

# CULTURE FORMATIONS (I)

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## PREHISTORIC ART

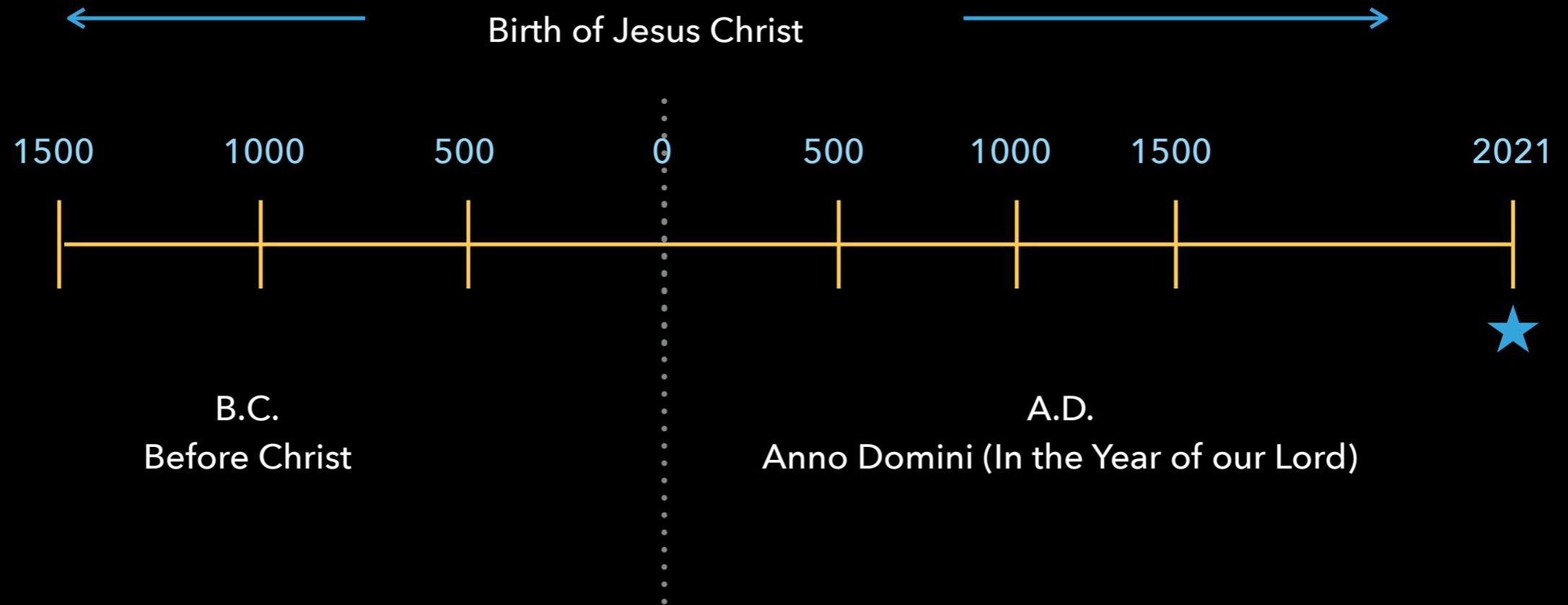
(2.5 MYA - 3000 BCE)

# Key Concepts

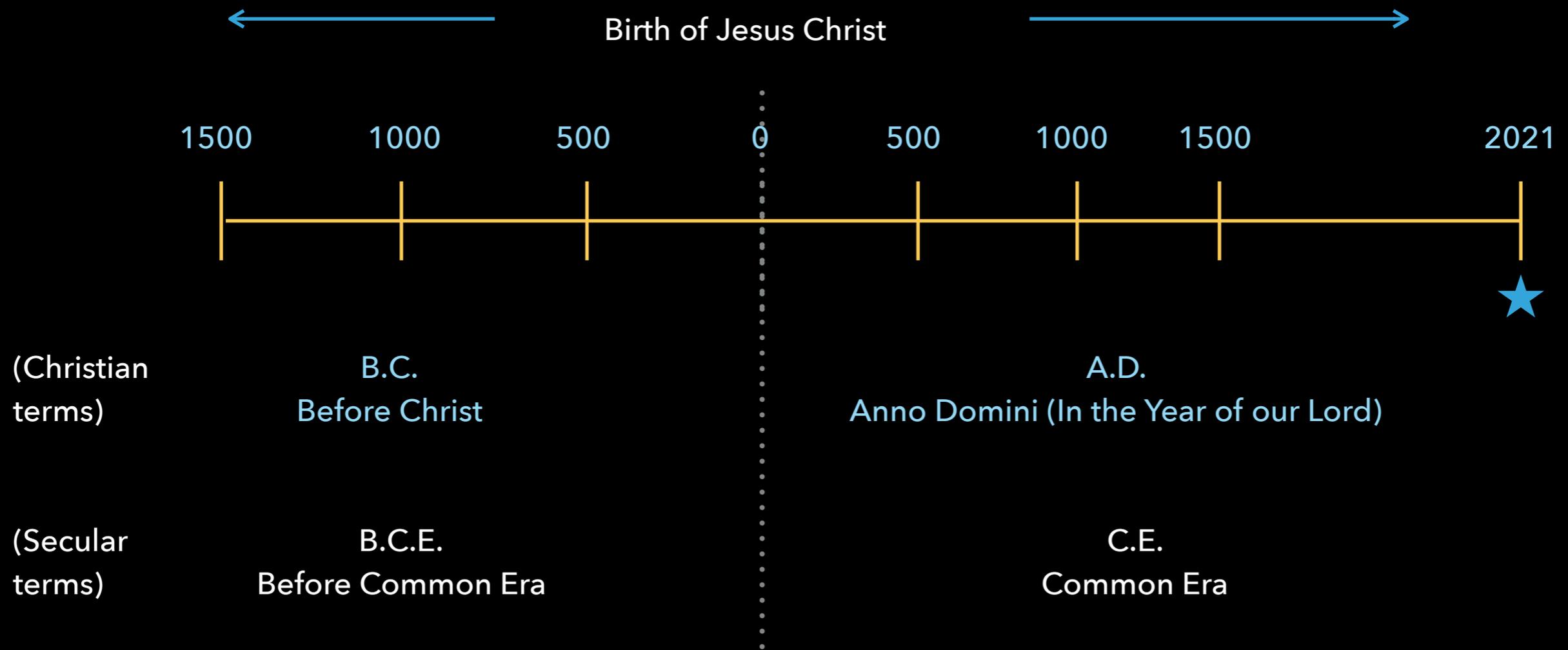
- ▶ What is a work of art?
- ▶ Reading visual objects
- ▶ The development of civilization, culture and society



# NOTE ON DATES, TIMELINES, CHRONOLOGIES



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Circa: written as c. or ca.

- Means approximately; used to indicate that the exact date isn't known
- c. 400 BCE would mean approximately 400 years before the Common era

# What Constitutes "Art"?



*Augustus of Prima Porta,*  
1st century C.E.  
Collection of Vatican  
Museums



Jar (Guan)  
c. 2350-2050 B.C.E.  
China  
Collection of the Met Museum



Jacob Lawrence  
*The Pool Parlor*  
1942  
Collection of the Met Museum

# Abstract versus Representational Art

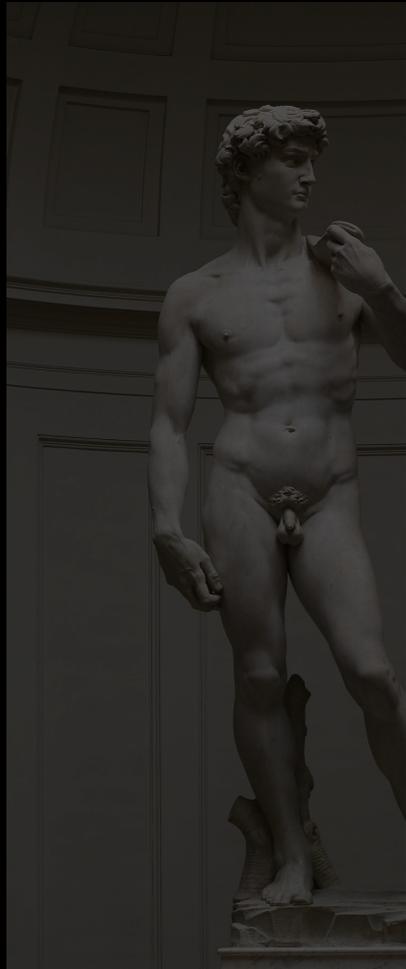


Michelangelo,  
*David*  
Marble  
C. 1501-1504



Jackson Pollock  
*White Light*  
1954

# Abstract versus Representational Art



Magdalenian, Bison licking its back, 15th to 10th millennium BCE

# What is Prehistory?

- ▶ A term that refers to all human history before the invention of writing systems, c. 3100 BCE. However, human expressions existed long before writing, as we will see in this lecture.
- ▶ Our understanding of this history is more of a reflection of archaeological discoveries than a true chronology of when humans created art (several gaps, limitations)
- ▶ Often art history texts begin with prehistoric art in Europe, but prehistoric art has been found across the world.
- ▶ It is generally categorised in three periods: the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age (for this lecture, we will be focusing on art from the Stone Age)



Drawing depicting The Shell Mound People, from the later Stone Age. They get their name from the distinctive mounds of shells and other kitchen debris they left behind.

# TIMELINE OF THE STONE AGE

Paleolithic  
(Old Stone Age)

Mesolithic  
(Middle Stone Age)

Neolithic  
(New Stone Age)



Handaxe,  
India



Omo Kibish Point,  
Ethiopia



Harpoon Point,  
Democratic Republic of Congo

# Paleolithic era

## Society

- ▶ Humans lived in **caves or simple huts**- were primarily **hunters and gatherers**
- ▶ Used **basic stone and bone tools**
- ▶ Period ended with the last Ice Age, which resulted in the extinction of many large mammals, **climate change** and eventually caused man to **migrate**

## Art:

- ▶ Subjects of art were primarily related to **food** (hunting scenes, animal carvings) or **fertility** (figures of women)
- ▶ **Small figurines** carved from stones, clay and bones.
- ▶ **Cave paintings** made using charcoal, minerals and tree saps.



# VISUAL ART TERMS

- ▶ **Composition:** How are the parts of the work arranged? Is there motion or is it static?
- ▶ **Space:** What kind of space is conveyed? What is the relation of the main figures or objects to the space around them? Could the viewer enter the space or is it flat/two-dimensional?
- ▶ **Color:** What type of colors are used? Complementary or contrasting? Dull or bright? Are they used to draw your gaze to a certain aspect of the work?
- ▶ **Line:** Do the outlines convey energy or motion? Are they smooth or jagged, bold or subtle, geometric or curvilinear?
- ▶ **Proportions:** Do the individual parts of the object work as a whole and look natural? Or are the proportions intentionally askew? What purpose might that serve?
- ▶ **Pose:** If there are figures in the work, how are they rendered- realistic or abstract? If there are multiple, how do they interact with each other or to the viewer?
- ▶ **Tone/Mood:** Do you sense an overall mood of the work? How does the mood impact your interpretation of the message of the work?



Venus of Willendorf  
Austria  
c. 28000-25000 BCE



Lascaux Cave painting  
Southwest France  
c. 15000-17000 BCE



Lascaux Cave painting, Southwest France, c. 15000-17000 BCE

# Mesolithic era

## Society

- ▶ Often lived **nomadically** in camps near rivers and other water bodies-
- ▶ Used small stone tools, now **polished and sharpened** to serve as arrows

## Art:

- ▶ Demand for **personal and decorative** art like jewellery and pottery- but emphasis was still on use not design/aesthetics
- ▶ Shift in subject matter. Early cave paintings focused on animals, but now paintings were usually of **human groups**, showing them hunting or engaged in rituals.
- ▶ Due to the warmer climate, the paintings were now created on **outdoor walls** rather than caves
- ▶ Often the humans are highly stylised and repeated as if in a **pattern**.



Pachmari Hills, Central India, ca. 9000-3000 B.C.



Pachmari Hills  
Central India  
ca. 9000-3000 B.C.

# Neolithic era

## Society

- ▶ Switched from hunter/gatherer to **food production**- agriculture was more widely practiced, animals were domesticated, new farming techniques developed
- ▶ Used polished hand axes for ploughing and tilling the land and **started to settle** in the plains

## Art

- ▶ Advancements in pottery and art- more **decorative** and for **ornamentation**, not just function
- ▶ Sculpture no longer only made by carving- now detailed **figurines made of clay**, perhaps used for rituals
- ▶ Architecture and **megalithic constructions**- creation of temples for gods and goddesses, tombs for the dead



*Vessel with flame-like ornamentation*  
Middle Jomon period, Japan  
3000-2000 BC



Deep Bowl  
Middle Jomon Period, Japan  
3000-2000 BCE



Stone Henge, England, 3000-2000 BCE



Stone Henge, England, 3000-2000 BCE

## GLOSSARY

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- ▶ **Nomadic:** A community of people who move from one place to another, rather than settling permanently in one location.
- ▶ **Megalith:** A construction involving one or several roughly hewn stone slabs of great size.
- ▶ **Representational:** includes objects or events in the real world, usually looking easily recognizable.
- ▶ **Abstract:** Imagery that is so far removed from its actual real-world appearance that it is almost impossible to easily discern what is being represented.