Art Since 1945 and How to Look

¶ 6.1



Part I: *The Evolution*

- Surveying the dramatic shift from Abstract Expressionism to digital art.
- Navigating urgent contemporary debates about museums and ownership.

Part II: *The Lens*

- Stepping back to learn how art historians rigorously weigh evidence.
- Performing structured formal analysis on any work.

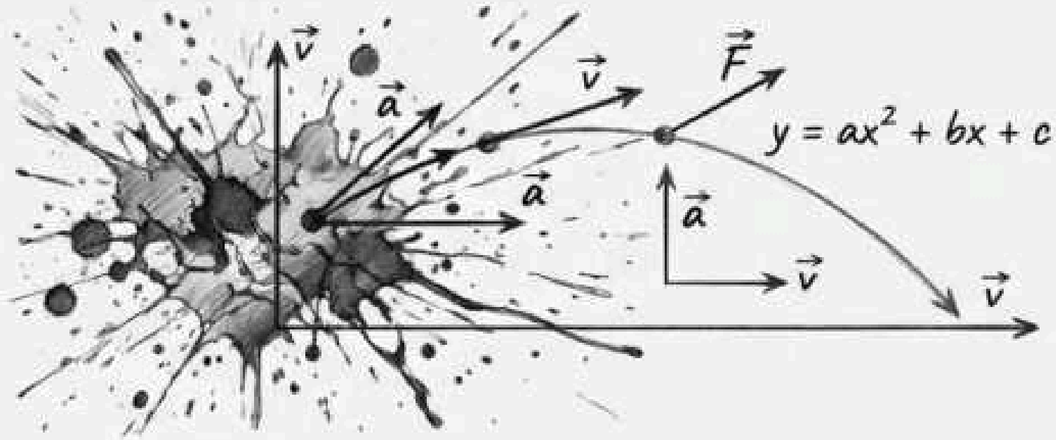
The Epicenter Moves: Abstract Expressionism

¶ 6.2



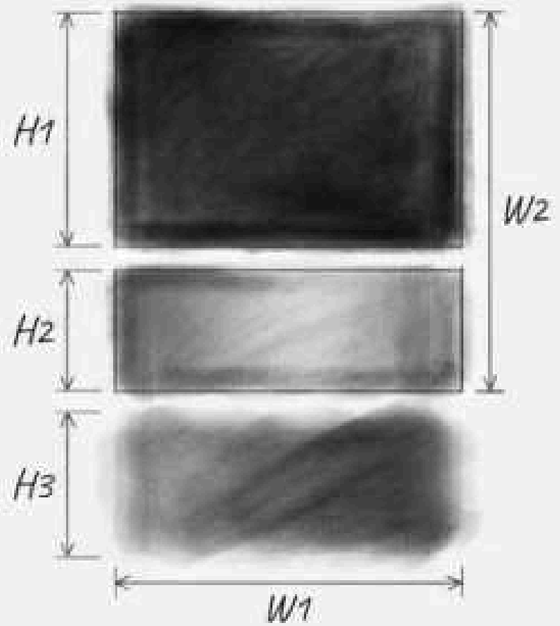
The Geographic Shift: Post-WWII, European artists flee to New York; collectors fuel a new era.





Jackson Pollock

- The physics of poured paint.
- Dripping directly onto huge horizontal canvases on the floor.



Mark Rothko

- Soft, floating geometry.
- Engineered to evoke deep, sweeping emotional movement.

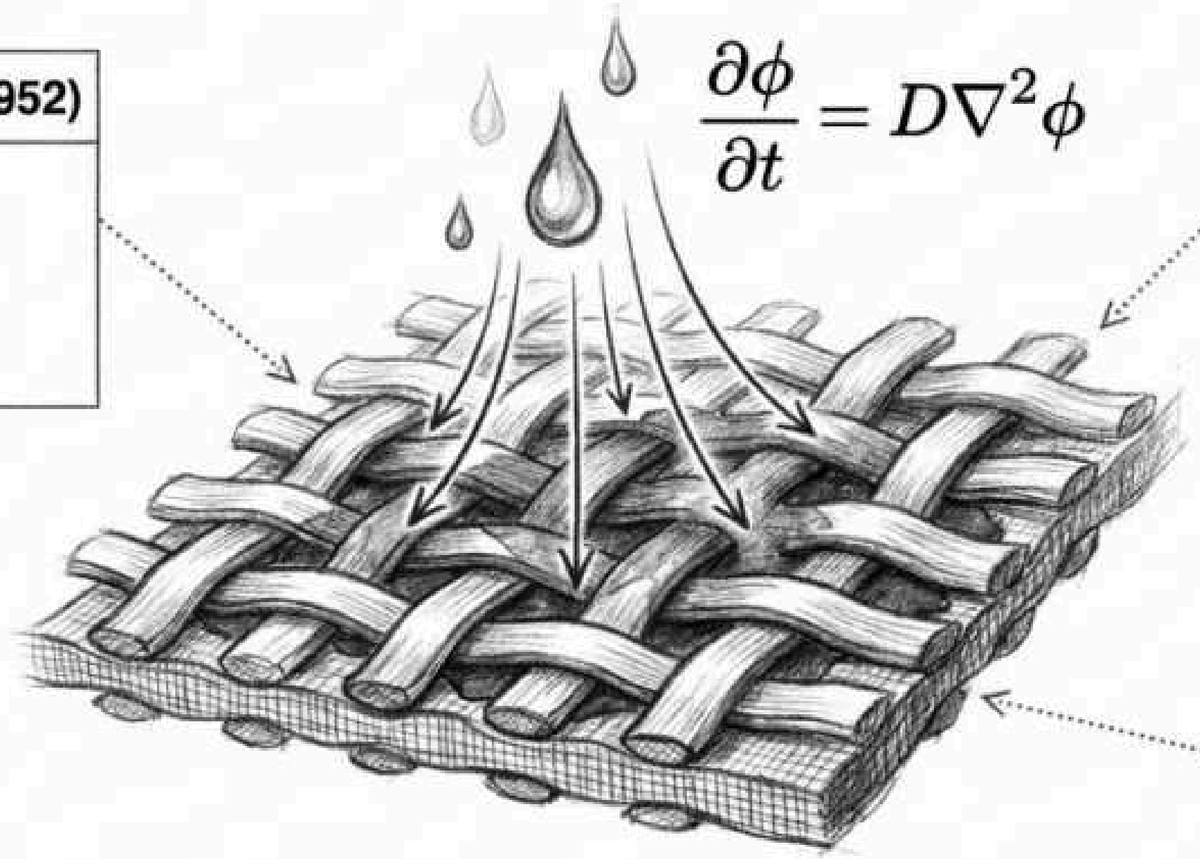
The Women of Abstract Expressionism

¶ 6.3

Beyond the Men: Female artists were often overshadowed in their time. Critics are actively rediscovering their monumental impact.

Helen Frankenthaler (1952)

Invented the luminous soak-stain technique, thinning paint to bond directly with raw canvas.



Lee Krasner

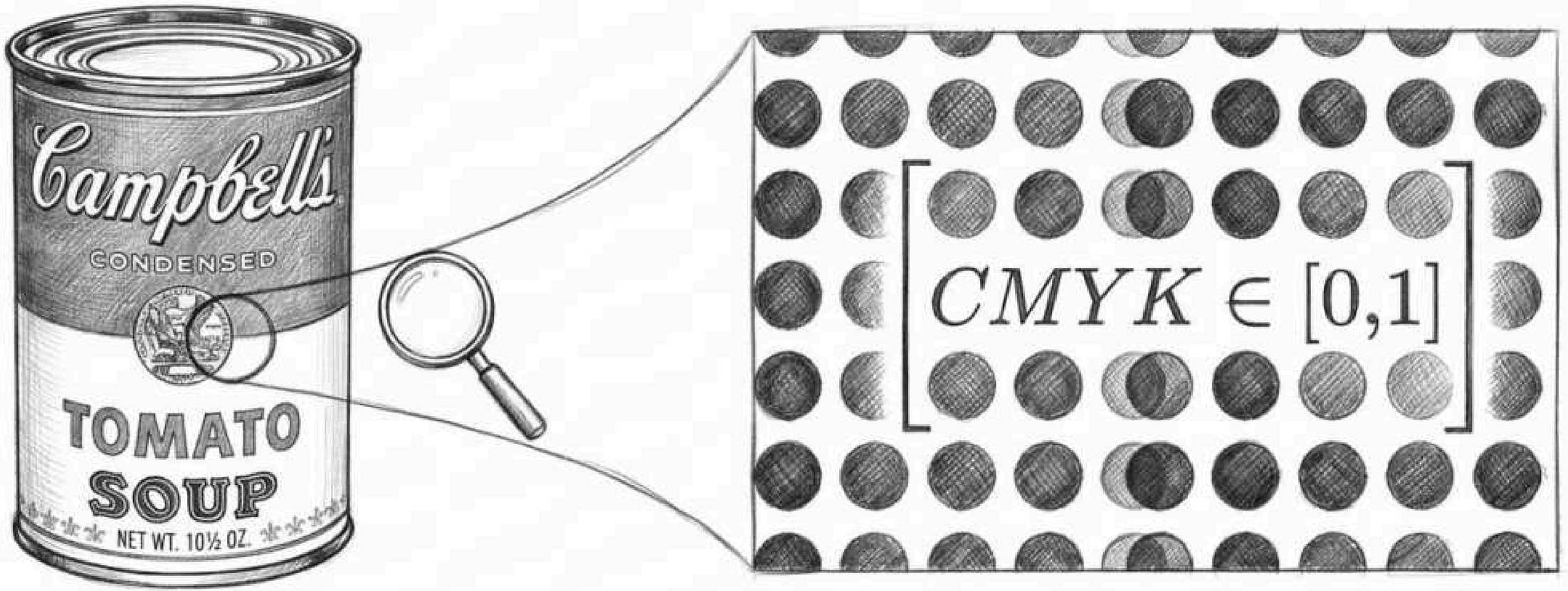
Built an independent, major career pushing structural abstraction alongside her husband, Jackson Pollock.

Joan Mitchell

Painted intensely energetic, large-scale landscapes of the mind.

Pop Art & Consumer Society

¶ 6.4



The Source

Drawing images directly from advertising, comics, and film (1950s Britain → 1960s America).

The Technique

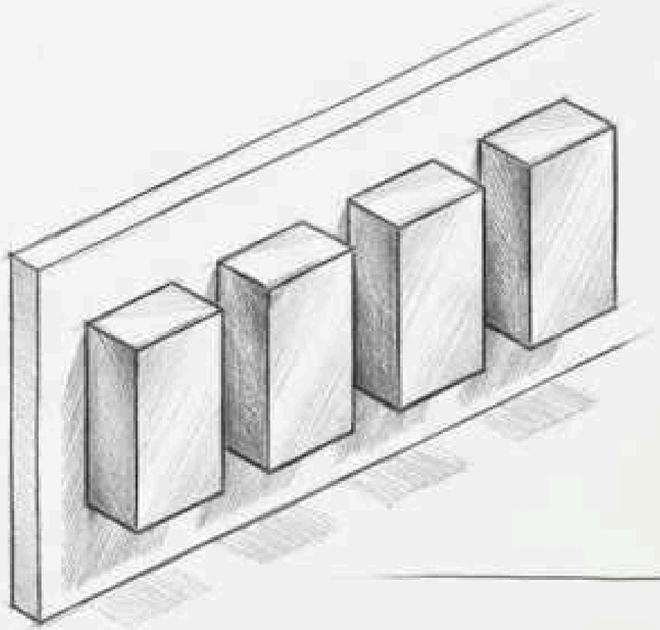
Andy Warhol's silkscreen repetition & Roy Lichtenstein's enlarged, printed comic-strip dots.

The Ongoing Debate

Critics remain divided on whether these works mocked consumer society or simply celebrated it.

Minimalism & Conceptual Art

¶ 6.5



Minimalism (Donald Judd)

- Stripping art to its absolute basics.
- The viewer's physical presence in the room is required to complete the plain metal boxes.

Art = {Object, Image, Definition}





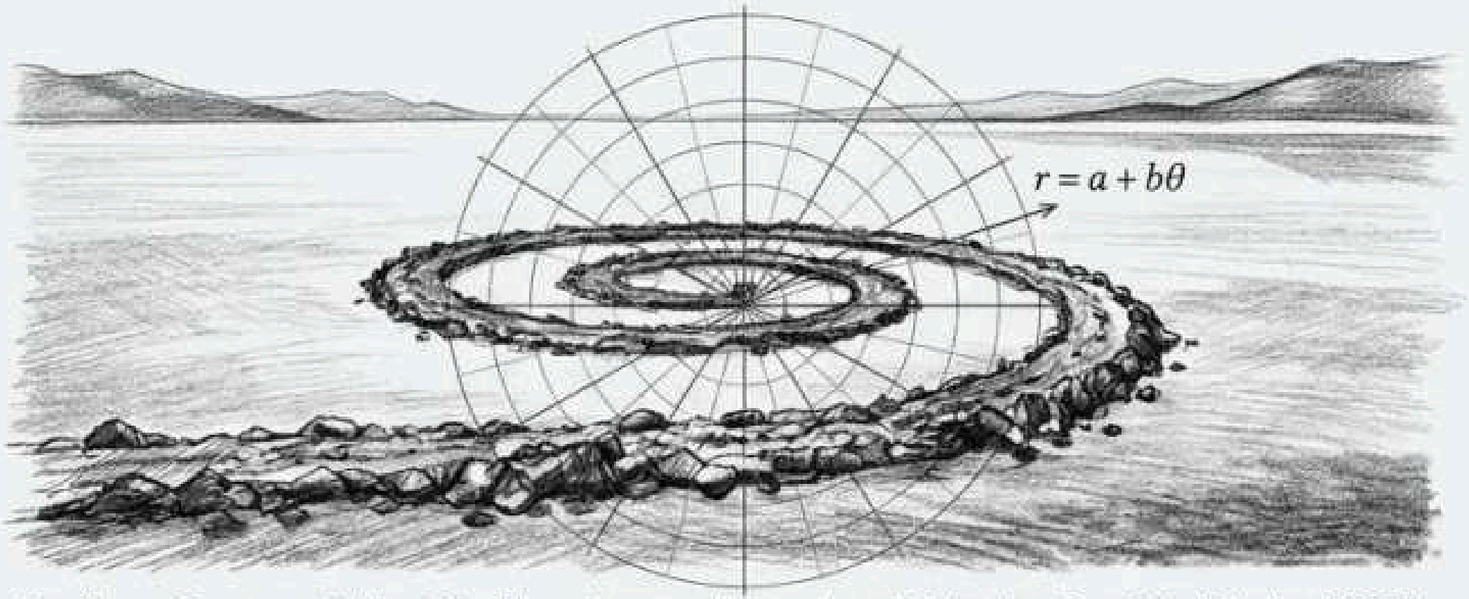


Conceptualism (Kosuth & LeWitt)

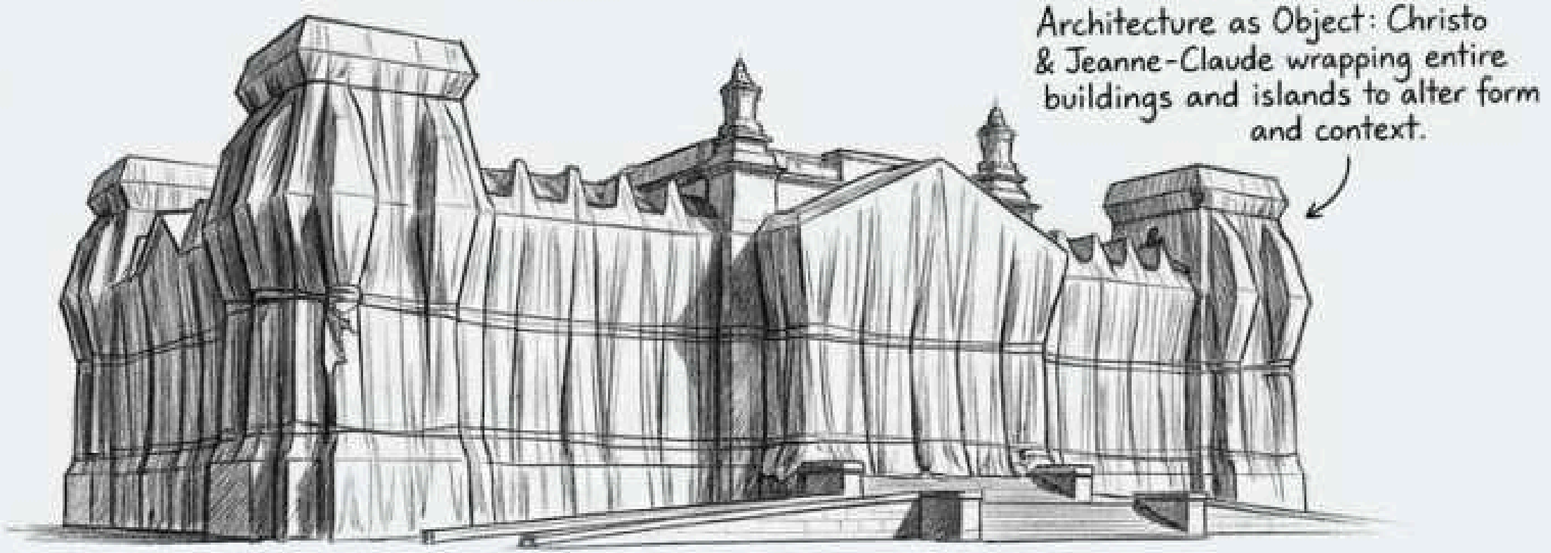
- The idea supersedes the physical object.
- Kosuth presented a chair, a photo, and a definition side-by-side.
- For Sol LeWitt, the concept itself WAS the work.

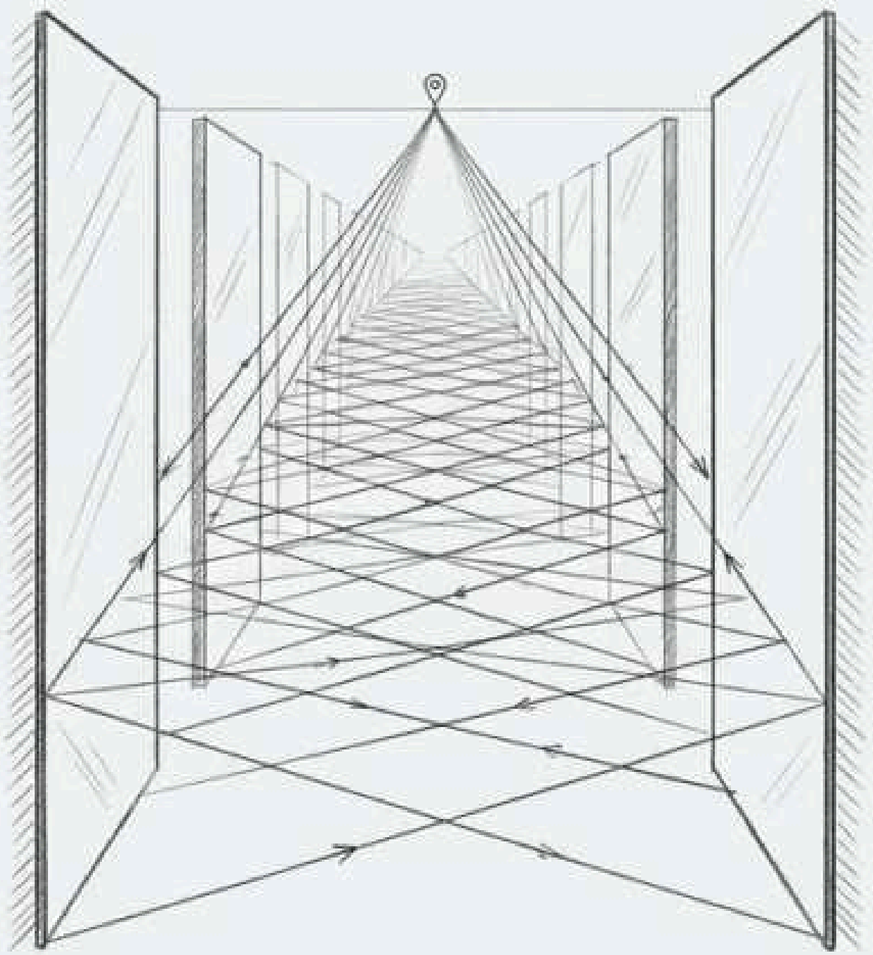
Leaving the Gallery: Land & Installation Art

¶ 6.6



Earth as Canvas: Robert Smithson's massive rock coil into the Great Salt Lake (1970).



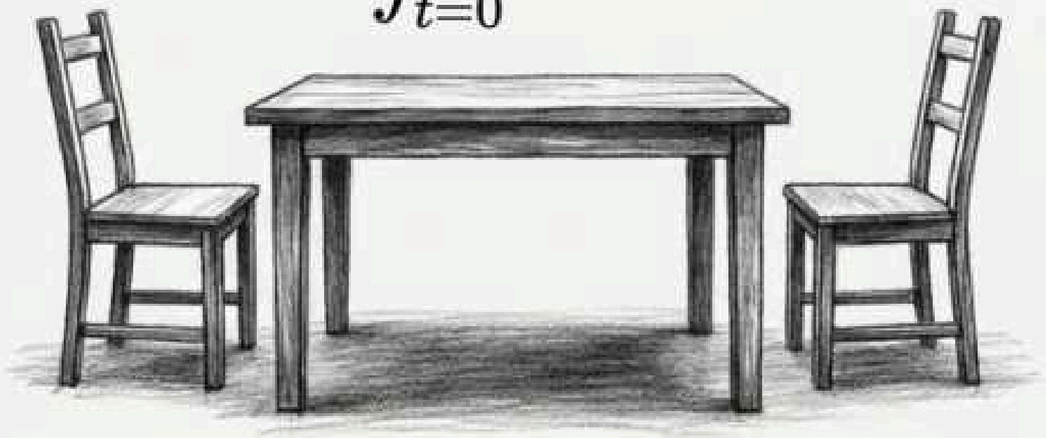


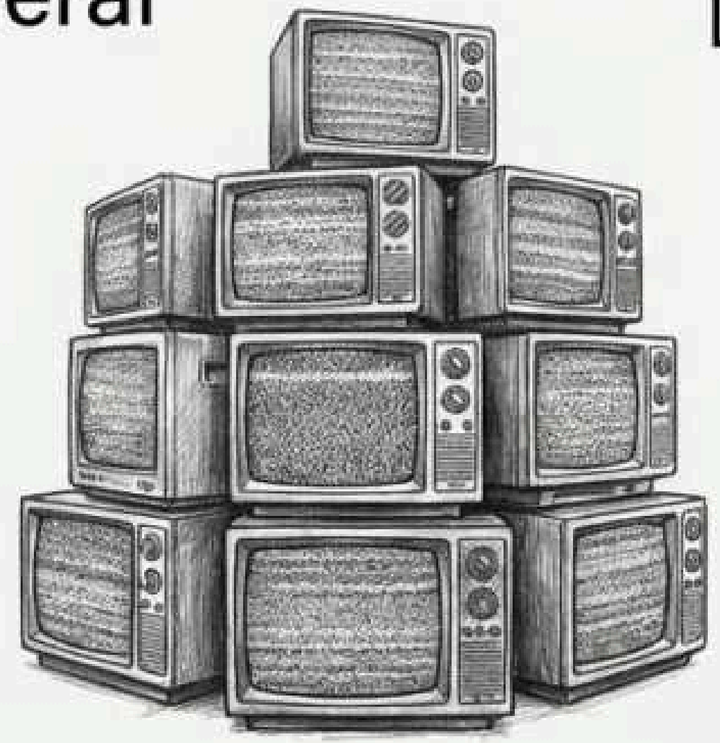
Space as Infinity: Yayoi Kusama's immersive rooms of mirrors and lights, creating the sensation of floating through endless space.

Performance, Video, and the Ephemeral

¶ 6.7

$$Art = \int_{t=0}^{t>700} Presence\, dt$$





The Body as Medium

- *Marina Abramović sits silently across from visitors for 700+ hours (MoMA, 2010).*

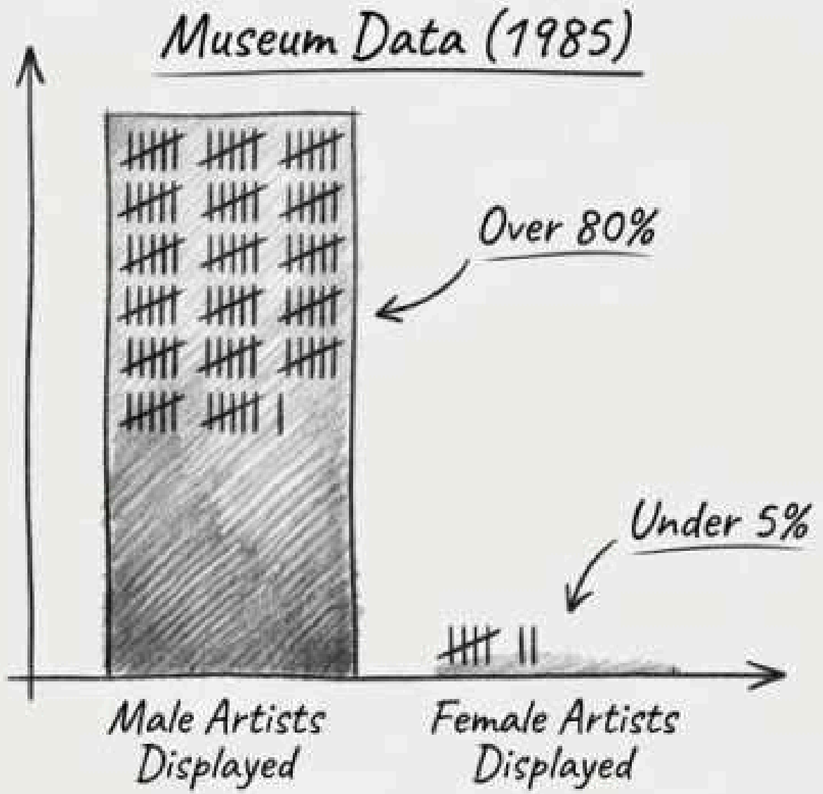
Tech as Raw Material

- *Nam June Paik transforms television sets and video feeds into sculptural art.*

The Museum Dilemma: How do you collect, preserve, and own an experience that exists only in human memory and temporary recordings?

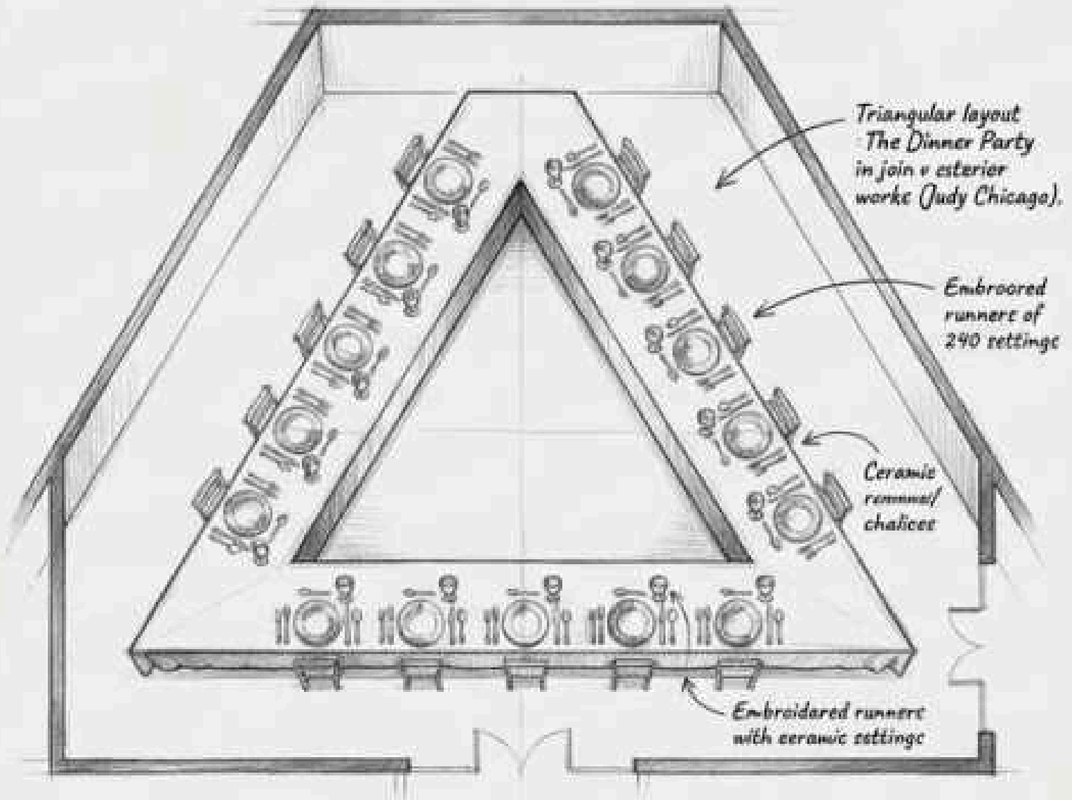
Feminist Art & Institutional Critique

¶ 6.8



The Question (1971): Historian Linda Nochlin asks, *"Why have there been no great women artists?"*

The Answer: The barrier was the *institutional structure* and lack of access, not a lack of innate talent.



The Action:

- Reclaiming history through monumental, collaborative works (*Judy Chicago*).
- Posting sharp, data-driven statistical critiques on the streets of New York (*Guerrilla Girls*).

Race, Identity, and Representation

¶ 6.9

Street to Studio: Jean-Michel Basquiat's meteoric rise from NYC graffiti to 1980s art fame before his death at age 27.





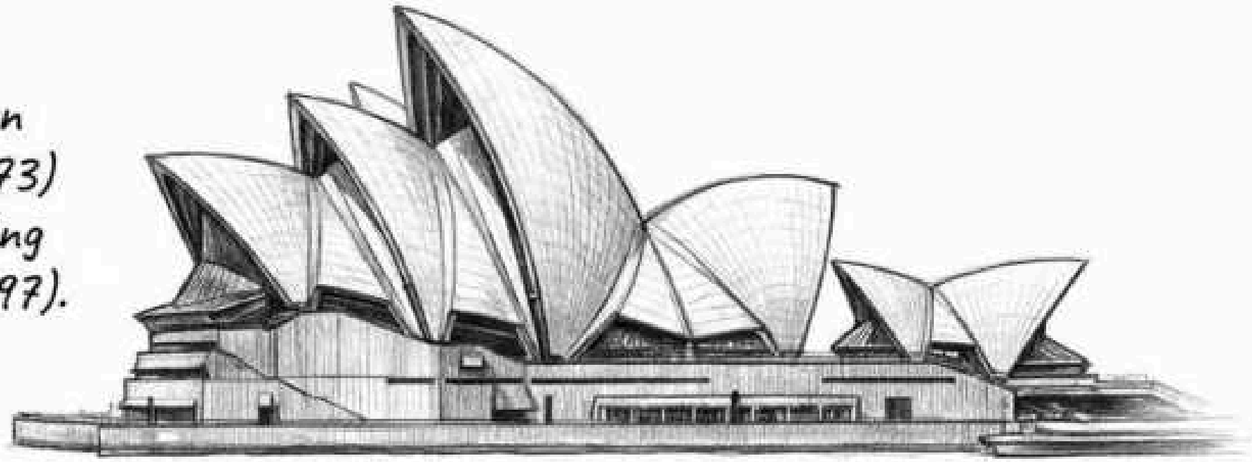
Confronting History: Kara Walker's cut black paper silhouettes exploring the brutal legacy of slavery, refusing to stay within traditional boundaries.

Redefining Power (2018): Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald dismantle historical exclusivity by painting the official portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama for the National Portrait Gallery.

The Bold Era of Architecture

¶ 6.10

Sculptural Forms: *Jørn Utzon's iconic roofs (1973) and Frank Gehry's curving titanium structures (1997).*

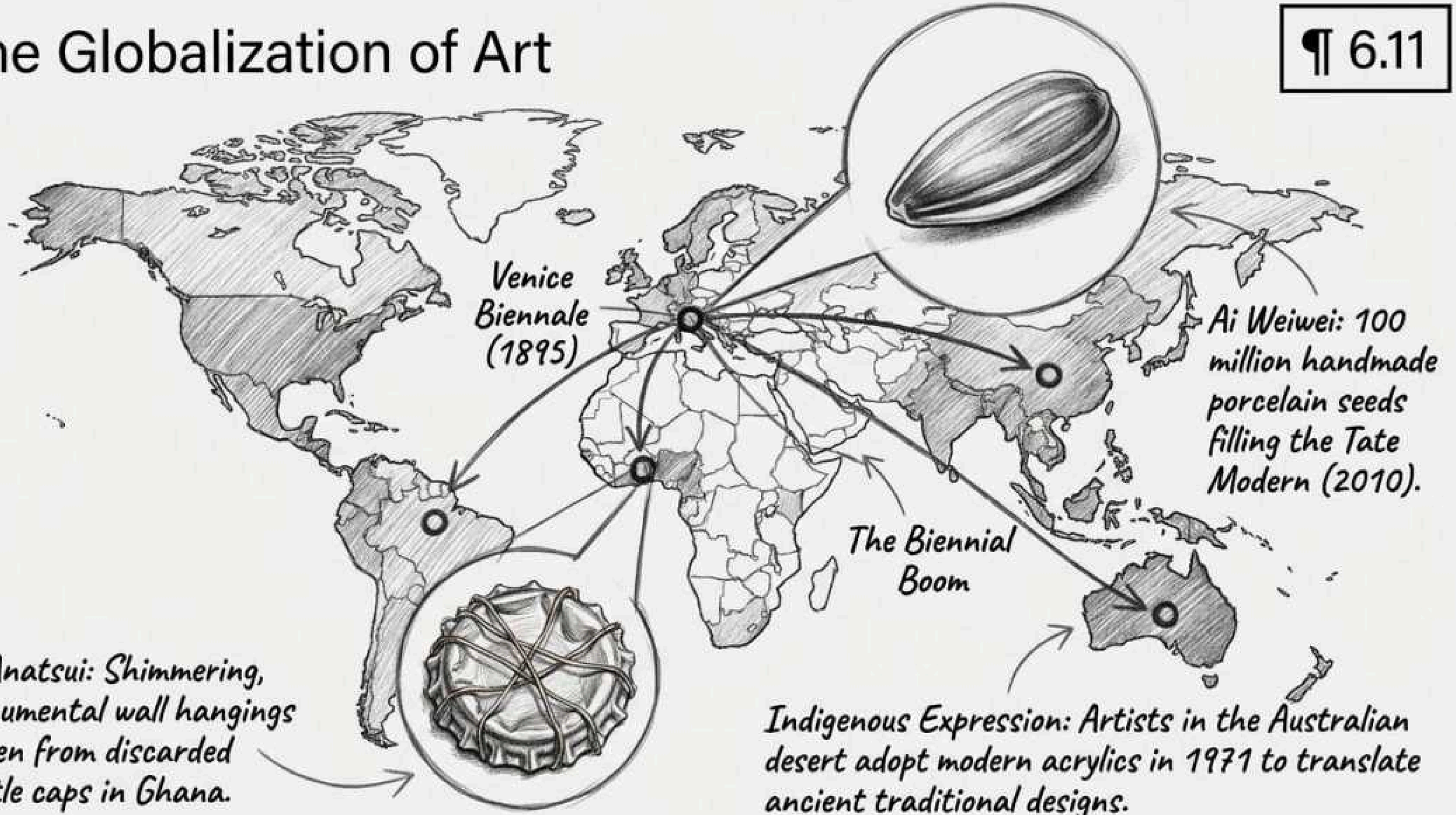


The Bilbao Effect: *Radical architecture driving massive tourism, effectively revitalizing entire post-industrial cities.*

Breaking Ground (2004): *Zaha Hadid becomes the first woman to win the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize.*

The Globalization of Art

¶ 6.11



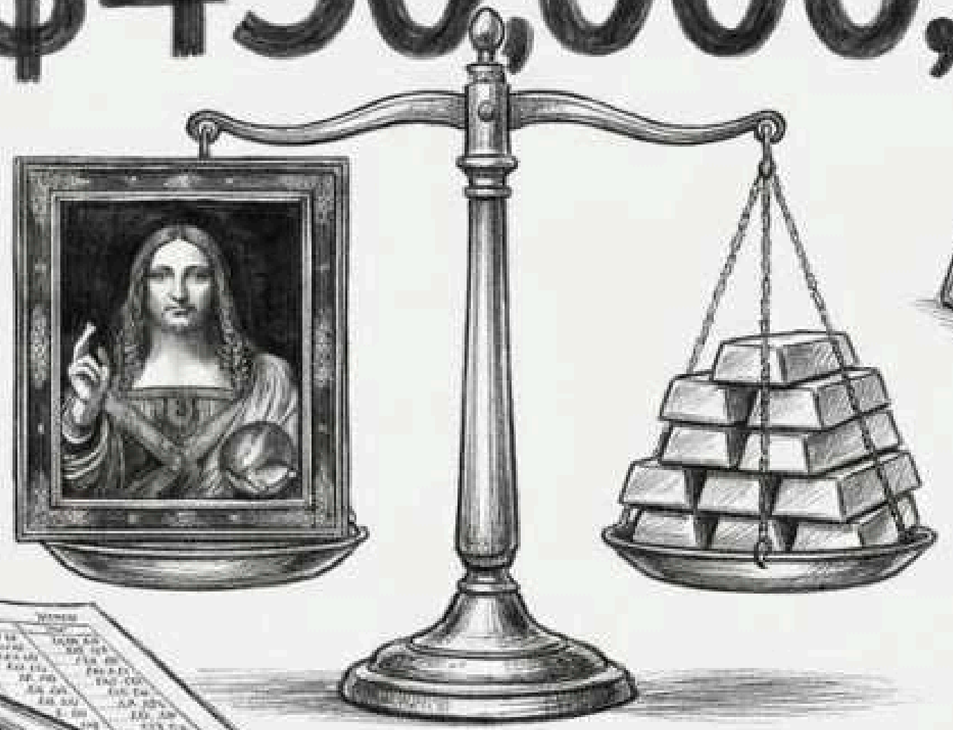
Money and the Art Market

¶ 6.12

The Record (2017): *Salvator Mundi (attributed to Leonardo da Vinci) sells for ~$450M at auction in NY, shattering all records.*

$450,000,000







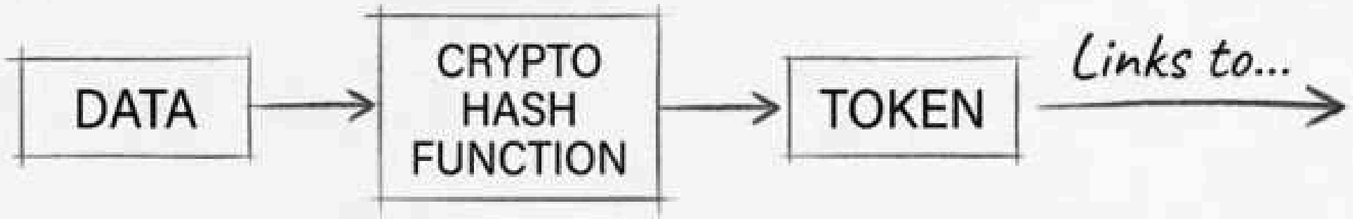
The Scholarly Divide: *The true attribution of the work remains hotly, bitterly debated among Renaissance experts.*

The Cultural Friction: *Critics express deep concern that art is increasingly treated as a liquid financial asset rather than a public cultural good.*

Digital Technology & New Media

¶ 6.13

$$H(x) = \text{Token}$$





The NFT Boom (Mar 2021): Artist Beeple sells a digital collage, token-linked as an NFT, for ~$69M at Christie's.

The AI Era: Image generators trained on millions of scraped pictures can now produce artwork from short text prompts.

The New Debates: These technologies trigger unresolved, fiercely contested questions regarding:

- Authorship
- Copyright law
- The fundamental definition of artistic skill

Museum Collections & Ownership Disputes

¶ 6.14





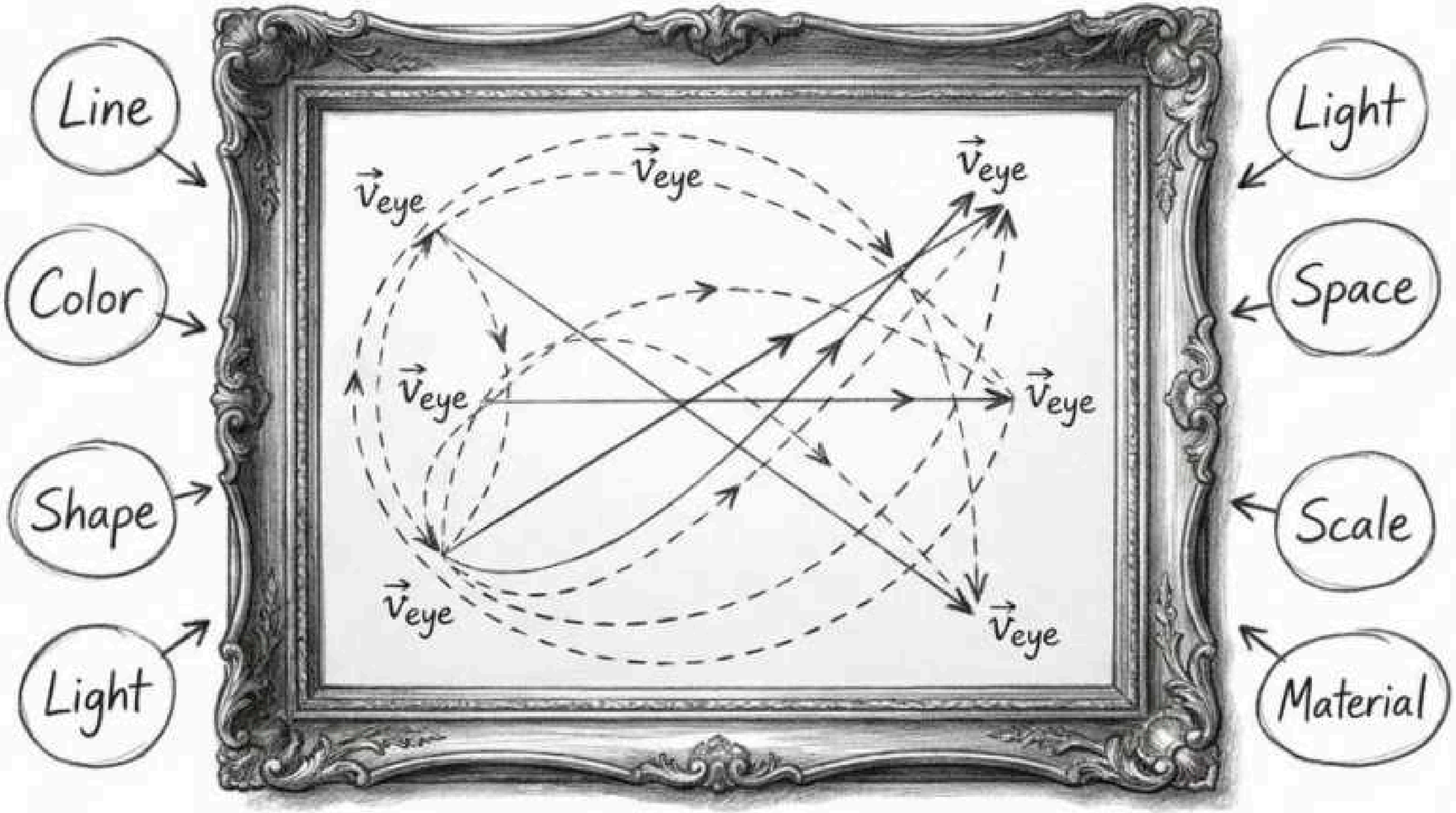
Parthenon Marbles: Taken by Britain in the early 1800s; restitution is actively and continually demanded by Greece.

Benin Bronzes: Looted by British forces from the kingdom of Benin in 1897; in 2022, Germany finally began returning its share.

The Core Conflict: Ongoing, intense disagreements between museums, governments, and indigenous communities regarding who has the moral and legal right to own cultural treasures.



How to Look, Step 1: Formal Analysis



Begin With What You See: Analyze the physical properties of the work before reading anything.

Eye Tracking: Ask how your eye naturally moves across the picture plane. What appears nearest? What is pushed furthest back?

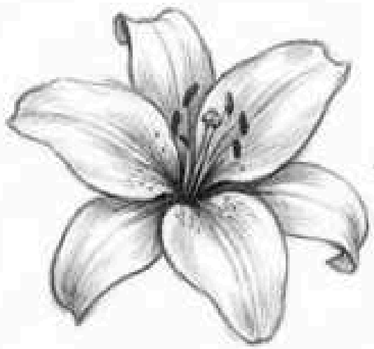
The Golden Rule: Slow looking for several minutes reveals infinitely more than a quick glance at the museum label.

How to Look, Step 2: Context & Iconography

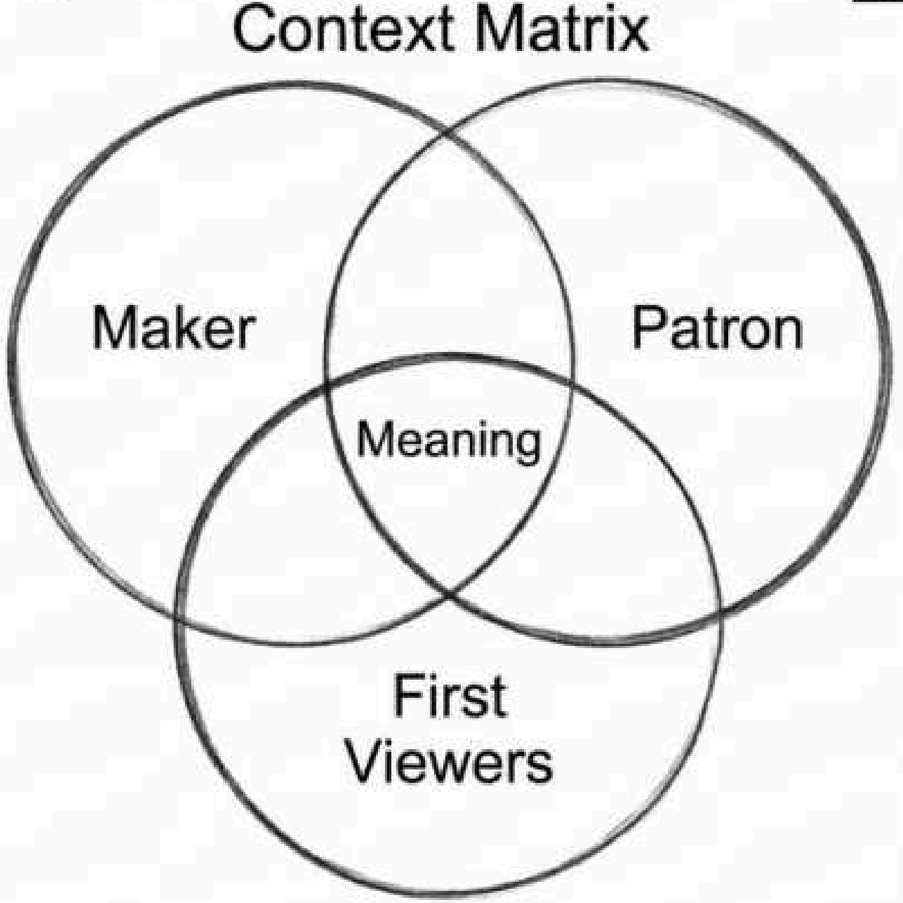
¶ 6.16



— Symbol = Death



— Symbol = Purity

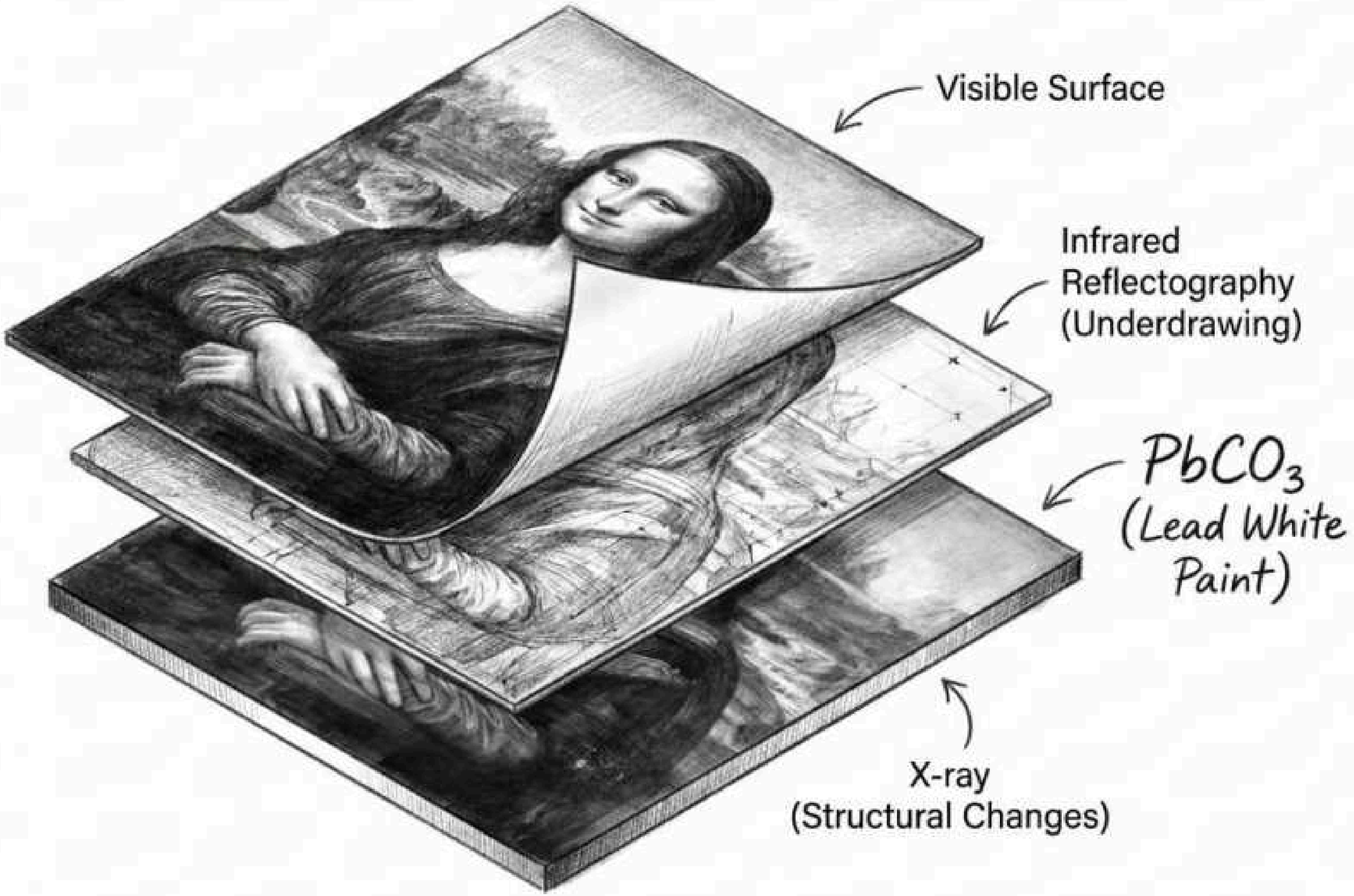


Contextual Checklist

- *The Ecosystem: Who made this, and for whom? Who paid, and what did the patron demand?*
- *Original Function: Where was the work originally displayed, and what role did it play in the daily lives of its first viewers?*
- *Iconography: Decoding the meaning of symbols (like skulls or lilies) which frequently shift and change meaning from one culture and century to another.*

How to Look, Step 3: Weigh Interpretations

¶ 6.17



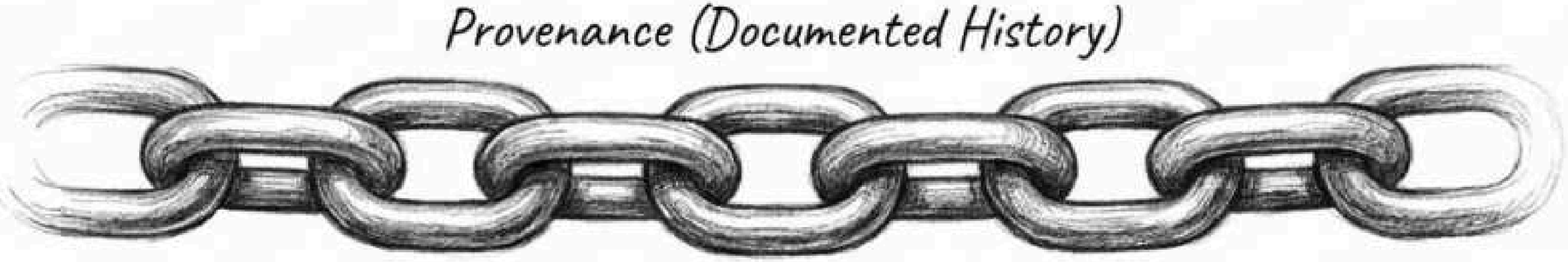
No Single Truth:
Scholars still vigorously argue about the meaning of Las Meninas, the Mona Lisa's smile, and Botticelli's myths.

Evidence-Based Method: The best interpretations do not guess; they rest on hard forensic evidence: contracts, letters, X-rays, infrared images, and chemical pigment analysis.

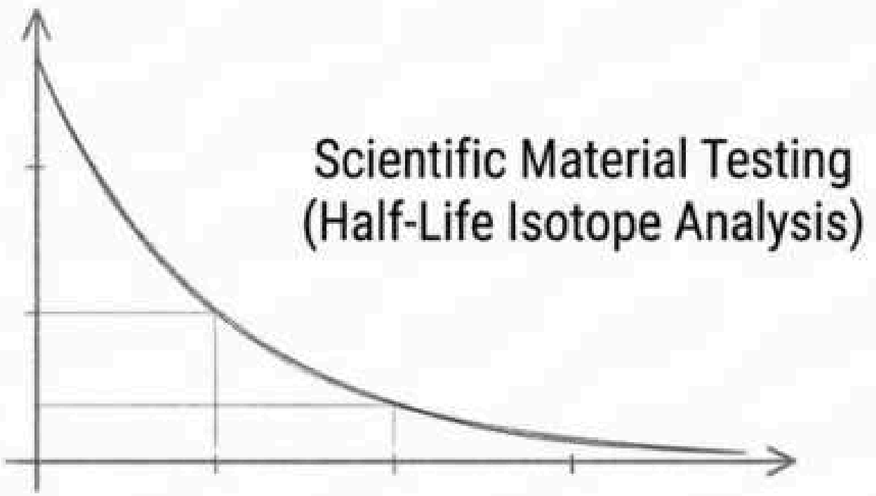
Intellectual Honesty: When the evidence runs out, a good historian explicitly says so and offers a careful, educated guess.

Authenticity & Provenance

¶ 6.18



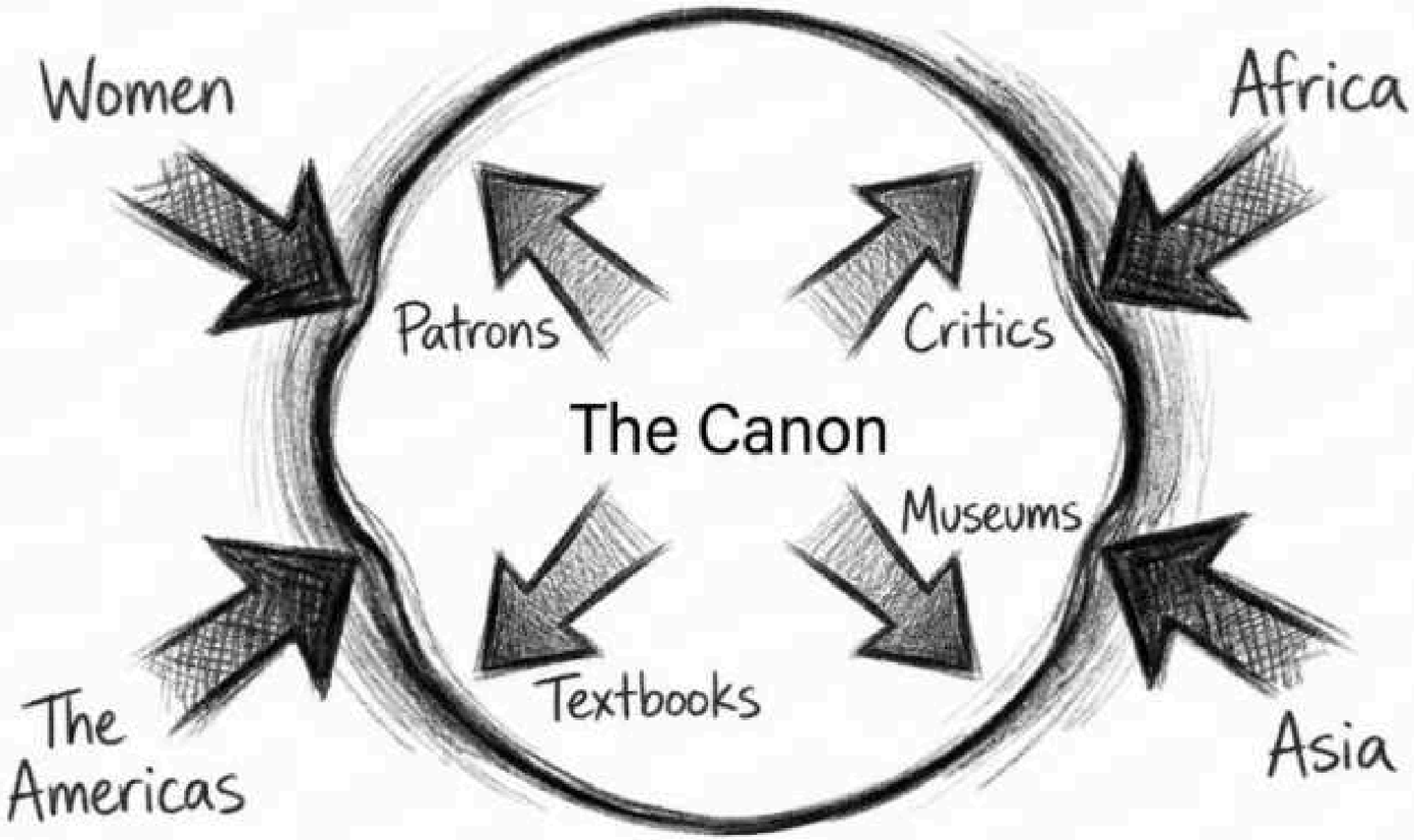




The Forger's Confession: Post-WWII, Han van Meegeren admitted that "Vermeers" sold to Nazi leaders were actually his own fakes.
Verification Today: Relies heavily on checking provenance (the documented chain of owners) cross-referenced with modern scientific material testing.
The Stakes: A famous name attribution can swing a price by millions; attribution matters enormously, and catastrophic mistakes do happen.

Shaping the Canon

¶ 6.19



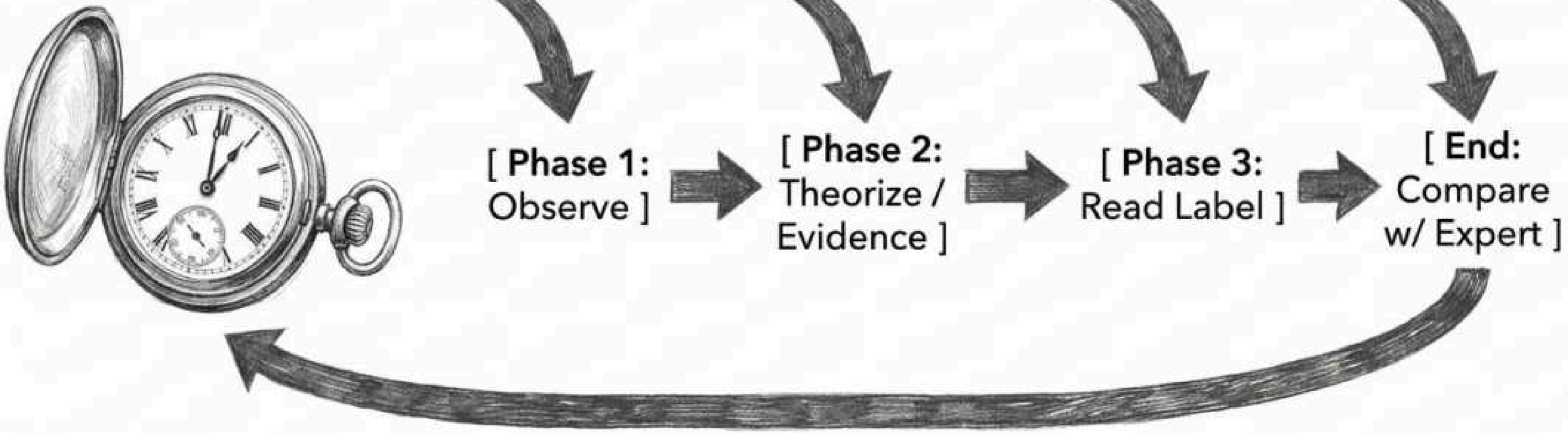
Constructed History: The canon (the "list of masters" we study) is not an objective truth; it was curated and shaped by historical power structures.

Historical Blindspots: For decades, textbooks systematically left out women and gave almost no space to Africa, Asia, or the Americas.

A Living Conversation: The canon actively changes and stretches as new questions are asked—and as a student, you are now part of that disruption.

Practical Habits for Looking

¶ 6.20



Time Investment: *Commit to spending five full minutes with one single work.*
Sequence: *Force yourself to read the label AFTER looking, never before.*
Document: *Write down what you see, what you wonder, and what specific evidence supports your idea.*
Practice: *Great museums now put collections online for free; test your eye on any painting, anywhere.*

Conclusion & Next Steps

¶ 6.21

