



GLOBAL MODERNISM: A VIEW FROM NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

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As an art critic, historian, and curator whose career began in New York City in 1980, I made a long journey from the Eurocentrism of my education to the global orientation of my current writing and teaching. The shift was propelled by my engagement with contemporary art: its “postmodern” character makes it inherently more open to a postcolonial perspective. Creating a global history of modernism from 1870 to 1970 remains a challenge, however. The conventional narrative of modern art as a series of formal innovations is inescapably sited in Europe and North America. The history of global modernism needs, instead, to address modern art as a series of responses to economic, social and political change.

KEYWORDS Eurocentrism; Global; Modern; Contemporary; Postcolonial

RESUMO

Enquanto crítico de arte, historiador e curador cuja carreira iniciou-se em Nova York em 1980, eu cumpri uma longa jornada da minha formação eurocêntrica à minha atual orientação global como autor e docente. Essa mudança foi motivada pelo meu envolvimento com a arte contemporânea: seu caráter “pós-moderno” a torna inerentemente mais aberta à perspectiva pós-colonial. A criação de uma história global do modernismo de 1870 a 1970 ainda é um desafio, no entanto. A narrativa convencional da arte moderna como uma série de inovações formais está assentada de modo incontornável na Europa e América do Norte. A história do modernismo global precisa, ao invés disso, abordar a arte moderna como uma série de respostas à mudança econômica, social e política.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Eurocentrismo; Global; Moderno; Contemporâneo; Pós-colonial

RESUMEN

En cuanto crítico de arte, historiador y curador cuya carrera empezó en Nueva York en 1980, yo cumplí una larga jornada desde mi educación eurocéntrica hasta mi actual orientación global como autor y profesor. Ese cambio fue motivado por mi involucramiento con el arte contemporáneo: su carácter “postmoderno” la vuelve inherentemente más abierta a la mirada postcolonial. La creación de una historia global del modernismo de 1870 hasta 1970 sigue un desafío, no obstante. La narrativa convencional del arte moderno como una serie de innovaciones formales está ineludiblemente firmada en Europa y América del Norte. La historia del modernismo global necesita, en lugar de eso, abordar el arte moderno como una serie de respuestas a lo cambio económico, social y político.

PALABRAS-CLAVE Eurocentrismo; Global; Moderno; Contemporáneo; Postcolonial

THE PERSONAL IS THE (GEO-) POLITICAL

I began my career in the art world almost exactly forty years ago with a review of the photographer Ralph Steiner in the New York magazine *Art in America*. I knew very little about photography and even less about painting, sculpture and contemporary art. What little I thought I knew was based on the 1969 edition of H. W. Janson's *History of Art* and on Clement Greenberg's 1960 collection of essays, *Art and Culture*. Ignorance did not prevent me from having a lot of opinions, and I was soon in demand as a critic and teacher. After a few years, I began to feel guilty. If I was going to spend my life talking about art, I reflected, I should really learn something about it.

I began taking classes at the Institute of Fine Arts (IFA), New York University, attracted by the presence of an unconventional young art historian named Kirk Varnedoe, who wanted to connect the formal language of modern art to the social and historical environment that gave birth to it. Today, this is common wisdom; in 1984 it was not. At the Institute, I had the good fortune to learn the canonical history of Western art from leading exponents

such as John Pope-Hennessy, chief curator of the Department of European Painting and Sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and William Rubin, chief curator of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art. Robert Rosenblum, another great professor at the IFA, was revising the narrative of art history by exposing connections between “major” and “minor” artists – for instance, between Jacques-Louis David and John Flaxman or between Pablo Picasso and Julio Romero de Torres. Years later, he was the lead curator for "1900: Art at the Crossroads" (Guggenheim Museum, 2000), a revelatory exhibition that demonstrated striking affinities among modernists, Salon painters and symbolists at the birth of the modern era. However, Rosenblum’s provocative mixture of famous, infamous and obscure artists remained limited to Europeans and North Americans.

While I was in graduate school, there occurred the now-famous scandal of the exhibition "'Primitivism" in 20th-Century Art" (MoMA, 1984) which was curated by two of my teachers, William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe. In hindsight, the debate about this exhibition appears as a catalytic moment in the emergence of a new, global understanding of art. At the time, it seemed to generate more heat than light. The critics, such as Thomas McEvilly and

James Clifford, were clearly right in noting the disparity between the exhibition's treatment of European and North American creators as self-conscious artists and its treatment of Native American, Oceanic and African creators as gifted but anonymous artisans. On the other hand, the actual exhibition offered an extraordinary selection and presentation of Native American, Oceanic, and African art, and the multi-author catalogue included ground-breaking studies of how these works were understood and misunderstood by European and North American artists.

"Primitivism" in 20th-Century Art" provided the stimulus for Jean-Hubert Martin's "Magiciens de la Terre" (Centre Pompidou, 1989), one of the first exhibitions of global contemporary art. Martin chose the term "magicians" to erase the invidious distinction between Western artists and non-Western artisans; however, the distinction remained tacitly at work in his selection of artists. The Western participants all belonged to the tradition of "high" art; the non-Western participants were mostly "naïve" artists working in craft traditions. Non-Western artists trained in the language of Euro-American modernism were silently excluded.

I regret to say that I did not see "Magiciens" first-hand, but only read what was written about it in North American newspapers

and magazines. To be frank, it seemed like a curiosity: interesting, but of marginal importance. In 1989, I was busy assisting William Rubin in the organization of "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" (MoMA) while organizing a second exhibition, "Robert Morris: The Felt Works" (Grey Art Gallery, New York University). Working on these two exhibitions was a wonderful experience, but it certainly reinforced my belief in the existence of a "mainstream" extending from Cubism to Post-Minimalism. That is, from Cubism to Post-Minimalism made in New York and Los Angeles. In 1989, I had never heard the names of Lygia Clark or Hélio Oiticica – a degree of ignorance that seems inconceivable today.

After finishing my doctorate in 1993, I found a part-time job teaching and resumed writing art criticism, serving as a weekly art critic for the *New York Times* in 1995-96. Bit by bit, I began to perceive that important art was being made outside of New York, London, Berlin and Milan. As it happened, the curators of the 1994 Bienal de São Paulo had invited a group of North American curators and art dealers to see that year's exhibition. After their return, three of the art dealers – Mary Sabbatino, Lori Ledis and Robert Flam – organized a multi-gallery survey of "Art Brazil in New York", which I reviewed in the *New York Times* of January 20, 1995. As I

wrote at that time, visiting these exhibitions seemed “like walking through the looking glass into an alternate version of the art world. The major developments of the last 30 years are all recognizable, but their arrangement has been altered, and their hidden faces turn out to look quite different from what one expected”. Later in the review, I noted that “Brazilian artists were actually in advance of American and European artists in their awareness of social and sexual issues”. A few months later, it occurred to me that there were a surprising number of Asian-American artists in New York, and I wrote a feature on their remarkable work.

I would like to report that, like Saul of Damascus, I had now seen the light, and was ready to preach the new gospel of global contemporary art. Not so. At this juncture, my mentor Kirk Varnedoe invited me to take up a temporary appointment as a curator at The Museum of Modern Art and to work with him on two exhibitions, "Jackson Pollock" (MoMA, 1998; Tate Gallery, 1999) and "Picasso: Masterworks from The Museum of Modern Art" (Atlanta, 1997; Ottawa, 1998; Los Angeles, 1998). Once again, I plunged into the heart of the modern canon.

In 1999, when my appointment at MoMA came to an end, I was lucky enough to find a full-time job teaching in the Department

of Art History at New York University, where I remain today. It is here, at NYU, that global modernism and global contemporary art have taken center place in my work as a teacher and scholar.

This did not happen all at once. Soon after my arrival I gave a new course on “Contemporary Art”, drawing on what I had learned as an art critic in 1995-96. I have given a version of this course every other year since then. Beginning around 2004, art from outside Europe and North America became a major part of the course. The initial impetus for this change came from the attention that New York journals were giving to Chinese art movements like Political Pop and Cynical Realism. Once my eyes had been opened to contemporary art from outside the U.S. and Europe, I began paying attention to exhibitions and surveys like:

"Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940-70s" (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2004)

"Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent" (Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, 2005)

"Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India" (Asia Society, NY, 2005)

"The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art" (Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, 2005)

East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe (Afterall Books, 2006)

"La ilustración total: arte conceptual de Moscú" (Fundación Juan March, Madrid, 2008)

"Seven Sins: Ljubljana-Moscow" (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2008)

"Contemporary Australia: Optimism" (Queensland Art Gallery, 2008)

Contemporary African Art since 1980 (Damiani, 2009)

"Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan" (Asia Society, NY, 2009)

New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century (Thames & Hudson, 2009)

Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art (Thames & Hudson, 2009)

Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran (Merrell, 2010)

South African Art Now (HarperCollins, 2009)

"Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya" (Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, 2009)

Unleashed: Contemporary Art from Turkey (Thames & Hudson, 2010)

"The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today" (Saatchi Gallery, London, 2010)

"Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, 2013)

"Contingent Beauty: Contemporary Art from Latin America" (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2015)

"Global/Local, 1960-2015: Six Artists from Iran" (Grey Art Gallery, NY, 2016)

"After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History" (Asia Society, NY, 2017)

"Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World" (Guggenheim, NY, 2017)

Some of the exhibitions listed here I was able to see firsthand; others I know only via their catalogues. (This brief list is drawn from a much larger bibliography available online [here](#).) I was also profoundly influenced by the firsthand experience of two global surveys curated by Okwui Enwezor: "All the World's Futures" (Venice Biennale, 2015) and "Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965" (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2016). Enwezor was the greatest curator of our era, and his untimely death is an incalculable loss to art and art history. I should add that I have also learned a tremendous amount from conversations with my colleague Edward Sullivan, a great scholar of art from South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, who provided me with lists of places to visit and people to meet in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Mexico.

By 2017, contemporary art from outside of Europe and North America represented more than half of my syllabus, and I changed the name of my course to "Global Contemporary Art." Meanwhile, a global perspective also began to infiltrate the other lecture courses that I regularly offer. At this point, my course on "Cubism to Surrealism" should probably be renamed "Global Art from 1900 to 1940" and "Abex to Pop" should be renamed "Global Postwar Art".

I don't want to give the impression that my research into global art has been a solitary pursuit. In addition to Edward Sullivan, my colleagues in the Department of Art History at NYU include full-time professors of African, East Asian, Islamic and South Asian art. Nonetheless, our curriculum has remained focused on the Euro-American canon, with every major required to take introductory courses in the history of Western art as a prerequisite for most advanced courses. A few years ago, the professors teaching in "non-Western" fields suggested that the time had come to reconsider this requirement. After prolonged discussion, we decided to create a new introductory course, "Foundations of Art History", which will draw on examples from multiple traditions. Beginning in fall 2021, new majors will take this course and will then be required to take advanced courses from a range of different time periods and different cultural traditions. We will continue to offer surveys of Western art, but they will be optional. A future student might fulfill the requirements for chronological distribution by taking three courses on different periods of Chinese art, and fulfill her regional distribution by taking a course on African art.

Meanwhile, in my own scholarship, I spent much of the last decade working on a new history of abstract art, organized not

around the usual succession of movements but around the themes of abstracted bodies, landscapes, cosmologies, architectures, signs, and patterns. This allowed me to include a broader range of artists than usually appear in surveys of abstraction. Kandinsky was paired with Ibrahim El-Salahi, Mondrian with Magdalena Fernández, David Smith with Gego, Ellsworth Kelly with Hélio Oiticica, Eva Hesse with Sheela Gowda, Lee Ufan with Carmela Gross. *Abstract Art: A Global History* was published in fall 2021 by Thames & Hudson.

It is on the basis of these experiences as a teacher and writer that I would like to offer some reflections on the critical problems encountered in thinking about modern and contemporary art from a global perspective. First, I want to clarify the differences among “global art history”, “global modernism” and “global contemporary art”. Then I want to examine the particular challenges to writing coherently about global modernism. Finally, I want to suggest how a history of global modernism might be written.

COLONIAL MODERN AND POSTCOLONIAL CONTEMPORARY

For art before 1870, the writing of global art history presents a practical problem but not a theoretical one. The practical problem is that it is impossible for any one person to know enough to write with insight and originality about art from East Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Oceania, Africa, Western Europe and the Americas before the arrival of Columbus. However, there is no intellectual problem because the artistic traditions of each region were independent of one another, and the inner logic of each tradition's evolution remained fundamentally self-contained. Yes, in the seventeenth century Rembrandt made drawings inspired by Mughal miniatures, and there was a long-distance interaction between Chinese and Persian art. Starting around 1750, artistic exchange became more common: *chinoiserie* was popular in eighteenth-century France, and Chinese artists and architects incorporated elements of European art. But these were discrete acts of appropriation, and the hybrid character of the results has often relegated them to the realm of the decorative arts. If a publisher assembled a textbook of *Global Art, 3,000 B.C. to 1850 A.D.*, with

a different author for each region, the resulting volume would be physically unwieldy but intellectually unproblematic.

The situation changed radically after 1870, when the Impressionists emerged as the standard-bearers of an artistic revolution. For several decades they remained marginal in terms of sales and critical acceptance, but this did not deter them from proclaiming that they represented the only valid artistic movement of their time. All other kinds of art were now out-of-date, indeed meretricious. The title of Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" sums up a core belief of modernism: art was either avant-garde or kitsch. There was no middle ground. How did this affect the relationship between European and non-European art?

In the nineteenth century, avant-garde artists admired foreign art forms such as Japanese woodcuts that dispensed with European conventions like shading but remained strongly naturalistic. In the early twentieth century, however, avant-garde artists turned for inspiration to the non-naturalistic art forms of the Native American, Oceanic and African traditions surveyed in "Primitivism". Avant-garde artists were drawn to styles they associated with "tribal" societies, which they believed were in touch with the basic instincts and "pre-logical" modes of thought

supposedly repressed by European civilization. Non-European styles associated with imperial courts or bourgeois merchants were of no interest to modern artists. Thus, the colonialist assumptions latent within the idea of the “primitive” became imbedded in modernism.

Indeed, there was a striking parallel between the modernist worldview and the ideology of Euro-American colonialism. The colonizing powers justified their actions by the argument that they were more “advanced” than the peoples they conquered, and that to dominate and exploit them was somehow to help them progress toward European-style civilization. In fact, as J.A. Hobson demonstrated in his 1902 study *Imperialism*, the Europeans reserved industrial development for themselves and reduced their colonies to mere suppliers of raw materials. Hobson’s argument was summarized by V.I. Lenin in his pamphlet *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) and has been reiterated in more recent texts such as Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972). The modernist avant-garde similarly positioned itself as an “advanced” form of art, for which non-European art could only provide raw material. To serve this purpose, non-European art had to be “primitive”. Sophisticated non-European

art was insufficiently raw. Modernist non-European art had to be dismissed as “derivative” or “belated” because it subverted the foundational antithesis of the avant-garde.

This was still how people thought in New York in the 1990s. Re-reading my 1995 review of "Art Brazil in New York", I remember being astonished to discover that powerful and original art was being made in places other than New York, London, Paris, Berlin and Milan. The experience made me uneasy. Brazilian art didn't fit into the history of avant-garde art as I understood it. Indeed, it threatened to disrupt the conceptual framework I relied on as a critic and an art historian.

Curiously, the emergence of global contemporary art after the turn of the century has not evoked the same sense of epistemological panic. Bit by bit, over the last twenty years, the aesthetic hegemony of Europe and North America has been replaced by a postcolonial multilateralism. No knowledgeable critic or curator believes any longer that art made in New York, London, Paris, or Berlin is inherently more “advanced” than art made elsewhere. On the contrary, it is widely perceived that the most exciting art of our time is being made in Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Beirut, Johannesburg, Tamale, Bangalore, Beijing and Seoul, and

by Black artists rather than white. The former periphery of the art world is now its leading edge.

How did this happen?

From a New York-based perspective, it seems logical to explain the global shift as a consequence of the postmodernist sensibility prevalent from 1980 to around 1992. Critics and artists of the era saw modernism as a closed chapter in the history of art. It began with impressionism and postimpressionism; divided into three branches (cubism and geometric abstraction, expressionism, dada and surrealism); ran out of steam in the late 1930s; rebooted after 1945 with abstract expressionism and neo-dada; and then came to an end with pop art and minimalism. I have already noted the inadequacy of this account, which does not include postwar abstraction in South America, the Saqqakhaneh movement in Iran, the Progressive movement in India, or the vital and diverse European art of the era. However, it offers semblance of coherence: a Hegelian narrative of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, its first cycle unfolding in 1870-1940, its second cycle in 1945-1970.

In the last chapter of this story minimalism evolves into conceptual art, rendering traditional art obsolete. After 1972, artists continue making paintings and sculptures, but, since these

works no longer move the Hegelian narrative forward, they are inherently devoid of historical significance. Many years later, artist-critic Walter Robinson coined the phrase “zombie formalism” to condemn the work of a generation of young abstract painters. Borrowing this pithy phrase, I would say that, in the 1970s, advanced critics regarded all new painting and sculpture as forms of zombie modernism. Believing that the meaningful evolution of modern art had come to an end, major scholars published essays with titles like “The End of Painting”, “Painting: The Task of Mourning”, and “The End of the History of Art.”

What were artists to do? The postmodernist answer was that they should become visual critics, using non-art media such as photographs, text and arrangements of found objects to “deconstruct” the languages of advertising and canonical modernism. They could even return to traditional media as long as they limited themselves to pastiches of earlier art, avoiding any pretention to originality.

By the mid-1990s, however, postmodernism itself seemed quaint and old-fashioned. Artists resumed making paintings and sculptures without feeling that they needed to apologize, and critics decided that it was OK to be enthusiastic about them. Nonetheless, postmodernism left behind two valuable legacies. One was to

establish installation and documentation as mainstream vehicles for contemporary art. The other was to definitively subvert the idea of progress in art. The postmodernists had argued that, if the evolution of modernism was complete, then it was no longer possible to make important art. The post-postmodernists realized that, if the evolution of modernism was complete, then anything was possible.

Global contemporary art is linked to postmodernism by a similar liberation from the idea of progress. Critics such as Geeta Kapur and Gao Minglu reject the idea that art in India or China must follow the same evolutionary sequence as art in Europe or the United States. For instance, in those countries, postmodernist art may *precede* modernist art. Global contemporary art draws from the repertoires of both modernism and postmodernism. Every style is equally valid, and “belatedness” or “derivativeness” are meaningless terms. The question is not where an artist’s style comes from, but what he or she has accomplished with it.

It seems inadequate, however, to explain the ecumenical quality of global contemporary art simply as a consequence of postmodernism. The Euro-American art world might well have been liberated from the evolutionary model of modernism while

remaining as self-absorbed as it was before 2000. What opened its eyes to art from the rest of the world?

Here, it may be useful to look at the economic and political factors that affected the art world along with the broader society. In brief, I want to argue that the difference between the postwar art world and the contemporary art world corresponds to the difference between the global economy of the postwar era and the new global economy that developed after 1975. Indeed, I believe that the rise of global contemporary art is a result of these economic changes.

In the postwar era – the three decades after World War II – most of Europe’s colonies gained their independence, some peacefully, some violently. However, political independence did not put an end to economic dependence. Europe and the United States maintained their supremacy as industrial powers, while their former colonies continued to supply commodities such as petroleum, copper, sugar, coffee, and bananas. Most attempts at economic independence ended in failure. Cuba, for instance, shook off the hegemony of the United States, but promptly fell into a neo-colonial relationship with the Soviet Union, exporting sugar in return for industrial goods.

The conventional economic wisdom of the era proposed that countries could escape from “underdevelopment” by a program of import substitution. Instead of importing manufactured goods, they would satisfy domestic demand by creating their own industries. This seemed like a logical policy, but it failed almost everywhere it was tried. There was never enough domestic demand to make the new industries profitable.

A handful of countries escaped from this trap by building new industries designed for export rather than for domestic consumption. The first was Japan, which had already industrialized before World War II. The destruction of the war provided an opportunity to rebuild using the latest technology. After the horrific suffering of the Korean War (1950-1953), South Korea embarked upon a similar program of export-led industrialization.

The United States had long regarded the automobile industry as the standard-bearer of its industrial supremacy. In 1953, Charles Wilson, the head of General Motors, became the nation’s Secretary of Defense. Asked about a potential conflict of interest, he was purported to have replied, “What’s good for General Motors is good for the country”. However, in the 1970s international crises drove up the price of gasoline. People in the United States began to buy

Japanese cars because they got better mileage than U.S.-made cars. Much to their surprise, they discovered that Japanese cars were also better made.

Over the next few decades, Japanese and South Korean manufacturers took over much of the U.S. car market and most of the market for cameras and electronic devices. The assumption of Euro-American technological and economic superiority was irrevocably shattered. After the death of Mao Zedong and the ascension to power of Deng Xiaoping, mainland China followed the same path of export-driven industrialization. In 1976, China's exports totaled \$7 billion. In 2000, they reached \$253 billion. Today, they are ten times that.

Japanese and Korean artists like Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik played an important role in the New York art scene in the 1960s. More recently, Takashi Murakami and Do-Ho Suh have become global "superstars", as have Chinese artists such as Wang Guangyi, Xu Bing, Huang Yong-Ping, Cai Guo-Qiang, Song Dong and Cao Fei. It is not, I think, a coincidence that Japanese, Korean and Chinese art achieved global recognition during the same decades that they achieved technological and industrial parity with Europe and North America. It should also be noted that, unlike the "non-Western" artists in "Magiciens de la Terre", these Japanese,

Korean and Chinese artists – like their counterparts from Brazil, Argentina and Mexico – work in the same range of figurative, abstract, and conceptual styles as contemporary artists in New York, London and Berlin. The expressive language of contemporary art is transnational, even if artists use it to respond to local experience and to invoke local histories. Much of the world is still divided by ethnic and national antagonisms, but global contemporary art offers a preview of a future where cultural difference leads to fruitful exchange, not conflict.

IMAGINING GLOBAL MODERNISM

Global contemporary art does not, however, offer a model of how to think about global modernism. The development of modernist art coincided with the era of economic colonialism, and the formal innovations of modernism were in effect the artistic counterpart to the industrial technology reserved for Europe and North America. How, then, is it possible to write a coherent history of global modernism – one that does not perpetuate the distinction between center and periphery, between “creative” and “derivative”, between “advanced” and “belated”?

One answer is to ignore the problem: to describe different schools of modern art wherever they appeared, without worrying about how they all fit together. This is in fact the default solution. Since 1990, numerous books and articles have been published on modern art in Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and other nations. The pace of publications continues to quicken. Isn't this good enough?

I think not. The accumulation of these “new” histories does not, in itself, change the basic narrative of modernism in Europe and the United States. There is a parallel here to the pattern that Thomas Kuhn described in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). New evidence may demonstrate the inadequacy of an existing paradigm, as the Michelson-Morley experiments of the 1880s challenged the wave theory of light. But the existing paradigm continues to dominate people's thinking until the appearance of a new paradigm. The wave theory of light was discarded only after the publication of Albert Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity in 1905. Let me describe the problem in more familiar humanistic terms. Suppose we continue to teach students the canonical history of modernism in Europe and North America.

The publication of new, non-European art histories makes it possible to supplement this history with examples of modernist art from other parts of the world. But if these examples remain mere supplements, they may end up reinforcing the underlying paradigm of “the West and the rest.”

Another popular solution is to rewrite the history of art between 1870 and 1970 as a story of “multiple modernisms”. With one bold stroke, this equates Wu Jiayou’s street scenes of nineteenth-century Shanghai with Gustave Caillebotte’s *Paris Street, Rainy Day*, and Park Seo-Bo’s gestural abstractions of the late 1950s with Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings of a decade earlier. Similarly, younger scholars today often speak of “networks”, a visual model popularized by the Internet. The concept of a network makes it possible to acknowledge the similarity between two works of art while avoiding assigning priority to one of them. The problem with these solutions is that they achieve equivalence between artworks or movements by erasing their histories. Wu Jiayou’s street scenes utilized a kind of perspective imported from the West; Park Seo-Bo was inspired by Abstract Expressionism in New York and *art informel* in Paris. These are historical facts. Repressing them may help avoid facile judgments that Wu or Park were “derivative” or

“belated”, but it also makes it harder to understand what these artists intended and what they actually accomplished.

It is more productive, I think, to acknowledge that there is only one “modernism” in the visual arts, just as there is only one “industrialism”. There are factories on multiple continents, but no one speaks of “multiple industrialisms” because, wherever they are located, factories use similar technologies. Toyota and Honda did not invent a new way to make automobiles; they improved on the assembly line invented by Henry Ford.

Modernism in the visual arts proposes new technologies for creating images: unshaded color (impressionism), gestural brushwork (expressionism), geometric construction (cubism), montage (cubism and dada), surprising juxtapositions (dada), uncanny lighting plus plunging perspective (metaphysical painting), weird distortions (surrealism). These technologies were invented in Europe, and nothing is gained by pretending otherwise. Like the engineers at Toyota and Honda, artists on other continents borrowed these technologies, improved on them, and used them for new ends. The Egyptian artists surveyed in “Art et Liberté; rupture, guerre et surréalisme en Egypte” (1938-1948), seen at the Centre Pompidou in 2016, did not invent a totally new

pictorial language. They used the existing language of surrealism to oppose the new threat of fascism and the continuing oppression of English colonialism. The neo-concrete artists in Brazil were inspired by the concrete art of Max Bill, but they transformed his geometric language and used it to express a specifically Brazilian experience of modernization and social transformation.

Form and content may be seamlessly integrated in a particular work of art, but they remain distinct for purposes of critical analysis, and they suggest different ways of writing art history. Formal analysis leads back to the canonical history of modernism understood as a series of formal innovations, most of which occurred in Europe or New York. The analysis of content opens up the possibility of a different history. In this history, the formal innovations of modernism would not be ignored, but they would be subordinated to an account of how artists used the language of modernism to convey the social and political experiences of the places and times in which they lived.

Jennifer Josten's *Matthias Goeritz: Modernist Art and Architecture in Cold War Mexico* (2018) offers a superb example of this type of history. Josten not only details the formal evolution of Goeritz's work, but also shows how he aligned himself with the

economic, social and political transformations of Mexico in the 1950s and '60s. Similarly, Joshua Shannon's *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (2009) links the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, and Donald Judd to the changing character of New York in the same decades, when the city lost its role in trade and manufacturing, specializing instead in administration and marketing.

How might such individual case studies be woven together into a broader history of modernism as an expression of social and political change?

A first answer is already available in Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel's three-volume history of modern art: *Les avant-gardes artistique, 1848-1918: Une histoire transnationale* (2015), *Les avant-gardes artistique, 1918-1945: Une histoire transnationale* (2017) and *Naissance de l'art contemporain, 1945-1970: Une histoire mondiale* (2021). Drawing on vast archival research, Joyeux-Prunel constructs her narrative around art movements on multiple continents. This approach allows her both to trace the global diffusion of styles (above all, Surrealism in the 1930s) and to show how particular styles took on new meanings in different national contexts.

Another approach would be to use social and political history more explicitly as an armature for narrating the development of modern art. *Arnold Hauser's Social History of Art* (1951), extending from antiquity to impressionism, might provide a model here. (Much maligned at the time of publication, Hauser's book is currently enjoying a revival.) Of course, constructing this new historical armature would in itself present a challenge. Histories of "the modern world" are often as Eurocentric as histories of modern art. A valuable exception can be found in two volumes by Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (1987) and *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (1994). As the title of the first volume suggests, Hobsbawm was acutely aware of how the European empires affected the world as a whole, and of how the brutal practice of imperialism shaped Europe itself. The phenomenon of "primitivism", discussed above, demonstrates that the effects of imperialism are not extraneous to the history of modern art; on the contrary, they profoundly shape the modernist worldview.

It might be argued that the history of the modern world falls into three broad chapters: the expansion of European imperialism, 1875-1914 (as described by Hobsbawm); its decay, 1914-1945; and

its violent dissolution, 1945-1975. In Europe and North America, the first, optimistic phase of modernism – from impressionism to geometric abstraction – coincides with the zenith of imperialism and with its utopian sequel in the years just after the Russian Revolution. The second, pessimistic phase – evident in dada, surrealism and the cult of the irrational – coincides with the rise of fascism, which is in effect imperialism turned inward, as Hannah Arendt argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). The third phase – including abstract expressionism, *art informel*, neo-dada, pop and minimalism – reflects the postwar era's strange amalgam of elation, anxiety, rage and guilt, responding to economic expansion, the Cold War, the end of empire, and the struggle against racism.

Outside of Europe and North America, these decades were experienced differently. In the 1920s and '30s, Japan absorbed Western technology, mimicked Western imperialism, and developed its own versions of avant-garde styles like cubism. The technological optimism imbedded in cubism seemed less relevant in underdeveloped regions like South Asia and Latin America, which instead developed alternative versions of realism and surrealism. After 1945, different regions took different social and artistic paths. India looked backward to the ideal of village

life, and its avant-garde plunged into expressive figuration. Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela strove for technological progress, and their avant-gardes invented new kinds of geometric abstraction. The postwar School of Paris remained a magnetic hub for artists from Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia. Artists from Japan and South Korea interacted with both Paris and New York beginning in the 1950s; elsewhere, it was only around 1965 that art from the U.S. began to exert a significant influence. In all of these instances, it is essential to evaluate how imported styles changed and acquired new meanings in their new contexts.

The time is ripe for new histories of modernism as a global phenomenon. They should survey the beauty and diversity of the art made on six continents between 1875 and 1975. And they should acknowledge the tragic epic of the hundred years in which this art was made.

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