

# European Art Facing Otherness

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## ABSTRACT

The art of Europe became the subject of art history very early on. In the late nineteenth century, the impact of the encyclopaedists' universalist thought prompted the discipline to embrace the production of the entire continent. Comparative works developed initially between European countries, and later between Europe and extra-European territories, with each one in turn becoming the exotic "other" opposite old Europe, the territory of reference and starting point for all studies. Colonial expansion, and especially the redefinition of the notion of "art" at the turn of the twentieth century, paved the way for a new reflection on how to understand extra-European creation. Initially seized upon by the burgeoning field of ethnology, these explorations later developed in the wake of global and connected history. From the 1960s onwards they underwent decisive transformations, characterised by an abandonment of former Eurocentric visions of art.



Titian, Diana and Acteon, oil on canvas, 185 × 202 cm, 1556-1559, Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland.

## **Comparative history and *histoire croisée* approaches to European art**

Comparative histories of European art long emphasized the patterns of artistic circulation from one country to another, the resistance of certain centres to the evolution of forms, similarities in style in different societies, and the travels of artists themselves between courts, cities, or even as part of the “Grand Tour”—in short, the internal diversity of European art as well as its common strategies. The historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) provided one of the first models of this type of approach, one that subsequently gave rise to numerous studies. In *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, published in Haarlem in 1919 and translated for the first time into English in 1924 and into French in 1932, he developed an understanding of Europe as a coherent entity whose homogeneity could be read within its particular “culture.” The work is as much an analysis of art from the Burgundian territories of France and Flanders at the turning point of the Renaissance as it is an examination of the unvarying aspects of European “civilization.” This culture, which Huizinga saw in different nations and identified with a “humanism,” served as the foundation for many writings on the art of Europe, the latter being understood as instances of a “spirit” geographically limited to a territory. This civilizational history to a certain extent enabled Norbert Elias to develop a historic sociology, notably in 1969 in his book on Ancien Régime court society. Basing himself on the structure of living spaces and the use of rooms within the royal château, he developed an overview of social orders throughout Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In his opinion, the distribution of apartments in parish architecture reflected structures of monarchical society, which deeply unified a Europe regulated by comparable state apparatus. Within an entirely different order of ideas, this understanding of Europe as a homogeneous civilization was the springboard for the volumes of *L'histoire artistique de l'Europe*, which began to appear in 1995 under the editorship of Georges Duby and Michel Laclotte and marked the height of transnational studies and the abandonment of the long-standing art historical notion of “schools.” This definitive break with the compartmentalisation of national historiographies called more for a comparative history than a *histoire croisée* approach: the interactions between artists, workshops, and patrons, along with the circulation of works, reveal the hidden springs of formal transformations. This complex network of points of contact, or conversely of rejections, traces a ceaselessly moving map of an endlessly recomposed artistic Europe. This entails a “relational” approach, which remains a rich source of inspiration for numerous works of art history and is frequently accompanied by a reflection on cultural transfer, a decisive element in the construction of artistic identity regardless of scale.

### **A global art history: the role of the object**

In studies of this type, however, only national frameworks defined *a priori* are considered as the starting or ending points of artistic circulations. Even when they shift, European borders maintain a “Western” delimitation, one that is regularly associated with the Christian world. The numerous interactions between countries comprising this world remain linear and bound to a continent, regardless of whether it is understood in a broad or narrow sense. Yet Europe, and beyond it European art, also and especially defines itself by what it is. In a sense the reality of European art never took stronger shape than through the prism of another art, which enabled it to better identify its own contours. This displacement of perspective led to a crossing of European borders in a variety of ways, which have been the subject of studies that are sometimes dissimilar and even opposed to one another.

“Primitivism,” a movement that arose around 1900 from the interest that European artists had for works from Africa or Oceania, offers a clear example of the evolution of extra-European studies in art history. The influence of so-called “primitive” works on the emergence of cubism (especially that of Picasso), fauvism, and what is referred to as the “avant-garde” was initially the subject of detailed research. This approach soon transformed into a search for an origin, namely the discovery of these objects by artists, a kind of ground “0” for the encounter between two cultures. This supposedly original point is not, for that matter, unconnected from the myth of Europe’s discovery of the “other” in 1492, when Christopher Columbus set foot in America in what he thought was the West Indies. The central issue of these studies became explorations of how European artists learned about new art—one totally foreign to what they had previously known—along with its reception and aesthetic appreciation. In Picasso’s case,

there was a long debate over the influence that “*art nègre*” had on the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* [The Young Ladies of Avignon] (1906-1907, New York, Museum of Modern Art). In the catalogue of the famous exhibition “*Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*” that took place in New York in 1984, William Rubin initially defended the argument that the painter was influenced by Iberian sculpture, which he apparently viewed at the Louvre through the intervention of Guillaume Apollinaire. The decisive role of Fang masks from Gabon, which Picasso’s artist friend Maurice de Vlaminck possessed beginning in 1906, was subsequently revealed, as was the impact of a small Vili statuette, also from Gabon, purchased by Matisse. More recently, the Picasso Museum exhibition in 1997 entitled *Le Miroir noir* demonstrated that Picasso had real contact with African sculpture only after finishing the *Demoiselles d’Avignon*. However, he had seen many contemporary postcards of women from Mali or Senegal, who had been photographed topless, a fact that raises doubts about earlier reconstitutions and connections. The Romanesque sculpted Virgin from the church of Gósol in Catalonia was another possible model for the *Demoiselles*, which shifted the field of the primitive arts—widely associated with the “savage” and exotic—to that of the primordial times of the Middle Ages. This incongruous return to the influence of Western art, combined here with extra-European sources, once again reveals a comparative methodology, with the only difference being the zone of confrontation, which went from an intra-European relational history to a history of the connections between Western and non-Western art.

However, unlike the former method, the latter was behind new orientations which can be analysed in the wake of global history. Following on research exploring circulating influences between European and extra-European styles, certain art historians rebelled against a Eurocentric understanding of art, or at the very least of an understanding of European art as a kind of standard in light of which extra-European art could be analysed. From this perspective it was less a matter of retracing the sources of cubism than assessing the art of other continents on equal footing. The development of the history of collections has certainly been important for this change in perspective, as the African and Oceanian sculptures that cubist artists owned in the early twentieth century were considered within the framework of Europe’s colonial past. The trade networks for these artefacts, along with the history of their collecting and their exhibition in scenographies imagined for them in Europe, which changed their meaning and sometimes crystallized new styles such as cubism, were in certain cases a way of emphasizing strategies of Western domination. In her *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989), Sally Price discusses the “Western arrogance” of civilizations based on writing. She also singles out the problem of the anonymity of collected objects, which for a number of centuries justified uprooting them from their context of origin, along with theft and forced acquisitions during colonial missions. *L’Afrique fantôme* by Michel Leiris, a logbook published in 1934 following the famous Dakar-Djibouti mission of 1931-1933, had already revealed the ambiguities of the predatory practices of ethnology. The object—an element of sacred ritual for the “indigenous,” but a subject of scientific and aesthetic study for mission members—revealed the violent confrontation between two worlds. The book caused a scandal in the world of French ethnology when it appeared; today it is seen as a literary account as well as one of the stages within the transforming perception of extra-European artefacts.

## **Anthropology of figuration, visual studies, and connected art history**

The *Les Magiciens de la terre* exhibition, which opened in the Grande Halle de la Villette and the centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989, acted as a dual trigger. For the first time it presented works by contemporary African, Inuit, South American, Asian, Far Eastern, and Pacific artists in comparison with those by European artists. It was recognized for its pioneering character but criticized in subsequent years for the absence of contextualization with respect to its extra-European works, which were often selected from the popular or religious category, thereby promoting, as Maureen Murphy has written, “the idea of alterity and difference so dear to the West, preoccupied with conserving ‘elsewhere’ a portion of regenerative alterity.” It was also connected to the *Métamorphoses des dieux* trilogy by André Malraux, published between 1974 and 1977 in three parts under the titles *L’Irréel*, *L’Intemporel*, and *Le Surnaturel*, which combined works from the East, Far East, and the West, and was a pretext for making aesthetic juxtapositions between historically unconnected works, since its purpose was to demonstrate the power of human

creation across civilizations and centuries. The *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition was nevertheless the occasion of an unprecedented awareness of extra-European alterity in the discipline of art history, as well as the catalyst of new museum presentations. *The D'un regard l'autre. Une histoire des regards européens sur l'Afrique, l'Amérique et l'Océanie* and *Planète métisse* exhibitions, held at the musée du Quai Branly in Paris in 2006 and 2008, similarly upended the standpoint ordinarily adopted for cross-cultural artistic *métissage* after the major expansions of the sixteenth century. Catalogues emphasized a possible alliance between art history and what Philippe Descola defined, in an important work published in 2005 entitled *Par-delà nature et culture*, as an "anthropology of figuration" or an "anthropology of the image," which embraces the figurative intentions of all societies. Visual studies played a substantial role in the progression toward another art history, one capable of perceiving extra-European art differently. Its focus on a history of "representation," whether it be on the order of discourse or the imaginary, was partially behind a new consideration for non-Western art. Revealing contradictory patterns of perception (often connected to distinct social and cultural practices), along with an emphasis on the existence of different forms of appropriation for the same artefact, have made it possible to consider extra-European creation for itself. Authors now highlight the figurative patterns specific to those who created the images, and underline the cultural transfers between European and non-European worlds. In his *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, published in 2011, Hans Belting has shown that the sudden appearance of perspective in Western painting during the Renaissance was the fruit of secular exchange between Arab mathematicians and Western scientists since the eleventh century, and that these transfers enabled Europe's rediscovery of Euclid around 1400. "The blossoming of the Renaissance," traditionally identified as the 1401 competition for the reliefs on the doors of the baptistery to Florence Cathedral, is in his opinion a fiction long maintained by a Eurocentric art history. Detailed analysis of the circulation of objects led to global studies, which no longer confined the Far East or Africa to the rank of silent walk-ons, and no longer placed Western and non-Western productions in a relation of influence and subordination. This "history in equal parts" is certainly one of the branches of global art history, but it also derives from the so-called "connected" history described by Romain Bertrand in *L'histoire à parts égales* in 2011, for it is first and foremost interested in transoceanic connections, while rejecting the "straitjacket of national histories." From this point of view, Timothy Brook's *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, which focuses on Dutch Golden Age painting, can serve as a reference. The book is structured around seven chapters that correspond to the travels of seven objects from the Far East or North America that Vermeer represented in his paintings (including a beaver hat from Canada, much more costly and "exotic" than the common felt hats widely used in Holland). The author thereby elucidates the forms of exchange through shipping routes between the United Provinces, China, the Indonesian coasts, Madagascar, and Samuel Champlain's "New France." Instead of the phenomenon of circulation and diffusion, Brook emphasizes within this complex network the circumstances of contact, the de-mythification of the pre-eminence of European art, and the contributions of extra-European actors in the development of Western images. Our understanding of Vermeer's paintings of interior scenes, long confined to an art of "silence," intimacy, and serenity associated with the emergence of a wealthy bourgeois society, has been renewed as a result. Through this "hallway leading to the vast world" opened by the author, Vermeer's paintings take us deep within the dissonant bustle of a connected, hybridized, and *métisse* world.

In the same line of ideas, the studies of Victor Stoichita explore the problematics of cultural *métissage*, while showing that the incursion of the "other" was never easy in European creation. In his *L'image de l'Autre. Noirs, Juifs, Musulmans et "Gitans" dans l'art occidental des Temps modernes* from 2014, the author explores, without leaving the shores of Europe, the many incursions of the "foreigner" in Western painting at the time of the discovery of America in 1492, the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and the organization of the black slave trade. A similar collective exploration, limited to the representation of blacks in Western art, was undertaken under the supervision of Dominique and John de Menil in the United States in the late 1960s. It was concurrent with the development of a global art history and the publication of pioneering works, notably those by David Bindman. Stoichita certainly takes his place within this tradition, to the extent that he

reworks the image of the “other” starting from the works themselves, notably using the pictorial corpus of the Renaissance: Adorations of the Magi in which the royal emissaries who have come to adore Jesus are Africans, Asians, and even Indians; portraits of coloured servants commanded by the prince, gypsies who slip into the first Venetian landscapes, etc. Yet for artists it was not simply a matter of sprinkling paintings with picturesque figures designed to please and draw attention, or to present the diversity of the world, whose reality had become established in European mentalities. For Stoichita, “exoticism” was a serious and reflexive subject that could redraw the outlines of old Europe. When Titian purely invented a black partner for Diana, thereby voluntarily straying from literary sources, he recomposed a new image of the ancient goddess’s nudity: dissimilar but nevertheless perfectly complementary to her early modern black double (*Diana and Acteon*, 1556-1559, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland). In Titian’s painting Acteon is petrified with surprise; the patron who commissioned the work, the champion of Catholicity Philippe II of Spain, hid it from view in the depths of his palace. It was no doubt sensitive to reveal these strange nudities, which ultimately suggested that Diana was as marginal as a black servant, or that Diana’s whiteness could be personified only by her coloured double. Titian represented this highly disturbing “other” in a very personal manner, but on the inevitable foundation of alterity: feminine alterity, social alterity (this black “Diana” is a servant), and bodily dissimilarity. Physical difference is not an insurmountable distance with Titian, for the two figures are wound around one another. For Stoichita, this theme imagined by Titian reveals not just a quest for Europe’s identity, but defines its relations at the dawn of the early modern period with both the “other” and a “foreigner within,” of which artists have always been aware.

## The stationary voyage

Because art can always be “alarming” or an “experience of alterity,” in the words of Emmanuel Levinas in *De l’existence à l’existant*, and even an “instrument of exterritorialization” without distant travels, it sometimes calls for analyses that are different from those of other disciplines. The art historian should of course consider diverse manifestations, beyond any reference to normative artistic canons, in order to understand the emergence of creation. To assess Gauguin’s art, it is not always necessary to interpret his travels to the Marquesas Islands, where the painter died in 1903. During his Breton period beginning in 1888, Gauguin encountered the “savage” and the “primitive,” and read in the landscapes of Pont-Aven the archaism that he later sought in Polynesia. His synthetic style had no need of what he later named the “studio of the Tropics” in order to blossom. Art history must also seek—within a nearby, every day, and even popular sphere—what seemed sufficiently strange in the eyes of artists to stimulate their imagination. In his *Honneur aux valeurs sauvages* from 1951, Jean Dubuffet defined *art brut* in this way, and found in this “art that has never ceased building itself in Europe in parallel to the other, this *art sauvage* to which nobody pays attention [...], authentic and living European art.” The “other” is not very distant here, but is nevertheless “outside”; it forces art history to always conceive of its object as “difference,” and prompts the artist to transcend the question of territories, extra-territoriality, and cultural *métissage*.

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