

Ut oeconomia Pictura: How the Global Art Market is Changing the Dominant Canons

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Abstract This study explores the pressure that the new configuration of the art market is exerting on the alleged universalism of Western artistic conventions, in particular as a result of the dramatic increase in the quotation of Chinese artists and the growth of China's market share globally. In fact, over the last decade, there has been a great cultural and economic valuation of artistic expressions that hardly correspond to Western conventions at all, especially in Asian and Islamic countries. These changes call for a thorough revision of the ethnocentrism that marks the West's artistic narratives and canons, as the need to create more inclusive narratives becomes increasingly more evident.

Keywords Art Market, Canons, Art History, Globalization, China

1. Introduction

For the first time since the beginning of the 19th century, the most valuable artists from an economic point of view are not European or North American.¹ In 2011, Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) became the best-selling artist on the world auction market as he out-earned the renowned Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), probably the most influential European artist of the 20th century[1]. However, this episode involving Zhang Daqian was not an isolated case; nor was it the result of a conjunctural phenomenon. In 2010, China had already become the largest art auction market, surpassing both the USA and the United Kingdom[2], and in 2011 it became the largest art market, in all three areas, i.e., the primary market (the first sale of a work of art), the secondary market (subsequent sales of a work of art by dealers and retailers) and the tertiary market (sales at auction). Another important piece of information about China's primacy is the fact that for the first time there were six Chinese artists[1] on the list of the ten most valuable artists of 2011, including the first and second places – the latter occupied by Qi Baishi (1864-1957). This would have been unimaginable a mere decade ago when even to find Chinese names on the list of the 100 most valuable artists

would not have been an easy task. Even if we take into account the overheating effect caused by speculators and investment funds, the overwhelming dominance of Chinese art on the art market throughout 2011 naturally reflects the maturity and dynamics of the so-called “emerging economies” and their cultural values.

This situation is particularly evident in the case of China, a country that became the second largest world economy at a GDP level in late 2010, and whose rate of growth indicates it will surpass the USA in terms of this very indicator in the next ten to fifteen years. The remarkable economic growth of the so-called BRICS, an acronym that refers to Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (and to which one could add equally populated countries with a growing economy, such as Indonesia, Mexico and Turkey), has brought about structural changes to the world economy, thus creating new challenges for the more developed economies – in particular for the USA, Japan and European countries, especially the Mediterranean ones, which are facing very low or even negative growth rates. Several of these “emerging countries” (a phrase that is becoming increasingly inadequate to identify the real drivers of the world economy) have ancient cultural traditions, as is the case of India and China. In other cases, as with the heirs of ancient Persia, there are countries that bring together centuries- or millennia-old cultures with an identity that is deeply marked by Islam. Countries where there isn't a well-defined boundary between the sphere of the State and the sphere of religion. Consequently, these are cultures that follow distinct conventions and aesthetic criteria that are very much their own, and for which Western canons have very little relevance in the field of the visual arts[3].

In this regard, the new map of the world economy also implies a new map for the cultural and artistic reality – a

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Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/arts>

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¹ The expression “most valuable artists” is used strictly to refer to artists, living or deceased, whose artistic production is traded on the market over a given year, giving rise to the highest business volumes. Although they are more important, we are not taking into account criteria of a subjective nature, such as the symbolic, artistic, historical and cultural value of the works by the artists in question.

new map for which the alleged universalism of Western artistic conventions is proving to be inadequate. In the text that follows, we will thoroughly examine the main changes the art market has experienced in recent years and we will see to what extent there is a discrepancy between that which the art market is valuing, especially among the so-called “emerging countries”, and that which represents the Western artistic canons. As a result of this analysis, we will also tackle the adverse effects of the political and ideological use of these canons, namely in terms of promoting civilisational imbalances. Hence the need to relativise these canons and to find new formulas for drawing up art histories that are less ethnocentric and more suited to the wealth and diversity of artistic creation among the different cultures and civilisations in the world, many of which possess their own artistic canons.

2. The New Geography of the Art Market

In the introduction to this article we mentioned that in 2011 Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) became the best-selling artist at auction, and that he was accompanied by another five compatriots on the world’s top ten list. That same year, Chinese artists accounted for a third of the artists present in the top 100[1].² In order to understand how profoundly the market has changed, we need simply to mention that a decade earlier, in 2001, Zhang Daqian was the only Chinese artist on the list of the 100 best-selling artists at auction. And at the time, he was very far from the top, coming in at number 73. In fact, it was only in 2005 that Zhang Daqian made it onto the list of the 50 most valuable artists, now alongside another four of his countrymen on the list of the 100 most valuable artists: Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) in 33rd place, Zao Wou Ki (1921-) in 42nd place, Qi Baishi (1864-1957) in 71st place, and Chu Teh-Chun (1920-) in 90th place. Furthermore, 2005 was a very important year in this regard, as it was the first time that China, by means of Hong Kong, managed to achieve a higher market share than a number of European countries, such as Germany and Italy, occupying fourth place, right behind the USA, the United Kingdom and France, with a 3.7% share of the fine arts auction market[4]. The speed with which China has imposed itself can be clearly seen in the growth of its share in the fine arts auction market and in the number of artists it places in the top 10 sales at auction.

In 2008, China had a market share of 7.2%, considerably far behind the USA’s 35.6% and the United Kingdom’s 35.7%, and slightly above France’s 6% share.[5] In the following year, 2009, which was marked by a general decrease in the art market’s invoicing volume, China’s auction market share expanded to 17.4%, thus approaching the United Kingdom’s share of 21.3%, but still far from the United States’ 27.9% share. However, China managed to

surpass France (with a 13.9% share), which had experienced an unrepeatable episode that year: the very successful auction of the Pierre Bergé/Yves Saint Laurent collection that was responsible for 40% of the total invoicing amount at art auctions in France that year[6]. In 2010, as previously mentioned, China occupied first place at a level of art auctions, reaching a 33% market share as opposed to the USA’s 29.9% and the United Kingdom’s 19.4%, and very far from France’s 5.1%[2]. Finally, last year in 2011, China achieved an overwhelming market share with 41.4%, followed by the USA with 23.6%, and the United Kingdom with 19.4%, with fourth place going once again to France with a share of 4.5%[1].

With regard to artists in the top 10, this only happened in 2009 for the very first time, with a single artist, Qi Baishi, who took third place in that ranking[6]. In fact, in 2008, the most valuable Chinese artist was Zhang Xiaogang, coming in at number 29, while Qi Baishi occupied a distant 63rd place[5]. In 2010, the importance of China became very clear, as it placed four artists in the top 10, namely: Qi Baishi in 2nd place, Zhang Daqian in 4th place, Xu Beihong (1895-1953) in 6th place, and Fu Baoshi (1904-1965) in 9th place[2]. Thus, in a scant four years between 2008 and 2011, China went from having no artists in the top 10 to occupying an unmistakably dominant position, as it accounted for over half of the list with six Chinese artists: Zhang Daqian (1st place), Qi Baishi (2nd place), Xu Beihong (5th place), Wu Guanzhong (6th place), Fu Baoshi (7th place) and Li Keran (1907-1989) (10th place)[1]. This situation clearly reflects the growth of China’s market share in those four years, from 7.2% in 2008 to a staggering 41.4% in 2011.

However, the truth compels us to emphasise that the data for last Spring (April-June 2012) reveals a sharp retreat in the invoicing volume of the major auction houses active in China (China Guardian, Poly Auction, Sotheby’s Hong Kong and Christie’s Hong Kong). In comparison with the sales volume for the same quarter last year (April-June 2011), there was a fall of 43%[7]. And compared with the results for last Autumn (October-December 2011), there was a fall of 32%. In the specific case of contemporary art, there have been higher valuations in recent years, driven by new consumption habits, as well as by speculation and by the intervention of investment funds. In this particular market segment, related to contemporary art, there was an even greater retreat in relation to the Autumn quarter, reaching 41%, and in comparison with the same quarter for Spring 2011 there was a fall of 58%[7]. Thus, by the end of 2012, it is likely that China will have lost its leadership position in the art market in terms of sales at auctions. Nevertheless, the distance separating it from the leader, probably the USA, will not be great, and if the Chinese economy continues to grow at the same rate, this country will probably return to the leadership position once again in the following years and remain there.

The great changes in terms of the geography of the art

² To be precise, there were 36 artists on the ‘100’ list, of which 17 were among the top 50.

market are particularly evident in the way the 2008-09 crisis was overcome, especially if we compare this process with the previous major crisis in 1990-91. At that time, the volume of sales was reduced to less than half, thus plunging the sector into a prolonged period of stagnation between 1992 and 2003, which was then followed by a gradual recovery that took four years to once again reach the invoicing levels of 1989. The 2008-09 crisis also caused sudden and sharp declines in the art market, although these were slightly less profound than in 1990-91. Nevertheless, the most interesting point that set the 2008-09 crisis apart was the fact that only two years were needed to overcome it, and by 2011 turnover was already back to what it had been before the crisis. A large part of the secret to this extremely rapid recovery has to do with changes in the geography of the art market, which have already taken place in the new century.

Apart from the epiphenomenon of the late 1980s, when Nipponese buyers took Impressionist painting to irrational record-breaking heights, the art market was centred in the USA, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, in France and Switzerland. However, since the beginning of the new century, Western countries have become progressively less important in this field, thus favouring the Asian market. Today, China holds the largest overall share of the market, and boasts three of the six greatest commercial hubs in this business, which are currently centred (in decreasing order) in Beijing, New York, London, Hong Kong, Paris and Shanghai. In fact, if we focus solely on the art auctions held last year, we find that in terms of market share Beijing had 27% of the share, New York 22%, London 19%, Hong Kong 7%, Paris 3.7% and Shanghai 3%[1].

In the last three decades, the numbers of new museums and art centres has grown considerably, especially in the field of contemporary art, as a result of both public and private initiatives[3]. And in both cases, this proliferation of institutes has also fuelled the art market, as many of these organisations had to build art collections from nothing, as well as take on a policy of annual purchases in order to accompany the evolution of artistic development. What is most interesting, however, is that the distribution of these new institutions has become much more balanced over the last decade. It has also been more pronounced in Asia, the Persian Gulf and Latin America than in the West, thus boosting, above all, the modern and contemporary art market in the countries or regions where said institutes are located and driving up the quotation of their own artists[3].

An important fact regarding the structure of the market is related to the importance taken on by modern art and by contemporary art, which – broadly speaking – correspond to art from the first half of the 20th century and art produced since the post-war era. The selection of this type of art, as opposed to older art, resulted from the combination of a number of factors. Firstly, a more sophisticated artistic culture among the public and consumers, supported by a larger number and better quality of institutions dedicated to modern and contemporary art. On the other hand, the

scarcity of older works of art on the market, especially in the upper segment, forced market players to move to a segment where supply is greater, and thus increasingly enter the sphere of more recent and younger artists. Finally, successive scandals involving the transaction of illegally excavated antiquities in countries such as Italy, Greece, China, Turkey and Egypt, which were later acquired by major European and American museums, led market players, especially auction houses, to distance themselves from transacting in such works whose origin and course are always more difficult to guarantee.

In short, the new geography and structure of the art market bear witness to a great disconformity between that which the market values and that which the Western canons embody. From a more critical approach, it could be said that this discrepancy would be healthy and that the ideal models of the canons would be better protected, and confirmed, precisely if they were at the antipodes of the vile commercialism that characterises the art market. However, this is not the case. In fact, what is happening is the systematic economic valuation of artistic goods that have no relation to Western canons. Firstly, there is the cultural valuation of ancient works of art, which in the West never enjoyed the centrality that they are given in their cultures or regions of origin. Furthermore, in the case of more recent works, it is common to value streams and typologies that hardly conform to Western contemporary art canons. These are works that place greater value on realism, figuration, calligraphy, technical ability and spontaneity than on, apparently, the historical and disciplinary author-referencing visible in the contemporary art of the West.

3. Conflicting Canons

From the foregoing, it is evident that we are facing a new reality in terms of the global consumption of art. For the first time in two hundred years, the art market is clearly dominated by an Asian country, with an artistic tradition very different to that of the West. Knowing that there is a tendency in the art world to converge economic valuation (the market) with symbolic valuation (culture), we are faced with an important question: To what extent has the new reality of the art market – on a global level – already started to change the artistic canons of the Western matrix?

The first step in order to answer this question involves defining, as accurately as possible, that which we have referred to as “Western artistic canons”. In the West, artistic canons have been based on the classical Greco-Roman tradition. According to this tradition, the quality of a work of art was measured by its capacity to mimic Nature. Much of what we know about this and about other classical canons was transmitted to us indirectly by Roman writers, such as Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE), or Pausanias (2nd century CE). In the case of Pliny in particular, we see that the primacy given to mimicking nature in the arts lies in the conception of nature as a creative force[8]. *Natura* is, in fact, the immanent reason of the universe; it is what gives life to

the cosmos, and what governs it with causal relationships. For instance: nature moves the heavenly bodies, which consequently lead to the changing seasons, which in turn mark the cycle of life on earth, especially in terms of plant life, and so on. To a certain extent, Nature is a self-creative power, almost some sort of divinity. Throughout *Natural History*, an encyclopaedia consisting of 37 books, Pliny tries to show us in what ways the divine power of Nature reveals itself and how humans interact with Nature rationally through the different arts, which are essentially lessons or imitations of nature[8]. Man has a rational relationship with *Natura*, while reaping its direct benefits and perfecting the *technai* (or *arts*) that best allow him to explore the gifts of nature. The *arts* are then improved by man as he observes the processes of nature itself and tries to imitate it artificially with activities ranging from farming and shipping to painting and sculpture[8].

This natural philosophy also gives rise to the organicist theory of the arts, according to which these also go through periods of genesis, maturity and stagnation. Hence, the Greco-Roman art theory is a theory based on an organicist approach (genesis, maturity, stagnation) and on the technical progress which made it possible to mimic nature[8]. Despite all the emphasis given to individual heroes, such as Zeuxis, Apelles and Phidias, Pliny is really interested in narrating the story of the evolution of an art where the artists are used instrumentally. Like Vitruvius, Pliny believed that the excellence of human rationality was rooted in its conformity with nature, and thus artists should not produce works that were unrealistic or fanciful. It is thus clear why Pliny felt that art had stopped evolving circa 300 BC, at the time of Alexander the Great – an idea he clearly expresses in chapter 52 of Book 34, *cessavit deinde ars* (“then art disappeared”), or in chapter 28 of Book 35, where he went so far as to say that in his time, the 1st century CE, painting was an *artis morientis* (a dying art)[9]. Art obviously does not die or disappear, but from Pliny’s point of view all possible technical progress had already been made (line, colour, composition, symmetry, rhythm, modelling, shading, perspective, etc). This, then, is the underlying idea: when art manages to achieve natural forms, it simply stops developing.

Pliny did more than merely justify the primacy of mimicking reality when evaluating a work of art. He also presented a discursive model for the appreciation of works of art that could be used by members of the Roman elite as a form of social distinction and differentiation[10]. The fact that he identified artists, identified the places where their works were to be found, and clearly presented the irrational prices paid for some of those works, also contributed to the perpetuation of his text as a modelling, canonical text.

During the Middle Ages, the West’s entire cultural and civilisational model changed, and art was no longer regarded as a reality with its own value. Possibly more complex than classical art, and certainly endowed with a higher metaphysical dimension, medieval art was seen as a means of access to values and realms that were more

important than the tangible world. A world created by God, and not by a self-aware and deified Nature. Thus, for almost a thousand years, the world abandoned the classical canons promoted by Pliny and many other authors, and there was no interest in resuming the long narratives inherited from the ancient world, including the history of the evolutionary process of each art in the Greek world.

In any event, as is common knowledge, the classical canons came back in full force during the Italian Renaissance[11][12]. During this time, the canon referring to the mimicry of reality was recovered and the artistic tradition set out by Pliny, with its stories and anecdotes, was repeated to exhaustion by writers who sought to value the art of painting and sculpture. The ultimate expression of the recovery of the classical canon and of its adaptation to the Renaissance’s modern days can be seen in the *magnum opus* by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574): *Le vite de più eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori italiani*, compiled and written in two different stages, and with a revised and extended second edition that was sent to the printing press in 1568. The idea to recover classical art on the ashes of the Middle Ages (embodied by Cimabue, Giotto and Simone Martini), and the narration of the technical feats of successive generations of artists up until Michelangelo (1475-1564), left an indelible mark on the artistic and aesthetic conventions that prevailed between c.1550 and c.1900. And there is still great consensus as to the importance of the artists included in the biographies written by Vasari. In effect, Ginsburgh and Weyers have shown that over half of the 250 painters written about by Vasari are always mentioned in the major art histories produced up until the end of the 20th century that deal with Renaissance art, thus demonstrating the strong consensus in this regard and, consequently, the strength of these canons [14][15][16].³

Vasari’s model remained more or less intact until the dawn of the 20th century, when Cubism and avant-garde movements definitely called into question the prevalence of the mimicry of reality as the criterion for defining the value of art, thus sparking the crisis of figurative art in the West[18]. Since then, value has increasingly been given to the demiurgic act of the artist and to the conceptual dimension of the work, while devaluing figuration and similarity to the tangible world, as well as lessening the technical and manual dimension of artistic creation. These canons applied to contemporary art have essentially prevailed from the moment that Picasso, Duchamp and others institutionalised the critique of the mimetic tradition practised uninterruptedly in Western art from c.1500 to c.1900.

Indeed, there could not be a more striking contrast between these Western canons and the canons of other

³ Even so, these findings cannot be generalised to all situations. For example, similar studies on Flemish and Dutch painting produced between the late 16th century and the end of the 17th century have shown that there are few artists who manage to remain in the major encyclopaedic works that deal with this topic in the period between c.1700 and c.2000 [17].

civilisations, such as China's. For example, Chinese canons never emphasised the mimicry of reality as a criterion to be valued – quite the opposite, in fact[19][20]. Inspired by the Confucian philosophy, the first Chinese art theorists believed that the artist should not represent reality exactly as it is seen, as it is imperfect and obvious. Instead, he should depict that which a specific landscape or object reveal of their ideal essence, something that the artist achieves with his mind and not with his eyes[3][19]. Thus, for almost two thousand years, not only did the Chinese canons regard the mimicry of reality as an elementary activity, of little merit and reasoning, but they placed calligraphy and painting on an equal standing – something completely unthinkable in the West[19]. This equivalence stems from the idea that painting is more of a mental product than the result of a skilled hand.

Compliance with these canons and the disdain shown by the technical virtuosity of Western art in the mimicry of reality, especially as a result of the importance of perspective, never held great fascination for the Chinese. Similarly, as important as building and maintaining a literary tradition regarding artistic canons, which greatly marked the difference between the elite and the other social classes[20], was the maintenance of collections filled with the largest possible number of works produced by the best artists of every period, especially in terms of painting and calligraphy. Well, contrary to what happened in Europe, the continent where classical art collections crumbled with the decline of the Western Roman Empire and the slow erosion of the Eastern Roman Empire (despite notable efforts such as those by Byzantine aristocrat Lausus in the 5th century[21]), China managed to maintain such collections more or less intact over the centuries, especially in the Imperial Palace[19], with the emperors themselves personally encouraging these types of collections. Concomitantly, in China it has been possible to maintain a permanent continuity between the first extended biographies on artists, written in the 3rd century (CE), and that which is happening today. Thus, early on, especially during the Song dynasty (960-1279), there was the determination to institutionalise the cult of the artistic canons in Chinese culture, with the development of biographical narratives on the major artists and calligraphers. Furthermore, the production of comprehensive catalogues on the imperial collections was encouraged, a practice that was cyclically taken up in almost every dynasty[19].

Zhang Yanyuan (c.815-c.875) stands out among the main biographers of Chinese artists, with his book entitled *Li dai ming hua ji* (Records of famous paintings of all the dynasties). Written during the Tang dynasty, it includes close to 370 painters from the 3rd century (CE) up until his time. This author characterises the style of each painter, identifies their specialties and ranks them, somewhat similar to Vasari in the 16th century. However, the criteria followed for this ranking stem from an earlier text written by Xie He in the early 6th century, entitled *Gu hua pin lu*

(Classification of Ancient Painters)[19]. In the field of calligraphy, Mi Fu (1051-1107) is responsible for one of the most remarkable works in the establishment of the canon in Chinese calligraphy, which, over the centuries, would continue to be considered as an art equal or superior to the art of painting. In any event, it was mainly from the Ming dynasty onwards that the production of books became generalised – books with illustrations of paintings and the calligraphy styles of the leading masters of the ancient Chinese art. These books were intended to consolidate the canons of Chinese art among the rising bourgeoisie, and works of a more biographical and informative nature were just as important as those designed to present the criteria for appreciation, the aesthetic judgements that should be followed by people in the upper strata of society[20].

It should also be noted that erudite Chinese culture always sought to ignore and remove the mercantile dimension from the production and circulation of the most elaborate forms of art, in the same way that it sought to place the creations of a scholar on a different level to those of a mere artisan. For the purposes of social etiquette, the literati who produced pieces of calligraphy or paintings were always considered as «amateurs», especially since many of them were aristocrats. However, since this production was their only source of income, they should in fact have been considered professional artists. In this case, the works by these artists were never sold directly. Such pieces were seen as a *gift* that required a *counter-gift* from a collector or “buyer”. This complex situation could involve the offer of gifts, which the scholar-artist would then sell on the market for money, or it could take the form of co-habitational patronage, where the learned artist would live in the house of his patron, and there receive all the care he needed. In contrast, professional craftsmen could clearly assign prices and sell their creations directly. However, these artists and these works did not enjoy the same esteem, since the creation by the scholar-artist was supposed to be disinterested and more spontaneous than the time-consuming and laborious creations of the craftsmen[19][20].

Thus, it is not surprising that among the Chinese artists most valued by the market today it is unusual to find a conceptual artist, more in line with the Western canons for contemporary art. In effect, Chinese contemporary painting is marked by two streams. One is more academic and traditional, normally in oil, figurative, and with impressive technical ability, or alternatively, there is the true *guo hua* (traditional Chinese painting), that is, painting on paper or silk in a more spontaneous manner, using only traditional brushes and pigments of mineral or plant origin, and where calligraphy plays a prominent role. The other stream fits in perfectly with the modernistic artistic conventions built up in the West throughout the 20th century, and is thus better accepted by the *nomenclature* of the global art world. This dichotomy has, in fact, been a bone of contention within the Chinese artistic community since the early 20th century, and there is a palpable tension and difference of opinions between the stream in favour of the “Westernisation” of

Chinese art (in terms of an approximation to the principles of modernism), and the purist stream that advocates maintaining the national Chinese tradition, which found it legitimate to resort to Western academic techniques, but where the pre-eminence of calligraphy, the principle of spontaneity, respect for traditional themes and the excellence of technical virtuosity were greater values. One of the most striking episodes in this conflict arose *à propos* the 1929 National Exhibition, where Xu Beihong exchanged bitter arguments with the Chinese artistic vanguard, which was mainly based in Shanghai[19].

As expected, of these two streams the one that has generated greater demand is precisely the one related to the contemporary Chinese art that is more faithful to its traditional artistic conventions, and which is thus a more “national” art than the art carried out by more conceptual artists, such as Ai Weiwei, for example. In effect, if we look at the six artists in 2011’s top 10 – Zhang Daqian, Qi Baishi, Xu Beihong, Wu Guanzhong, Fu Baoshi and Li Keran – we find that all of them have in common a great respect for the traditional stream of Chinese painting (*guohua*), even if some of them have sought to incorporate some of Western art’s more abstract tendencies into the Chinese tradition. Filiation to tradition is felt, above all, in Qi Baishi, Fu Baoshi, Li Keran and Xu Beihong, and to a lesser extent in Wu Guanzhong and Zhang Daqian. Finally, it must also be noted that with the exception of Qi Baishi, all of these painters were active in the 20th century, especially between the early establishment of the Republic in 1912 and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

Thus, we are thoroughly convinced that the dominant canons for ancient art (pre-1900), as well as the dominant canons for modern and contemporary art (post-1900) are currently undergoing a readjustment dictated by the art market, which is nothing more than the reflection of the rebirth of a number of cultures and civilisations that have suffered the harmful effects of Western hegemony over the last two centuries.

4. Conclusions

In the past two hundred years, the West has managed to impose its political and economic domination at a global level, with the colonisation of other countries being the most obvious expression of this dominion. Then, hand in hand, came the West’s cultural models and canons, including those related to the visual arts, and all other models and canons were judged by this measure. Wherever there were locally established canons and traditions, these realities were largely ignored or devalued, so as not to call into question the justice and inevitability of the West’s political and economic hegemony. The ethnocentrism of the West was thus ideologically justified by the supposed superiority of its culture, making it inevitable for the other cultures to be led by it. This same ethnocentrism justified the colonial occupation of vast regions around the globe, especially between the early 19th century and the mid 20th

century, with noble “civilisational” objectives.

The question now arises whether the current direction followed by the art world, in terms of a growing focus on Chinese art, may not, in the long term, lead to the replacement of Western canons by Chinese canons. That is, the mere exchange of one hegemony for another, while the same system remains and certain dominant canons are exchanged for other different canons. Even so, the present-day reality might very well be the opportunity we needed in order to develop new, more inclusive narratives and multipolar artistic canons, while giving up the pretension of uniformising a linear and teleological discourse regarding artistic reality. Naturally, this implies leaving the field open for diversity in contemporary art, and not closing the door on that which does not fit in with the most rigorous criticism. Also, it implies valuing artistic expressions and forms for what they are in their own production and consumption contexts, such as the art of calligraphy, for example, which is fundamental in the Far East and in the Arab and Islamic world, without obsessively and normatively pointing out what is in keeping with the canon and what moves away from the canon.

Hence, we believe there are two areas that need to be explored in the field of art history. Firstly, a more in-depth study of the non-Western artistic tradition that goes in search of its canons and internal values. On the other hand, we feel that encouraging results may also arise from studying art created in the past and in the present as a result of the fusion or meeting of cultures, such as the art developed in the East in the 16th-18th centuries for Western consumers, for example. From the study of these hybrid and syncretic works, we might find the necessary mechanisms for the development of the new narratives and the more inclusive canons that we so desperately need at the beginning of the new millennium.

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