing intellectual content. Changes in art are explained as a result of changes in people's perception.

A third fundamental criticism which applies not only to Hegel but to other nineteenth-century art historians as well arose in the twentieth century: such theories did not adequately link artistic expression with social conditions prevailing at the time. For art historians influenced by Karl Marx's critique of ideology and the capitalist economy (see Chapter 7), art plays an active part in maintaining the unequal distribution of power and wealth in societies and it is these that need to be considered when discussing art. What changed art was not innovations by individuals, different modes of perception, or the power of Hegel's metaphysical spirit, but the concrete redistribution of wealth and power in the economic sphere. For Marx there was a clear historical pattern in which changes in the economic base of societies unfolded and hence Marxist art historians were able to retain Hegel's ambition of giving a developmental account of art without accepting his metaphysical presuppositions.

Others have become sceptical whether such a developmental account was either possible or desirable (see Chapters 7 and 11) in the first place. Hegel's attempt to answer the two fundamental questions of what makes art historically specific and what motivates changes in art, has come to be criticised as misguided altogether. According to this position, Hegel's account set the agenda for an art history that claimed to have privileged insight into history, leading to a narrative which in some magical way is supposed to reflect the immanent logic of art's development. The consequence of abandoning such claims to objectivity is that 'historians can make no claim as to whether or not their narratives intersect with anything beyond themselves' (Moxey, 1998, p. 27). Hence Hegel's fundamental questions for art history are best abandoned, the argument goes, in favour of an honest acknowledgement of the fact that the writer's own account plays a contemporary, not timeless, role.

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