

# Art history from a global perspective

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Since the year 2000, art history's tunnel-vision view of the earth and the art forms created on it has been gradually adapting to the modern world. Traditionally, only the West was studied and regarded as 'The Canon of Art History'. Fortunately, times are now changing and the arts and the humanities have realised that art is a worldwide phenomenon that requires global research. While the global perspective in art history has only arisen in the last ten years, other academic studies have been examining the object of their attention from a global perspective for considerably longer. Cases in point are cultural anthropology, history and linguistics. New visions produce progressive insights and gradual change, with reference not just to globalism but also to interdisciplinarity and interculturalism, meaning cross-fertilization between cultures.

*Before explaining what this all means, who is occupied with what and what it all leads to, I first want to tell you a little about myself and my background, what colours this essay and what therefore makes it subjective.<sup>1</sup>*

## **My colour**

As a small girl, I always thought that when I grew up I would go and live and work in Africa, perhaps as a journalist or a reporter. An immense craving for adventure, the unknown, and a desire to communicate what I found there to the rest of the world fuelled my fantasies about my future. Today, after studying art and architectural history at the University of Groningen, working as a post-master education of arts lecturer at the University of Amsterdam and a long series of journeys as a travel guide of cultural and adventure journeys<sup>2</sup>, I still harbour a great fascination for the communication of knowledge about art and the culture of the unknown.

Why? Simply because we live in the 21st century and our world has become a 'global village'. It is no longer possible to close your eyes to what is going on outside your own environment. Every day a confrontation takes place with images, texts, sounds from another world or culture than your own. So why not study those cultures and draw them into your own world? Familiarize yourself with them so that you understand the other better, and thereby, perhaps yourself? Today I am fortunately in the position not only to provide interested tourists with information about art and culture in other countries, but can also teach future art lecturers a thing or two. This is on account of my work as a Theory of the Arts at lecturer Fontys College for the Arts and as visiting lecturer at various institutes. Within the ABV, one of the subjects I am engaged with is Art Worldwide<sup>3</sup>. I started out by enthusiastically mapping out the contours of the subject, but was quickly beset by many questions. How should the course best be structured? Do you teach art history as it is generally known and assumed to be in the Western world? And can the corresponding package of concepts be projected onto art outside the West as a standard format? Is drawing attention to artistic and cultural treasures elsewhere in the world enough to show the world outside the West? Or does the subject then become a sort of journey around the world, zapping from one UNESCO world heritage site to the next? During my study, unfortunately, art outside the West was ignored. The parts in the handbook on Islamic, African and Asian art were simply skipped over.<sup>5</sup> How do contemporary art historians study and teach art history in a global perspective? And how do people in other parts of the world deal with a subject like Art Worldwide? With these questions in the back of my mind, I found myself surfing the internet in search of answers.

## **World Art Studies**

A true revolution appeared to be taking place in the world of art history and I decided to go back to the lecture hall as a student, this time at the University of Leiden. I stepped into a new world in art history referred to as 'World Art Studies'. This field as was started in 1992 by John Onians of the University of East Anglia in Norwich, currently professor emeritus, and adopted as an academic programme in Leiden. John Onians initiated a new framework (theoretical model) to be used to study art throughout the world. It is multidisciplinary, allowing each specialist to present his particular knowledge, but within a context relating it to the knowledge of other specialists. The new framework ensures that no classifications arise based on existing assumptions about cultures, but that instead, reasoning is based on nature, meaning the earth and the human beings who are limited to its resources. Nature (the earth) determines the life-style of humans and the activities necessary to them such as self-expression in material, or in other words, the creation of art. 'Modern' humans, Homo Sapiens, who arose 200,000 years ago in Africa, managed to spread throughout Europe and Asia and up to 30,000 years ago, replaced any predecessors they encountered on their way. They were successful because they were in possession of a resource that ensured success, even when climatological circumstances were tough. The resource consisted of a complex brain network that led, among other things, to the use and decorative and figurative designing of objects.<sup>7</sup> Approximately half our brain appears to be formed at birth, while the rest develops later by passive exposure to the environment and active intervention with other people. This is why people differ among themselves, also in terms of the creation and experience of art. Subconscious exposure to the natural environment ensures the development of the brain. After we have seen something for the first time, our brain helps us deal better with it in the future; we thus recognize and create visual preferences. Based on these preferences, art is created and art is viewed. The artistic tradition therefore appears to be largely dependent on the natural environment that human beings are passively exposed to. The main factors that confuse this system are active powers outside this natural environment. In a community, an important, powerful group or individual can have a substantial influence, either internally or externally, on the rest of the community. The most powerful external influences are generally military conquests, religious conversion and commercial or ideological dominance. This influence is not unilateral, but also functions vice versa and within World Art Studies, is referred to as interculturalism.

### **Occidentalism versus Orientalism**

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries give clear examples of military conquests and the stamp they left on art. Egypt was occupied by Napoleon (1798-1801) and in Cairo, the French implemented urban developmental changes. Public works were carried out like the restoration of bridges and the construction of large squares and roads, such as Haussmann's urban renovation in Paris, the main goal being that the army could march across them. Egypt was thereafter governed by governor Mohammed Ali Pasha (1805-1849), who continued 'European Modernization' Egyptian scholars such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi were sent to Paris to study European science and urban development. This led to a tendency in the Egyptian upper class to 'modernize', i.e. to adopt aspects from Europe which gave rise to downtown Cairo, a zone of European neoclassical buildings and a 12th century mosque – Hussayn – that was renovated using neo-gothic style elements. Khedive Ismael Pasha, who governed from 1863 till 1879, set out to demonstrate that as a monarch he was equal to the monarchs of Europe, by having a celebrated Italian compose an opera for him on an Islamic theme. In 1869 Verdi's *Aida* was performed on the occasion of the opening of the Suez canal. Conversely, contact with the Orient stimulated Europe fantasies about sexual and spiritual freedom that found its expression in the arts.<sup>8</sup> It can thus be seen that Egyptians had an idealized vision of European civilization and absorbed elements of it into their own civilization and vice versa. A large difference is that in the 19th century, initially, Western art was forced on Egypt by military conquests, while the West admitted the Orient as muse<sup>9</sup>.

In World Art Studies, no culture is dominant or stands above another. Each culture produces art and has equal access to the art of another culture. Art is found to be a worldwide human expression in all times and places where mutual exchange takes place. This is the vision that arose in John Onians' 'School of World Art Studies' at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. His vision has been recognized by various other universities, namely the University of Chicago, the Penn (University of Pennsylvania), the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) and the University of Leiden<sup>10</sup>.

### **Three key points**

At the University of Leiden, Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme are striving to further develop World Art Studies (WAS), each conducting research and teaching based on their own discipline and expertise. Ms Zijlmans is professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory and Mr Van Damme is Art Historian with a focus on African Art and

Social and Cultural Anthropology. One of the points of departure for WAS in Leiden was John Onians' statement: *'Imagine looking at earth from another planet - why is only such a small segment of the art on earth studied?'* Onians and everyone else occupied with the anthropology of art, world aesthetics and issues related to the origins of art initiated a debate. The different points of view were linked up and gave rise to a book that is now considered the handbook for WAS in Leiden.<sup>11</sup> Based on a number of seminars, workshops, conversations and publications<sup>12</sup>, Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme formulated three main themes indicative of the conceptual framework of World Art Studies. Firstly, the origins of art are studied, with the point of departure being that all humankind stem from Homo Sapiens, a small primeval population in Africa. This relatively recent group of individuals has a common origin. We are said to have a *shared humanity* in which the creation of the first (art) objects is studied. Secondly, the comparison of *cultures and cultural expression* (form, theme/ content, function, artistship, aesthetic evaluation, art philosophies) and thirdly *interculturalization or cultural exchanges* (artistic interaction between cultures: nature, conditions, etc.) These three main themes have been introduced on account of the fact that worldwide, so many parallels and analogies are often not taken into consideration. It would, after all, be a pity to remain stuck in a 19th century art historical notion. The current method of periodization is of a transitory nature and a new way of looking is required. The connection between the large periods and lines currently employed is not tenable, as they can no longer capture the complexity of the world. What is needed is an approach with room for complexity<sup>13</sup>. Ms Zijlman's & Mr Van Damme's book is, at any rate, the first book that attempts to contemplate the usable concepts therein and the structure of the historiography of the subject.

### **Globalization**

The traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of art history is based on Greek Antiquity, with the Italian Renaissance as hinge-point. Everything that happened thereafter in the Western world is either a continuation therefrom, or a counter-reaction there-against. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, Eastern art history underwent a process of gradual globalization. Art forms of non-western traditions were also studied, especially by archeologists, anthropologists and linguistic and the cultural specialists of the relevant regions.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt and Mesopotamia, Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians were studied. Although they had their own writing and sustainable architecture, these cultures were initially considered 'primitive'. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a rising interest in the countries of the 'East', such as China, Japan and India, including the Islamic world. In this period, attention was also focused on the pre-Colombian America of the Mayas, Incas and Aztecs. And little by little Africa, Oceania and Native America also gained ground. In the twentieth century the study of visual art forms outside the West remained the domain of regional specialists. Their research is scarcely included in the regular discipline of art history. Thanks to World Art Studies <sup>14</sup>, this situation is now changing.

### **Interculturalization**

Among other things, World Art Studies emphasizes interculturalization, meaning cross-fertilization between different cultures. Cultures are not static, but dynamic as a result of internal and external factors. When conducting intercultural research, the culture must first be described and the setting and context determined. On an artistic exchange, the specific properties of artefacts, such as their function and the materials they are made of, as well as the motivation of all those involved and the role they played in the realization of the work of art should be known. <sup>15</sup>In this way, in cooperation with Wilfried van Damme at the University of Leiden, I carried out research into contemporary islamized Malian artists working in the city using Bogolan techniques. Bogolan is a traditional Malian technique that uses mud on canvas and natural paints like leaves, tree bark, etc. Following his schooling at the INA (Institut National des Arts) in Bamako, Mali, the Malian artist Hama Goro produced paintings using this technique. From 1995 till 1997 he studied at the National Academy [*Rijksacademie*] in Amsterdam. Before he started his study his 'paintings' were highly figurative and based on traditional themes such as African female figures with baskets on their heads and geometric symbols. Almost all Bogolan artists in Mali were trained at the INA and make similar work, in keeping with what they learnt at school. After Hama's exchange in a highly international artists' environment in Amsterdam, his work starting expressing a different content, and the techniques he used also sometimes differed. What inspired him to change his pictorial language and techniques? The answer is predominantly based on personal choices, driven by emotions linked to his lack of understanding of European culture, where the concept of loneliness occupied a central position. Upon his return to Bamako Hama Goro set up an artists' initiative where Malian artists can work and discuss among themselves and where workshops and seminars are held. Many international artists also take part in the projects. <sup>16</sup>As a result of the

contact with other cultures, Hama Goro started using new working methods. His artists' initiative influences many artists who are in turn inspired and start experimenting with different materials, techniques and content. The working method of artists after temporarily working in Mali, such as the Dutch students who spent a month studying the Bogolan technique, naturally changes. But established artists such as Nan Groot Antink have also been inspired by the Malian Bogolan technique and specialized in using Malian natural paints and surfaces. Artists from both cultures inspire each other, leading to cross-fertilization or interculturalization and a new pictorial language.

### **New Frameworks**

If art is studied in a global perspective, problems arise. What should be regarded as must-read standard works? Should a new handbook be compiled that encompasses the whole art history of the world, including intercultural connections? Or should we reject all standard works? What forms part of the art-historical concepts base, can the existing base be projected onto the art of another part of the world? I agree with Elkin's idea that nobody can read everything published throughout the world - above all it would not be relevant for everyone. <sup>17</sup>However, academics engaged with art should be aware of its worldwide methods and forms of texts and the questions that it evokes, as they may be of importance in many different places in the world. The subjects do not necessarily have to be shared. An art historian specialised in Flemish medieval triptychs does not need to know everything about medieval triptychs in Bulgaria, but it is however important that he is familiar with the methods of important scholars throughout the world. Not only as far as their own specializations are concerned, but, to give an example, also Japanese methods of researching Asian art. The desire to know and be familiar with each other's academic accounts on a worldwide basis and to make a point of continuously following them, regardless of any particularly specialization, should be the point of departure. This is not possible if Western iconography or stylistic analyses are considered standard items of art history. The obligation to learn how works of art in other places throughout the world are regarded is then negated. An example is the following: an art historian in China needs to know what is happening in the Netherlands, South-Africa and Peru, because this familiarizes him with new methods of interpretation (of objects) very different to his own. Books and articles published elsewhere than in the West should not be an art-historical extension of the Western method, but viewed completely separately, on their own merit.

In Elkin's view, a worldwide set of methods, that can all be seen as art history would be a good start. Upon writing a new publication, scholars should reflect on their own area of expertise and show their true colours. After all, the version of (art) history given is always subjective, and highly dependent on the author's discipline, expertise and background. The time of the omniscient, impersonal voice-over in standard handbooks is in the past<sup>18</sup>. Show your true colours and reveal your background.

### **What now?**

In the light of World Art Studies, familiarity with the vision of scholars from India and Africa as to how a discipline like art history should be further developed and how we can bring our points of departure more into line would seem desirable. Because in spite of the fact that the Western tradition has had a great deal of influence, it does not have the monopoly on different approaches.<sup>19</sup> A serious subsequent phase of the WAS project should be to make contact with researchers worldwide.

How can a single worldwide network be built up that encompasses everyone occupied with art history and methods and theories with regard thereto, on a professional, scholarly basis or otherwise? Where can people show their findings and where is there a platform for discussion? The answer is simple: start a site like Facebook or LinkedIn: a social network for an *online Art Historians / World Art Studies Community* to link up with the world in a network of knots, lines and connections of international and local traditions.

As Facebook says: *'Give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.'*<sup>20</sup> Rather than being based on the idea that everyone should share the same easily accessible theories and methods, thereby negating local, regional and national phenomena,<sup>21</sup> the goal should be an exchange of methods and theories based on their own expertise and specialism. Allow me to briefly remind you of the time when I was beset by questions as to how the subject of 'Art Worldwide' should be shaped. Many lectures, books, study days and Malian student exchanges on, I have come to believe that the ultimate method of giving art history a global perspective is non-existent. However, the search for the one true method did make me realize that my starting point should be my own specialism and expertise and that it was necessary for me to reveal my own true colours. Students should be encouraged to develop the insight that there are different methods and theories, which are moreover continually subject to change. In actual fact therefore, the starting point should be the historiography of art history. Moreover, we need to ask ourselves where we currently stand.

What could the next point be? Students are given to understand that the world is a network of knots, lines and connections, whereby the horizontal lines represent the international links and the vertical lines the local traditions.<sup>22</sup> What we are concerned with here is studying art from a global perspective, whereby cross-fertilization between different cultures is elucidated. Discussions need to be conducted within a global network in which everyone shows their true colours.

Notes:

1. Zijlmans, K. in Elkins, J. 'Is Art History Global?', Art Seminar Volume Three, Routledge and the University College Cork, 2007 (293-298). Ms Zijlmans points to the importance of both academically and personally showing one's true colours on instituting research, with a view to clarifying one's point of departure.
2. Travelling through Europe, the United States, the Middle-East and particularly Africa for various travel organizations.
3. I also organize cultural exchanges with Art institutes in Mali, in cooperation with the *Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten* [Amsterdam School for the Arts]. [www.malimaand.wordpress.com](http://www.malimaand.wordpress.com) is the blog kept by the students during the project carried out in 2009.
4. In spite of the fact that 'Non-Western' is a Eurocentric approach, the term is used here to indicate reference to the arts outside the West.
5. Most widely used handbooks in art education: Janson, Honour & Fleming, Gombrich and Gardner.
6. Onians, J. 'Atlas of World Art', Oxford University Press, 2004. (11-13). [www.uea.ac.uk/art/moreabout](http://www.uea.ac.uk/art/moreabout)
7. In 2003, a piece of ochre was found in the Blombos Cave in South Africa, with engravings dating back to 75,000 BC. The object is regarded as the first art object made by a 'modern' human. A critical examination of the definition of art that should be hereby employed is, however, required. Predecessors of the Homo Sapiens made use of symmetrical celts [prehistoric axe-like tool]. Van Damme in 'World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches', 2008 (23-61).
8. All European disciplines were inspired by the Orient. See the literary works of Victor Hugo and William Bilderdijk; theatre performances of 1001 nights and Aladdin; Ingres, Antoine Jean Gros, Ludwig Deutsch in painting and oriental expression in architecture like the tobacco mosque in Dresden, the Moorish synagogue in Folkingestraat, Groningen, etc, as well as the objects collected in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London that served as examples of British design, that were found to be much too mechanized. The times were dominated by Orientalism and Egyptomania.
9. Interdisciplinary University of Amsterdam colleges 'Islamic Art & Architecture' Robert Woltering 2009.
10. These universities have started the academic programme, 'World Art Studies' and are interlinked. They also organise seminars, workshops and lectures on World Art Studies.
11. Zijlmans & van Damme. 'World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches', Valiz, Amsterdam, 2008.W
12. Elkins, J. 'Is Art History Global?', Art Seminar Volume Three, Routledge and the University College Cork, 2007.
13. Zijlmans in an interview in Metropolis M, 6 July 2008.
14. Lectures, University of Leiden 'Other Cultures', W. van Damme in 2008.
15. Zijlmans & van Damme. 'World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches', Valiz, Amsterdam, 2008. (375-384).
16. Centre Soleil d'Afrique, Bamako, Mali. [www.artscollaboratory.org/organisations/centre-soleil-dafrique](http://www.artscollaboratory.org/organisations/centre-soleil-dafrique); [www.soleildafrique.org](http://www.soleildafrique.org)
17. Elkins, J. 'Is Art History Global?', Art Seminar Volume Three, Routledge and the University College Cork, 2007. (21-23).
18. As in the above-mentioned handbooks, among others of Honour & Fleming and Janson.
19. Zijlmans in an interview in Metropolis M, 6 July 2008.
20. [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)
21. The idea of globalization: local, regional and national phenomenon will be transformed into global phenomenon and everyone in the world will be united in a single community and function together. Through globalization, we become increasingly aware of our own local identity, which differs from the global identity, and this speeds up the process of globalization. (Nico Vink, *Grenzeloos Communiceren* [Borderless Communication], a new approach to intercultural communication, KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, 2001)
22. This vision was brought up in a conversation with Kitty Zijlmans during a study afternoon in Academie Minerva, Groningen April 2009.