

How Do Cross-Cultural Studies Impact Upon the Conventional Definition of Art?

While Stephen Davies argues that a debate on cross-cultural aesthetics is possible if we adopt an attitude of mutual respect and forbearance, his fellow symposiasts shed light upon different aspects which merit a closer scrutiny in such a dialogue. Samer Akkach warns that an inclusivistic embrace of difference runs the risk of collapsing the very difference one sought to understand. Julie Nagam underscores that local knowledge carriers and/or the medium should be involved in such a cross-cultural exploration. Enrico Fongaro searches for a way of experiencing cross-cultural art such that it can lead to a transformative experience. Relatedly, Meilin Chinn uses the analogy of friendship to explore the edifying dimension of experiencing an art form. Lastly, John Powell studies whether Dickie's Institutional Theory can be meaningfully used to identify works of art in Western and non-Western traditions.

Key words: artworld; bodily experience of art; fusion of horizons; garden; Intercultural philosophy; Islam; Kitarō Nishida; musical friendship; otherness; translation; Zhuangzi

Can Westerners Understand the Art of Other Cultures and What Might They Learn by Doing So?

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I write this from the perspective of a Westerner, though much of what is said should be true for non-Western groups who are considering the art of other cultures. My use of the word “art” is not meant to be technical or provocative, though I will not attempt a definition here.¹ The paintings of Rembrandt and Picasso are works of art, as are the compositions of Mozart and Stravinsky, the novels of Dickens and Faulkner, and the plays of Shakespeare and Mamet. And if it becomes an issue, I am happy to include among the class of artworks skillful, high quality entertainments, such as *The Sopranos*.

Some Westerners would deny that other cultures make art, so let's start there. Among the reasons given for such a view are that other cultures lack a word for art, they do not create non-functional items that are for contemplation alone, and their traditions are conservative rather than innovative and rebellious. But these generalizations are false, both in what they assume about Western art and as they apply to the art of other cultures.² Much Western art has been conservative and functional: consider medieval religious art and iconography. Some other cultures do have words that seem to correspond to “art.” In any case, one can make art without a term or even a concept for it. The people who made the first art certainly had specific goals in mind but could not have thought of what they made as art, not until the relevant public practice was locally established and eventually named.³ And many other literate cultures with strong religious or court traditions create non-functional art, intended for contemplation for its own sake, and surround this with elaborate theories and histories. Besides, I do not see why art cannot be functional, as already indicated. And finally, the art-making practices of other cultures sometimes value creative change as much as the Western avant-garde does.⁴

The claim is not that *they* have art if *we* call it that, or that the practices just mentioned are uniform across cultures. Other cultures have established their own, independent art traditions

and conventions. The claim is, rather, that we can see that we share their conception of art because of what arts across the cultures have in common, notwithstanding their manifest differences.

In tribal societies art might not be institutionalized as it is in the West; it might involve the active participation of most people in the group, and it might be closely connected to ritual. But these are not defeating differences. It makes as much sense to say they have art as to say they have cooking, clothing, marriage, and religion, though all of these might be distinguishable from their Western equivalents.

We should acknowledge the existence of non-Western art, then. Indeed, it would be insulting not to, because so fundamental is art to people's identity, denying that they have art comes close to denying their humanity. And we can often recognize such artworks as such, because of the overlap with our art forms. They have singing, dancing, storytelling, acting, painting, and carving. In addition, they might have art forms that are new to us—shadow puppet plays⁵, paper folding, elaborate flower arranging, sand “painting,” and so on. But again, we can see the continuities that link these new art forms to those that overlap more squarely with ours. They involve the same care, skill, rules of appreciation, and the like. In other cases, perhaps, a practice might be sufficiently distant from ours that we cannot be sure whether it should count as an art form—think of Asian calligraphy, martial arts, and tea ceremonies.

The fact that we can identify some of the artworks of other cultures is not to say that we can understand those works appropriately. (Similarly, we can identify foreign languages as such, but without understanding what is said in them.) I subscribe to a view that I call *ontological contextualism*.⁶ It holds that artworks take some of their identifying features and contents via relations in which they stand to their art-historical and socio-cultural location. For instance, artworks regularly allude to, quote, repudiate, or satirize previous works in their tradition. They can be full of symbols and codes. As a result, the art of other cultures can be opaque to outsiders.

Take poetry as an example. It can be appreciated only by someone who has a sophisticated grasp of the language, who is familiar with its poetic genres and conventions, and who is aware of all the topics it could embrace, including the society's wider culture, history, ethics, practices, conventions, and so on. Plainly, few foreigners to the society are likely to appreciate its poetry. Nevertheless, they might be able to identify examples of its poetry by their use of regular meters and rhyme schemes.

It is certainly possible, however, to improve one's appreciation of art from an unfamiliar culture, and doing so can be richly rewarding. Even non-literate cultures possess theories and histories of their arts, along with codes for its reception and appreciation.⁷ These are matters about which the foreign tourist can learn. Indeed, there are likely to be essays on the topic in her guidebook. And as well, there are local teachers who may instruct her, so that she attains a degree of practical knowledge about the society's art forms.

Of course, we share much in common with other people, whether we belong to their cultures or not. We have the same evolved perceptual systems. We are programmed to organize the manifold of perception—to find pattern, repetition, and closure, to distinguish a subject from its background, to attend to what is new or different. We look for causal relations. We try to explain the present in terms of the past and, in planning, extrapolate from there to the future. This is not to deny that “top down” or learned processes can affect what we see,⁸ for instance, by altering what we attend to. And these processes can have a culturally distinct basis.⁹

We also share with others evolved affective and cognitive systems. Of course these are highly plastic and culturally malleable. How we feel about death might depend, for example, on whether it is seen as the extinction of life, as the door to eternal paradise, as a mode of recycling, or as a route to reincarnation. But certain human refrains seem to be universal. When it comes to other people, we look for meaning and intention. We track social relations and keep score. The same themes are familiar across the world and are repeated in countless tales—crime and

punishment, war and peace, pride and prejudice, heaven and hell, alongside love, jealousy, compassion, adventure, revenge, competition, quest, commerce, justice, violence, and so on.¹⁰

Artworks draw attention to themselves by stimulating these shared systems and universal interests.¹¹ So, we can expect the art of other cultures often to be accessible in terms of their perceptible structures or thematic contents.

Another consideration is that the challenges of different art media remain constant across cultures. Consider dance. We all know what it is to move our bodies under the force of gravity. That alone places us in a position to have a basic appreciation of the dancer's grace or athleticism, whatever culture she comes from. Virtuosity and skill are prized in all cultures, and we can recognize this in pictorial representation, acting, and carvings of stone or wood. The same usually applies to music, where precision, speed, and expressiveness tend to be valued.

Additionally, the earliest art typically deals with aesthetic properties that have a fairly simple, direct appeal. It uses vivid colors, realistic depiction, symmetrical patterns, stories on basic human themes, plainly recognizable expressive tropes, easily sung tunes, etc. As time passes, it can become more abstract, symbolic, and self-referential, and this can demand connoisseurship on behalf of its audience. But even as this occurs, it is rarely the case that the arcane forms of art extinguish the more basic forms. Some of the art of a culture retains sensuous accessibility of a type that provides a point of entry for the cultural outsider (or for the uninitiated insider).

So, what do we learn when we try (with partial success) to understand the art of other cultures? I claim that art is a window into people's hearts and souls, so we learn from non-Western art both what we share in common and what makes each culture different and unique.

It is clear that other cultures have artistic traditions, classic artworks, and artists (whether heralded or not) that are a match for those in the West. The Mahabharata and Ramayana epics in India and south Asia have a Shakespearean scope, for instance. Architectural styles differ widely, but all permanently settled peoples build large structures with both power and beauty. Virtuoso orators, actors, dancers, and musicians are everywhere, as are skilled storytellers, poets, and picture-makers. So, one can learn from the art of other cultures what one can learn from the art of the West. We value art for its insights and the knowledge that it affords, and non-Western art is valuable for the same reasons.

Though non-Western art, when compared with Western art, does many of the same things and deals with related themes, it is very often different in many of its details and purposes. Not only does it showcase our deep commonalities, it also highlights cultural eccentricity and dissimilarity. From the Japanese, for instance, we can learn the aesthetic interest and value of imperfection,¹² or how to be profound within the constraints imposed by the 5/7/5-syllable structure of the haiku, or how to reconcile high stylization with pictorial realism. Of course, Japan is an artistically and aesthetically rich culture, but I think most cultures, both ancient and modern, are similar. Consider the jade and stone work of the Mayans, the brass castings of Benin¹³, dot paintings of Aborigines of the Western Desert¹⁴, Turkish rugs, Indonesian shadow-puppetry, the soapstone, ivory and antler carvings of the Inuit, Maori wood-carving¹⁵. All of these are culturally distinctive, and within each culture there are various periods, schools, and artists with different styles.

Let me use just one simple example. After centuries of experiment, not to mention a great deal of algebra, Western artists mastered the skill of vanishing point perspective in order to represent the three-dimensionality of space. But what we learn from examining the pictures of other cultures is that there are many ways of capturing the spaciness of reality. In Chinese art, the disposition of clouds and mountains achieves the effect. In ancient Egyptian pictures, sometimes a picture contained multiple perspectives—consider Nebamun's garden.¹⁶ Amerindians of the American northwest succeeded in picturing the whole animal by splitting and splaying the image.¹⁷ As should be apparent from the many ways in which a two-dimensional map of the earth can be

projected,¹⁸ many systems are possible and some will be more accurate or convey more information than others.

More systematic comparative studies by experts can help in uncovering what can be learned from the art of other cultures.¹⁹ These comparative studies tend to be offered by anthropologists and ethologists and rest on observation rather than systematic experimentation; that is, they are qualitative rather than quantitative.

Though they might be revealing, cross-cultural empirical studies are rare. Is there any variation across cultures in terms of the ways people comprehend pictures or narratives? When it comes to common, bottom-up physiological processes, we do not know for sure, though, as conceded previously, how things are categorized can affect what gets focused on in pictures.²⁰

Psychologists and others have performed experiments with music as the focus. Cross-cultural studies have tended to focus on the interesting question of whether musical expressiveness is cross-culturally recognizable. Obviously, an answer (yes, no, sometimes) could help considerably in the analysis of how music is expressive and what is being perceived when it is so described. Many studies have been done.²¹

Unfortunately, though, there are many problems with this line of research. For instance, it is very difficult to find a culture in which people have not heard Western music, so the studies do not deal with equally naïve listeners. And some musics are more similar—for example, in scales—than others, so there is a danger in generalizing from positive results. Methodological issues fault many of the experiments.²² For instance, one study,²³ comparing Europeans with people of Indian descent, took its European participants from the University of Manchester and its Indians from a teachers' college in Bradford, and it assumed that musical expressiveness always is a matter of contingent association!

The more careful and interesting studies do suggest that there is significant cross-cultural recognition of coarse-level musical expressiveness (say, sadness, happiness, or anger) in at least some cases. That result can have implications for our theoretical understanding of musical expressiveness, for instance by counting against those views implying that expressiveness depends exclusively on culturally idiosyncratic features.

A skeptic might argue that even if art is universal, it is not all universally good, and that the best, most sophisticated art belongs to the West, so that Westerners cannot expect to learn much of interest from the art of other cultures. But this ignorantly overlooks the rich differences in the ways of life pursued in the world's cultures. And though not everything is to my taste—I'm not a fan of Chinese opera yet—it seems to me that one need not look far to find in every culture art that is not only of astonishing force and quality but also revealing of cultural difference and human variety.

In Chauvet cave (or its replica), examine the individuality of the animals in the “horse panel” or the pent energy and focus shown in the “hunting pride” of cave lions.²⁴ These images were created by Cro-Magnon *Homo sapiens* hunter-foragers more than 35,000 years ago; that is, by people very culturally distant from us. I predict the viewer will be jaw-dropped by the force of these pictures. Picasso is said to have commented of the parietal art in Altamira cave, which is more than 12,000 years old, “After Altamira, all is decadence.” He might better have decided that art of the highest quality can be found everywhere in our species' history and in its many cultures.

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- 1 An evaluation of current definitions took me an entire book in Davies 1991! For my most recent attempt, see Davies (2015).
- 2 For discussion, see Blocker (1993), Davies (2000), Dutton (2000).
- 3 Davies (2015).
- 4 See Layton 1991, ch. 5. On the fetish for artistic innovation in Balinese culture, see Davies (2007).
- 5 *Wayang Kulit: Kresna*, shadow puppet, Bali. Wikimedia, last modified 3 August 2016, 16:24. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wayang_Kulit,_Bali.jpg
- 6 Gracyk (2009).
- 7 For instance, Zemp (1978, 1979) records the elaborate and extensive music theory possessed by the 'Are'are, a people of fewer than 20,000 who live on part of the island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands.
- 8 Connolly (2017).
- 9 Nisbett (2003).
- 10 For discussion of human universals, see Brown (1991).
- 11 See Dutton (2001). On universals in music, see Higgins (2006). On universals in literature, see Gottschall and Wilson (2005); Literary Universals Project (<http://literary-universals.uconn.edu>). On connections between art and evolution, see Davies (2012, 2014); Dissanayake (1995).
- 12 Saito (1997). See in the public domain: *Shino chawan (tea bowl)*. Wikimedia, last modified 20 September 2016, 20:53. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shino_chawan_MBA_Lyon_E554-146.jpg
- 13 See in the public domain: *Benin brass plaque 01*, British Museum, London. Wikimedia, last modified 18 February 2018, 10:59. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Benin_brass_plaque_01.jpg
- 14 *Coolamon with dot-painting*, softwood coolamon with acrylic paint design, Australian Museum, Sydney. Wikimedia, last modified 7 December 2016, 7:34. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coolamon_with_dot-painting.JPG
- 15 *Maori wood carving*, Te Whare Runanga Meeting House at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, New Zealand. Wikimedia, last modified 6 January 2018, 5:56. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maori_Wood_Carving_\(3335850391\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maori_Wood_Carving_(3335850391).jpg)
- 16 *The Garden*, painting on plaster, 72 x 62 cm., *fresco* from Nebamun tomb, originally in Thebes, Egypt, now in the British Museum, London. Wikimedia, last modified 5 February 2018, 7:07. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_Jardin_de_Nébamoun.jpg
- 17 For an example, see Robert Davidson's *Split Beaver* (1975).
- 18 Wikipedia, s.v. "Map projection," last modified 25 February 2018, 18:28. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Map_projection
- 19 Representative examples would be Anderson (1990), Dissanayake (1995), Layton (1991), and Van Damme (1996).
- 20 See Nisbett 2003 on differences between the ways Asians and Americans think about and thereby see the world. We do know that experts scan pictures differently from novices; see Nodine, Locher, and Krupinski (1993), Massaro, Savazzi, et al. (2012).
- 21 For an overview, see Thompson and Balkwill (2010).
- 22 Davies (2011).
- 23 Gregory and Varney (1996).
- 24 *Chauvet horses*, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France. Wikimedia, last modified 1 February 2016, 17:35. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Chauvet_Cave#/media/File:Chauvethorses.jpg and https://public-media.smithsonianmag.com/filer/08/0f/080fe4c6-241f-467f-9e3c-8062db55f153/apr2015_h07_chauvetcave.jpg