Global Art

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Global art embraces any type of art, including paintings, sculptures, photography, cinema, video art, digital Internet art, as well as conceptual, installation, and performance arts, that participates in the international art world through cultural exchange or commerce. The exchange is not limited to one-directional transfers from dominant art cultures to indigenous sources. Rather, there exists a pluralism of active sources contributing to the reciprocal flow and mutually enhancing stream of art and its support systems, including art institutions, art publications, art criticism, and educational support. Contemporary art, as well as the traditional art forms of national and local cultures, have been influenced by globalization. The discussion here provides an examination of the changes brought about by global art as it relates to the art market and to cultural institutions such as museums and art biennales. Although the history of global art began with trade among the major civilizations in Asia, Europe, India, and the Ottoman Empire, this history is not repeated here.

Unlike the situation in the colonial era and during the period of 20th-century modern art, the global exchange of cultural influences today is no longer hegemonic. This means that the main currents of influence no longer flow from a dominant art-rich center such as Paris or New York to supplant or suppress the art in other regions. On the contrary, global art centers across the world, such as Beijing and New Delhi, compete successfully with European and American art centers as wellsprings of artistic innovation. However, instead of thinking and acting as cultural imperialists, the artists in the global era seem more content to share their art-producing strategies and their ideas with artists working in other cultures.

Cross-cultural exchange of art practices is not an entirely new development, as Western modern art has attracted the attention of Asian artists throughout the 20th century and before. For example, throughout the 20th century, artists, whose training might have begun with the study of Chinese traditional art forms, found in Western modern and contemporary art, such as Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art, ways of developing their own art in new directions. At the same time, there exists a well-established tradition of Western artists, including avant-garde artists John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg and others in the United States, who look to Eastern art and philosophy for inspiration. The Guggenheim Museum's 2009 exhibition, The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989, which showed the works of 110 artists, offers ample evidence of this development.

Globalization, Transnational, and World Art

Taken in the broadest sense, the term global means worldwide, universal, all-inclusive, complete, or exhaustive. Global art requires a narrower frame than this broad sense of global. Its network is worldwide, and it implies the possibility of some sense of universal art understanding, as it transcends particular national, regional, or local cultures. Still, global art is neither all-inclusive nor complete, because there are forms of art (e.g., amateur art, commercial art, local crafts, and art used solely in particular religious practices) that do not participate in transnational cultural networks.

Other terms might qualify as candidates for describing the processes that are referred to as global art, for example, transnational art instead of global art, as has been proposed by the philosopher Noël Carroll. Transnational means going beyond national boundaries or solely national interests. Some scholars, however, prefer the term global art over transnational art for at least two important reasons: It is the language often used to discuss the dynamics of worldwide issues in other important cultural domains such as economics and politics. Furthermore, global is more suited to the nature of art practices taking place in contemporary geopolitical divisions where national boundaries are fluid and where pluralistic nation-states such as China, India, and the United States embrace diverse cultural and artistic practices. Given these considerations, transnational seems less useful than global for identifying the movement of art forces, which are currently taking place both within and across geopolitical boundaries. The term world art, previously used to characterize art museum and ethnographic museum collections of art gathered from around the world, also fails to capture the changes that art has undergone since the 1980s.
Agencies of Global Art

The contemporary agencies of global art include artists working in exile, art fairs, galleries, auction houses, and biennales, and also museums. The focus here is on artists intending to produce work aimed at making a contribution to culture through aesthetic or conceptual understanding and deemed to have artistic merit. It does not include the work of amateur artists made solely for personal expression or art produced solely for commercial purposes. In some cultures, there are many layers of artistic production: government-supported artists, artists who participate in regional and national art associations, members of art academies and university art departments, and free professional artists. It is the last group that figures most prominently in the contemporary global art world because the work of those artists is most likely to attract the interest of the museums and other cultural institutions and is also most attractive to the art market. These global individual artists often work in multiple geographic locations such as New York and Beijing.

International fine art fairs organized for the display and sale of art represent an important means of globalizing art. Art Basel, the Maastricht Art Fair in the Netherlands, Art Basel Miami Beach, Art Chicago, Art Dubai, London’s Frieze Art Fair, Arco Madrid, Asia Pacific Contemporary Art Fair in Shanghai, and the Korea International Art Fair in Seoul are among the main vehicles for global art market transfers. Art dealers, collectors, and museum representatives frequent these gatherings to select artworks for their respective art enterprises and for the exchange of ideas.

Private art galleries and art auction houses located in virtually every metropolitan center across the world also contribute to the globalization of art. For example, one finds available in the Art Zone 798 section of Beijing artists from the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world, as well as offerings of Chinese artists. New York’s Chelsea art district, as well as similar sites in Paris, Berlin, and London, regularly offers art from China, India, Japan, and elsewhere across the world.

Also important to the market distribution system for global art are the international auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s. With headquarters located in London and New York, these major auction houses also have offices in cities throughout the world. For example, Christie’s hosts offices in 30 countries and regularly holds art auctions in a wide range of places, including Beijing, Dubai, Moscow, Mumbai, New York, London, and other European and Asian cities. Sotheby’s also offers auction services in the Americas, including major sites in Buenos Aires, Caracas, and Rio de Janeiro, as well as through its offices in Asia and Europe. Reportedly, worldwide auction sales grew more than eightfold between 2003 and 2007 (though there was a slight decline during the global economic downturn from 2008 to 2010).

A highly visible aspect of the contemporary global art world is the art biennale; by 2010, there were some 60 offered throughout the world. A biennale is a major international showing of works by up-and-coming contemporary artists held in an important city every 2 years. A biennale is normally international and noncommercial. The artists are invited by the organizing institution and are able to show, but not to sell, their works. A biennale typically has a theme and may spotlight artists of the host nation. The Venice Biennale, established in 1895 in Venice, Italy, is one of the oldest and most important. Other well-established biennales include the Whitney Biennale in New York and those in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Sydney, Australia. (Documenta, held in Kassel, Germany, every 5 years, functions in ways similar to the biennales.)

The biennale circuit has contributed a nomadic-like character to global art. Biennale artists tend to move from city to city presenting their works under the guidance of an international curator designated by the organizing city. Curators, who may have initially worked on museum collections and exhibitions or as art critics, also follow the path of nomadicity created by the constantly shifting geographic locations of the biennale circuit. Similarly, the transient character of the biennale circuit has impacted the shift from painting and sculpture as the preferred art media to photography, video art, and digital art. From a practical perspective, these media arts are more portable than paintings and sculptures and less susceptible to damage in transport.

Museums have also contributed to the development of global art, as they offer exhibitions drawing on artistic works from across the world. Lately, museums have offered exhibitions intended to reflect on the meaning of global art. Global
Conceptualism: Points of Origin (April 28, 1999, to November 6, 2000) opened at the Brooklyn Museum and traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Miami Art Museum. This exhibition identified four key themes common to the global conceptual artists selected from Asia, Europe and the Soviet Union, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, North America, and Latin America. The themes were (a) the emergence of conceptual art from local circumstances instead of from a single international source, (b) prioritization of language over visuality, (c) critique of the institutions of art, and (d) dematerialization of art to focus on conceptual ideas. The curatorial staff of this global art project, under the leadership of its directors Louis Camnitzer, Jane Ferver, and Rachel Weiss, was equally global as it included, among others, Okwui Enwezor from Africa, Gao Minglu from China, and Carmen Ramirez from Latin America. In 2003 (February 9-May 4), the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis mounted an exhibition, How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age, to explore how contemporary art is practiced in a global context. Among the questions considered were how global change impacts art, how there occurs a blurring of lines between disciplines, and how a global sensibility takes physical shape. The yearlong project at the Walker Art Center included programming in the visual arts, new media, film/video, and performing arts and was the culmination of 4 years of research and planning by a team of scholars and curators from across the world. Global Feminism, at the Brooklyn Museum (March 23-July 1, 2007), curated by Myra Reilly and Linda Nochlin, offered the works of 88 women artists from around the world. This exhibition included art in all media—painting, sculpture, photography, film, video, installation, and performance art. The exhibition presented feminism in a global perspective with a look at life cycle issues, identity, and emotions. The themes in these three exhibitions showed a progression from a focus on general characteristics of global art to its application to a particular theme showcasing women artists.

Impact of Global Art: Issues and Problems
The focus on globalization in art follows heightened attention to global economic and political discourse. This development raises issues important to the future understanding of art and its role in human experience. By focusing on the whole of artistic production worldwide, including the changes in local art, globalization draws attention to the diversity that exists in the arts as they function in different cultures and to the changes that are taking place. Recognition of diversity and change reinforces the need for an understanding of art that is broad and inclusive. This means that any definition or theory of art useful for a philosophical understanding of art must be in the form of an open concept instead of a closed definition. Any fruitful attempt to define art thus will look for correspondences among the various art practices without seeking conformity when examining the varieties of art that may come to be from time to time. Change and diversity offer important reasons for opting for an open concept of art. An open concept of art does not preclude the discovery of common or universal elements among the various practices because all art must serve some human need or interest.

Among the changes that have attracted attention today is the emergence of increasingly nomadic artists from across the world who participate in the seemingly endless stream of art biennales and art fairs showing new art. This development has prompted Carroll (2007) to propose that we are witnessing the emergence of a unified international art world, “something like a single, integrated, cosmopolitan institution of art, organized transnationally in such a way that the participants . . . share converging or overlapping traditions and practices at the same time that they exhibit and distribute their art in international coordinated venues” (pp. 136–141). Carroll finds in this development common themes such as “post-colonialism, feminism, gay liberation, globalization and global inequality, the suppression of free expression and other human rights, identity politics.” Accompanying these common themes are sense-making strategies that are shared by artists, presenters, and their audiences. According to Carroll, these strategies might include “a battery of formal devices for advancing those themes, including radical juxtaposition, de-familiarization, and the de-contextualization of objects and images from their customary milieus” (p. 141).

This development represents one aspect of the overall globalization of art. But the themes and the
strategies of the category of artists cited by Carroll offer a very narrow slice of art as it is being practiced in the current global world. The interests of these artists seem to be limited to a particular segment of the art world, and perhaps to an even narrower segment of art interests of the world population at large. Hence, the impact of global art cannot be gauged from this sampling alone.

A related set of issues is addressed in a series of conferences and publications on global art conducted by Hans Belting and others. Among the important questions raised by Belting’s studies are these: To what extent is the new globalization of art prompting a critical reevaluation of the notion of mainstream art? How will the outcome of these developments affect the future role of the art museum as a barometer of cultural identity?

Of particular importance is the impact of globalization for the future of the art museum. Local and national museums across the world presently provide a measure of cultural identity for the local and national communities in which they are located, as well as a measure of cultural achievements and a banner of civic pride. Museums, in the Western tradition at least, are looked on as a main source of public access to art. In the West especially, but not exclusively, museums have had an important role in bringing art from across the world to their local constituencies.

Global art takes the discussion of contemporary art and art institutions one more step beyond post-colonial discourses on art. As Belting (2007) has noted, globalization of art brings forth a tension between the forces of “an aggressive localism that makes use of culture as a mark of otherness and as defense, and a transnational art, indifferent to claims of geography, history and identity.”

With the latter claiming universality and the former holding on to local traditions, or seeking to embrace global art that is grounded in local or national traditions, the future of art worldwide remains in a state of transition. Thus, it is not possible to predict the future shape of global art at this time.

Accordingly, the push for global art raises complex cultural and psychological issues. Whether people who share the same visual environments and ownership of particular art practices will adapt to radical changes in art resulting in the abandonment of local cultures remains to be seen. There is some evidence from research in current neuroscience that sustained exposure to certain forms of visual conditioning may result in shifts in cognitive patterns, which supports the possibility of changes in local art practices with respect to both production and appreciation of art. Yet, other factors, including the pressures from economic and political interests, may also affect receptivity to changes in artistic practices. In any event, ongoing tensions from conflicting local and global interests in art will be important in shaping the future of global art.

**Conclusion**

The history of the globalization of art suggests that its results have not always been positive. There is the risk of local art being trampled or destroyed in the process of globalization. A second issue arises when art is considered a national treasure, which should be retained within its culture of origin. Auction houses, as well as museums, find themselves in the midst of international controversies over global transfers of works of art involving the disputed ownership of art believed to be looted or stolen, or otherwise improperly removed from its culture of origin. Such disputes often arise out of circumstances of long-standing duration. The transfer of the Elgin Marbles from Athens to the British Museum in the late 19th century is still disputed by the Greeks. A recent incident resulted in the Chinese government’s condemning of Christie’s auction house for the allegedly illegal sale of two bronze artifacts taken from a Chinese palace 150 years ago. The bronzes in question are of particular interest for a discussion of global art, because the artist of the two bronzes was a Jesuit who created the bronzes for the Qianlong Emperor of China in the mid-18th century. Interestingly, the bronzes were removed from the Chinese Palace by Anglo-French forces led by the Eighth Lord Elgin, whose father acquired the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon.

Such examples abound. The Getty Museum, one of the most prestigious art institutions worldwide, has been in litigation with the Italian government over allegedly stolen items that found their way into the Getty collections. This long-standing dispute ended when in 2007 the
Getty Museum, under pressure from the Italian government, agreed to return some 40 disputed antiquities to Italy. A 6-year trial of ex-Getty curator Marion True, who had been charged with complicity in trafficking of stolen art, ended in October 2010 when the Italian judge determined that the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution had expired.

It is not yet clear what sorts of problems will ensue from the globalization of contemporary art. One area to watch will be the effects of the new developments on the museums and other cultural institutions charged with stewardship and preservation of culture for future generations. Another area of concern that is unresolved is the effects of the new globalization on the development of local art. Whether recent efforts toward the advancement of global art will help to resolve long-standing issues remains to be seen.

What is clear, however, is that contemporary global art has given new life to the international art market and has expanded the opportunities for innovative collaboration among the artists and cultural institutions of the world. On the positive side, global art increases the flow of ideas and art across cultural boundaries and advances the efforts toward mutual understanding among the peoples of different cultures. It endows individual artists with greater resources to create, using ideas, visual forms, and materials, irrespective of their particular cultural or geographic origins. This means that the artists have available an evolving universal vocabulary of artistic resources. Artists may then draw on the cumulative traditions of their own culture, as well as seize on innovations from other cultures in their creative undertakings. Similarly, audiences benefit increasingly from the rich variety of art that globalism continues to make available. The prospects for an increased interest in global art will continue to improve as the arts and culture take on a greater role in the global economy and are a greater concern for foreign policy.

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Further Readings

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