



THE BIG QUESTION: Is There a Global Canon?

Good poets borrow; great poets steal.
—T.S. Eliot

I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors-and-paste man.
—James Joyce

All art is theft.
—Pablo Picasso

Our world is increasingly interconnected, and artistic theft has never been easier. There were lines once, rooted in Europe, that delineated and informed the creation of a canon of great works. Those lines are now blurred, or have disappeared altogether. Artists collaborate across countries and continents, inspiring their brethren, prompting further acts of thievery. Art, literature and music live in a world without borders, where national identities can mean everything or nothing. These recent, ongoing developments have called into question the very notion, and relevance, of a Western Canon. Is a Global Canon emerging? A panel of experts, assembled by *World Policy Journal*, weighs in.

JONAS HASSEN KHEMIRI: REGIONAL WRITING

When I attended school, the classics consisted of 100 great books subsidized by the Swedish government. Unfortunately, almost all of them were written by dead white men—and there was a slight problem of representation—none from Australia, or Asia, or Africa, or the Middle East.

In response, the reference group that I am currently a member of has been asked by the Swedish government to add 50 new titles to create an updated canon of 150 books that will be subsidized in schools and hopefully read and spread throughout Sweden. Even in the home of the Nobel Prize for Literature, this has been controversial, with some conservatives fearing

we'd delete Strindberg and Ibsen from the Canon (the horror!). In actuality, though, we are just adding books, and the best part is that we are able to offer schools wonderful works by writers like Chinua Achebe, Juan Rulfo, Forough Farrokhzad, Janet Frame and Naguib Mahfouz.

But at the same time we continually need to question what makes a novel African or Japanese or Brazilian. How many geishas or cherry blossoms to call a novel Japanese? How many stereotypes for our geographical aspirations to be fulfilled? We must focus on the best texts. We included Yukio Mishima's "The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea," not because of its "Japanese-ness," but because it is a wonderfully-composed novel that should continue to find new readers and influence them in new ways in the future. And that's exactly what the Global Canon should do. No matter when or where each component was written.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri is an award-winning Swedish playwright and novelist.

KAYHAN IRANI:

A TRANSFORMING CANON

There has always been a Global Canon of artists, although the established Western Canon does not recognize their names. More often than not, notions of worthy or unworthy in art refer back to the Western Canon. Subscribers to the Western Canon accept a basic assumption that some official body of artistic judgment is able to place value on every art-making endeavor equally, and with the appropriate tools.

In reality, this process is limited by the personal experience and cultural perspective of the people we install as artistic intermediaries. As such, a canon gets crafted using narrow points of reference, socialization and knowledge. Knowing these inadequacies we (everyone interested in art and culture) must work to break down the canonical edifice.

Since the Canon is a dynamic, social

construct, we can participate in its transformation. We must insist on practicing and creating justice in the arts—through expanding our notions of where art happens, how it functions and who is called an artist. That includes honoring practices that are rooted in community and broadening our engagement in the world. It means listening less to critics and the market and more to artists and audiences; allowing them to speak about what is valuable.

Kayhan Irani is an Indian-Iranian playwright and Theater of the Oppressed practitioner.

TIMOTHY D. TAYLOR:

WORLD MUSIC

While it is clear that there is a canon of Western European classical music—a product of decades, even centuries, of scholarship and teaching, not to mention proselytizing, nationalism, sexism and other forms of chauvinism and parochialism—if there is a canon of world music, or, more accurately, world musicians, it is still forming, and in partly the same ways as its European counterpart. "World music" as a category has only been around for a couple of decades, though there had been stars recognized in the West before its emergence, for example Indian classical sitarist Ravi Shankar. But world music courses and scholarship, radio airplay and retailing, are still making their determinations about a world music canon.

Most world music stars likely to be considered canonical tend to be in the realm of popular music rather than classical (like Shankar). Most are individual singers, great voices rather than instrumentalists or bands, or above all composers. Singers from the past (Egyptian Umm Kulthum and the Lebanese Fairuz, major stars in the Arab world) were placed in the Canon after the rise of the "world music" label. Younger singers, like Senegal's Youssou N'Dour, have become pop superstars and are also part of this nascent canon. But the period

when these musicians and others from outside the West are accorded the same level of scholarly, critical and popular attention that musicians like the American Elvis Presley, Britain's Beatles or Germany's J.S. Bach receive is still in the future.

Timothy D. Taylor is a Professor of Ethnomusicology and Musicology, University of California, Los Angeles.

**FRANK STEWART:
ART AS COGNITION**

Thanks to new media and skilled translators, global examples of art at their most penetrating, profound and affirming are in reach of everyone willing and brave enough to overcome the arguments for old hierarchies and the false notion that differences are unbridgeable. I am defining art as a powerful exploratory form of cognition, applied to understanding the predicament of being alive. Art is a particularly human way of thinking and an evolutionary adaptation for cooperative survival. So in times of crisis, such as ours—when a bleak future seems to be rushing toward us—all perspectives and insights that potentially enrich our understanding of each other, regardless of their origins in certain nations, languages, religions or historical moments, should be plumbed.

To contemplate a future when individuals and communities can live together—without destroying the non-human world—we need to attend to the metaphorical intelligence of humanity's tribe of inventors. If we want to know what is human in the shaman stories of China's Yi people, the songs of Mongolia's Tuvans, South Asia's Mahabharata or Polynesia's genealogical chants—we can experience them now for their usefulness and truth, provided we have the broadness of mind to think inclusively and to ask thoughtful, urgent questions.

Frank Stewart is the editor of Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing.

**CYNTHIA MACMULLIN:
SHIFTING THE PERCEPTION**

What is a "Global" Canon? Is it the dismissal of borders or themes of nationalism? Is it the open market place where the art market and art fairs, artists, collectors and curators are digesting its production and

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spitting it out as a commodity? Does it only occur in democracies, while banned in dictatorships, defined by embargoes or sanctions, such as Cuba and Venezuela?

For most of the 20th century, modern Latin American art and artists have been overlooked for their contribution to a Western Canon—stigmatized as stylistically figurative and narrative, folkloric, colorful and exotic, derivative of such European art movements as Surrealism or Constructivism. In the past two decades a revision of modernism embracing other histories outside of the European vernacular has allowed a re-evaluation of this art and these artists—expanding the Canon.

Conceptual art, video, photography and media art have responded to a changing panorama of international and global issues—bringing producers in developing countries, once considered marginalized, onto the radar of the mainstream world. The result? A shift in perception; non-western art and creativity rises to the top—viewed from a broader perspective scope, with new conditions, cultural complexity, communal, social and political, even subversive, practices, as part of the new global aesthetic. This new permissiveness allows art and artists to be

viewed as freed from national or regional identities such as Latin American, Asian, Middle-Eastern or African.

Cynthia MacMullin is Senior Curator at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, California.

MIRANDA KENNEDY: A NON-INCLUSIVE CANON

For decades, the words “Great Painter” were synonymous with the Renaissance—Italian painters who experimented with perspective and revived classical antiquity—and neglected to include Northern European artists of the same time period, who were experimenting with human expression and psychology. And if there has been a reluctance to include Northern Europeans in the Canon, Asia and Africa are all but ignored.

Even now, when many universities offer courses on African and Islamic art, more people would describe Leonardo da Vinci as a universal genius than they would Ibrahim El-Salahi, of Sudan, which has less to do with da Vinci’s inherent talent than that he is better known. The reason for this is the persistent belief in a single, objective canon.

By its very nature, a canon cannot be inclusive. With its accompanying notions of genius and greatness, it implies a hierarchy, which has little relationship to the way most people experience art in today’s globalized, disparate, multicultural world. Art and literature can no longer be said to center on the European or white experience, when the fast-growing, highly-educated populations of China and India resonate as loudly as the voices of immigrant populations in the U.S. and Europe.

The proliferation of Indian novels written in English, for instance, radically altered our expectation of what would happen when we opened a book. Now, Indian and South American authors are routinely

part of high school curricula in the U.S.; yet they still aren’t considered part of the Canon. While much of the literature and painting that is included has worn its years well, the structure of the Canon itself has not. Rather than try to redefine it, I’d opt to throw out the idea of a canon altogether. *Miranda Kennedy is the author of the forthcoming “Sideways on a Scooter,” about women’s lives in globalizing India.*

BAJAH + THE DRY EYE CREW: RHYTHM & BEATS

Many of the greats in the Western Canon of musicians—Elvis Presley, James Brown, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Miles Davis—have been influenced by the rhythms and beats of Africa, via the slave trade with North America. Many of these slaves were held in my own country, Sierra Leone, and departed from the port of Bunce Island, off the coast of the main city, Freetown. So it’s inaccurate to say that there is a “Western Canon” and now an emerging “Global canon,” as the Western Canon is comprised of sounds from all over the world, but made popular by, and hence defined as, American or European music.

At the same time, many more artists from other countries are being recognized today—a direct consequence of globalization: Fela Kuti, Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, all musicians of the past, and Angelique Kidjo, Shakira and K’Naan, performers in the present. Each is known globally, and has contributed significantly to the current music scene. As the world grows smaller, music crosses the globe many times over.

What I love about the music I make now are the influences and inspiration from these older western musicians, as well as others from my own country like Ebenezer Calender, Kabbas Brothers and Steady Bongo, not to mention the “African greats,” like Fela and Baaba Maal, even the

sounds of hip-hop from America, which are, of course, at their root, the sounds of Africa. African beats—transported by the slaves—have now returned to Africa in the form of hip-hop and dancehall. I'm appropriating those sounds now, forming something entirely new, and yes, quite global. *Bajah + The Dry Eye Crew is a hip hop group from Sierra Leone.*

**ALYCE MAHON:
TRADITIONAL VALUES**

Even in this postmodern era of global and hybrid identities, questioning and self-doubt, the Western Canon and its values remain strong. Michelangelo and other grand masters have had recent blockbuster exhibitions. Style, iconography and attribution retain a privileged role in museums, galleries and auction houses. The art aficionado's faith in timeless and intrinsic beauty persists—notions under assault since the birth of modernism, when Édouard Manet and the Impressionists launched their independent exhibition, the Salon des Refusés, in Paris in 1863. Avant-garde movements—Cubism, Dada, Surrealism and Pop Art—continued the assault through the 1960s. Surrealism, subverting the supposedly civilizing mission of Western art, embraced so-called primitive Oceanic, Native American and African

cultures, promoting such non-European artists as Mexico's Frida Kahlo, who took New York by storm in 1938, and is now herself a cultural icon.

Today, public opinion, critics and the academy continue to expand the Canon with new branches from once outrageous modernists—Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, Andy Warhol, even such contemporary artists as Jeff Koons and Marina Abramovic. A continuing preoccupation with dead white males from Europe and the United States sits uneasily alongside a growing flexible inclusivity. Such institutions as the Tate and Guggenheim have worldwide reputations and virtual presences on the web. Major festivals are thriving: the biennials of Venice and Sydney, Art Basel and Hong Kong's International Art Fair. And a global diversification comprises video art from Iran's Shirin Neshat, the Cynical Realism of Chinese painter Yue Minjun and the feminist science-fiction installations of Australia's Patricia Piccinini. Whether such new art will become canonical is open to debate, as are the practices and politics of inclusion and exclusion inherent in canon formation. ●

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—edited by Yaffa Fredrick