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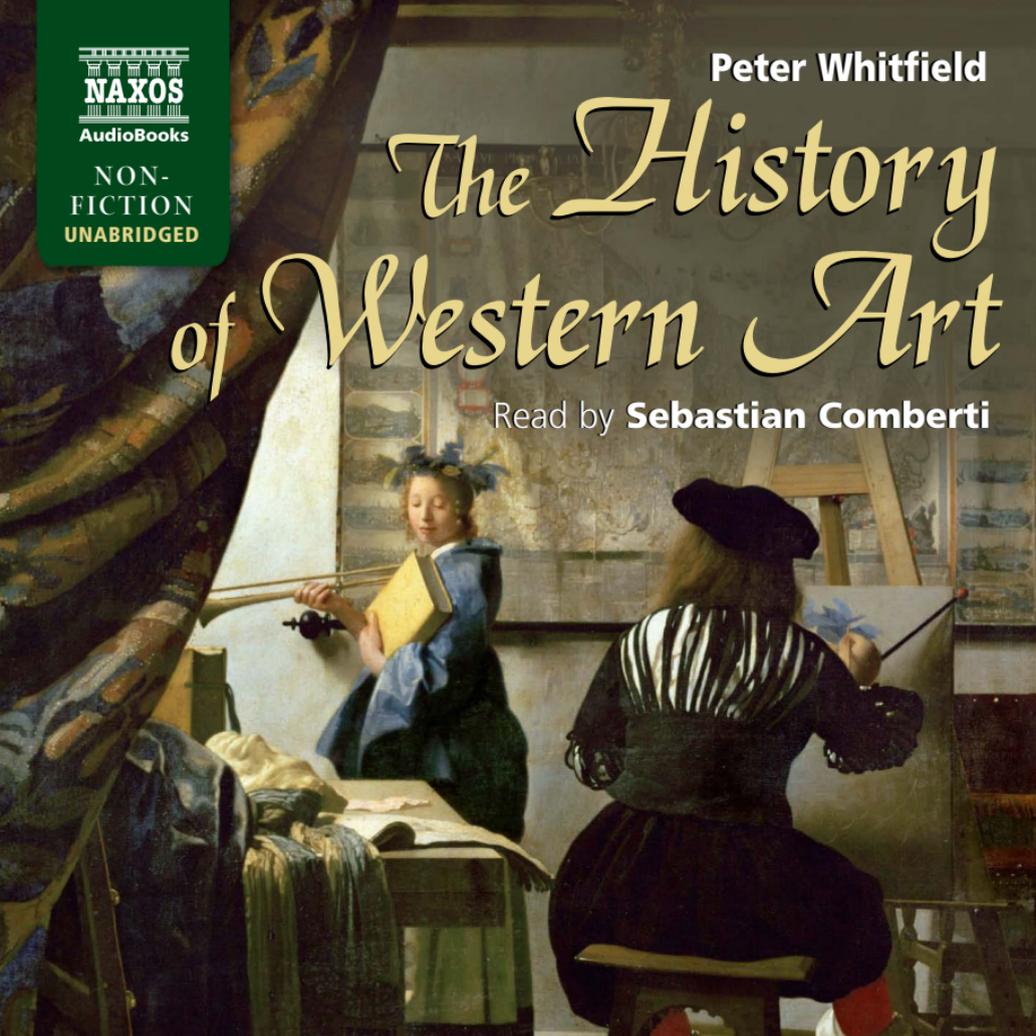
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Peter Whitfield

The History of Western Art

Read by **Sebastian Comberti**



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Total time: 5:14:18

Peter Whitfield

The History of Western Art

What is 'art'? What images are conjured up in our minds when we hear that curt, enigmatic word, so familiar and yet so difficult to define?

The first image has to be the art gallery, cut off from the outside world, with its large, echoing, essentially empty rooms, whose sole feature is the array of grand paintings adorning the high walls; paintings from the past, from epochs and societies long vanished. In these paintings, the figures of Christ and his angels, pagan gods and goddesses, kings and queens, formal portraits, landscapes and seascapes all meet our eyes, staring back at us as a series of tableaux preserved from worlds now utterly remote from our own. The second image would probably be the artist himself: the distinctive and solitary figure in the strangely unreal surroundings of his studio, standing, brush in hand and canvas before him, wrestling with ideas, forms and colours, trying to give

expression to some vision that half exists in his imagination.

Both of these images are valid: they give a clear reality to the word art. But how do we get from one to the other, from the man working alone with his brushes, his paints and his solitary imagination, to the great edifice which we call 'art', that succession of grand, stylised, mysterious images from past centuries which hang in those galleries, and which are regarded as the cultural treasures of the world? What do the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Rococo, Neo-Classicism and so on really mean to us now? Why are we so interested in these images?

This brief history of western art argues that art is an index of certain fundamental forces in our individual psychology and in our collective culture. That history reaches back some 30,000 years to the neolithic cave paintings found in France and Spain, yet throughout that expanse of time,

certain themes have remained remarkably constant. The first is the encounter with the visible world with its natural living forms, human and animal. It is as though the underlying instinct of all art is the impulse to create in miniature a parallel world to this one. All the techniques of drawing, painting and modelling developed over the centuries, have been aimed at perfecting this art of imitation or illusion, this act of re-creation. Perhaps therefore, art springs from a desire to share in the creative processes of the universe, or, to put it more simply, the artist can feel himself akin to the gods.

Yet no work of art is an exact mirror of nature. All painters select and rearrange elements from the real, visible world in order to make something that did not exist before, but which now exists in the parallel world which we call art. Take Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*: no part of this overwhelming work is detached from physical reality. It consists of a multitude of human figures – natural, angelic or demonic; but they have been assembled into a totality which no human eye could ever witness. So the visible world, the basis

of all art, is transformed in the imagination of the artist, and that transformation is re-enacted in the mind of the spectator as he contemplates the work.

The natural elements of the physical world could be described as neutral: a picture of a hand, a tree, a stone or a bird is simply that. But the final assembled picture, which places these things in a deliberate composition, is not neutral; instead it will express something beyond itself, something invariably drawn from the belief systems of the surrounding culture. The distinctive art of ancient Egypt was centred above all on the afterlife of the soul; the art of Greece focused on the beauty of the human form as the expression of human nobility; post-classical Christian art illustrated the hierarchical universe, consisting of heaven and earth, God, angels, men and demons, and the interaction between them; Renaissance art fused Christian themes with a renewed homage to Greek ideals of beauty; 19th-century art expressed the forces of Romanticism and revolution, and so on. So here we see the third fundamental component of art: that it

embodies the spirit of its age. The idea of the artist as a solitary genius at odds with his environment is only a partial truth, for he also expresses the fundamental beliefs and tensions that exist within his culture. So we have to envisage the artist as a focal point in a three-way interplay between the individual soul, the outer physical world of nature, and the collective belief system of his society. Somehow the artist focuses and registers these forces as he transfers his vision from his mind's eye to the canvas. The interplay of these forces is what constitutes the history of art. These same three forces are still present to us today, even though our modern environment is so completely overlaid with the products of science and technology. We too still face the question of relating our own being to the world that surrounds us: what are the controlling beliefs of our own age? What do we regard as true, valuable, noble or beautiful?

When we look at the paintings of past ages, we are looking back to a world of coherence, of shared beliefs and ideals. Looked at in this light, what shall we say about the art of the last hundred years,

which was the first to turn its back on the great historical project of encountering the visible world, to create instead an art of abstraction? Was it a coincidence that the 20th century also saw the end of our age-old certainties in the fields of religion, science, philosophy and the social order? Half a century of abstractionism created the problem of image-starvation, but when the inevitable reaction set in, modern artists turned for inspiration to the world of pop culture, to the sea of imagery waiting on the streets and in the mass media. High art was dead, replaced by post-modern collage, in which ugliness and horror was as valid as beauty, formlessness as valid as form. In the 20th century, as in all previous ages, the artist registered seismic changes in human psychology and beliefs, including now perhaps the *end* of beliefs. This narrative traces these complex and exciting themes through several thousand years of western art, interpreting works of individual genius as products of the civilisations that gave them birth.

Notes by Peter Whitfield

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue

DEBUSSY ORCHESTRAL WORKS, VOL. 1 Orchestre National de Lyon; Jun Märkl, conductor	8.570759
FROM BYZANTIUM TO ANDALUSIA: MEDIÆVAL MUSIC AND POETRY Oni Wytars Ensemble	8.557637
ADORATE DEUM/GREGORIAN CHANT Nova Schola Gregoriana; Alberto Turco, conductor	8.550711
DUFAY CHANSONS Unicorn Ensemble; Michael Posch, conductor	8.553458
MUSIC OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE Shirley Rumsey	8.550615
MONTEVERDI SCHERZI MUSICALI A TRE VOCI Concerto delle Dame di Ferrara; Sergio Vartolo, conductor	8.553317
ELIZABETHAN SONGS AND CONSORT MUSIC The Rose Consort of Viols	8.554284
MOZART SYMPHONY NO. 25 Capella Istituzionale; Barry Wordsworth, conductor	8.550113

SOR FANTASIE POUR GUITARE SEULE, OP. 58 Nicholas Goluses, guitar	8.553342
DEBUSSY PIANO WORKS, VOL. 1 François-Joël Thiollier, piano	8.553290
GRIEG ROMANTIC MUSIC FOR STRINGS Capella Istropolitana; Adrian Leaper, conductor	8.550330
GRIEG SIGURD JORSALFAR BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra; Jerzy Maksymiuk, conductor	8.550864
BERG PIANO MUSIC Peter Hill, piano	8.553870
ELGAR ENIGMA VARIATIONS Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra; George Hurst, conductor	8.553564

Music programmed by Sarah Butcher



Sebastian Comberti was born in London of Italian/German parents. As a professional cellist of many years, he performs with many of London's chamber orchestras and is active as a recitalist and chamber player. In 2001 he founded the Cello Classics recording label which has won international acclaim for its innovative programming. He has also worked as a voice-over artist, with roles including 'lost boy' in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and 'lost cellist' in *The Madness of King George*. He has also read *Discover Music of the Baroque Era* and *Venice* for Naxos AudioBooks.

Credits

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Peter Whitfield

The History of Western Art

Read by **Sebastian Comberti**

What is art? Why do we value images of saints, kings, goddesses, battles, landscapes or cities in eras utterly remote from our own? This history of art shows how painters, sculptors and architects have expressed the belief systems of their age – religious, political and aesthetic. From the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece to the revolutionary years of the 19th and 20th centuries, the artist has acted as a mirror to the ideals and conflicts of the human mind. He has always started with reality, but has selected and reshaped that reality to create a parallel world: a world of the imagination.



Peter Whitfield is the author of more than a dozen works of history and literary criticism, including *English Poetry: a New Illustrated History* and *A Universe of Books: Readings in World Literature*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has written *The Story of the Bible* and *The History of Science*. He has also published three collections of his own poetry.

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