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# Art History and the Global Challenge: A Critical Perspective

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## Abstract

The challenge of globalization and the “decolonization” of our way of thinking have become a major concern for most art historians. While it is still too early to assess the impact on the discipline of the “Global turn”—a turn that is all the more timid that it materializes more slowly in public collections and public opinions than in books—we nonetheless wanted to probe scholars who are paying close attention to the new practices in global art history. Coming from different cultural milieus and academic traditions, and belonging to different generations, they agreed to answer our questions, and to share with us their insights, questions, doubts, but also hopes for the discipline. This survey must be regarded as a dialogue in progress: other conversations will follow and will contribute to widening the range of critical perspectives on art history and the Global challenge.

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**1. In your mind, is there today a global field of Art History? Since the publication of James Elkin's *Is Art history Global?* in 2006, art history has become more international, but has the discipline really opened to non-Western (non-North-Atlantic) contributions?**

Has art history indeed become global in the past ten years? The response to the question, I believe, would vary depending on the intellectual genealogies that we bring to bear on the discipline. My own introduction to the discipline of art history, for instance, had begun in India at the Art History and Aesthetics department of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara. By no means was this the first department of art history in the subcontinent. Indeed, the initial thrust for the institutionalization of the discipline in India had come from the Calcutta University, where a Department of Ancient History and Culture was established in 1918. But as such, the inauguration of discipline in India predated its institutionalization.

The publication of R. D. Bhandarkar's *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious System* (1913) and T. A. Gopinatha Rao's multi-volume *Elements of Hindu Iconography* (1914) were important steps in the establishment of art history in India. Unlike the prejudices of earlier European studies on Indian art, these were first attempts to systematically catalogue and analyze the iconography of Indian sculpture. Subsequently, by the 1920s, Stella Kramrisch, a Jewish émigré trained in art history in Vienna, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, a Sri Lankan aesthete and a participant of the international arts and crafts movement, had further destabilized the history of Indian art that had been conjured up by European imperialist discourses. One could then trace a more nuanced genealogy of the discipline through innumerable other such episodes that played out in the former peripheries of art history, well beyond north Atlantic worlds.

That art history has always been global is without doubt. But if these trajectories of art history appear to lie outside the frames of the discipline,

surely it is because of the limitations of a Westernist frame of reference?

**2. Would you say that there are platforms (conferences, journals, blogs, etc.) which play a more important role than others in the internationalization of Art History?**

I am hesitant to privilege one organization, journal, or intellectual platform over another since questions that arise from the specificities of a given local shape our imagination of the global. Likewise, concerns that we bring to the international often stem from the particularities of regional contexts. As a result, no single journal or organization—governed as they are by editorial and organizational oversight—can effectively maneuver a more crucial role than others in the internationalization of art history, although some may appear to do so when viewed from specific geographic or intellectual persuasions. If we think in terms of the larger discipline globally, however, we may find several institutions, non-government organizations, journals, and magazines steadily pushing art history towards a pluritopic direction. Not necessarily in tandem or unilaterally. But in ways that substantively reconstitute the intellectual horizons of the discipline as such. I think, for instance, of the Clark Art Institute, the Getty Research Institute, and the College Art Association in the US and the Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz and the Forum Transregionale Studien in Europe. The Comité international d'histoire de l'art, which held the *World Congress of Art History* in Asia for the first time in 2016, also comes to mind.

In parallel, other organizations come to mind: the Asia Art Archive, an institution that has not only become a node connecting various Asian artistic and art historical contexts but has also developed a robust publication and symposium program; the journal *ARTMargins*, which includes a section on English translations of critical texts written outside Anglophone worlds by way of initiating a global dialog on art history; and the libraries of the

Fondation Zinsou and Meschac Gaba's *Musée de l'Art de la vie*, both of which serve as an intellectual laboratory for art history and art practice in Benin. These, of course, are only a few arbitrary examples. Nonetheless, they offer critical perspectives on the discipline's shape and practice in the present in diverse locations across the world.

### 3. What is, or could be, the role of the Internet and the digital in this globalization?

At one level, the internet has certainly democratized the production and circulation of knowledge. It has also produced rhizomatic networks of intellectual and political solidarity. At another level, we must remember that the internet too produces a particular set of locational hierarchies. As several scholars have noted, commercial search engines play an ever-increasing role in structuring information dissemination over the web. The same keyword search conducted across different search engines not only generates entirely different results but these results also vary based on the geographic location from where the search is conducted. Google, for instance, relies heavily on location services. At the same time, the visibility of a website, measured by the number of links to it, affects the indexing potential of search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Baidu. The discoverability of a website belonging to a small institution in suburban India, for instance, is significantly lesser than that of a major art history institution based in New York, Paris, or London. Moreover, the scope and scale of digitization projects in dispersed parts of the world vary dramatically. To imagine that all artists and artworks from all parts of the world are traceable via the simple click of the mouse is only a sign of the hubris of the privileged. The extent to which such locational hierarchies will ultimately impact the shape of art history can only be mapped in the *longue durée*. But much depends on the kinds of questions that we ask in a digital environment and the sorts of answers that satisfy us.

### 4. What is the impetus for this globalization? Does it only rest on art historians' willingness and political engagement? Or has the global approach also become a career strategy? Do the demands from our universities, which seek to attract more international students and incite us to publish internationally, have a real impact on research?

I think it is important, even necessary, to separate the question of the global from the fact of globalization. Put simply, globalization is an economic phenomenon driven by free trade and flow of capital. From the perspective of this model of globalization, the increased attentiveness to the world beyond North Atlantic frontiers may well present a strategic professional move that opens up new markets for European and American institutions. European and American academics may certainly venture to the former peripheries in search of new publics, new platforms, and new research venues. There is, of course, a kind of pragmatic logic to such an expansion, one that replays earlier histories of the colonization of knowledge. Indeed, only the willfully uninformed can ignore the ways in which the unequal legacies of colonialism have impacted knowledge production. Thinking in terms of the global, in contrast, is a fundamentally different work of imagination that confronts the politics and poetics of knowledge itself. Is the global, then, a question of approach and method? Or is it better envisaged as a practice or a form of thought? We do know that the global—not in the sense of contemporary globalization but in the sense of globality, a way of being in the world—preceded neoliberal globalization. How was the global defined prior to globalization, and did this definition shift across time and place? To what extent did conceptions of the global vary depending on the place and context of enunciation? Might a renewed attention to such variations, in turn, granulate art history's global arraignments? Thinking in terms of the global brings to the fore a range of compelling questions that push against professional pragmatics and institutional demands of globalization. The

resultant traction, I believe, promises to constitutively transform the conceptual frames of the discipline.

**5. Is Art History still dominated today by the “continental frame of art historical narratives,” so much so that the globalization of art history is in fact the hegemony of a Western way of thinking history, art, and the history of art, rather than a diversification of thinking paradigms? More generally, what do you think of the phrase “continental way of thinking”?**

I hesitate to demarcate the world into two neat categories: the so-called west and the non-west. In 2017, I doubt if there is something we can call a “western way of thinking” or a “non-western way of thinking.” But there certainly is an epistemic thrust that can be broadly described as westernist in the scope and scale of its conceptual projections. Having said that, I also believe that there are many contending narratives within art history today, as opposed to a singular dominant one. Think, for instance, of the story of modernism, a story that, for long, had been primarily narrated through artistic and intellectual movements originating in Western Europe and North America. This act of narration—still repeated in some textual and oral discourses—had also engendered terminologies, lexicons, and vocabularies to annotate, describe, classify, and categorize artistic practices and movements. This had produced a specific genealogy of art, one that pertained to the particularized histories of the North Atlantic worlds. But this particular history, nonetheless, stood in as the rule or the standard. Hence, the trajectories of twentieth-century art from all parts of the world came to be appended as a postscript to this Euro-American master-narrative. By the very nature of its constitution, this canon—or any canon for that matter—delimitated, bound, and guarded to include some and created the conditions for the exclusion of many others. Yet the vocabularies, categories, and lexicons that the westernist canon engendered and legitimized cannot in fact be extended, without significant

modifications, to speak of artistic practices that were external to its conventional narrative registers. This, on the one hand.

On the other hand are projects and processes that narrate other stories, generate other lexicons, and produce other imaginaries. Think, for instance, of *Verboamérica*, a research project and exhibition curated at Malba in Argentina by Andrea Giunta and Agustín Pérez Rubio. As part of the project, Giunta and Rubio have created a glossary of terms, based not on Euro-North American conventions, but on words that artists in Latin America used as they devised their aesthetic agendas: Indigenism, Negritude, Neo-concretism, Constructive Universalism, Military Dictatorship, Muralism, Destructive Art, real cities, dreamed cities, utopian cities, work, exploitation, banishment, peasant insurrection, prostitution, poverty, black, indigenous, body, maternity, menstrual blood, rape. As much as the westernist lexicon cannot describe or annotate histories of art unfolding in other conceptual worlds, the Latin American glossary compiled by Giunta and Rubio does not aim to illuminate the history of European art. Competing narratives of art thus comes to surface, shifting the terms of the debate as it were.

**6 - Have we, as art historians, progressed in the ‘decolonization’ of our points of view (I am referring here to the ideas of Walter Mignolo and Boaventura de Sousa Santos)? To speak of “global Art History,” is it still germane to use frames of interpretation inherited from the reception of thinkers such as Bourdieu, Derrida, or Foucault, and that have been pervasive in postcolonial approaches since the 1980s, and the binary vulgate often derived from their writings. Should we, and can we, go beyond the models dominant/dominated, canon/margins, center/peripheries?**

From the list of words collated by Andrea Giunta and Agustín Pérez Rubio in *Verboamérica*, it must be clear that the geo-politics of knowledge goes hand in hand with the geo-politics of knowing.

When, why, and where is knowledge generated and for whom? Shifting attention from what is enunciated to the place of enunciation, I want to propose that we begin to see conceptions of "dominant/dominated," "canon/margins," and "center/peripheries" beyond imagined West/Non-west binaries. Notions of "center/peripheries" belong in part to a geography of the mind, a mental map that demarcates certain places as more distant from others. They are not threaded to actual distance that can be calculated in kilometers and miles but on projections of cultural geography, historical assumptions, and perhaps also networks of elective affinity. Conceptually and in terms of infrastructure, the art worlds of New Delhi may in fact be closer to New York or Paris than Lucknow, a small town in eastern India. When the word canon is invoked, the assumption is that the point of reference is the canon of Euro-American art. Yet, in each instance art history is narrated in context to the frameworks of the nation-state, particular centers are produced (New Delhi) with its own set of margins (Lucknow). Even within Europe, one must be attentive to the distinctions between metropolitan centers such as Paris and regional peripheries such as Marseilles. As I learnt during my research on Asian artists in the Caribbean, women artists in Trinidad, Suriname, and Guyana locate their artistic praxis in relation to both the institutional hierarchies of an international art world and the gender hierarchies in the region. What is needed then is a renewed attention to how relationships of "dominant/dominated," "canon/margins," and "center/peripheries" are constituted locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

**7. In the history of global circulations of art, there have been many Souths and many Norths. Circulations are not as hierarchized and vertical as a quick and easy postcolonial approach could suggest (cf. the convincing positions of Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Michel Espagne). Working in the perspective of cultural transfers and geo-history, one sees**

**very well that through their circulations, ideas about art, and the receptions of artworks change greatly—the artworks also change, according to what Arjun Appadurai calls the 'social life of object.' A transfer from the North to the South can be used by the South in local strategies that will not necessarily benefit what comes from the North. Do you think one could adapt these ideas to Art History and its globalization? Do you notice, in your own scholarly, editorial, or critical work, a multiplicity of strategies and discourses from the local to the global?**

The global of global art history is always open to contending contentions. But there is something that we can affirm with absolute certainty. That is the fact that the global is always elsewhere. It is never here, never on the ground upon which we stand. But resolutely elsewhere, both in conceptual terms and in the logic of cartography. In India, the global is in the west. In the west, the global lies in the former peripheries. The global, then, is always the Other. A conceptual obverse to the global, the local stands in for a zone of familiarity that allows for a certain kind of self-construction, to put it somewhat simplistically. In turn, this sets up parameters within which knowledge is produced, received, and circulated. What this necessarily implies is that questions and concerns that arise from the specificities of a given local condition, even color, our imagination of the global. Likewise, concerns that we bring to the global stem from local arraignments. There was once a time when scholars and curators could assume that the knowing subject is transparent and outside of the real and imagined configurations of the world in which people and cultures are ordered. Today, that assumption is no longer tenable. A globally oriented intellectual practice of art history, for me, demands an incessant interrogation of the limits of both the unfamiliar and familiar in a way that muddies the borders between the global and the local, bringing the Other at least a little closer to the self.

**8. To conclude, what you see as the most important challenges facing the international field of Art History today?**

With new systems of communication, new infrastructure, and the institutional demands of internationalization, the question of the ethics of international engagements becomes ever more pressing. At one level, the internationalization of art history prompts collaborations premised on an unspoken, even unacknowledged, hierarchy of power and privilege. We, scholars based in the North Atlantic worlds, work with, and are dependent on, collaborators outside of Europe and North America. Yet, following earlier colonial logics, our collaborators often risk slipping into the position of the native informant rather than an equal participant in knowledge production. At another level, our research often depends on regional texts in languages other than English that have not previously circulated in Anglophone contexts. Here too the regional risks losing its authorial agency to become a mere source for our research. The ethics of translation and collaboration is, for me, the most important issue facing art history today.