



COLLAPSING CERTAINTIES

Reflections on the End of the History of Art

By Partha Mitter

A recent work, *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios*, edited by Maria Lind and Olav Velthuis, discusses the complex relationship between contemporary art and the commercial market, as represented by auction houses, biennales, art fairs, and similar global institutions. Art has become an asset to be exploited by hedge-funders. Equally it serves as a status symbol for super-rich transnational celebrities. Sotheby's and Christie's are bending over backwards to penetrate the burgeoning art market in the Middle East; and a venerable museum, the Louvre, is not far behind by commissioning a museum in Abu Dhabi. The rapidly changing scenario is encapsulated in a blunt question posed at the Art Dubai fair, itself a subsidiary of the Dubai International Financial Center: how will the Middle East affect contemporary art in the next ten years?

This question arises only because Dubai, part of a region that until recently hardly featured in the world of art, now wields considerable power: certain developments have taken place in the last decades as art increasingly acquires a global persona and becomes an asset in postcolonial geopolitics. Not just Dubai but neighboring Qatar and also the BRICS nations (Brazil, India, Russia, China, South Africa) have ushered in a new world order. The changing balance of power is having an obvious impact on the art market. The heroes of Thomas L. Friedman's book *The World is Flat* are the "zippies," offspring of Indian and Chinese capitalism, who are now big players in global art transactions. These changes reflect the growing dominance of the super-rich from the periphery—Roman Abramovich and Dasha Zhukova, Anil and Tina Ambani, Carlos Slim, Jack Ma, and the Gulf emirs, among others.

Comparable in some ways to the spread of multinational conglomerates, the world market in art has reached enormous proportions. Biennales, art fairs, and other global institutions shape our taste

◁ Detail from *The World of Kantha*, circa 1950, by Jamini Roy. Courtesy Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art

and tell us what good art is. Among significant changes, the global presence of international curators and artists from outside Europe and America has had a radical effect. The art critic and curator of Nigerian origin, Okwui Enwezor, had a very successful global art show for the documenta in Germany where he sought to redress past exclusions. In 2011 he was appointed director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, and has been named artistic director of the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. Equally, ambitious European curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist, who direct international mega projects, cast their nets far and wide. Their intervention has made leading art museums such as the Tate Modern in London, or the Museum of Modern Art in New York, sit up and take note of hitherto unknown artists from the margins. One of the memorable events in the art world of 2013 was an ambitious retrospective of the visionary Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi at the Tate Modern.

Multiple Modernities

Biennales and similar mega-institutions aim to reach all the way from the extreme east to the westernmost corner of the globe. One cannot but commend the inclusion of artists from regions that were previously considered to be peripheries. However, the utter newness of the situation has given rise to unease, creating a growing sense of crisis and uncertainty. The discipline of art history, the armature that sustains and forms our taste in art, seems to be in a turmoil faced with multiple modernities with their multiple and clashing time frames. The contradictions between the narrow focus of mainstream art histories, and the enormous diversity of art forms and practices have become acute. This has caused serious soul searching among art historians about the future of a discipline faced with the collapse of earlier certainties—strikingly expressed in the 1982 work by the German scholar Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, who regrets the death of art history as a grand Hegelian narrative. He is led to the conclusion that contemporary global art encourages the repudiation of art history. Societies that had no previous share in modernism insist on creating art narratives that define visual production as a form of cultural practice.

While agreeing with this sense of crisis, I see the problem somewhat differently. The disquieting aspect of globalization in art is that it is predicated on the streamlining of taste. The presence of artists from the Middle East, East and South Asia, Latin America, and Africa may appear to celebrate an all-embracing inclusiveness while in reality it underscores the continued hold of the Western modernist canon, which tends to undermine local voices and practices, thereby undermining the plurality of expressions. The Social Darwinian survival of the fittest within the art canon contains its own inherent predicament. While artists from the margins have been allowed access to Western institutions with a global reach, there has not been much change

in the narrow focus of the discourse of modernism, which continues to present the Western canon as a universal one. Thus any artist who happens to fall outside the uni-linear progress of modernism or does not subscribe to it is quietly left by the wayside.

There were significant developments in Middle Eastern, African, Asian, and Latin American art in the twentieth century, with many of its artists engaged in creating vital modernist expressions of cultural resistance to colonialism that did not fit the objectives of mainstream avant-garde art. (I use the concept avant-garde interchangeably with modernist art in this essay.) Hence it is useful to remind ourselves of the definition of avant-garde, which is an aspect of wider modernism. The word refers to works that are experimental or innovative. In this context it is important to remember that the artists outside Euro-America sought to evolve radical art forms that were meaningful to their own societies and cultural contexts even though their timeframe may not coincide with that of the narrative of Western modernism. Surprisingly, even today leading artists from outside the charmed circle of Euro-America rarely feature in standard art history textbooks. Put in another way, the avant-garde aesthetic canon continues to be a closed discourse that has tended to erase non-Western art from art history. Such marginalization is explained in terms of the “derivativeness” of non-Western art, a delayed development from the metropolitan centers of invention. This judgment still dominates representations of the art of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Australia. Also least known is the fact that the non-canonical art of northern, central, and eastern Europe has suffered a similar fate. The omission of artists from regions outside the metropolis, however, is simply a reflection of a wider problem: the common practice of equating Western norms with global values has the unintended consequence of excluding the art of the periphery from art history. The concept of “art” is often regarded as neutral and disinterested, but this systematically ignores the implications of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class in art history. Such misguided faith in universal values is not unique to art history but pervades all aspects of knowledge although art history creates its own specific inclusions and exclusions.

The embedded hierarchy implicit in the modernist canon and its impact on contemporary art in regions regarded as the periphery can only be explained in historical terms. The rise of art history as a discipline in the eighteenth century coincided with European expansion overseas. In the following century, the colonial powers sought to inculcate “good taste” in the subject nations through the introduction of academic naturalism and classical standards of taste. At the end of the century, the avant-garde revolution in the West challenged academic art, as Cubists, Expressionists, and Surrealists declared war on the colonial/capitalist system and bourgeois artistic values. Modernism’s experimental attitude constantly sought to push the intellectual frontiers. Its ideology of emancipatory innovation, and its agonistic relationship to

tradition and authority, spread to the colonial world, shaping global perceptions of contemporary art and literature. The revolutionary technology of avant-garde art, notably the formal language and syntax of Cubism, allowed artists in the periphery to devise new ways to represent the visible world. The modernist revolt against academic naturalism was openly welcomed by the subject nations who were preoccupied with formulating their own resistance to the colonial order.

Colonizer and Colonized

The worldwide impact of the Western avant-garde cannot be exaggerated. Also from the 1970s, Marxist, postmodern, and postcolonial critics helped temper the triumphalism of avant-garde art, the fractures and contradictions of modernity, and its complex relationship with tradition. Nonetheless, the discipline of art history is yet to question in any substantive manner the implicit acceptance of non-Western modernism as derivative, a product of delayed growth and imitation. Put simply, certain ingrained ideas persist.

Let me take two cases that highlight the glaring contrast in art-historical assessments of cultural borrowing between the metropolitan center and the peripheries. The exhibition *“Primitivism” in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, held in New York in 1984, aimed at highlighting the “accidental affinities” between the “primitive” motifs in the works of Picasso and other iconic modernists and “tribal” art, affinities that were supposed to transcend time and space. Any hint of the influence of African art on Picasso was studiously avoided. In sum, Picasso’s borrowings from ethnographic objects, produced by a simple society, did in no way compromise his cultural integrity as an artist. In a similar vein, John Golding, a noted art historian, writing a decade later on Vladimir Tatlin’s discovery of a tribal mask in Picasso’s studio, could thus exclaim: it is one of the wonders of our age that such a simple tribal artifact, which could justifiably be called primitive, should have given birth indirectly to Russian Constructivism, one of the most technically visionary of all twentieth-century art movements.

The same process of cultural borrowing is treated very differently in the case of colonial artists. The Indian artist Gaganendranath Tagore, a pioneering Indian modernist, was one of the first Indian painters to adapt the revolutionary syntax of Cubism to produce a series of exquisite miniature paintings between the years 1921–28. Writing on him, the English art historian William George Archer posed a pertinent question: can modern art be appropriated by Indians and then in what manner? In answer to this, he claimed that such appropriation must be ‘absorbed into the blood stream’ of that society to be a genuine item. Following his own logic, Archer drew the conclusion that Gaganendranath had failed miserably. Archer simply could not appreciate

the Indian artist's achievement in deploying the flexible syntax of Cubism in order to create water colors of poetic intensity that were meaningful in the colonial-nationalist milieu of India. Gagenendranath belonged to the world of the colonized, which immediately locked him into a dependent relationship, the colonized mimicking the superior art of the colonizer.

The idea rests on a reductive criterion, which I call the "Picasso manqué" syndrome: successful imitation was a form of aping, but imperfect imitation represented a failure of learning. I have ascribed this phenomenon to the complex discourse of power, authority, and hierarchy involved in evaluations of the non-Western avant-garde. The debate itself seems to hinge on the politics of stylistic influence, which has been a formidable tool of art history. Yet as a category, influence ignores more significant aspects of cultural encounters, the enriching value of the cross-fertilization of cultures that has nourished societies since time immemorial. These exchanges of ideas and forms need not necessarily be interpreted through ideas of domination and dependence. We have the example of the migration of symbols across ancient cultures, which is a fascinating story of how the West received and transformed images and motifs from the Orient.

The modernist canon embraces a great deal more than influence; its powerful teleology constructs a whole world of inclusions and exclusions, the epicenter and outlying regions. What is involved in the relationship between the global and the local is the asymmetrical valuations of the center and the periphery, the roots of which are to be found as far back as Renaissance art history. The idea of a linear art history, with its ideology of constant and inevitable progress, originated with the Italian artist Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), who created the master narrative for Renaissance art centering on the conquest of visual representation. Vasari defined Florence, Rome, and Venice as centers of innovation, categorizing other regions in Italy as sites of delayed growth and imitation. Thus periphery became a matter of geography, not of art history. In the next century, the German antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann enshrined these prejudices in his history of ancient art by formulating climatic, national and racial differences in art as objective facts. Following in his wake, other historians applied Darwinian principles in the mapping of world art from its "primitive" base to its triumphal climax in Victorian history painting. In the process they assigned an inferior position to non-Western art within the hierarchy.

So the question facing us in the postcolonial period is this: what theoretical framework can we deploy to make sense of the transmission of ideas and technology across cultures that are not predicated on the notions of power and authority or on the center/periphery imbalance? If we discard stylistic influence as a meaningful category, in what other ways can we study the origin and development of an art form? Recently,

postcolonial art histories and studies in visual culture have offered a rich array of strategies of empowerment through new readings of the avant-garde in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Visual culture, for instance, aims at destabilizing the modernist canon by challenging aesthetic hierarchy and the narrow, empirical, connoisseurship-focused discipline of art history that focuses on analysis and documentation of style and iconography. Its aim has been to erase the distinction between high art and material objects that had been excluded from the canon, thereby destroying the exclusivity of the concept of high art that tends to reinforce global inequality in power relations. Others plead for a more open discourse of avant-garde art that would embrace plurality and uneven edges, and allow within art history critical voices from the periphery. The most exciting aspect of modernisms across the globe has been their plurality, heterogeneity, and difference. The Argentine anthropologist Néstor García Canclini proposes multi-temporal heterogeneities, while the Cuban curator Gerardo Mosquera opts for the notion of a decentralized international culture. He feels confident that the peripheries are emerging as multiple centers of international culture, even as they strengthen local developments in a constant process of cultural hybridization.

These are laudable efforts. But my conviction is that before we can proceed with the task of creating a less hierarchical art history that is tied to the Western aesthetic canon, we need to de-center the canon itself. There is the necessity of destabilizing Vasarian concepts of artistic center and periphery, which were given unique authority in the German philosopher Hegel's theory of artistic progress as the inevitable unfolding of the world spirit. To put it in a nutshell, the whole concept of art history since Vasari, including the history of Western modernism, is predicated on the notion of continuous technological progress from the Italian painter Giotto in the thirteenth century to the present. This doctrine is considered to have a universal value and is applied to art traditions outside the West, inevitably resulting in distortions simply because these other traditions have different objectives and priorities. Hence, there is the urgent need to historicize the development of Western art and not view it as possessing a timeframe that is universally applicable. Although it is tempting to view Western modernism as transcending time and space, the greatest achievements of the Western avant-garde have in fact been historically situated within its own set of conventions, even though its experience has enriched other traditions. Without privileging any art in particular, and not even Western avant-garde, we may investigate art practices in their social and cultural settings, taking into account the peculiar contextual needs and expressions of regional artistic productions and consumptions, and the local assertions of global concerns. To my mind, it is the multiple local possibilities that illuminate the global processes of modernity more effectively than a grand globalizing narrative, which is more likely than not to perpetuate a relationship of power.

Thus an inflected narrative of global modernity offers us a possible way of restoring the artist's agency in the context of colonial empires, by analyzing art practices and their reception as a cultural document that is historically situated. One serious criticism of "influence" as an analytical tool is that it views artists as passive agents of transmission rather than active agents with the ability to exercise choice.

Virtual Global Community

I want to take a case study in order to clarify what I propose as a contextual analysis of avant-garde art in the period of globalization. It is possible to formulate concepts that will address not only the particular interactions between global modernity, artistic production, and the construction of national identity in the colonized regions, but also seek to restore the artist's agency in these regions. I have chosen the rise of the Indian avant-garde art in the 1920s—an area of my specialization—where I have tried to show that its history can be meaningfully mapped within the context of nationalist resistance to the British Empire. One of the powerful aspects of modern nationalism has been the interplay of the global and the local in the urban space of colonial culture. "Hybrid" cosmopolitan port cities, such as Shanghai or Kolkata (Calcutta), gave rise to a Western-educated intelligentsia that created flourishing centers of cultural exchange. Recently, scholars have applied the concept of cosmopolitanism to redress current asymmetrical global relations. Cosmopolitanism is seen as an inevitable consequence of global technology transfers, and communication and transport revolutions. Cosmopolitanism appears to challenge the pessimism regarding the possibility of fruitful cultural exchanges and offers a corrective to the politics of identity and difference. Nonetheless, the problem of power and authority that confer visibility and inclusion, in the historically uneven relationship between center and periphery, cannot be ignored.

Wherever we may stand on the particular interpretation of cosmopolitanism, I would point out that asymmetrical power relations do not prevent the free flow or cross-fertilization of ideas on the level of virtuality. More privileged cosmopolitans from the periphery could of course afford international travel because of the development of faster transports such as the train and the steamship in the nineteenth century, which enabled them to overcome a narrow parochial view of the world. However, the apparently less fortunate ones that remained at home represented a different kind of cosmopolitanism. I have proposed the notion of the virtual cosmopolis to explain the colonial elite's critical engagement with modernity—a hybrid city of the imagination that engenders elective affinities between elites of the center and the periphery. The shared global outlook was possible through English, French, and Spanish, the major hegemonic languages, disseminated by means of the printed media, such as books and

journals. The Indian colonized elite—the typical virtual cosmopolitan, for instance—had the opportunity to share the global storehouse of ideas on modernity through print culture without having to travel to distant places. They also had the freedom to appropriate these circulating ideas and engender new discourses that were not beholden to their Western sources. Virtual cosmopolitanism is a community created among strangers through the print medium because of a sense of common project, the project of modernity.

I will illustrate an example of virtual cosmopolitanism in colonial India in the realm of art. One of the most creative ideas developed by the Indian avant-garde in the 1920s was the use of the empowering concept of primitivism, which can be defined as a form of resistance to urban industrial capitalism and the ideology of progress; the cornerstones of colonial empires. Primitivism was a critical form of modernity that united likeminded critics of industrial capitalism in the East and West even though they were not necessarily in contact with one another and sometimes did not even know of one another's existence. They were simply reacting to global issues such as urban alienation and the loss of the community spawned by industrial capitalism. Importantly, their responses related to their own historic contexts. The Western primitivists consisted of an important group of German thinkers, notably the theorists Carl Einstein and Wilhelm Hausenstein, and the artist Oskar Schlemmer. Critics of industrial capitalism and urban alienation, they sought to restore collective art and the sense of community that had been lost in the industrial age.

In many ways parallel to their ideas, the innovative formalism of the Indian painter Jamini Roy (1887-1972) was based upon a primitivist re-imagining of the folk art of India that powerfully mediated between the global and the local. His aim was to restore through art the pre-colonial community that had been severed from national life during British rule, alienating the elite from its cultural roots. The intimate connection between the vitality of an artistic tradition and its mythological richness became the central plank in his theory of collective art. Roy created his own nationalist ideology of art by repudiating urban colonial society and seeking to return to the village community. The Indian painter deliberately eschewed artistic individualism and the notion of artistic progress, the two flagships of colonial art. Roy's search for the formal equivalent to his primitivist doctrine eventually led him to the village scroll painting of Bengal, the *pat*, which offered him an ideal synthesis of formalist robustness and political theory. Through intense concentration and a ruthless ability to eliminate inessential details, Roy created an avant-garde art of monumental simplicity and radical social commitment. Primitivists East and West did not deny the importance of technology in contemporary life; they simply refused to accept the unquestioning faith in modern progress. I call these similarities of ideas

“structural affinities in a virtual global community,” since neither the Germans nor the Bengali artist knew of the existence of the other.

Future art history will be enriched through such grounded studies of non-Western modernism that engage with the socially constructed meaning of artistic production. This will help challenge the commonplace that peripheral modernisms are merely attempts to catch up with the originary avant-garde discourse of the metropolitan center.