

chicago manual of style common errors art history

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) is a vital resource for academics and writers in numerous fields, and its application in art history is particularly nuanced. Understanding common pitfalls when adhering to CMOS guidelines can significantly elevate the quality and credibility of art historical research papers, essays, and publications. This article delves into frequently encountered errors that art historians make when citing sources, formatting footnotes and endnotes, constructing bibliographies, and handling specific terminology within the Chicago Manual of Style framework. We will explore the intricacies of citing artworks, exhibitions, digital resources, and secondary scholarly materials, alongside common mistakes in grammar, punctuation, and stylistic consistency as prescribed by CMOS. By identifying and addressing these frequent missteps, scholars can ensure their work meets the rigorous standards expected in art history scholarship, thereby enhancing clarity, precision, and academic integrity.

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Introduction to Chicago Manual of Style in Art History

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) serves as a cornerstone for scholarly communication, and its principles are fundamental to the rigorous discipline of art history. When art historians grapple with the stylistic demands of CMOS, a unique set of challenges and potential errors emerges. This section lays the groundwork for understanding why these errors occur and how a focused approach to CMOS can fortify art historical writing. The manual's comprehensive nature means that adherence requires meticulous attention to detail, especially when dealing with the visual and often complex nature of art objects and their contextualization.

Navigating the specific requirements for citing artworks, for instance, can be a complex undertaking. Art historians frequently deal with primary sources in the form of visual art, which necessitates particular citation practices that differ from standard textual sources. The correct attribution of an artwork, including its title, artist, date, medium, and dimensions, followed by its location and accession number, is crucial for scholarly verification. Errors in these details, or in their formatting within notes and bibliographies, can lead to confusion and undermine the authority of the research.

Furthermore, the interpretation and description of art often involve specialized vocabulary and theoretical frameworks. While CMOS itself doesn't dictate art historical interpretation, it provides the structure for presenting that interpretation clearly and consistently. Misapplications of its rules regarding punctuation, capitalization, and the use of italics can obscure meaning and detract from the

academic rigor of the writing. This article aims to demystify these common issues, offering clear guidance for art historians seeking to master CMOS.

Common Citation Errors in Art History

The realm of art history presents unique challenges for consistent and accurate citation, often leading to specific types of errors when applying the Chicago Manual of Style. These errors can range from misinterpreting how to cite artworks themselves to mishandling secondary scholarly sources that are crucial for building an argument.

Citing Artworks: The Primary Source Dilemma

One of the most frequent areas of difficulty for art historians is the proper citation of artworks. The CMOS guidelines for citing objects, especially unique ones like paintings, sculptures, or installations, require a specific order of information. A common mistake is omitting essential details or presenting them in an inconsistent format. For example, the title of an artwork should typically be italicized, but failing to do so is a frequent oversight. Similarly, the artist's name, the date of creation, the medium and dimensions, and crucially, the location (museum, gallery, private collection) and accession number, must all be included and formatted according to CMOS.

Another recurring error involves how to attribute authorship when it is unknown or contested. CMOS provides guidance for such situations, but art historians may inconsistently apply these rules, leading to ambiguity. For example, using "Anonymous" or "Unknown artist" requires specific formatting that can be overlooked. When discussing an artwork, the initial mention in the text or in a footnote often needs to be accompanied by full bibliographic information, and subsequent mentions can be shortened. Failing to distinguish between these levels of detail is another common citation pitfall.

Exhibition Citations: Beyond the Artwork

Art historical research frequently involves engaging with exhibitions, both historical and contemporary. Citing exhibition catalogs and the artworks displayed within them presents another layer of complexity. A common error is to cite only the exhibition catalog without also acknowledging the specific artworks discussed or reproduced, or vice versa. The CMOS requires clarity on whether the citation refers to the catalog itself as a publication, or to the specific artwork as presented within the exhibition context.

When citing an exhibition catalog, several elements are vital: the exhibition title, the name of the venue (gallery or museum), the dates of the exhibition, and the editor(s) or author(s) of the catalog. Errors often arise from inconsistent naming of exhibition titles (e.g., using italics when not required, or omitting them when they are) or from neglecting to include the exhibition dates, which are crucial for contextualizing the event. For example, citing an exhibition as simply "The Louvre" is insufficient; it requires the exhibition title, the museum name, and the dates.

Digital Resources and Reproductions

In the digital age, art historians increasingly rely on online archives, museum websites, and digital art repositories. Citing these digital resources correctly according to CMOS can be challenging. Common errors include failing to provide stable URLs (if available), omitting the date of access, or inconsistently formatting the names of websites or online databases. CMOS emphasizes the importance of providing enough information for a reader to locate the resource, even if it is digital and potentially ephemeral.

When citing reproductions of artworks found online, it's crucial to distinguish between citing the reproduction as a digital object and citing the original artwork. Errors occur when the citation focuses solely on the online source without referencing the original artwork's details (artist, title, date, original location). For instance, citing a JPEG from a museum website without attributing the original artwork to its artist and provenance is a significant omission.

Secondary Scholarly Sources: Books and Articles

While the complexities of citing artworks are unique to art history, the accurate citation of books, articles, and other scholarly texts follows general CMOS principles. However, even here, art historians can fall into common traps. One prevalent error is inconsistent application of CMOS regarding the treatment of book titles versus article titles. Book titles should be italicized, while article titles are typically placed within quotation marks. Incorrectly swapping these conventions is a frequent mistake.

Another common issue relates to the full bibliographic information required in the first citation of a source. Art historians might abbreviate author names inconsistently, omit publisher information, or misformat page numbers. For subsequent citations, the use of shortened notes (author-title) or consecutive notes citing the same source is often applied inconsistently. Ensuring a clear distinction between the first full note and subsequent shortened notes, or correctly employing the "ibid." and "op. cit." conventions if desired (though CMOS generally prefers shortened notes), is vital for maintaining clarity and adherence to the manual.

Footnotes and Endnotes: Navigating the Details

The application of footnotes and endnotes in art historical writing demands precision, as these elements are critical for providing scholarly apparatus and supporting evidence. Several common errors can detract from the clarity and professionalism of the work.

Numbering and Placement Errors

One of the most fundamental errors involves the numbering of notes. Notes should correspond sequentially to the superscripts placed in the text. A common mistake is skipping numbers, repeating note numbers, or placing superscripts in incorrect positions, such as after punctuation instead of

before it. CMOS specifies that superscripts for notes should generally appear after the word or clause to which they relate, but before any punctuation, unless the punctuation is an integral part of the preceding quotation.

The consistent placement of superscripts is essential. For example, when referencing a specific quotation, the superscript should follow the closing quotation mark. If the note pertains to an entire sentence or clause, it should appear at the end of that sentence or clause, prior to the terminal punctuation. In art history, where long descriptive passages are common, ensuring these superscripts are logically placed and accurately numbered is paramount.

Incomplete or Inconsistently Formatted Notes

Many errors arise from the content and formatting of the notes themselves. A frequent pitfall is providing incomplete bibliographic information within a note, especially for the first mention of a source. For instance, an art historian might cite an exhibition catalog with only the author and title, omitting the exhibition venue, dates, and publisher. CMOS requires a comprehensive set of details upon first reference.

Inconsistencies in formatting within the notes are also problematic. This includes variations in the capitalization of titles, inconsistent use of italics for artwork titles versus book titles, and irregular formatting of dates or dimensions. Even minor variations in spacing or punctuation within notes can detract from the polished appearance expected in scholarly work. Ensuring that every note adheres strictly to the CMOS format for the specific type of source being cited is crucial.

Misapplication of Shortened Notes

While CMOS generally favors shortened notes over the traditional "ibid." and "op. cit." for subsequent references, errors can still occur in their application. A common mistake is using a shortened note when the source is the immediately preceding one, where "ibid." might be more appropriate if the author chooses to use that system. More frequently, however, the error lies in not providing enough information in the shortened note to uniquely identify the source. A shortened note should include the author's last name and a brief, recognizable title of the work.

Art historians might also inconsistently abbreviate titles in shortened notes or fail to provide a clear title if the author has multiple works being cited. For instance, if an author has written several articles on the same artist, the shortened note needs to be specific enough to differentiate them. The goal of a shortened note is to allow the reader to quickly locate the full bibliographic information in the accompanying bibliography or in the first full note.

Bibliography Construction for Art Historians

The bibliography, appearing at the end of a scholarly work, is a critical component for providing readers with a comprehensive list of sources consulted. For art historians, constructing an accurate

and properly formatted bibliography according to the Chicago Manual of Style requires attention to detail, especially when dealing with the diverse range of materials art history engages with.

Inclusion and Exclusion of Sources

A common error in bibliography construction is the inconsistent inclusion or exclusion of sources. Scholars must decide whether the bibliography will list all sources cited in the notes, or if it will include additional sources consulted but not directly cited. CMOS typically recommends listing all sources cited. Errors occur when sources mentioned in the notes are omitted from the bibliography, or when sources not cited in the text are included without clear justification, potentially confusing the reader about the scope of research.

For art historians, this also extends to deciding how to list primary visual sources. While artworks are often discussed extensively in the text and notes, their inclusion in the bibliography requires careful consideration. CMOS generally advises including primary visual materials if they are central to the argument and have been referenced extensively, but the formatting must align with the manual's guidelines for objects. Failing to list key artworks or including them in an unscholarly format are common oversights.

Formatting of Entries

The formatting of individual entries in a bibliography is a significant area where errors can occur. This includes the order of names (last name first for authors), the italicization of book titles and exhibition titles, and the consistent treatment of dates, editions, and publication information. For example, forgetting to italicize exhibition catalog titles or consistently misplacing the city of publication are frequent issues.

When citing artworks in the bibliography, the format should be consistent with how they were introduced in the notes. This typically includes the artist's name, the artwork's title (italicized), the date of creation, the medium and dimensions, and its current location (museum or collection) with accession number. Errors arise from inconsistent order, incorrect capitalization, or omitting crucial details like accession numbers, which are vital for identification in art history.

Alphabetical Order and Consistency

The bibliography must be arranged alphabetically by the author's last name or, if no author is listed, by the first significant word of the title. Errors in alphabetization can easily creep in, particularly when dealing with numerous sources or when works by the same author are listed. This requires careful checking to ensure that the list is indeed in strict alphabetical order.

Beyond alphabetical order, the principle of consistency is paramount. Every entry within the bibliography should follow the same formatting rules. This means that if one exhibition catalog entry includes the editor's name, all similar entries should do so. If artwork dimensions are consistently

provided in centimeters, they should always be in centimeters. Inconsistencies, such as switching between centimeters and inches, or varying the way dates are presented, can make the bibliography appear unprofessional and less credible.

Stylistic and Grammatical Pitfalls

Beyond citation and formatting, art historians, like all writers, must contend with stylistic and grammatical conventions. The Chicago Manual of Style offers guidance that, when misapplied, can lead to confusion and a reduction in the clarity of the prose.

Capitalization and Punctuation in Titles and Headings

CMOS has specific rules regarding capitalization for titles of artworks, books, articles, and exhibitions, as well as for headings and subheadings within the text. A common error is the inconsistent application of "sentence case" versus "title case." For example, capitalizing every major word in an article title when sentence case is required, or vice versa, is a frequent mistake. Similarly, the capitalization of proper nouns within titles needs careful attention.

Punctuation within titles and subtitles also presents challenges. The correct use of colons to separate a title from a subtitle, and the appropriate punctuation at the end of titles (or lack thereof), are areas where errors often occur. For instance, adding a period at the end of an italicized artwork title when it is not part of a complete sentence, or failing to use a colon between a main title and subtitle, are common oversights.

Use of Italics and Quotation Marks

The distinction between using italics and quotation marks is crucial in scholarly writing, and art history is no exception. CMOS dictates that book titles, exhibition titles, journal titles, and artwork titles should generally be italicized. Article titles, chapter titles within books, and titles of individual artworks when not italicized by convention (though artwork titles are typically italicized in art history) are often enclosed in quotation marks.

Art historians frequently err by swapping these conventions, italicizing article titles or placing artwork titles within quotation marks. The correct usage is vital for distinguishing between different types of works and for adhering to established scholarly practice. For instance, consistently italicizing the title of a painting, such as *Starry Night*, is standard, but failing to do so or enclosing it in quotation marks is a common error.

Clarity in Descriptive Language and Nominalization

While not strictly a CMS rule, clarity of expression is a fundamental aspect of good writing, and CMS

provides implicit guidance through its emphasis on clear prose. Art historians sometimes fall into the trap of overly dense or jargon-laden prose, which can be exacerbated by excessive nominalization (turning verbs into nouns, e.g., "the analysis of" instead of "to analyze"). This can make sentences cumbersome and difficult to follow.

Furthermore, ambiguity in descriptive language is a common pitfall. When describing visual elements of an artwork, the language must be precise. For instance, using vague terms for color or form, or failing to clearly connect descriptive passages to the analytical argument, can obscure meaning. Ensuring that the descriptive elements directly support the interpretive claims is a mark of strong art historical writing, and clarity is key.

Specialized Content Formatting in Art History

Art history writing often involves unique forms of content that require specialized formatting. Adhering to CMOS for these elements ensures accuracy and academic rigor.

Dimensions and Media of Artworks

The precise formatting of artwork dimensions and media is a critical detail in art historical scholarship. CMOS provides guidelines for how to present this information, typically in height x width x depth, with units specified (e.g., cm, in.). A common error is inconsistent unit usage (e.g., mixing cm and inches without clear notation) or an inconsistent order of dimensions.

The specification of medium also requires care. Art historians must accurately list the materials used by the artist (e.g., oil on canvas, bronze, watercolor on paper). Errors can arise from vague descriptions of the medium or from inconsistent terminology. Ensuring that the medium is clearly and accurately stated, often after the dimensions, is essential for proper cataloging and scholarly citation.

Dates of Creation and Provenance

The dating of artworks is often complex and subject to scholarly debate. CMOS provides guidance on how to represent these dates accurately, whether they are precise (e.g., 1923) or approximate (e.g., ca. 1923, 1923–24). Errors commonly occur in the use of "ca." (circa), hyphens for date ranges, and the appropriate representation of historical periods or uncertain dates.

Provenance, the history of ownership of an artwork, is also a critical component of art historical research. While CMOS doesn't dictate specific provenance formats for all disciplines, it emphasizes clarity and accuracy. Art historians must ensure that any stated provenance information is clearly presented and, if it is being cited, that it is done so according to the manual's general citation principles. Inconsistent or incomplete provenance details can weaken the scholarly apparatus.

Captions for Reproductions

Image captions are vital in art history, providing essential information about the artworks being discussed. CMOS offers guidelines for caption format, which typically include the artist's name, the artwork's title, the date, the medium and dimensions, and the current location and accession number, followed by the image credit. Errors here are frequent and can include:

- Incorrect order of information.
- Missing essential details (e.g., accession number, location).
- Inconsistent formatting (e.g., inconsistent use of italics, parentheses, or periods).
- Incorrectly attributing the artwork or providing erroneous dates.
- Failing to credit the source of the reproduction accurately.

The caption serves as a mini-citation and a descriptive label, and its accuracy is paramount for both reader understanding and scholarly integrity. Forgetting to italicize artwork titles or misstating the artist's name are common and easily avoidable errors.

Use of Foreign Terms and Foreign Language Titles

Art history often involves engagement with works in foreign languages, as well as the use of foreign terms within the text. CMOS provides specific guidance on how to handle these situations. A common error is the inconsistent treatment of foreign language titles, such as whether to italicize them and whether to provide an English translation. Generally, titles of foreign language works that are italicized in their original language should remain italicized, and translations should be provided in parentheses.

The use of foreign terms that have become part of common English usage (e.g., "avant-garde," "chiaroscuro") typically do not require italics. However, less common terms or those being used in a specific, nuanced way may benefit from italics. Errors arise from inconsistent italicization of such terms, or from failing to italicize foreign terms that are not considered standard English vocabulary. Providing a glossary for highly specialized or frequently used foreign terms can also enhance clarity, although this is not a direct CMOS requirement, but a stylistic choice.

Conclusion: Achieving Excellence in Art Historical Writing

Mastering the Chicago Manual of Style is an ongoing process for any scholar, but for art historians, it presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. By understanding and actively addressing the common errors discussed in this article—from the precise citation of artworks and exhibitions to the nuanced formatting of dimensions, dates, and foreign terms—art historians can significantly enhance

the clarity, precision, and credibility of their work. Diligent application of CMOS principles not only ensures adherence to scholarly standards but also facilitates a more effective and impactful communication of complex visual and interpretive arguments.

The commitment to meticulous detail in footnotes, endnotes, and bibliographies ensures that readers can easily trace the lineage of ideas and locate the sources that underpin the research. Likewise, consistent attention to stylistic elements like capitalization, punctuation, and the appropriate use of italics and quotation marks contributes to a polished and professional presentation of scholarship. Ultimately, by embracing the detailed guidance of the Chicago Manual of Style, art historians can produce work that is not only academically sound but also a pleasure to read and engage with, furthering the discourse within the field.

Q: What are the most frequent errors art historians make when citing an artwork using the Chicago Manual of Style?

A: The most frequent errors include omitting crucial details such as the artwork's medium, dimensions, or accession number, inconsistent italicization of artwork titles, incorrect formatting of dates of creation, and failure to properly attribute the current location of the artwork. Additionally, misplacing superscripts for notes, especially in relation to punctuation, is a common pitfall.

Q: How should an art historian format the title of an artwork when citing it in a footnote or bibliography according to CMOS?

A: According to CMOS, artwork titles should generally be italicized. For example, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. If the artwork title appears within a larger work, such as an exhibition catalog entry, it might be enclosed in quotation marks if the larger work's title is italicized. However, for direct citation of the artwork itself, italics are standard.

Q: What is the correct way to cite an exhibition catalog as a source in art history using Chicago Manual of Style?

A: An exhibition catalog citation should include the exhibition title (italicized), the name of the organizing institution or venue, the city of publication, the publisher, and the year of publication. If an editor is listed, their name should be included. For example: *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting*. Edited by Walter Liedtke. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Q: Are there specific guidelines in CMOS for citing digital reproductions of artworks?

A: Yes, CMOS requires clear attribution for digital reproductions. The citation should ideally include information about the original artwork (artist, title, date, etc.) followed by the details of the digital source, including the website name, the URL, and the date of access. For example: Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, oil on oak panel, 82.2 x 60 cm. National Gallery, London,

Q: What are common mistakes in using footnotes and endnotes for art historical research?

A: Common mistakes include incorrect numbering of notes, placing superscripts in the wrong location relative to punctuation, providing incomplete bibliographic information in the first note, and inconsistent formatting of details within the notes themselves. Misapplying the rules for shortened notes, such as not providing enough identifying information, is also frequent.

Q: How should dimensions and media of artworks be consistently presented in art historical writing following CMOS?

A: Dimensions are typically presented as height x width x depth, followed by the unit of measurement in parentheses (e.g., cm or in.). For example, 82.2 x 60 cm (32.4 x 23.6 in.). The medium is usually stated after the dimensions, such as "oil on canvas" or "bronze." Consistency in the order of dimensions and in the units used is crucial.

Q: What are the best practices for using foreign terms and titles in art historical writing according to CMOS?

A: Foreign language titles of artworks, books, and articles should generally be italicized, and an English translation provided in parentheses upon first mention if helpful for the reader. Foreign terms that have become common in English (e.g., "chiaroscuro") typically do not need italics. For less common terms, or when a term's specific foreign meaning is being emphasized, italics may be appropriate. Consistency is key.

Q: Should artworks themselves be included in the bibliography in art history, and if so, how?

A: Yes, artworks can be included in the bibliography if they are central to the argument and have been referenced extensively. They should be formatted similarly to how they are introduced in notes: artist's name, artwork title (italicized), date of creation, medium and dimensions, and current location with accession number. For example: van Eyck, Jan. *The Arnolfini Portrait*. 1434. Oil on oak panel, 82.2 x 60 cm. National Gallery, London.

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