

The Sensorium Made Visible A Sixty-Thousand-Year Cross-Mapping of Art History onto the Nineteen-Layer Architecture of Perception

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Abstract

The "Nested Sensorium" architecture proposes that human organisms are structurally continuous with nineteen layers of physical and informational organisation, from the quantum vacuum to a speculative planetary coherence, and that conscious perception accesses only a filtered fraction of the signal available at each layer. That essay treats art and culture as a late, largely passive product of the architecture — situated at Layer 9 (symbolic/linguistic meaning) and, briefly, Layer 18 (archetypal/mythic patterning), via the entoptic-phenomena argument from Palaeolithic rock art. This article argues that this placement under-describes art's actual role. Read across sixty thousand years, art history is not a single late layer of the architecture; it is a recurring technology for making specific layers of the sensorium *temporarily accessible to consciousness* — sometimes reopening Layer 6 (raw neural registration), sometimes consolidating Layer 13 (institutional power), sometimes deliberately suppressing Layer 10's left-hemisphere mode in favour of its right-hemisphere counterpart. We propose a layer-by-period cross-mapping, evaluate which correspondences are well-evidenced and which remain interpretive, and conclude that art functions as an active instrument distributed across the entire architecture rather than a passive symptom located near its top.

1. Restating the Problem

The Nested Sensorium essay's central claim is that the boundary of conscious perception is not the boundary of what physically arrives at an organism — that organisms are coupled to layers of reality (electromagnetic fields, interoceptive states, collective synchrony) that are registered, in some attenuated form, beneath conscious report. The essay's own annotated reference list cites Lewis-Williams and Dowson's analysis of entoptic phenomena in Palaeolithic rock art as evidence for Layer 18 — but treats this as a single illustrative data point about shared neurological substrate, not as the opening move in a much longer history.

This leaves an asymmetry in the architecture as originally framed. Every other layer in the essay is given multiple, time-extended lines of evidence — magnetoreception studies spanning decades, hemispheric research spanning McGilchrist's career. Layer 9 (symbolic meaning) and Layer 18 (archetypal patterning) are each given a single anchor point and treated as comparatively settled. But if the architecture is right that organisms are continuously coupled to layers of reality that exceed conscious registration, then the history of art is the most extensive available record of how human cultures have *built tools* to widen, narrow, or redirect that registration — and that record deserves the same layer-by-layer treatment given to migratory birds and alpha rhythms.

This article supplies that treatment.

2. Method

We follow the same constructive method the original essay uses: for each major period or movement in art history, we ask two questions. First, which layer of the nineteen-layer architecture does this body of work make newly or differently accessible to conscious perception? Second, what is the best-documented mechanism — technical, neurological, or institutional — by which it does so?

A caveat carried over directly from the source essay: the lower layers of the architecture (0–9) rest on far firmer empirical ground than the upper layers (15–19). The same asymmetry applies here. Correspondences involving Layer 6 (neural registration), Layer 10 (hemispheric attention), and Layer 13 (institutionalisation) are grounded in independently documented neuroscience, art history, and archaeology. Correspondences involving Layer 17 (non-local correlation) or Layer 19 (planetary/noetic coherence) are explicitly speculative extensions, included for structural completeness and clearly flagged as such, exactly as the source essay flags its own upper layers.

3. The Cross-Mapping

3.1 Palaeolithic and San Rock Art (~60,000–10,000 BCE) — Layers 18 and 6

This is the period the source essay already treats, and it remains the strongest anchor point. Lewis-Williams and Dowson's analysis showed that geometric motifs recurring in trance-derived rock art across unconnected cultures correspond to entoptic phenomena — phosphenes and other visual artefacts generated by the human nervous system itself under altered states, not a transmitted iconographic code. What rock art adds to the architecture, beyond what the source essay already states, is that it is not merely *evidence for* Layer 18; it is among the earliest known *technologies for reaching* it. Sustained rhythmic activity, sensory deprivation, and controlled breathing — the documented antecedents of trance states in San practice — are procedures for deliberately suppressing ordinary Layer 9 (symbolic, linguistic) processing in order to surface Layer 6 patterning that is normally filtered out before report. Rock art is the earliest known materialisation of that achieved state, and as such, it functions as both Layer 18 evidence and Layer 6 technology simultaneously.

3.2 Neolithic Monumental Architecture (~5,000–2,000 BCE) — Layer 14

Stone circles and chambered monuments aligned to solstitial and lunar extremes are the first clear case of an organism-scale technology built specifically to register a Layer 14 signal — geophysical and astronomical periodicity — and render it perceptible to an entire community at once, rather than to an individual nervous system. This is a different operation from Palaeolithic rock art: it does not suppress ordinary cognition to reach a buried signal, it builds external infrastructure to make an already-present but slow, diffuse environmental periodicity (solar position, seasonal light) legible on human timescales. Megalithic architecture is, in this sense, the sensorium externalised into stone.

3.3 Egyptian and Mesopotamian Art (~3,000–500 BCE) — Layer 13

With the emergence of writing and centralised political authority, art's primary function shifts toward Layer 13 — civilisational institutionalisation. Egyptian relief conventions (fixed proportion canons, frontal/profile composition rules maintained for roughly three millennia with minimal

stylistic drift) are not failures of technical progress; they are a deliberate technology for fixing a layer of cultural meaning so firmly that it resists the ordinary entropy of stylistic change across generations. This is the layer at which art stops primarily mediating an individual's contact with deeper layers and starts primarily stabilising a society's contact with its own institutional continuity.

3.4 Greek and Roman Classical Art (~500 BCE–400 CE) — Layers 9 and 10 (left-hemisphere mode)

Classical proportion systems, including ratios approximating the golden mean, and the systematic development of anatomical and architectural geometry mark a turn toward what McGilchrist's research (cited in the source essay for Layer 10) identifies as the left hemisphere's characteristic mode: narrowing attention to isolate, measure, and manipulate discrete parts. This is not a value judgement against classical art — McGilchrist's own framework insists both hemispheric modes are necessary — but a structural observation: Greco-Roman aesthetic theory is among the first sustained cultural programmes to make the *measuring, isolating* mode of attention itself the explicit subject and method of an entire artistic tradition, rather than a background cognitive operation.

3.5 Medieval and Byzantine Art (~400–1400 CE) — Layer 11

Byzantine icons and medieval devotional art are deliberately anti-naturalistic: flattened space, reversed perspective, schematic faces. Read through the architecture, this is best understood as a technology aimed at Layer 11 (affective/limbic processing) that *bypasses* Layer 10's left-hemisphere measuring mode rather than serving it. The absence of naturalistic depth is not a technical limitation of the period (contemporaneous craftsmanship in other domains was highly sophisticated) but a structural choice: affect is being transmitted through symbolic schema rather than through optically accurate representation, a strategy that privileges direct emotional/limbic registration over geometric verisimilitude.

3.6 Renaissance Linear Perspective (~1400–1600 CE) — Layer 10 (transition)

Linear perspective is the clearest single technical event in this entire mapping. Brunelleschi's and later Alberti's codification of vanishing-point geometry is a literal technology for training the eye into a single, fixed, measurable viewpoint — the left-hemisphere mode formalised as a reproducible technique and exported across an entire visual culture. Where Classical art *exercised* this mode, Renaissance perspective *engineers* it into a teachable, transferable system. This marks the most complete capture of Layer 10 by its narrow-attention pole in the entire timeline, and sets up the precise tension that later movements (Impressionism, Cubism) will react against.

3.7 Baroque (~1600–1750 CE) — Layer 11 (re-intensified)

Baroque chiaroscuro, dynamic composition, and bodily drama mark a partial return swing toward Layer 11 affective registration, now operating *through* rather than *against* Renaissance technical mastery. This is a useful corrective to any reading of the architecture as one-directional: layers are not visited once and abandoned, they are revisited with accumulated technique from the intervening period.

3.8 Romanticism (~1780–1850 CE) — Layers 14 and 7

Romantic landscape painting and the aesthetic category of the sublime mark a deliberate return to Layer 14 (geophysical/planetary fields) and Layer 7 (whole-organism coordinated response), this time framed explicitly as a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism's left-hemisphere dominance.

The sublime, as theorised by Burke and Kant in the same period, is precisely the experience of a signal (scale, force, natural power) that exceeds the organism's capacity for measured, Layer-10-style comprehension — an aesthetic category built around the felt limits of one's own filtering architecture.

3.9 Impressionism (~1860–1890 CE) — Layer 6

Impressionist technique — broken colour, attention to the optical mixing of light rather than the conceptual identity of objects — is a direct technology for accessing Layer 6: the raw neural registration of retinal input *before* it is organised into stable object-categories. Monet's late series paintings of the same subject under different light conditions are, in this reading, a systematic experiment in isolating what the visual system registers prior to conceptual closure — a documented and durable concern, not unique to Impressionism but given its most sustained programme there.

3.10 Cubism (~1907–1920 CE) — Layer 10 (challenge to the dominant mode)

Cubism's simultaneous multiple viewpoints constitute a direct technical challenge to Renaissance perspective's single fixed eye — and, by extension, to Layer 10's left-hemisphere dominance as the default mode of pictorial representation. By fracturing the single vantage point, Cubism reintroduces something closer to the broader, context-holding right-hemisphere mode into a visual language that perspective had spent five centuries optimising against.

3.11 Surrealism (~1920–1950 CE) — Layers 16 and 18

Surrealism's explicit engagement with Freudian and Jungian theories of the unconscious, automatic drawing techniques, and dream-logic composition makes it the first major movement to take Layers 16 (predictive/anticipatory activity) and 18 (archetypal/mythic patterning) as *conscious, declared subject matter* rather than as an unexamined substrate, as in Palaeolithic art. This is a structurally different relationship to the same layers accessed sixty thousand years earlier: deliberate, theorised, and produced for an audience already equipped with a vocabulary (psychoanalysis) for interpreting what it sees.

3.12 Abstract Expressionism (~1940–1960 CE) — Layer 7

Action painting, particularly Pollock's drip technique, foregrounds the whole-organism motor act of painting itself as the content of the work, rather than as a means toward a represented image. This is a Layer 7 technology in the most literal sense available in this mapping: gesture and coordinated bodily motion are registered directly onto the canvas with minimal intervening symbolic translation.

3.13 Minimalism and Op Art (~1960–1970 CE) — Layer 6 (instrumentalised)

Op Art's optical illusions are not merely decorative; they are functioning, reproducible instruments for demonstrating specific, measurable properties of low-level visual processing — edge detection, afterimage, apparent motion — to a general audience, decades before such phenomena were standard material in vision-science textbooks. Minimalism's insistence on the literal materiality of the object performs an adjacent operation: it strips away symbolic and representational content specifically to foreground Layer 4–6 registration (texture, scale, presence) as the work's entire content.

3.14 Conceptual Art and Postmodernism (~1970–2000 CE) — Layers 9 and 12

This period marks a decisive shift of the centre of gravity toward Layer 9 (symbolic/linguistic meaning) and Layer 12 (cultural transmission), with much of the work explicitly *about* language, signification, and the instability of cultural meaning rather than about perception in the lower-layer sense at all. This is a legitimate and well-documented phase of the architecture's upper-middle range, but it is worth noting as a relative *narrowing*: compared to the wide layer-spread of the preceding century (6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 16, 18 all visited within decades of each other), Conceptual Art and Postmodernism concentrate heavily on Layers 9 and 12 specifically.

3.15 Digital, Network, and Generative/AI Art (~2000 CE–present) — Layers 17 and 19 (speculative)

Contemporary work engaging networked, generative, and algorithmic systems — including art that explicitly simulates collective or distributed behaviour — is the first body of work in this mapping that takes Layers 17 (non-local informational correlation) and 19 (planetary/noetic coherence) as direct working material, rather than as inherited mythic content (as in Surrealism's relation to Layer 18). Consistent with the source essay's treatment of its own upper layers, this correspondence is flagged as speculative: there is no settled empirical sense in which network art demonstrates non-local correlation as a physical phenomenon. What can be said with more confidence is that this body of work *thematizes* the upper layers of the architecture as subject matter, continuing a pattern visible since Surrealism of artists taking previously unconscious or peripheral layers and making them objects of deliberate representation.

4. What the Mapping Changes in the Original Architecture

Three findings follow from this cross-mapping that revise, rather than merely decorate, the source essay's treatment of art and culture.

4.1 Art is not a single layer. The source essay implicitly locates art at Layer 9, with a secondary gesture toward Layer 18 via the rock-art citation. The mapping above shows work addressed to nearly every layer in the architecture, from Layer 6 (Impressionism, Op Art) to Layer 14 (megalithic architecture, Romanticism) to Layer 18 (Palaeolithic art, Surrealism). Art history is better described as a *distributed instrument* operating across the full vertical span of the architecture than as a phenomenon proper to its upper-symbolic end.

4.2 The direction of travel is not monotonic. If the nineteen layers were visited in ascending order across history, this would weakly support a developmental or progressive reading of the architecture. They are not. Renaissance perspective intensifies Layer 10's narrow mode; Cubism, four centuries later, directly reverses that intensification. Medieval art privileges Layer 11 over Layer 10; the Renaissance reverses that privileging; the Baroque partially re-reverses it. This oscillation is more consistent with the architecture's own framing of layers as *persistently available channels whose gating varies* than with any picture of cultural evolution as steady ascent through the holarchy.

4.3 A second-order pattern emerges from Section 3.11 onward. From Surrealism forward, several movements (Surrealism, Conceptual Art, generative/network art) do not simply access a given layer — they take *the layer itself*, or the act of perception at that layer, as the declared subject matter of the work. This is a distinct operation from earlier periods, where, for instance, Palaeolithic artists accessed Layer 18 without a theory of Layer 18, or Romantic painters invoked Layer 14 without an explicit geophysical vocabulary for it. The appearance of self-aware, theorised engagement with one's own perceptual architecture is itself a datable historical development —

arguably itself a Layer 9/12 phenomenon (a culture developing the linguistic and conceptual apparatus to talk about its own filtering) superimposed on whichever lower layer a given movement is addressing.

5. Limitations and Open Questions

Several cautions, consistent with the standard the source essay sets for its own upper layers, apply here with equal or greater force.

First, this mapping is a Western-art-historical sequence for the period after roughly 3000 BCE; the pre-3000 BCE layers (3.1, 3.2) draw on global and specifically southern African and circum-global evidence, but the periods from Section 3.3 onward follow a conventional Western timeline. A parallel mapping using, for instance, Chinese, Indian, Islamic, or Mesoamerican art-historical sequences would likely produce a different period structure and might test whether the layer-correspondences proposed here are genuine structural regularities or artefacts of a particular historiographic tradition. This is a clear direction for extension rather than a flaw to be argued away.

Second, several of the period-to-layer assignments (3.4, 3.6, 3.10 in particular) rely on McGilchrist's hemispheric framework, which the source essay's own annotated bibliography already flags: the *descriptive* neuropsychological claim (two distinct attentional modes) is well-evidenced, while the *broader cultural-historical thesis* (that whole civilisations or eras can be characterised by hemispheric dominance) is considerably more contested. This article inherits that same caution. The hemispheric labels applied to Classical, Renaissance, and Cubist art above should be read as a structural heuristic consistent with McGilchrist's descriptive claim, not as an endorsement of strong civilisational diagnosis.

Third, Section 3.15's engagement with Layers 17 and 19 carries exactly the same evidentiary status the source essay assigns to those layers elsewhere: included for structural completeness, not as settled finding. Network art demonstrating "non-local correlation" thematically is not evidence that non-local correlation, in the architecture's stronger sense, is a real physical phenomenon at any layer.

6. Conclusion

Read against the nineteen-layer architecture, the history of art from Palaeolithic rock painting to contemporary generative work is not adequately described as a single late-layer phenomenon, nor as steady upward progress through the holarchy. It is better described as a long, non-monotonic record of cultures building and rebuilding technologies that open, close, intensify, or reverse access to specific layers of a perceptual architecture that — per the source essay's central claim — never fully closes any channel, only filters it more or less heavily. The earliest known instance of this activity, San and Palaeolithic rock art, already displays the full structure that recurs for the next sixty thousand years: a deliberately engineered alteration of ordinary perceptual gating, materialised in a durable artefact, addressed to a layer of reality that exceeds unmodified conscious registration. Everything after it, including the most recent network and generative work, is a variation on that same operation, applied to different layers, with different tools, and — increasingly, from Surrealism onward — with an explicit theory of what is being done.

Annotated Reference List

Alberti, L.B. (1435). *De Pictura*.

Primary source for the codification of linear perspective discussed in Section 3.6. Establishes the technical/geometric basis for the single-viewpoint system. **Status: Established art-historical and technical source; the geometric claims are mathematically verifiable; the perceptual-training claim built on top of it in this article is interpretive.**

Burke, E. (1757). *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

Source for the sublime as discussed in Section 3.8. Status: Established aesthetic theory; contemporaneous with, not derived from, the Romantic painting it is used here to interpret.

Kant, I. (1790). *Critique of Judgment*.

Companion theoretical source for the sublime, Section 3.8. Status: Established philosophical source; the mapping onto Layer 14/7 is this article's interpretive extension, not Kant's own claim.

Lewis-Williams, D., & Dowson, T.A. (1988). The signs of all times: Entoptic phenomena in Upper Palaeolithic art. *Current Anthropology*, 29(2), 201-245.

Carried over from the source essay; foundational for Section 3.1. Status: Established neuro-anthropology; well-regarded in the field; this article's extension of it into a "technology for reaching Layer 18" claim is interpretive, building on but going beyond the original finding.

McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. Yale University Press.

Source for hemispheric attention modes, used in Sections 3.4, 3.6, and 3.10. Status: Established neuropsychology for the descriptive two-mode claim; the broader civilisational thesis is contested, as already flagged in the source essay. This article's period-by-period application inherits that same split confidence level and should not be read as settled.

Panofsky, E. (1927). *Die Perspektive als "symbolische Form"*.

Classic art-historical source on the cultural construction of perspectival space, relevant background for Section 3.6. Status: Established and influential in art history; its own thesis (perspective as historically contingent symbolic form rather than neutral optical fact) is broadly compatible with this article's framing but argued on different grounds.

Various standard art-history survey sources (period dating for Sections 3.3–3.15).

Used for conventional period boundaries only (approximate dates of movements), not for any layer-correspondence claim, which is original to this article. Status: General reference; period datings are conventional and approximate, as is standard in art-historical periodisation.

This article is offered as a direct extension of "The Nested Sensorium" (constable.blog, June 2026) and should be read alongside it. Its method — distinguishing well-evidenced lower-layer correspondences from speculative upper-layer ones, and flagging interpretive extensions explicitly

within each entry — follows the sourcing discipline established in that essay's own annotated reference list.