Migration and artistic identities

Author-s:
Christine GOUZI [1]

Abstract

Artistic migrations have often been studied in order to better understand the circulations that artists chose and planned for, as well as the phenomenon of reciprocal influence in art. Yet the movements of artists have not always been voluntary, as creative activity has also been the result of forced migrations since the Middle Ages. This phenomenon would later spread during the nineteenth century and became a major aspect of a twentieth century marked by wars as well as ethnic and political exoduses. The impact of these migrations on artistic identity and on works themselves can be reassessed in this light, which reveals the breaks and discontinuities that are a key component of creative activity and helps to better identify processes of acculturation and their impact on inspiration. Artistic migrations can thus be seen as multi-faceted "crises," ones that shed a different light on both the form of a work and the artist's intentions and identity.

Article

Artistic transfers have been at the centre of art history research for a number of decades, as have cultural transfers and their resulting acculturation. For instance, it has been shown that the movement of people and artwork has helped forge a European identity since the Middle Ages by maintaining dynamic relations between different cultural zones, and especially by promoting the circulation of models. With this in mind, Michel Espagne and Mickaël Werner have identified the artist as a "cultural mediator" and even more so as an essential actor in an "intercultural history" combining highly heterogeneous settings (M. Espagne and M. Werner, eds., *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand*, 1988; M. Espagne, *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands*, 1999).

However, studies have often insisted on the contributions of these exchanges, without taking into account the breaks and tensions they prompted in art, or their harmful consequences on artists and the creative process. For movements have not always been voluntary. The departure for Rome, which was codified in the fifteenth century as an educational journey—one that was essential to appreciating the ancient roots of European art—is only one of the more positive facets of artistic circulations. Travels to different courts or in connection with the Grand Tour, which was developed during the eighteenth century, stand in opposition to the many forced migrations of European history. Artists were of course persons rooted in their century, and fully subject to its traumatic events, including forced expatriations caused by wars, revolutions, and racial or religious persecution, along with economic crises, the death of a prince, or disgrace, all of which shaped the art of a period. Artistic and cultural transfers can therefore be the result of involuntary movements, both physical and symbolic, whose temporary and uncertain nature represented an ordeal for creative activity. Moreover, their consequences are difficult to discern and quantify, for they have a multi-faceted reality that resonates in many ways and are sometimes similar to Walter Benjamin's "destructive character," which he saw as a characteristic of "modernity." Yet in putting artists in a marginal situation and uprooting them from the daily life of their own culture, these migrations were also the catalyst for a genuine "hermeneutic of distance," whose violence could be productive: they are in

keeping with the Hegelian "negative work," as they create an "essential" lack that the artist incessantly seeks to fill.

Migratory flows and scourges

Epidemics were the most frequent crises in the everyday life of European populations until the eighteenth century, along with wars and famines. They gave rise to major movements of panic and flight, ended promising careers, especially artistic ones. We are familiar with the deadly consequences of many episodes of the plague, one of which took the life of Giorgione in 1510 in Venice. This premature and sudden end has led to considerable debate regarding the attribution of his paintings. Were they painted entirely by his hand? Were they finished by Titian? The great plague of 1649 that struck Spain contributed to the decline of Seville, which Zurbarán left for Madrid shortly after his son and assistant succumbed to the disease. Natural catastrophes were often followed by economic decline, which forced artists to find new clientele by leaving behind the artistic centres they had helped so much to develop. Epidemics of the plague in Normandy during the first half of the seventeenth century were likewise followed by food shortages and even famine, as well as political disturbances such as the repression of the Nu-Pieds revolt in Rouen in 1639, or the exile of the Parliament in 1640. The city became less artistically dynamic and was no longer sufficient to retain the painter Daniel Hallé (1615-1675), who left Rouen permanently for Paris in the late 1630s. Twenty years later, in 1661, it was inconceivable for the seventeen-year-old Jean Jouvenet (1644-1717), who would become the King's painter, to remain in Rouen rather than settle in the capital. The balance of life in the provinces was enduringly shaken by these migratory bloodlettings, which favoured the artistic centralization of the kingdom of France late in the reign of Louis XIV, and greatly blurred the artistic identity of artists from the provinces.

Similar effects resulted from wars, which were considered in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe as a scourge equivalent to epidemic or famine. The example of Flemish weavers, who suffered from the wars of religion, is a good illustration. Their case was studied by Guy Delmarcel, who retraced the more or less chaotic journey of tapestry cartoon painters, tapestry weavers, and their merchants (*La tapisserie flamande*, 1999). The Spanish garrison's destruction of the stock belonging to the weavers of Antwerp in 1576 compelled some to move to other cities in the early 1580s. After the sack of Antwerp by the Spanish in 1585, many Protestant artists settled in Delft, Haarlem (where Karel van Mander, the future author of *Schilder-Boeck*, had also settled), Middelburg, and Gouda. Economic difficulties and the promise of a better future drove others to emigrate beyond Northern Europe. Marc Coomans from Antwerp and François van der Plancken from Oudenarde went to Paris in 1601 at the instigation of Sully and Henry IV of France. They Gallicized their names and founded two tapestry-weaving dynasties that brought about a renewal of weaving technique and style in their host country during the seventeenth century. They were also behind the future Gobelins manufactory. In 1622, François Tons tried his luck in Spain, where he developed a manufactory in Pastrana specializing in verdure tapestry in the Northern style.

These forced movements call for a reconsideration of the notion of an artistic "school," whose legitimacy with regard to early modern Europe is being debated by art historians today. They demonstrate the contingent and porous nature of creative centres, which were often dependent on sporadic migratory flows that were more imposed than genuinely chosen. These flows engendered permanent reconfigurations of artistic environments, and undoubtedly conditioned the inspiration of artists.

Artists struck by the plague

In 1951, Millard Meiss shed light on the effects of the Black Death of 1348 on Florentine and Siennese

painting, thereby sparking an enduring renewal of the vision of the art of the first Renaissance (*Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*). While many artists were unable to flee due to the violence of the epidemic, the artistic identity of the survivors was affected nonetheless. Meiss clearly showed that representation was not drastically transformed by this apocalyptic experience of death. In the words of Georges Didi-Huberman, taken from his introduction to the revised edition of 1994, the scourge that decimated over half of the inhabitants of Siena and Florence left no more than a "minor iconographic mark." Renewed interest in Our Lady of Pity and plague saints such as Roch or Sebastian, along with an unusual taste for images of mystical ecstasy, were the only realities of the catastrophe in religious representation. However, a number of symptoms of a vaguer malaise spread, such as ubiquitous images of bodily decomposition, in addition to the insistence on redemption or even a form of artistic "regression," which drove patrons to prefer pre-catastrophe art with its more reassuring and fixed formulas. These regressive accents can be seen as a kind of "symbolic migration," with the plague causing a backward surge that broke with the rediscovery of Antiquity and the implementation of a more realistic spatiality inherited from Giotto. The isolated and troubled surviving painters, such as Taddeo Gaddi (ca. 1300-1366), transformed their manner. The plague, which shaped the imagination of Europeans for centuries (to the point of talk of a "brown plague" in the twentieth century), disturbed artists to such an extent that it shattered the *continuum* of creation and brought about a reactionary transposition. Taking its impact into consideration also has an indirect effect on the notion of artistic "progress" so dear to Vasari in his *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (1550), for it once again emphasizes the importance of discontinuities and "breaking points" in the unfurling of art history, which Michel Foucault has emphasized in other disciplines.

However, these physical and intellectual "displacements" did not always take the form of a "distancing" or "uprooting." For instance, they did not exclude real or metaphorical returns, an example of the latter being the many recurrences of Antiquity in Florentine circles of the late fourteenth century, which were behind what has been called the "blossoming of the Renaissance" at the beginning of the following century. Nor did they prevent harmonious circulations at the moment of the crisis itself. For example, in 1505, Dürer fled Nuremberg in the middle of a plague epidemic for a pleasant two-year stay in Venice. These migrations therefore cannot be compared with the major exoduses that followed wars or revolutions, or those that resulted directly from the rise of totalitarianism during the twentieth century.

Exiled, banned, and outlawed

These exoduses took a heavy toll on writers as well as artists, one that frequently took the form of exile. Like writers, painters were often exiled for their ideas, political commitment, ethnic background, or more simply due to their very status as an intellectual. Artists were nevertheless different from writers or *littérateurs*, who bore the full brunt of the loss of their mother tongue. "I write in a foreign language, and that is the problem of emigration," wrote Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers in 1945, when she had taken refuge in the United States. On the contrary, artistic language is universal, and exile did not imperil the material conditions of its implementation. For example, Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun (1755-1842), who emigrated after the French Revolution of 1789, continued the same formula of the aristocratic portrait in Italy, Austria, and later Russia. Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), who was affected by the law banishing regicides after the Bourbon Restoration in France in 1816, continued to create during his near decade of exile in Brussels. He renewed his manner of history painting and continued to be a sought-after portraitist until his death in 1825. In the famous report he addressed to the governor of the city upon his arrival, David expressed his relief in finding a refuge, and emphasized his need for "tranquillity," one that he likened to a "moral repose" fostered by his condition as an exile, and also saw as a guarantee of independence. This "repose" allowed him to "devote the rest of his life to his art," whose forms he planned out with great precision. His status as

an exile also gave him a new stature, which prefigured the romantic image of the heroic intellectual who chose to abandon his country to defend his convictions. Forced flight can thus be retrospectively turned into a desired exclusion, one that is ultimately assumed to guarantee artistic practice. Claude Monet (1840-1926) experienced an ordeal of this sort during the Franco-Prussian War, when he chose to settle in London with his family in December 1870. In 1871 he went to the Netherlands and avoided the bloody episode of the Paris Commune. Still, he was particularly productive during this period of exile: he finished over eighty paintings during the four months spent in the Netherlands, including timeless landscapes totally detached from Parisian events, which later enabled him to refine his representation of space. In this extreme case, exile imposed an absence of commitment, which preserved inspiration and the very possibility of creation.

The language of exile

The privileged position of artists in exile can help explain why they often remained isolated in their host country, without feeling a strong need to be part of a community of refugees, or even to exalt patriotic or nostalgic sentiments in their work. The Eastern European painters and sculptors who emigrated to Paris between 1918 and 1939, after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the political repression linked to the rise of totalitarianism, similarly formed an unstable entity that is difficult to define as an "entity." Laurence Bertrand-Dorléac has clearly shown that the "Paris School," the term most often used to refer to this group, is an "imbricated concept" in search of a "permanent identity." It serves the purpose of describing Russian or more broadly Slavic *émigré* artists (and sometimes includes Modigliani), whether Jewish or not; after 1940, it was defended as a national school which demonstrated the vitality of French art. The fate of the Russian Marc Chagall (1887-1985), who arrived in Paris in 1923 and became part of the Paris School world, offers an illustrative example. He took advantage of the solidarity of the *émigré* artist group in Paris, but at the same time succeeded, without being isolated, in distinguishing himself through his art, whose foundations he had established well before his departure from Russia. The varied styles of *émigré* artists from the 1920s and 1930s clearly show the absence of a collective reaction to emigration, whether political or artistic. Despite the search for artistic sociability, which was sometimes accompanied by cultural sociability, the reaction of artists to the violence of expatriation could only be on an individual level and is only implicitly present in their works.

Exile nevertheless affects works and can do so even indirectly. While Chagall did not fundamentally change the dreamlike theme of his canvases when he arrived in Paris in 1922, he remained entrenched for a time in the representation of still lifes and landscapes, in short neutral genres which he had not previously explored in this manner. The images of his hometown and the world of his childhood, which were a constituent part of both his intimate and artistic identity, diminished in favour of more impersonal compositions. They mark the loss of bearings with respect to identity and reveal a kind of "mutilated life" akin to the one described in 1951 by Theodor W. Adorno in *Minima moralia*. For however universal artistic language may be, it is not comparable to the "language" specific to each creator: exile can therefore prevent artists from "inhabiting" their language, which ultimately escapes them and forces them to reinvent in the mode of loss or lack.

Inner exile

This is all the truer of Jewish artists who, like Chagall, could consider themselves as being "stateless" within their country of birth, even before the experience of being uprooted. This touches on the complex problem of the artist's intrinsic marginality within society, which far surpasses the romantic vision of the solitary "genius," and helps explain a kind of "immobile" exile; it also touches on the condition of Jewish artists emancipated from their environment of origin, who in the words of Hannah Arendt considered themselves to be "conscious pariahs." As foreigners in their own country and

community, artists exclude themselves and turn their inner exile into the catalyst of their creation. This "crypto-emigration," described by Walter Benjamin in his *Essays on Brecht* collected and published in 1966, can be seen as a voluntary distancing, one that can take on a variety of forms that strongly nuance the consent they garner. The twentieth century's totalitarian regimes were the stage for numerous exiles of this type, all of which were connected to marginality, secrecy, and censorship, and even to deportation and death. In less tragic circumstances, artists can take a borrowed name that materializes their dual identity and schizophrenic relation to art, as was the case for A. R. Penck, who was born Ralph Winckler in Dresden in 1939, or Georg Baselitz, who was born Hans-Georg Kern in Deutschbaselitz in 1938. Penck assumed numerous pseudonyms during his career, which corresponded to the numerous stages of his artistic engagement, and in particular symbolized its slow "deconditioning." Penck always refused the realism imposed in the GDR, instead using the world of graphic signs to represent the human figure. Forbidden from exhibitions in his country and struck from the official list of artists, his extradition to the West in 1980 was the result of an internal defection that had already taken place even before the reality of exile. Defection, however, was not always synonymous with emancipation, for Penck's art bore the mark of the violent division between East and West even after the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification. Emigration nevertheless provided Penck with the possibility of experimenting with monumental sculpture, music and film, thereby extending his field of action to other *mediums*. We can see this diversification as a discovery of liberty, although it is also akin to a kind of roaming of the spirit, not unlike the physical wandering of the person without ties.

In his *La crise de la conscience européenne* (1934), Paul Hazard identified the beginning of the major waves of forced movements in the transition to the early modern period during the seventeenth century, when religious persecution resumed in France after the wars of religion. The migrations brought about by wars, as well as by religious, political, and ethnic repression, were essential elements of a certain "modernity" that took root in the very awareness of European belonging. Artists nevertheless played an ambiguous and specific role in these events, for while they were witnesses to collective and individual suffering, they were also indirect witnesses by translating, transmuting, and transfiguring the torments of exile into their art. *Émigrés* also had the capacity to quickly appropriate their host country's culture, not only because the artistic training of Europeans has always been based on a deep knowledge of the work of their peers, but also because artists, even stateless ones, were not invisible to the public and rarely remained anonymous. As a land of violence, Europe has been the stage of numerous artistic migrations, although it has also been a land of welcome for artists from other continents, who found the artistic blossoming that was not available to them in the country of their birth. This aspect of artistic migrations, which can be classified as migrations of elites, has been explored by Linda Nochlin in the framework of gender studies. The author has notably highlighted how American impressionists, such as Mary Cassatt, were liberated by their stay in France: they could embody their artistic identity only by way of displacement and marginality. In this case emigration was an escape from the social constraints of the country of origin, and made possible the recognition of artists, who sometimes paradoxically rewrote their identity as strangers to themselves and found lasting success thanks to the most unexpected movements.

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