Global Artists

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The globalization of artists and their work refers to the transfer of artistic practices and the works of art in various art media, such as the visual arts, performing arts, and media arts, from one culture to another. Through their migration, artists directly influence art beyond national or regional boundaries. Artists have an increasingly important role to play in the emerging field of global studies. Whether art is seen as a response on the part of artists to nature and the evolving manifestations of civilizations or is mainly a product of the artist’s imagination, it holds an important place in the global world past and present. Together with
language, works of art offer important symbolic means for human expression and communication of diversity and harmony both within and between cultures.

The movement of artistic practices from one culture to another often accompanies religious, commercial, or political interventions. Such efforts are not new to the 21st century. Western art first traveled to China by way of the Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century. In this instance, art was a part of the Jesuits’ strategy for introducing Christianity to the Chinese. These efforts met with limited success, as Chinese viewers interpreted the symbols of Christian iconography, such as the Virgin Mary or Christ, as referring to Chinese Buddhist figures. On the other hand, Jesuit artist Giuseppe Castiglione, who came to China in 1715 and was appointed as court painter at the Imperial Palace in Peking under three successive emperors, successfully adapted his art to Chinese taste.

Western ventures into the Ottoman, Persian, and Arabic cultures involving the arts were more likely to follow the paths of commercial or diplomatic channels. For example, paintings of European artists depicting scenes with orientalist costumes and interiors were one manifestation of the globalizing connections between Europe and the Ottoman Empire during the Enlightenment in Europe. From the 1850s on, following the British occupation of India, art in India was officially guided by British-founded art schools in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. Hegemonic efforts of the British to dominate art in India by founding British-run schools and by presenting exhibitions of British art were offset in part by revival efforts of the Bengal renaissance in the early part of the 20th century reviving traditional Indian art. Today's Indian artists such as Surendran Nadir and Vivan Sundaram have established their places in the international art world.

Globalization was also evident in the movement of modernist art from Paris to New York at the beginning of the 20th century. The result was that Paris artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse dominated American art until the post–World War II era when American artists established Abstract Expressionism as the first original art movement in the United States. This movement featured American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.

From the mid-20th century on, international contemporary art fairs, gallery representation of international artists in major cities across the world, and international museum exhibitions have advanced global art. Since the 1980s, a main path of global traffic has been between artists in the West and the East. For example, as Pop Art from the United States and England, based on Western commercialism and everyday life, became known in China, Chinese artists such as Wang Guangyi responded by developing their own Political Pop Art. At the same time, Chinese artists such as Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and Wu Shanzhuan took their art to the urban centers of the United States and Europe and became active participants in the global art market as well as recognized museum artists of international stature.

One positive result of globalization is that it offers artists a greater choice of artistic means. Globalization opens the possibility for artists located virtually in any part of the world to draw on a broad stream of artistic knowledge as it has developed in the diverse artistic cultures. Global art thus enables individual artists to create, using the means available, without regard to national or regional limits. This means that artists have available an evolving universal vocabulary of artistic ideas and techniques contributed over time from the practices of artists working in many cultures across the world. Creating art today mandates that artists be free to incorporate into their work their own cultural histories as well as the culture histories of others. The outcome does not lie in creating a universal language for a new “International Style,” reminiscent of the Euro-centered Western international style grounded in modernism, as a standard for future developments in art. Rather, the situation invites artists to continue to employ their creative imaginations in developing new ideas for art. For example, an artist working in China today has available the resources of traditional Eastern and Western art practices, as well as the pluralisms of modern and postmodern art.

There are also economic advantages working for the global artist, who may benefit from access to a wider audience. For example, a Chinese artist who works also in Berlin and New York has a much wider range of opportunities to participate in the art world of museums as well as the art market.
More important for the future of humanity, however, are the opportunities for global artists working today, in a fragile world of globally linked natural and social environments, to aid in expanding and deepening our understanding of the realities, both internal and external, natural and social, that will shape life into the future for human beings. What can artists working in a global context contribute toward alleviating the clashes of culture leading to war and other forms of social violence? Perhaps, with their special sensitivities and conceptual articulateness, artists are able to perceive and communicate aspects of these realities that might otherwise escape notice or be deemed unimportant until brought to attention in a striking visual image, a poem, a song, or a moment in the theater. Perhaps the evolution of art freed of national boundaries and informed by diverse cultures will better communicate values that all persons, irrespective of their particular cultures, can share.

Globalization opens the doors for border crossings where artists are no longer limited to national or local practices. Intercultural confrontations through art can be both informative and productive. At the same time, they require attention to the needs to respect and preserve important local and national art traditions while forging the path for the new.

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See also Aesthetics; Art; Cultural Hybridity; Culture, Notions of; Globalization, Phenomenon of; Heritage; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

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