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WHITHER ART HISTORY?

Whither Art History in a Globalizing World

Parul Dave Mukherji

“Whither Art History?” is a question that, potentially, the discipline, like every other discipline, is capable of raising in a moment of self-critical reflection. But what marks this question raised today, around the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, as different is the very directionality that it poses. “Whither art history” addresses as much the future scope of the discipline as the past from which it emerges. Perhaps it is a sign of contemporaneity that today it is impossible to separate these two questions about art history’s future as well as its present.

With many art histories and many art practices in the south gaining visibility, not only the sense of where we are going but also who “we” encompass become germane to our discussion. Many terms have been coined to register this growing plurality of practices, such as “posthistorical,” “postcolonial,” “postracial,” and “postethnic,” all of which have gone hand in hand with the proliferation of new disciplinary terrains, such as world art studies, world art history, and global art history.¹

My point of entry into the debate will be through one of the salient terms used to theorize contemporaneity: postethnic. I aim to problematize developments leading up to the notion of a global art history, which, however well-meaning, is caught in an insidious ethnocentrism. In the abundance of terms that get yoked with “post-,” “postethnic” posits itself as a new term to capture the contemporary dynamics of the art world and seems to pose key questions about the future of art history as it reflects on its past. Bereft of its “post-,” ethnic art history would signify the period in art history in the West when a clear distinction was believed to have existed between the art museums devoted to modern and contemporary art trends as opposed to the ethnographic museums that primarily housed artifacts from non-Western cultures, more as objects of curiosity than of aesthetic significance. The distinction was created by the West for the West, for its consumption.

There are a plethora of reasons why the gap between these two sites of modernity—the art museum and the ethnographic museum—closes or is viewed with suspicion. Apart from the broader shifts within academia following Edward Said’s *Orientalism*² and, more directly, the postcolonial turn in art history following Partha Mitter’s *Much Maligned Monsters*³ and the subsequent rise of postcolonial studies, some art events themselves signal the need for a new paradigm to grasp the changes that have occurred on the ground, with the Cold War drawing to a close and a new world order coming into existence by the early 1990s.

The landmark exhibition “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, organized by William Rubin at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1984 provoked what we would today call a postcolonial critique, as it

reduced non-Western art to a primitive source for the metropolitan West’s fashioning of the modern. To complicate the East-West binary, Jean-Hubert Martin’s pathbreaking exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, 1989, counteracted the representation of the non-Western artist as a silent other. Considering that this exhibition drew a wide range of responses from acute dismissal to ardent admiration for such an unprecedented move, it was apparent that the curator had touched the pulse of the art world. Rasheed Areen’s curated show at London’s Hayward Gallery in 1989, *The Other Story*, was another landmark event that brought into visibility doubly marginalized immigrant artists, who until then were overlooked as much by their “home” country as by the country they settled in.

We are told that the “postethnic” moment arrives when those who were considered incapable of self-representation acquire agency in fashioning their own identity.⁴ This involves not just taking agency in fashioning one’s identity but doing so self-consciously, with its constructedness kept in view. “Postethnic” is envisaged as an empowering term that marks the arrival of the Third World artist and, by extension, art historian within the horizon of contemporary art and art history. Perhaps from the postcolonial perspective and my location in India, I am expected to embrace this term as liberating us from the stranglehold of the past, as it is well known that art history, like many other disciplines, arrived in the colonized world under the aegis of colonial modernity.

The Globalizing World in Art History

It is difficult to talk about the now of art history without alluding to the globalizing world. The art history that emerged out of European nationalism in the nineteenth century has lost its original job description, and what becomes of it when the world shrinks into a planet? As global art history is on the rise, what can I contribute to the current debate, given my location in India, which, according to the database followed by James Elkins,⁵ has a population of 1.069 billion—second only to China—and the fewest number of art history departments? How productive is the quantitative mapping of art history by enumerating population and institutions? Given these statistics, what right do I have to speak at this global forum, coming from a country that has no more than five recognized institutions that teach art history? Not, perhaps, through a nation’s number of art history departments, then, but through the sheer strength of the population, which in 2013 has certainly outstripped the earlier figure cited by data analysts by several millions, of which the majority remain steeped in visual illiteracy—a problem of little importance in a developing world. On the one hand, there are positive moves by state-run institutions like the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to counter

visual illiteracy by introducing art history as an optional course in high school. On the other hand, it is caste politics that seems to dominate when visual images enter the public sphere. This was evident in a recent controversy about cartoons featuring national icons like Jawaharlal Nehru and B. R. Ambedkar in school textbooks that rocked the Parliament in 2012. However, it also needs to be emphasized that in developing countries like India, there exists a visual literacy that is best mobilized by politicians in their use of logos and election campaigns and that this has a wider reach than the verbal slogans.

Despite India's more than sixty years of independence from colonial rule, art history there continues to struggle against the twin burden of colonial legacy and cultural nationalism. It needs to be stressed that art history entered India under the aegis of colonialism largely as a handmaiden to archaeology and history. Its early shape in India served both the colonial project of a reconstruction of India's past and the nationalist agenda of recovering national pride, even if the golden age was a thing of the past. Chronology and connoisseurship emerged as the foremost concerns, and a deep ambivalence about the applicability of fine arts to Indian art persisted until the interventions of art historians like A. K. Coomaraswamy. Coomaraswamy lent support to cultural nationalism and dispelled European colonial reservations about Indian art through recourse to ancient Sanskrit treatises on art, aesthetics, and metaphysics.⁶ Trained as a geologist, he took up art history and laid down scientific and empirical methods of studying the country's artifacts. However, on encountering colonial prejudice toward Hindu gods and goddesses as multiheaded and multilimbed monsters, he became a transcendentalist and delved deep into Indian metaphysics and philosophy to raise art to the height of the sacred sublime. Another pioneer of art history was Stella Kramrisch, trained in Vienna, who came to India in the 1920s armed with a formalist methodology and preoccupation with race. Ethnicity permeated her stylistic analysis so strongly that, for her, a so-called Aryan predilection for the abstract and a Dravidian tendency toward the decorative informed the visual interpretation of ancient Indian sculpture of different regions.⁷ Both of these pioneering art historians prepared the ground for the emergence of nationalist art history, which followed India's independence in 1947. In postcolonial India, eroticism and religion perhaps rose as key preoccupations among the art historians, who equated them and reified, for instance, the sculptures of goddesses in the nude on the temple walls as a higher civilizational ideal.⁸ The drive to create a difference in the form and nature of female nudity in Indian art from their position in the Western tradition largely informed the nationalist project. It was not until the late 1980s and the early 1990s that M. F. Husain, a modernist artist who had reached an iconic stature by then, came under increasing censorship over his Muslim identity and his depiction of Hindu goddesses in the nude at a time of the ascendancy of the right-wing Hindu political party.⁹

Toward a New Art History

Let me now jump-cut to the move toward a "New Art History" about 2000, when the discipline of art history in India encountered its "whither" moment within the Department of

Art History and Aesthetics at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda. Until that point, the discipline of art history was dominated by cultural nationalists, who, in their search for past civilizational glory, were impervious to the politics of representation and oblivious to questions of gender and caste. In light of the widely perceived misfit between given conceptual frameworks and new objects of study from popular visual culture, the inadequacy of an object-centered approach became clear. Attention to a critical framework and current art practice that came to be known as the Baroda Narrative trend engaged squarely with the political,¹⁰ leading to an awareness that art history was caught in a time warp. What sustained the elitist practice of art history, where classical (considered as separate, yet derived from, the Greco-Roman legacy by the nationalists) and high art received most attention, was the division of art history and art criticism. If art history was viewed as a historical discipline that engaged only with premodern art, then art criticism turned its back on history and trained students to adopt a tunnel vision focused on contemporary practice. It was this separation between the historical and the critical that did not allow the political to figure as a major concern.

Once art history entered into an interrogative mode of questioning its own insularity from the political, it created conditions for identity politics to invade its neat and placid arena. Class had received much critical attention, as most cultural theorists were steeped in Marxism during the postcolonial and secularist Nehruvian era (inaugurated by India's iconic prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru). I have in mind the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*. In the almost fifteen years that it ran, from the early 1980s until 1999, it published the contributions of leading cultural theorists (including G. P. Deshpande, Geeta Kapur, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, and Madhava Prasad) in the fields of theater, art, and films. They were among the first to question the Brahmanic elitism that had come to define the field of culture.

This era concluded in the 1990s as India adopted neoliberal economic policies. If the 1990s heralded the onset of globalization, it also brought caste into the public sphere, as the officially described "backward" castes, who had been subjugated for centuries in a premodern caste-ridden society, now acquired greater political representation through an affirmative-action policy that the state had come to embrace under democracy. The intellectuals who had relied on Marxism for their radical political credentials had to confront their own elitist blindness to the caste inequity.¹¹

The project of a "New Art History" arose at this moment, and it owed its emergence to a cross-disciplinary conversation between art history and literary theory; the latter had profoundly absorbed the impact of cultural studies and postcolonial theory in the 1980s.¹² What acted as an interface between them was the politics of representation that had expanded beyond class to bring into the ambit of the visual the issues of sexuality, gender, and caste. These debates grew out of an increasing discomfort with the framework of art history that was geared toward connoisseurship and chronology, which could scarcely explain the field of the visual in our time. A number of conferences were organized at Baroda around the themes of the politics of representation, gender, and sexuality, strongly registering dissatisfaction with the

practice of art history that celebrated a humanist and politically neutral position. This may have been the “whither art history” moment in India that precipitated a disciplinary crisis and the cultural and political amnesia around caste and gender as such analytic categories came to the forefront.

The Global Turn in Western Art History and Its Implication for Art History in India

My chancing on Elkins’s *Stories of Art* in a bookshop in Oxford in 2004 occasioned an epiphany.¹³ As someone whose undergraduate training was shaped by E. H. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*, I was used to relativizing Indian art as one more branch on the gigantic tree of world art. I later learned that the book, which was considered a bible for undergraduates in India, was in fact a high-school textbook in the United Kingdom. Given such inequity in knowledge circulation and consumption, the multiple “Stories” and Elkins’s claim to address a multicultural moment seemed like a major corrective.

The section on non-Western art history in this book captured my attention, as the author was exploring a new terrain of non-Western art histories and making sense of other art histories in an admirable attempt at stepping outside “the self portrait of Western art history.” *Stories of Art* was thus an unprecedented enterprise that stressed the need to familiarize Western readers with non-Western aesthetic texts as a framework for non-Western artworks. Despite the fact that this was a commendable move within Western art history, reliance on fragments of texts from “native discourse”—and not necessarily the most reliable editions—has had the potential of creating misunderstanding more than illuminating the questions of visual representation. The very act of culling out a fraction of a text and making it emblematic of a tradition at large is mired in an asymmetry of forms of knowledge in the West and non-West and ultimately leads to an asymmetry of interpretative efforts by each side.

What Elkins’s intervention enables is the recognition of the gap between live and dominant discourses of art theory in the West that set out to make sense of the other intellectual traditions and the dead concepts of premodern Indian art that are consigned to history and antiquarian interest. While in the West certain key terms like “mimesis” or “catharsis” from Greek and Roman art theory function as live terms and continue to participate in the discourse on visual representation that has been constructed as a continuous intellectual enterprise, these premodern categories in the Indian context, once part of a rigorous theoretical lineage, now exist primarily as practice-oriented concepts. Seldom does a South Asian art historian engage with these concepts as resources for critical thought for the present. And when one ventures into this territory, one is met with complete incomprehension and lack of interpretative effort.

David Summers’s *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* constitutes another major attempt to write a non-Eurocentric account of world art by focusing attention on different types of spatiality that shape art in different civilizations.¹⁴ I could continue to add more such publications to demonstrate how earnest the move has been in recent years to include the others.¹⁵ Mobility and travel have marked the lifestyle of many Western art historians in recent

years, as they undertake field trips to far-flung countries outside Europe and the United States to gain a better grasp of other art histories. Such travel is no longer the preserve of Western art historians, as it is increasingly embraced by art historians from non-Western societies, although by many fewer. This inequality of mobility, almost symptomatic of uneven access to resources and institutional support, leads to a situation where tokenism flourishes and the burden to represent native art history and culture falls on select shoulders.

In such a situation, ethnicity is raising its head in new ways. In many global forums where I have participated in group discussions, the question posed to me has been: “For too long, we in the West have been using concepts and tools created by us, and now we have reached a point of exhaustion. What tools can you provide us to rejuvenate the discipline?” As we turn to the second decade of the twenty-first century, should we really attach ethnicity to the tools of thinking and move toward this intellectual essentialism? Its more recent reiteration is again by Elkins, in his interrogation “Why Art History Is Global”:

The art of all nations continues to be interpreted using the toolbox of twentieth-century Western European and North American art history: structuralism, formalism, style analysis, iconography, patronage studies, biography. . . . an enormous challenge awaits a more adventurous historical practice, one that would try to explain artworks using indigenous, non-Western texts.¹⁶

For me, such a proposition makes me question the use of the “postethnic” and the Western interlocutors’ historical amnesia of two hundred years of colonialism that preceded Indian independence in 1947 from the British rule. It also signals essentialism in the way it expects that a radically different method of thinking must prevail in India, from which authentic Indian discourse must emerge. Any claim to an “Indian” interpretative system is as fraught with reductionism as the “Western” intellectual tradition, as ideas that circulate and cross-fertilize over a long period of time and space do not respect ethnic or geographic boundaries. This adherence to ethnicity goes hand in hand with the misunderstanding of postcolonial theory as the validation of “local concepts, taken from indigenous—often non-western languages.”¹⁷

We are far from the situation where the “postethnic” can circulate as a relevant category, just as another term, “postracial,” coined by Paul Gilroy to decenter ethnicity, also has not received sufficient engagement.¹⁸ While globalization is leading us to think of the “postnational,” it takes something like a Venice Biennale to remind us of the persistence of national identity. It will be a while before art historians can identify themselves as world citizens and become freed from the burden of ethnic identity. Until then, tokenism will color the field of global art history, a field that many of us from the Third World had hoped was becoming more equitable through the effects of globalization. So where are “we” going? Is it to the formation of a new “us” and “them” binary—between those of us who have invented (a dominant) art history and those of us who duplicate interpretative tools and are shackled in a derivative discourse as a perpetual condition?¹⁹

The burning question in studies in global art history has been whether non-Western art history can be studied through native intellectual frameworks.²⁰ It is possible to plot various answers to this question between the two poles of using only non-Western terminology while retaining the basic structure from Western art history to letting the other framework radically disturb the Eurocentric assumptions of the discipline. In this sense, global art history is an impossible project if it implies studying art objects not only from culturally disparate contexts but also through the interpretative frameworks drawn from “native” aesthetic theories. For it to happen, unfamiliar terrains have to be charted, risking incomprehension and even encountering a cacophony of voices and languages. It cannot emerge as an insular discourse that only the cultural insiders can access but must be translatable if it is to enable a dialogue across languages and disciplines.

The “where” in “Whither art history?” is no longer located in a future of semantic plenitude and universal lucidity but involves traversing uncharted territories from the past, when experiments with art history took place outside its mainstream. It could be anywhere, in South Africa, Latin America, the former Soviet bloc, or India. One such experiment occurred in India at Santiniketan in the 1930s, when Nandalal Bose, an artist pedagogue, who undertook a postcolonial project (in colonial times) of creating an alternative art historical reference for contemporary art practice, designed a student dormitory that came to be called the Black House.²¹ If André Malraux dreamed of a museum without walls, Bose cited sculptural reliefs from world art—ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Japan (strategically bypassing the classical Greco-Roman legacy enshrined in colonial art schools)—on the outer walls of the students’ dormitory. If its interiors composed the living quarters of students, its outer wall worked as a curated museum with sculpture reliefs and served art pedagogy. In the discourses that were in circulation, an alternative way of theorizing visual representation and similitude was being developed, and these debates were often published in Bengali, a language in which modern art theories and art criticism came to be formulated during colonialism.

If global art history abandons its overarching story of progress and canonization and turns its gaze on the non-Western and postcolonial archive and its overlooked sites,²² it will have much to gain from a local and regional focus, which can be best conducted as case studies. For a new theory to emerge, it will have to consider these overlooked histories and sites of experimentation in which space will have a new primacy and become a source of new temporality: not the temporality of homogeneous time, but temporality as a construct that acquires coherence within a specific, located spatiality.

The “whither” may go hither and thither, but perhaps in the crisscrossing of space and time, art history, though it lose its connecting thread, may gain in its conceptual amplitude.

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Notes

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1. On the recent expansion of art history into a global discipline, see Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008); Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (London: Routledge, 2007); and James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, eds., *Art and Globalization* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). It should be noted that this influential work, which was published a year after Partha Mitter’s *Much Maligned Monsters*, focused primarily on travel literature and literary representation, whereas Mitter’s main thrust was on visual representation.
3. Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). This work continues to remain salient in the way it anticipated the main thrust of postcolonial art history around the question of imperial power and cultural representation.
4. Hans Belting coined this term, which, however problematic, is critical in capturing the politics of representation in the contemporary art world. Belting and Buddensieg, *The Global Art World*, 58.
5. James Elkins, “Canon and Globalization,” in *Partisan Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 55–77.
6. A. K. Coomaraswamy, “Visnudharmottara, Chapter XLI,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 52 (1932): 13–21. In this key article, Coomaraswamy mobilizes an ancient Sanskrit art treatise for arriving at a transcendentalist interpretation of early Indian art.
7. Stella Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture* (Calcutta: Y.M.C.A. Pub. House; London: Oxford University Press, 1933). This work offers an example of how tools of formalism and stylistic analysis are deployed to understand styles associated with regions largely divided between the so-called Aryan North India and Dravidian South India.
8. For a rigorous institutional critique of art history and archaeology and the investment of cultural nationalism in the claims around eroticism in Indian art, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 258–59.
9. Parul Dave Mukherji, “The Cult of the Goddess and the Cult of the Public,” in *Iconography Now: Rewriting Art History?* (New Delhi: Sahmat, 2006). In this essay, I pointed out the time gap between the execution of line drawings of Indian goddesses like Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Sita in the early 1970s and the eruption of the controversy about Hussain’s Muslim identity in the early 1990s, demonstrating the altered political climate during the ascendancy of Hindu fundamentalism by this latter period.
10. The political in art practice is best articulated by the art critic Geeta Kapur, whose catalog essay “Partisan Views about the Human Figure,” for the exhibition *Place for People*, Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay, 1981 (Bombay: n.p., 1981), also functioned almost as a manifesto for the artists included in the group: Sudhir Patwardhan, Vivan Sunderam, Jogen Chowdhury, Nalini Malani, Bhupen Khakhar, and Gulam Sheikh. Rejecting abstraction as a trend associated with the hegemony of Euro-American modernism and turning to the figurative mode, these artists attended to their local surroundings and identified themselves with the common man. Many artists rebelled against the suppression of democracy under the Emergency (1975–77), a repressive period during Indira Gandhi’s rule.
11. Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practices in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000). Kapur’s late recognition of Savi Sawarkar, today regarded as India’s first Dalit (who belonged to a former untouchable caste) artist, may be a case in point. For a critique of elitism in art history, see S. Santosh, “Spectres of the ‘Radicals,’ or Where Have All the ‘Radicals’ Gone?” in *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism*, ed. Deeptha Achar and Shivaji Panikkar (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012), 181–200.
12. Shivaji K. Panikkar, Parul Dave Mukherji, and Deeptha Achar, *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2003).
13. James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002). As I regard Elkins’s contribution to global art history as comprehensive and sustained over more than a decade, I will concentrate on his intervention, which has helped shape this emerging field in Euro-American academia.
14. David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2003).

15. David Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).
16. James Elkins, "Why Art History Is Global," in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 380.
17. *Ibid.*, 381. I continue to be intrigued by not only such a reading of the postcolonial theory but also the ease with which it is dismissed as irrelevant by many contemporary art historians in the West. In a round-table discussion on transnationalism at the College Art Association Annual Conference in Los Angeles organized by Iftikhar Dadi in 2009, Terry Smith declared postcolonial theory to be a passé discourse. Far from valorizing some nativist discourse, postcolonial theory, in fact, deploys the Marxist/Foucauldian/Derridean conceptual tools to provincialize the Western knowledge system from within and undermine its claims of universal rationality. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), for a critical exposition on postcolonial theory.
18. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).
19. See Monica Juneja, "Global Art History and the 'Burden of Representation,'" in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jakob Birken, and Andrea Buddensieg (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 274–97, for her exploration of the negotiations with ethnicity and challenges posed to it by contemporary women artists from India. While it seems that many contemporary women artists selected by Juneja have escaped the burden of ethnicity by deploying self-reflective strategies of representation, art discourse is still entangled in it and is becoming more so under the pressure of global art history.
20. Frederick M. Asher, "The Shape of Indian Art History," in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Vishakha N. Desai, Clark Studies in the Visual Arts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
21. Parvez Kabir, "Copies before Originals: Notes on a Few Black House Reliefs at Santiniketan," in *The Black House: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Sanjoy Mallik (Santiniketan: Visva Bharati Publication, forthcoming).
22. See Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008): 531–48, 568–74, for the debate it spawned among younger art historians around the contestations of the Western canon and the politics of representation in the postcolonial context.