## Malraux, Art, and Modernity

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

André Malraux 1935

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If an essay concerns art and modernity, one would naturally expect its focus to be on modern art. Malraux would agree, but he would add that there is another major aspect of modernity that should not be forgotten. If we regard the era of modern art as the period stretching from the late nineteenth century to the present day, that period of time also encompasses the emergence of what Malraux terms “the first universal world of art” – the unprecedented expansion of our world of art to include works from a wide range of cultures whose artefacts had previously been excluded from art museums and from inclusion under the general rubric “art”. Put in more concrete terms, at the close of the nineteenth century, works from (for instance) Hindu India, Pre-Columbian America, and pre-colonial Africa were routinely excluded from art museums; but by 1950 they were becoming part of their general collections. Malraux reminds us, in other words, that modernity in art has *two* major elements: the emergence of modern art, and the expansion of the concept art to include large numbers of works from *all* historical periods, not only of the West but of all human cultures whose painting and sculpture is known to us. For Malraux, moreover, this is no coincidence: there is a direct causal link between the two events. Modern art, he argues, transformed our “way of seeing” and in so doing allowed us to see non-Western art (and pre-Renaissance works such as Byzantine and Romanesque) in a new light. “The dec­isive meta­morphosis of our time,” he writes, summing up the point, “is that we no longer apply the term ‘art’ to the forms it assumed in this or that time or place, but that we accept from the outset that there are no longer any such boundaries.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

The present essay examines this remarkable event and the causes that brought it about. The analysis will encompass key elements of Malraux’s theory of art including his fundamental conception of art, his explanation of the relationship between art and time (“the temporal nature of art”), and his vital concept of metamorphosis. At convenient points, we will also discuss the disappointing response of modern aesthetics and philosophy of art[[2]](#footnote-2) to the issues in question, and especially to the neglected question of the temporal nature of art.

We begin by looking briefly at the certain elements of Malraux’s thinking that have also been major themes in Western thought more generally since the early twentieth century. Malraux was born in 1901. As early as his first essays in the mid-1920s, he had concluded that modern Western culture[[3]](#footnote-3) is no longer sustained by any fundamental value or, as he sometimes says, by any “absolute”. Signs of Christianity’s decline had become apparent by the seventeenth century and the coup de grâce was delivered in the following century by the repeated assaults of Enlightenment philosophers. For a time, the resulting vacuum was filled by a faith in humanity itself – a faith, Malraux wrote in 1927, that

can only be compared, in power and importance, to a religion. It manifests itself above all in a powerful attraction, a kind of passion, for Man, which takes the place previously occupied by God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This faith, however, did not survive the shocks of the twentieth century. Two world wars of unprecedented ferocity, and a series of scientific discoveries and major intellectual developments profoundly altered Western civilisation’s view of itself and the world, shaking previous assumptions to their foundations. In Malraux’s 1926 essay, *La Tentation de l’Occident*, which takes the form of an exchange of letters, Ling, the Chinese correspondent, writes to his Western counterpart: “Absolute reality for you was God; then man. But *man is dead*, after God, and you are now engaged in an anguished search for something to which you can assign his strange inheritance[[5]](#footnote-5).”This predicament is still with us today and, in this period of limbo (to borrow Malraux’s term), Western culture is obliged to make do with simulated values. We have what we like to regard as values, he concedes, but “they seem to have been emptied of substance. They lack dynamism and their unity having been destroyed, we no longer recognize them as values.[[6]](#footnote-6)” The situation is without precedent. Modern Western culture, Malraux writes in *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, is the first civilization “conscious that it is unaware of the significance of man.[[7]](#footnote-7)”

Noting Malraux’s enthusiasm for visual art, commentators have occasionally claimed that he regards art as a religion – a new absolute.[[8]](#footnote-8) Malraux consistently rejected this proposition, but it merits brief mention here because it points our thinking in a useful direction. Art and religion, Malraux’s agrees, do have a fundamental element in common: they both combat the sense of transience and futility engendered by a scheme of things that lacks justification by an absolute – the sense of life as mere fleeting appearance that defies understanding and negates values. An absolute such as a religion (or a faith in man) responds to this situation by sweeping aside the world of appearance and revealing a fixed, once-and-for-all explanation of the world in which everything, including humanity, has its rightful place. The Christian, the Jew, or the Muslim, for instance, are assured that the world exists, and is the way it is, because it is the work of a Creator God and the manifestation of his Divine Will; while the Buddhist, correspondingly, believes that the world we perceive as fleeting illusion conceals the immutable Truth revealed in the Buddha’s Illumination. Responses such as these, religious or secular, have taken many forms, but their common feature is that, as absolutes, they render the world “natural” in the sense that it is seen to exist and be the way it is, *for a reason*. The world is not an arbitrary, transitory spectacle; it is a coherent whole fashioned to be the way it is (by God, or the preordained processes of History, for example) and humanity is “at home” in it, even if – as Christian faith taught, for instance – the home is only temporary and frequented at times by malevolent forces.

Thus, there is common ground between religion and art because they both confront the same adversary: they both replace an ephemeral and unintelligible scheme of things with a unified world in which everything has its place and its reason for being. But this is wherethe resemblance ends. While a religion or a secular absolute confers meaning on the unknown scheme of things, art’s more modest aim is to create a *rival* unified world – of painting, literature, or music, for instance. In doing so, Malraux writes, art creates a world “scaled to man’s measure[[9]](#footnote-9).” It wrests forms from the chaotic “real” world to which bewildered man is subject “and makes them enter a world in which he is ruler[[10]](#footnote-10).” Thus, although art “stands for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality”,[[11]](#footnote-11) unlike a religion or a secular absolute, it does not affirm the unity of all things.[[12]](#footnote-12) It makes the world one but does not affirm that there is only one world – a unique scheme of things created once and for all.

This analysis, to which we shall return shortly, lays the foundation for Malraux’s explanation of the relationship between art and time which, in turn, explains key elements of his account of modernity as it relates to art. Before considering those issues, however, we need to look briefly at two crucial events in European history that help us understand Malraux’s position. Unlike many modern philosophers of art, Malraux fully accepts the historical and anthropological evidence showing that the term and concept “art” were non-existent in most, if not all, non-European cultures and also in pre-Renaissance Europe itself such as medieval and Byzantine societies. The term “art” in its initial Renaissance sense[[13]](#footnote-13) emerged as the result of two interrelated influences: the gradual weakening of Christian faith and the emergence of a form of painting and sculpture that was no longer exclusively in the service of the Christian absolute (as medieval and Byzantine works had been) and which gradually began to *act as a replacement absolute*. Prompted initially by Giotto, Renaissance artists discovered a power of painting and sculpture that evoked an ideal world of nobility, harmony, and beauty (the world of the *irréel* as Malraux terms it) exemplified by artists such as Donatello, Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Titian. By bodying forth this exalted, imaginary world outside of which “man did not fully merit the name man[[14]](#footnote-14),” this new power elicited admiration and commanded authority solely through the quality of the work itself. The term that emerged to describe this new form of painting and sculpture was “art” (or “les beaux-arts” or “fine art”), which soon lodged itself firmly in Western consciousness. The term “art” as applied to painting, sculpture and the other “arts” is second nature to us now, but this was its first appearance in this sense, not only in Europe but (*pace* certain writers in aesthetics[[15]](#footnote-15)) anywhere.

Highly influential though it was in Western thinking, however, this state of affairs subsequently underwent a profound change. The principal cause was the eighteenth century’s relentless attacks on religious belief, motivated in large measure by the triumphs of science which seemed to imply that the path to truth lay solely through the empirical, observable fact. This in turn led to scepticism about transcendence in all its forms, including that of the exalted, imaginary world of the *irréel* sponsored by art since the Renaissance. The consequences, Malraux writes in *The Voices of Silence*, were decisive and would transform both art and culture: “What was disappearing from the Western world,” he argues, “was the absolute”;[[16]](#footnote-16) and the final disintegration, when it came, was swift and decisive. An Encyclopaedist “was farther removed from Racine in his Port-Royal retreat than Racine was from St Bernard; because that notion of retreat had ceased to mean anything to the Encyclop­aedist”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Conventional forms of piety persisted, as they do today, but “Eternity withdrew from the world,” and “our civ­iliz­ation became as unresponsive to the voice of Christianity as to the stellar myths and Druid trees[[18]](#footnote-18).”

The result, after the interregnum of humanist faiths mentioned earlier, is today’s agnostic culture bereft of any absolute, the causalities including the Renaissance concept of art. Across the millennia, in cultures as diverse as Egypt, India, Pre-Columbian Mexico and medieval Europe, the function of painting and sculpture had always been inseparable from an absolute, and this remained the case even when, from the Renaissance onwards, the replacement for the Christian absolute – the exalted, imaginary world outside of which “man did not fully merit the name man” – depended on art itself for its existence. But what might the function of art be in an agnostic culture? How could art survive in a world in which the only path to truth seemed to lie through the empirical, observable fact?

The answer was provided first by Manet in 1865 when his *Olympia* made its startling appearance. Manet, in Malraux’s eyes, occupies a place in the history of Western art no less important than that of Giotto, who, as mentioned, had triggered the birth of the art of the *irréel*. Like Giotto, Manet discovered not just a new style, but a new *power* of painting. But forsaking Giotto’s discovery, Manet abandoned the pursuit of a transcendent, fictional world and created a form of art that is simply its own value. Manet, writes Malraux, discovered the “autonomy of painting,[[19]](#footnote-19)” painting that relies solely on its own powers, and from this point onwards a long and illustrious chapter in the history of Western art, with representatives as famous as Michelangelo and Titian, drew to a close.[[20]](#footnote-20) No longer linked to any value outside itself, painting and sculpture henceforth depended exclusively on their power to create a rival world. Divorced from any absolute and left to its own devices in an agnostic culture, art fell back on what Malraux terms “its invincible element”[[21]](#footnote-21) – the irreducible element without which it would not even be a possibility: the creation of a unified world that stands for unity against the chaos of mere, given reality. Almost unnoticed, in other words, the meaning of the term “art” began to change radically. The word itself remained (hallowed by centuries of use), but the significance it held for Michelangelo, Titian, Watteau, and many other painters of the *irréel* no longer applied. Malraux detects this fundamental change in the works of painters such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, Chagall, Miró, et Picasso; and although he died in 1976, he would doubtless have seen it as the underlying ambition in what is now often called “contemporary art”.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The birth of art in this radically different form is a central aspect of modernity and Malraux fully recognises its importance. As mentioned earlier, however, modernity in art in his eyes is a twofold event. The emergence of modern art sparked another development which is no less important: the resuscitation of works from a wide range of non-European cultures and from pre-Renaissance Europe. Here we encounter, in a particularly dramatic form, the operation of the process of metamorphosis.

As noted earlier, an absolute, such as a religious faith, asserts that all things exist, and are as they are, for a reason (such as the will of God), while art speaks only of its own rival world, leaving the question of the fundamental nature of things unanswered. Art, in other words, unifies the world but does not assert that there is only one world, one scheme of things created “once and for all.” Thus, while the worlds created by art are coherent, *they are never definitive, never final*. They are worlds born to metamorphosis – worlds whose meaning is capable of change over time (in principle endlessly). Or as Malraux phrases the point, metamorphosis is “the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics[[23]](#footnote-23).”

This is not simply an abstract argument; it is an explanation directly applicable to the realities of the history of world art as we now know them. As one example among a multitude of others, let us consider the celebrated Romanesque tympanum at Autun sculpted in the twelfth century. (See below.) This work began its lifeas a sacred image in a deeply religious



*Last Judgment*, Tympanum, Cathedral of St. Lazare, Autun (France), c. 1130-46

society in which, like many others, the concept of a “work of art” did not exist. Over the following centuries, as religious belief waned, the tympanum doubtless seemed increasingly alien until eventually, in the eighteenth century, it was plastered over with decorative baroque motifs and effectively forgotten. In the twentieth century, as part of a widespread resuscitation of medieval and Romanesque works, the plaster was removed, and the tympanum was revealed as a masterpiece of Romanesque art. This is an excellent example of metamorphosis at work. Like so many other sculptures that fell into obscurity over the centuries (ancient Egypt, Khmer culture, India...), the tympanum at Autun was resurrected as a consequence of a new “way of seeing” revealed by modern art. Malraux expresses the point this way:

The metamorphosis of the past was from the outset a metamorphosis of our way of seeing. Without an aesthetic revolution, the sculpture of early times, mosaics, and stained-glass windows, would never have come to rank beside the painting of the Renaissance and of the great [European] monarchies; and without that, the ethnographical collections, no matter how extensive they had become, would never have crossed the barrier that kept them out of art museums.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The key factor is the “metamorphosis of our way of seeing” – the revelation by modern works of the power of a rival, coherent world, and the recognition of the same power in many works of the kind Malraux mentions. A “dialogue” begins between the works involved, based on their (now) shared nature – a dialogue that would be out of the question if the works from the past and other cultures were still viewed solely as sacred figures or fetishes. The resuscitation of the tympanum at Autun exemplifies the process well. The work is no longer an embodiment of a sacred Christian vision (although it may still be that for a devout Christian); it is a powerful expression of Romanesque style and, as such, of a coherent rival world able to respond on this basis to a modern work such as a Cezanne, a Van Gogh, a Picasso, and many other works within our vastly expanded world of art. In one of his rare uses of the word “aesthetic”, Malraux underlines the fact that the resuscitation is due to the power of art itself, not to external factors.

In particular, it should be stressed that the process is not the result of increased *knowledge* about the works resuscitated or about the cultures from which they come. One might, for instance, be tempted to assume that an event such as the resuscitation of the Autun tympanum was simply the consequence of greater availability of historical information about Romanesque Europe and the various religious ideas symbolised by the tympanum’s different elements. But our own experience is surely enough to remind us that information alone makes little difference to our reactions to a work of art. How many people who have little or no response to Mozart’s piano concertos, for example, will suddenly experience a genuine response of enjoyment and admiration when given accounts of the different parts of the music? We know also that we have no difficulty admiring works from cultures about which we know little or nothing, obvious examples being the cave art at Lascaux and Chauvet, sacred figures from early Sumerian civilizations, many Oceanic artefacts, and Olmec sculpture. Here, as in all such cases, the works in question have become part of our world of art through the effects of metamorphosis. “It is not research work that has led to an understanding of El Greco,” Malraux writes. “It is modern art”. And later: “Who caused the antique statues to reappear, the excavators, or the Renaissance masters who opened their eyes?” And: “Who rendered the Gothic works dumb, if not Raphael? [[25]](#footnote-25)”

 Brief though it is, this explanation covers the essential elements of the process of metamorphosis, and once we grasp these points, we quickly see that there was another similar event earlier in European history. When artists of the Renaissance invented the art of the *irréel*, they not only created a new style and a new ideal, they also initiated a dialogue with the sculpture of antiquity, despised for a millennium as pagan and worthless. There was of course no question of reviving works from outside the classical orbit (such as Romanesque sculpture, which like many others, doubtless seemed incompatible with a vision of nobility and ideal beauty) but Greco-Roman art was in harmony with this new vision. The resuscitation that resulted has traditionally been explained simply as the consequence of the discovery of buried Greco-Roman works during excavations in Rome and elsewhere – that is, as the result of a one-way influence exerted by works of antiquity. Malraux inverts this explanation. He argues that Greco-Roman sculpture was resuscitated by the art of the *irréel*, again through the discovery of a “a new way of seeing” which transformed pagan debris suitable only for building material into admirable works of art. As Malraux sums the matter up:  “In art, the Renaissance was no less the creator of antiquity, than antiquity was of the Renaissance[[26]](#footnote-26).”

The effects of modern art have obviously been much more extensive, causing the metamorphosis of works from a wide range of cultures, including those of the pre-Renaissance centuries of the West itself such as the Autun tympanum. The principle at work in both events is nonetheless the same. And just as the Renaissance did not resuscitate Greek and Roman *beliefs* when it resuscitated their works (Europeans did not begin praying to Greek and Roman gods), instead integrating those works into the new world of the *irréel*, so, from the early twentieth century onwards, our modern metamorphosis has revived works from a wide array of cultures, once again separated from their original meanings but integrated into a new and greatly enlarged world of art made possible because, as Malraux writes in a crucial sentence, “in ceasing to subordinate creative power to any supreme value, modern art was revealing the presence of that same creative power throughout the whole history of art”.[[27]](#footnote-27) This, as Malraux stresses, is an unprecedented development. We today have discovered what he calls the first universal world of art (“le premier monde de l’art universel”), a world in which “a Mexican god becomes a statue, not a mere fetish, and Chardin’s still-lifes join the Chartres *Kings* and the gods of Elephanta in a common presence”.[[28]](#footnote-28) This event goes hand in hand with what Malraux aptly terms *le musée imaginaire[[29]](#footnote-29)* which is, in essence, each person’s ideal collection of works – seen in art museums or even as reproductions – chosen from our new “universal world of art.” The art museum, real or imaginary, provides a venue in which each work engages in dialogues with others, based on their shared status as coherent rival worlds. For several decades now, oddly enough, art museums have been the target of occasional negative comment from philosophers of art. For Merleau-Ponty, they are merely “necropolises” where works of art come to die; for Adorno, pursuing the same theme, they are the “family sepulchres of works of art;” and for Georges Duthuit, works on display in art museums are “trophies in a place of exile[[30]](#footnote-30).” Malraux has a quite different view. Whether real or imaginary, art museums are the location of an ideal colloquy among the works they contain, in which each participant’s contribution – each work – rather than simply seeking to establish its own worth, also reveals the strength and vigour of the others.

In 1935, when first formulating the ideas that would later form part of *The Voices of Silence*, Malraux wrote that “A work of art is an object, but it is also an encounter with time[[31]](#footnote-31).” This statement, which seems to have passed more or less unnoticed at the time, contains, in embryo, the key ideas considered in this essay – ideas that are, arguably, among the most important to have entered the field of art theory for a long time. Not that thinkers had completely ignored the possibility that art may have a temporal aspect – a specific relationship with time. Since the Renaissance, poets – Spenser and Shakespeare, for instance – had often claimed that, unlike other objects, art is impervious to time (that is, eternal, immortal, or *timeless[[32]](#footnote-32)*); and over the centuries, the idea had occasionally attracted interest from philosophers of art. In more recent times, however, support for the notion that art is eternal has declined noticeably, perhaps as a result of the emergence of our “world of universal art”. How, after all, would one defend the notion of “eternal” art – art *immune* from change – given that so many of the objects that now make up our vastly expanded world of art are works whose significance has obviously changed – through revival after centuries of oblivion or because they were not “works of art” to begin with anyway[[33]](#footnote-33)? Even if modern philosophers of art have not asked themselves this question explicitly (which they probably have not, given their lack of interest in the temporal nature of art) they are perhaps vaguely conscious that this immense change over the past century has rendered the idea of eternal art indefensible. In a rare supportive comment on the idea, a philosopher from the analytic camp, suggests that “There is a tendency among scholars and non-scholars alike, to think that art works, or more specifically, great art works, are in some sense immortal,” adding that he himself sees “some truth in the view[[34]](#footnote-34)” – hardly a ringing endorsement. The preferred solution for aesthetics today seems to be to ignore the topic altogether: despite conceding in a general way that great art may have a power to endure, philosophers of art would prefer to skirt around the topic and, in particular, avoid discussing the *nature* of this power – in effect consigning the key issue to philosophical limbo.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The neglect of the question of the temporal nature of art (leaving Malraux aside for the moment) is a serious – possibly the most serious – gap in the modern philosophy of art and the gap has become increasingly obvious over the twentieth century and subsequent decades as large numbers of once-despised or forgotten works from other cultures and from pre-Renaissance periods of our own, have been welcomed into our world of art and taken their place in art museums. As Malraux points out in *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* (a book few philosophers of art appear to have read), if Baudelaire (whom he regards as an excellent art critic) could be magically transported to the present and shown the collections of major art museums *today*, he would conclude that large numbers of the objects on display have nothing to do with art – so radically has our world of art changed.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In a key respect, in other words, the aspects of Malraux’s theory of art considered here might be said to *define* modernity. Not of course that his thinking was responsible for the formation of our “first universal world of art.” That was a natural course of events once modern art began to have its effect. But Malraux has highlighted the exceptional nature of the modern period, stressing that it is not only about the advent of modern art – crucial though that is – but also about the remarkable consequences of that event in facilitating the emergence of a vastly enlarged world of art. In doing so, Malraux has also made the event *intelligible* – something philosophers of art have plainly not done, and in most cases not attempted. Continuing a tradition unchanged for many decades, modern aesthetics has concentrated almost exclusively on art’s characteristics as an *object*, as if the discipline were simply about isolated works suspended in time. The tendency is exemplified by one of the *causes célèbres* of twentieth century aesthetics which attracted a lot of attention and debate within the discipline. At issue was a somewhat esoteric problem, prompted by Arthur Danto’s influential book *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, concerning a commercial packing case for soap powder placed on display in an art gallery as a putative work of art (entitled *Brillo Box*).[[37]](#footnote-37) Philosophers of art earnestly debated *inter alia* whether this box should be distinguished from other identical boxes not placed on display. Were they works of art too? If not, why not? Lengthy discussions ensued at conferences and in print. Meanwhile, continuing a decades-old state of affairs, not a word was uttered about the enormous expansion of our world of art that had been under way for several decades. On the placid surface of academic aesthetics, the unprecedented emergence of the first universal world of art created, and, astonishingly, still creates, scarcely a ripple.

Finally, a word should be said about the fundamental questions raised early in this essay concerning Malraux’s view about the absence of an absolute in modern Western culture. As we saw, Malraux argues that “*man is dead* after God” and that modern Western culture is the first civilization “conscious that it is unaware of the significance of man.” His definition of art, in keeping with this view, places no reliance on supposed universal attributes of man, such as a psychology endowed with a “sense of taste” that responds to beautiful objects and evokes a special form of delectation called “aesthetic pleasure”. Likewise, he makes no appeal to theories of history (or art history), or to claims about the nature of human perception – themes that, among others, figure prominently in aesthetics, especially of the continental kind. The question this poses is whether, by clinging to traditions with roots as far back as the eighteenth century, and relying, consciously or not, on assumptions built into those traditions, aesthetics is out of touch with the agnostic culture[[38]](#footnote-38) in which it now operates? Is it possible, for example, that prominent names such as Kant, Hume, and Hegel, which continue to be influential in modern aesthetics, have been a mixed blessing? Doubtless they have helped boost the reputation of the discipline – as prestigious “founding fathers,” so to speak – but have they also acted as blinkers that prevent aesthetics from seeing the true nature of the world in which it now operates? The present essay’s discussion of the temporal nature of art – a topic almost completely absent from traditional aesthetics – suggests that the answers to these questions should be in the affirmative. Apart from an occasional reference to the familiar, but quite unsustainable, claim that art is impervious to time, the aesthetics tradition underlying modern philosophies of art has almost nothing to say about the relationship between art and the passing of time[[39]](#footnote-39) – an astounding situation. Malraux’s account of this relationship makes an enormous contribution to our understanding of art, revealing, among other things, that the major expansion of our world of art that took place over the twentieth century and continues today, is *due to the* *nature of art itself –* to the power of metamorphosis inherent in art which, as he writes, is “the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics.”

1. André Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I)*. ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, Paris, Gallimard, 2004. p. 882. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The terms aesthetics and philosophy of art are virtually interchangeable, and no distinction is made between them in this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The term “Western” in this essay is intended to encompass *Westernised* cultures as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. André Malraux, “D’Une Jeunesse européenne,” in *Écrits, Les Cahier Verts*, Paris, Grasset, 1927, p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. André Malraux, *La Tentation de l’Occident*, Paris, Grasset, 1926, p. 128. Malraux’s emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Guy Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient: entretiens entre André Malraux, Guy Suarès, José Benjamin*, Paris, Stock, 1974, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Écrits sur l’art (II)*, ed. Henri Godard, Paris, Gallimard, 2004*,* p. 37. Cf. also his remark in 1948: “The drama enveloping Europe today is the death of man.” André Malraux, “Adresse aux intellectuels,” *Le Cheval de Troie*, no. 7-8 (1948), p. 984. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See for example, Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’album de l’art à l’époque du « Musée imaginaire »*, Paris, Hazan, Louvre éditions, 2013, p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. André Malraux, “De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient,” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, p. 933. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, p. 539. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*., 544. Cf. André Malraux, *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, p. 289,

where Malraux speaks of “the coherence of style, which becomes the rival of universal chaos” (“la cohérence du style, qui devient rivale de l’insaisissable universel”). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It should be borne in mind, however, that the notion of unity (or coherence) in Malraux’s definition of art (and of an absolute) has no connection with conventional notions of *structural* unity which one sometimes encounters in aesthetics and art criticism. Malraux is in no sense seeking to revive the argument that to be a work of art an object should possess qualities of “balance,” “harmony,” or “order”. The unity he has in mind is of a deeper nature: it is a “metaphysical” unity in a quite precise sense of that elusive word: a work of art is unified to the extent that it replaces fundamental chaos – the unknown scheme of things – with a coherent world. Traditional arguments about form and structure have no place here. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. We shall see later that this initial sense subsequently underwent a major change. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux : L’Intemporel, Écrits sur l’art (II)*, sous la direction de Henri Godard, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, p. 657. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Aesthetics and philosophy of art rarely consider the issue in question here, but when they do, they usually take the view that the concept “art” is universal, and that even if the *word* does not exist in a given culture, the concept is known and understood. Apart from anything else, this claim raises interesting questions about the relationship between words and concepts. It should be added that although the word “art” was in use in the medieval period, its meanings at that time were quite different from the Renaissance meaning discussed here. (See Jacques Le Goff, *L’Homme médiéval*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1989, p. 237.) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. André Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, p. 722. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., p. 707. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 723. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Malraux, *L’Intemporel*, p. 669, 670. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A “realistic” form of the *irréel* was pursued for a time by Salon painters, or “pompiers” as they were sometimes disdainfully called. Malraux describes their works as “anti-art.” See my discussion in Allan, *op. cit*., p. 59, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, p. 737. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. In *L’Intemporel*, Malraux speaks briefly about Duchamp — sometimes seen as a harbinger of “contemporary art” — and includes a reproduction of *Seche-bouteilles*. Nothing he says there suggests that he sees Duchamp as a fundamental break from the new conception of art under discussion here. Malraux, *L’Intemporel,* p. 934-945. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Malraux, *L’Intemporel,* p. 971. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Malraux, *Le Surnaturel,* p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, p. 263 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence,* p. 484. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, p. 871. Moreover, as Malraux’s statement implies, he is speaking not only of the art of non-Western cultures and periods prior to the Renaissance, but of works of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance West as well. That is, he is arguing that the effects of the aesthetic revolution brought about by modern art were not limited to works previously excluded from art museums but encompassed *existing* inhabitants as well. See my more extensive comments in Allan, *op. cit*., p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Malraux, *Le Surnaturel*, p. 25. The art historian Hans Belting makes the strange suggestion that Malraux wanted to extend the world of art to include objects from other cultures to assuage his sense of guilt arising from the episode in Indo-China in the 1920s when he was arrested (wrongly in Malraux’s own view) for removing Khmer statues. Of all the improbable accusations art historians have launched against Malraux’s theory of art – and there have been many – this must surely rank among the most far-fetched. Hans Belting, “Le musée de l’art mondial,” *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 606, (2013), p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Translated usually as “the imaginary museum,” or “the museum without walls.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, « Le langage indirect et les Voix du silence », in *Signes,* Paris, Gallimard, 1960*,* p. 78 ; Theodor Adorno, « Valéry Proust Musée », in *Prismes*, Paris, Payot, 2003, p. 181 ; Georges Duthuit, *Le Musée inimaginable*, vol. 1, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1956, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. André Malraux, « Préfaces, articles, allocutions: “L’Œuvre d’art” », *Écrits sur l’art (I)*, p. 1190. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. An equivalent term in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Given also that, as Malraux recognises, the significance of any work may change *again* in the future. See Allan, *op.cit*. p. 178, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Christopher Perricone, “Art and the Metamorphosis of Art into History,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, no. 4, 1991, p. 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Occasionally, the problem is misunderstood altogether, commentators implying that it simply concerns a *physical* power to endure – a special power to resist decay or destruction possessed by art alone. See for example John Carey, *What Good are the Arts?*, London, Faber and Faber Ltd, 2005, p. 148. Carey writes: “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.” Fortunately, basic misunderstandings of this kind are not widespread. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Malraux, *Le Surnaturel,* p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1981, passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Taking “agnostic” in the broad sense where it goes beyond religion and includes secular absolutes. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Hegel (and Marx) have a lot to say about the relationship between art and *history*, particularly in terms of historical determinism, but that is a quite different matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)