

Symposium II

World Philosophy, World Art Studies, World Aesthetics

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All human cultures engage in activities which contemporary Westerners may typify as belonging to the broad and fluid category of 'the arts'. However, cultures' motivations or justifications for the involvement in these and related activities, as well as their ways of characterising, classifying, and experiencing them, may differ significantly. Indeed, people in various cultures not only make and use artistic objects and events, they have also developed diverse ways of thinking about these forms of activity and the products they involve: they have evolved views about their origin and nature, their creation, the perception and evaluation of their qualities, and the effect and purpose of their production, performance or presence. To explore the possibility of establishing and comparing these various cultural ways of 'thinking about the arts' may be regarded as one of the objectives of the *Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics* that was held at the University of Sydney in June 1997.¹

To consider cultural conceptions about the arts under the heading of *aesthetics* is in keeping with the twentieth-century Western academic parlance of particularly philosophers and art scholars, who commonly employ the term to refer to both the more or less coherent set of views and attitudes towards the arts as developed by individuals or schools within a given period or culture, and their specialised study. Aesthetics could then in effect be said to be used as a synonym for 'the philosophy of art', a practice that among Western academics can be observed from Hegel onwards, and today is also found in philosophical circles beyond the West. It should be noted, however, that many scholars from such varied disciplines as neuroscience, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, employ the term 'aesthetics' in a sense that is at once more restricted and more extensive. I am quite evidently referring here to a tradition that goes back at least to Kant—and ultimately to Baumgarten who coined the term from the Greek *aísthesis*, sense-perception—and which conceives of aesthetics as having to do primarily

with 'beauty' or other qualities as these are experienced within or outside the context of the arts, however broadly defined, with the extra-artistic domains including the manifestations and products of nature, and, on the border of nature and culture, the human body (whose evaluation frequently involves features that may seem natural but that may well to some extent be influenced by culture, such as body size, gaze, and gait). In this respect it may be interesting to observe briefly that the philosopher Wolfgang Iser (1997) has recently advocated a return to *aisthesis* as the main topic of aesthetics, conceived of as a multidisciplinary field of study.²

The latter interpretation of aesthetics was not given prominence during the Sydney conference, although probably none of the participants would deny the relevance of the questions raised by this conception of aesthetics in a cross-cultural perspective, and the overlaps with the former interpretation seem clear. If aesthetics had been conceived of as pertaining chiefly to 'beauty' and related qualities, then the somewhat troublesome nature of the adjective 'transcultural' in this context would have been more apparent. That is, it would have become quite clear that *transcultural aesthetics* could well be interpreted as dealing predominantly with questions concerning the aesthetic appreciation across cultural boundaries, as indeed cross-cultural psychologists, anthropologists, and others might interpret the term. To avoid such a limited interpretation of the idea of 'transcultural aesthetics', one could suggest employing the expression *world aesthetics*, which was introduced at the end of Grazia Marchiondi's paper that opened the Sydney conference.³ To be sure, the label 'world aesthetics' has its own drawbacks, but in the context of the present paper it may at least be considered to have a rhetorical advantage. By employing the designation 'world aesthetics' to refer to the—comparative—study of the various cultural traditions' ways of thinking about matters artistic and aesthetic, in this brief comment I hope to establish the idea of 'transculturality in aesthetics' as bridging two other recent scholarly trends that share the commitment to address related and fundamental aspects of being human from a global perspective, namely, *world philosophy* and *world art studies*. The few observations offered here are mainly meant to encourage researchers involved in these emerging fields of study to take the topic of cultural views on the nature and value of 'art and beauty' into consideration right from the beginning.

Since the *Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics* counted among its participants scholars who are in the forefront of

advancing the study of philosophy from a global perspective,⁴ such a call should in fact be considered superfluous in the case of world philosophy, and comments will accordingly be kept to a minimum here. As an emerging field of study, the present-day discipline of world philosophy⁵ may be regarded as a late twentieth-century outcome of a gradually increasing interest in previous decades on the part of Western philosophers for the philosophical systems of non-Western cultures. In the early years, attention was almost exclusively confined to the philosophies of India, China and, to a lesser extent, Japan, with Western scholars seeking the collaboration of their Oriental colleagues, and with those involved in 'comparative philosophy' largely concentrating on literate traditions. The field is now being extended to include the philosophical systems of particularly African cultures, the Islamic world, Native American cultures, and the cultures of Oceania. World philosophy may thereby profit from the epistemological and methodological discussions engendered previously by 'comparative philosophy',⁶ albeit the inclusion of cultures which traditionally are orally oriented will pose its own problems.

Today's field of world philosophy would seem to be in a phase of exploration and mapping, covering both past and present cultures. Given the interest in 'aesthetics' of some of the pioneers in this field, we may then indeed expect that in charting the world's philosophical traditions due attention will be given to the views which these traditions have developed vis-à-vis the arts, their origins, qualities, and functions, or indeed that future research projects will more specifically focus on such views. The advantages of this type of investigation within the context of a more general interest in philosophy seem clear, since the study of a culture's aesthetics or philosophy of art will then be rightly embedded within a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of this culture's world view and conceptual frameworks.

There may, however, also be certain disadvantages to such an approach. While elaborating an undeniably valuable contextualisation in what might be called a 'conceptual' sense, which is likely to give priority to specialists' opinions, it may run the risk of underexposing or even neglecting a contextualisation in what could be termed a 'sociocultural' sense, which would situate these opinions within the dynamics of sociocultural life as a whole, including actual art production and evaluation as well as the views held in these matters by non-specialists. The risk of a confinement to the relatively isolated levels of experts' concepts and opinions would indeed seem quite real if the analysis concentrates on views as these have traditionally been

formulated and commented upon in written form by what could be considered an intellectual minority in a given culture. A similar danger exists if in cultures with an oral tradition attention is centred on experts' knowledge and interpretations of relevant forms of orature and on the conceptual or ideational contextualisation of these views by either the experts themselves or by outside analysts.⁷

So it should always be asked *whose* views on the arts and their qualities we are in effect studying (or whose views the available sources focus on). Indeed, can we distinguish, in a given cultural tradition, between specialists' opinions and so-called folk models and, if so, what is their interaction? Who are in fact responsible for the formulation of aesthetic and art-philosophical views in a given culture, and with what authority and in which sociocultural contexts do such people operate?⁸ Also, what is the relation in a particular culture between the views at issue and the practices of making and assessing art forms? Do the latter activities perhaps prompt the more or less systematic phrasing, and revision, of aesthetic and art-philosophical principles? Are such principles or views part of the training of artists—who may themselves be responsible for formulating these views—and to what extent do they surface in art criticism? Does any—institutionalised—form of art criticism in fact exist in a given tradition and, if so, who serve as critics, and what is the actual source as well as the impact or sociocultural significance of their evaluations? How do the art critics' aesthetic evaluations relate to the assessments of so-called non-specialists, which may be less articulate or comprehensive but which may nonetheless turn out to be extremely meaningful? Are there perhaps some significant commonalities permeating the opinions and judgements of various segments of a society, when the latter's views and evaluations are looked at from the distance that comes with an intercultural comparative perspective?⁹

One aim of studying the art-philosophical and aesthetic conceptions of the world's various cultures evidently lies in trying to more fully understand the artistic traditions of these cultures. Given the need to know the views which inform the production, assessment, and in fact the actual existence of a given art form in a certain cultural context, one may confidently maintain that the study of philosophies of art and aesthetics should also be accorded a prominent place within another emerging scholarly field, one that is referred to as 'World Art Studies'. For the time being, the systematic development of this new discipline would seem to be limited to the School of World Art Studies which was established at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England,

in the early 1990s. The origins and orientation of this emerging discipline have recently been briefly described in the introduction of an article in which John Onians pleads for the development of what he calls 'A New Natural History of Art' within the context of world art studies.¹⁰

As regards the orientation of this new field of research it should be observed, first, that world art studies proposes to broaden the traditional Western art-historical investigation of European art to include the arts from whatever culture in time or space. Moreover, it is suggested that attention be focused not only on the various forms of 'high' art but also on the world's traditions of 'folk' or 'popular' arts. Although one cannot but applaud such a broadly conceived perspective on the study of art, it should be noted that, at least as yet—and in contrast, incidentally, to the idea of 'transcultural aesthetics' as it was launched at the *Pacific Rim Conference*—emphasis is placed on the visual arts, thus largely disregarding music, dance, drama, literature and orature, and other art forms that may be of paramount importance in a given culture, and whose significance often far surpasses that of the graphic and plastic arts.¹¹

Second, in his delineation of the field of world art studies Onians suggests drawing on several approaches in dealing with the phenomenon of visual art worldwide. In addition to the traditional perspectives of Western art history, he mentions the approaches offered by anthropology, archaeology, and culture studies.¹² Onians would seem to attach relatively great importance to the contributions that can be made to world art studies by the anthropological study of art. Importantly, the latter appears not so much to be conceived of here as the study of the art forms of, roughly, those non-Western cultures that have formerly been colonised by the West. Rather, the anthropological study of art would seem to be interpreted as the application of a specific *approach*.¹³ In the context of Onians's article, this approach may then be said to be characterised by a perspective that deals with the visual art forms of Western and non-Western cultures on the same footing, that pays equal attention to the art forms of an intellectual minority and those of a populace's majority, that relates these artistic phenomena in various ways to their sociocultural contexts, and that does not avoid a relatively mundane look at visual art as something which certain people make of certain materials and that is used in some way or another in some context for some purpose.¹⁴

World art studies would thus seem to provide a fertile context for addressing the questions that were listed above in order to avoid

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research into aesthetic and art-philosophical views, when conducted rather exclusively within the framework of a particular culture's philosophy, thereby becoming a fairly isolated and conceptually oriented study of specialists' opinions. At any rate, what is important from the perspective of the project of world aesthetics is that one should urge scholars in world art studies to take a particular culture's aesthetic and art-philosophical views into account when studying that culture's art forms. Many questions may then be put on the agenda of this emerging discipline. In addition to the ones already mentioned or alluded to above, here I may provide some examples which remain rather close to the more traditional art-historical study of visual items as artistic or aesthetic objects. The examples given here—which, like the ones already mentioned, may be Western-inspired but seem general enough to serve as a starting-point for a cross-cultural analysis—at the same time provide illustrations of the type of questions the answers to which are in great demand from yet another recent Western academic discipline, one that is concerned with theoretical approaches to multicultural art education, and one that no doubt will welcome the development of both world art studies and world aesthetics.

In studying the art forms of a given cultural tradition one may then, for example, address the following questions concerning opinions on artistic production, with an emphasis on relating a particular culture's conceptions to that culture's world view: Is the creation of certain artistic products seen as an individual effort, or are we dealing with multiple authorship? Which amalgam of underlying cultural views in effect gives rise to a particular conception of authorship in a given context? Are artistic performances or objects viewed as the result of applying established rules that allow no deviation, or are they seen rather as the outcome of the inventiveness of their maker(s)? Can prevailing conceptions in this regard be accounted for by pointing to a culture's value system that encourages or discourages either view (considered as poles of a continuum)? And, especially if inventiveness or originality plays a major role, how does one conceive of 'inspiration', 'creativity', and 'imagination' in a particular culture? Is the idea of 'artistic calling' of any relevance in the culture in question? Also, are the production and use of certain artistic objects in a particular culture governed by the idea of permanence or transience, and can this underlying principle be clarified by reference to this culture's more general views on the nature of the universe and the role of art forms in it? Furthermore, can the latter views perhaps contribute to elucidating why certain types of art forms—visual, verbal, musical, et cetera—are

given prominence over others in a given culture?

In addition to dealing with these queries—the cross-cultural examination of which, as with the other queries mentioned here, is likely to throw into relief particular notions of the researcher's own culture—the investigation should tackle the following fundamental questions: What qualities should a given type of artistic object or event possess, and why? Which criteria are used locally in producing and evaluating these? Can the qualities and standards involved be related to principles and values that are applied more generally in the culture concerned?

Following a somewhat different line of inquiry, focusing more on the context of use and the sociocultural roles of the arts, one may pursue questions that concentrate on a culture's views on the effects which the experience of art forms would have on percipients, for example as members of society (which could lead to a consideration of such topics as artistic censorship and opinions on the role of the arts in propaganda and education). Or one may focus attention—and in some of the world's cultural traditions this may be equally important—on opinions on the assumed or hoped-for impact of art forms on 'non-human percipients' (which may, for example, lead to the investigation of views on the role of 'beauty' in communicating with the 'supernatural realm'). Research into these and related questions may then help one to gain insight into the ways in which a given culture accounts for the existence of its various art forms and its investments in these.

Both world philosophy (by focusing some of its attention on the arts and their qualities) and world art studies (by taking into account the philosophy that motivates the production and use of the art forms it investigates) may then contribute to the aim of world aesthetics, being to establish, first, the art-philosophical and aesthetic views of the world's various cultures. Once fully embedded in their sociocultural settings, the next step should then be tentatively to compare these contextualised art-philosophical and aesthetic views in order to lay bare differences and similarities on several levels of analysis. Such cross-cultural examinations of the ways of 'thinking about the arts' as evolved by what Patrick Hutchings¹⁸ in his conference paper referred to as the various 'forms-of-life' developed by a 'life-form', may then in the end provide one avenue to contribute to the study of the place of the arts in human life and hence ultimately to the understanding of our species.

Notes

- 1 I should like to thank the conveners of the conference, especially Catherine Runcie and Paul Redding, for their invitation to participate. This comment was written in the Autumn of 1997, while the author was a postdoctoral fellow of the Fund for Scientific Research, Flanders, Belgium.
- 2 Wolfgang Welsch, 'Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics: Towards a New Form of the Discipline', *Literature and Aesthetics* 7 (1997): 7–24. While looking for 'a contemporary aesthetics that wants to do justice to its name' Welsch suggests: 'I imagine aesthetics being a field of research which comprehends all questions concerning *aisthesis*, with the inclusion of contributions from philosophy, sociology, art history, psychology, anthropology, neurosciences, and so on. *Aisthesis* forms the framework of the discipline. Art is one—but, as important as it might be, only one—of its subjects' (p.22). Although the reference to anthropology may be read as a commitment to 'transculturality', the cross-cultural dimension is not explicitly considered by Welsch. For an anthropological contribution to some of the topics surrounding *aisthesis*, see Wilfried Van Damme, *Beauty in Context: Towards an Anthropological Approach to Aesthetics*, Leiden, New York, Köln, 1996. A multidisciplinary approach to aesthetics has also been proposed by T. J. Diffey, 'A Note on Some Meanings of the Term "Aesthetic"', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35.1 (1995): 61–66, p.61, who does not, however, provide any reference to transculturality—as part of an anthropological perspective or otherwise. In addition, Diffey conceives of the subject matter of aesthetics more broadly than does Welsch, including among its topics such issues as 'the nature and defining characteristics of art'. A cross-culturally oriented analysis of the latter is provided by the anthropologist Richard L. Anderson, *Calliope's Sisters: A Comparative Analysis of Philosophies of Art*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1990.
- 3 Grazia Marchianò, '"Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom, Birds and Crabgrass Notwithstanding": Some Auspicious and Realistic Views on Transcultural Aesthetics', in *Proceedings of the Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics*, ed. Rick Benitez, pp.1–5. Sydney 1997, pp.1–5. [publication on disk].
- 4 One possible disadvantage of this label's usage—in addition, for example, to its undeniable impression of trendiness in today's context of omnipresent talk of globalisation—could be the suggestion that we are dealing with the merging of aesthetic conceptions on a global scale. Although several of the world's aesthetic systems have indeed to various degrees influenced each other, and will increasingly continue to do so, one could propose to employ the appellation 'world aesthetics' as an umbrella term for both the whole of what have been or still are significantly independent sets of aesthetic or art-philosophical conceptions and their study. The focus in my comment will be on 'world aesthetics' as a field of study. It will be

clear that in the sense in which it is used here, world aesthetics does not deal with all aspects that might be considered when looking at 'aesthetics' from a global, i.e., pan-human and pan-cultural point of view. In keeping with the spirit of—Western—philosophical and philosophy-tinged perspectives that informed the *Pacific Rim Conference*, emphasis is placed on the modes of thinking which the world's cultural traditions have developed in view of what might be reasonably considered their arts, including the qualities these and, in part, perhaps other phenomena are assumed to possess.

- 5 I am referring here particularly to Eliot Deutsch, Kathleen Higgins, and Robert Solomon. See, for example, Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins, eds, *World Philosophy: A Text with Readings*. New York, 1995; Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe, eds, *A Companion to World Philosophies*. Oxford, 1997. Especially in the recent volume edited by Deutsch and Bontekoe, 'aesthetics' is clearly considered an integral part of the study of 'world philosophies', with essays by Edwin Gerow, Stephen J. Gouldberg, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, exploring aesthetics and the philosophy of art in Indian, Chinese, and Islamic traditions. In another recent survey of the field, David Cooper (*World Philosophies: an Historical Introduction*. Oxford, 1966) does not actually address thinking about the arts and their qualities, although its importance to the author seems clear; for example, when he argues on the origins of human thinking that 'with self-awareness, there would also have come the emergent appreciation of being a creature that can reason and deliberate, make free choices, *enjoy beauty* and feel resentment, care about the past and the long-term future, *string meaningful noises together, depict the world of nature in coloured powders or movements of the limbs ...*' (p.5; emphasis added).
- 6 'World philosophy' is circumscribed by Solomon and Higgins as 'a conception of philosophy that takes into account the great variety of philosophies and philosophical types and styles around the globe without trying to give special status to any one of them' (pp.xxv-xxvi). As do Deutsch and Bontekoe, Cooper (p.1) uses the plural 'world philosophies' which, he says, 'might refer to philosophies from around the world, or it might mean something like "world views", theories on the grand scale about "The World". My title is intended to bear both senses, so it is a pun'.
- 7 See, for example, Eliot Deutsch and Gerald James Larson, eds, *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*. Princeton, 1988.
- 8 See, and compare, Solomon and Higgins, Cooper, and Deutsch and Bontekoe.
- 9 One difference may be that the various forms of orature, which in the latter case serve as the starting-point of the analysis, may in themselves to varying degrees well be available to and known by larger portions of the population, albeit the latter are not likely to provide the same type of

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comprehensive interpretations and comments. The relevance of the examination of orature for the study of local aesthetic and art-philosophical conceptions has, for example, been pointed out by several African scholars (see Van Damme, pp.196–98).

- 10 By analogy with Solomon's and Higgins' observations on the study of world philosophy (pp.xlii–xlili), such a question, and some of those that will follow, could be said to belong to the category of 'meta-aesthetic', or perhaps better here, 'para-aesthetic' questions.
- 11 Cf. Van Damme, pp.49–52.
- 12 This is of course not to deny that differences may be relevant intraculturally. Indeed, the above observation is made while being aware of the criticisms of 'cultural monolithism' and 'essentialism', and it should in fact be clear that some of the questions posed above are exactly meant to critically guide the scholarly presentation of a given culture's 'philosophy of art and aesthetics'. Looking from a global perspective, however, relevant intracultural differences may give way to relevant intracultural similarities. As an illustration of the latter, I may refer here to Earl Miner (*Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*, Princeton, 1990) who has argued with respect to the intra- and intercultural comparative study of literature that:

Donne and Jonson may make a sound comparison, because they were contemporaries, indeed, friends, who often wrote in the same literary kinds and sub-kinds. Even that comparison could go wrong, however, by comparing the dramatic elements in Donne's lyrics with Jonson's plays. The differences are too great. Counterparts of the Donne-Jonson comparison exist in other literatures. Chinese are fond of comparing Li Bo (or Li Bai; d. 762) with Du Fu (712–70), and Japanese Matsuo Bashō (1644–94) with Yosa Buson (1716–83). On the Chinese scale, the two Tang poets are enough alike to compare, but they seem very different. The same holds for the Japanese poets.

When, however, we undertake comparison of the Chinese with the Japanese poets, the Chinese now seem very similar but different from the Japanese, who now seem quite like. If we then enlarge the scale further, introducing Donne and Jonson (or Hugo and Baudelaire, etc.), we are struck by the resemblances of the Chinese and the Japanese poets to the one side and those of the west to the other. (pp.21–22)

- 13 An Internet search in the Autumn of 1997 did produce a reference to the World Arts and Cultures Master of Arts Students Coalition (WACMASC) (www.saonet.ucla.edu/LSP/500.htm), but this site could not be entered without a password.
- 14 John Onians, 'World Art Studies and the Need for a New Natural History of Art' *Art Bulletin* 78.2 (1996): 206–9. Onians's own aim of developing, within the context of world art studies, a 'new natural history of art', with a special interest in the role of the human eye and hand, leads him to add

disciplines which approach the topic of art from the perspective of human (neuro)physiology and psychology, in addition to those that study what in this respect can be considered the relevant behaviour and abilities of non-human primates and such animals as dolphins. See also Elen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, New York, 1992, where related topics are addressed. Dissanayake, who views human artistic activity from what she variously calls a Darwinistic, bioevolutionary, and ethological point of view. Onians's project and Dissanayake's research, together with related work currently being done within 'evolutionary psychology' and other evolutionary frameworks (see, for example, Donald Symons, 'Beauty is in the Adaptations of the Beholder: The Evolutionary Psychology of Human Female Sexual Attractiveness', in *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*, eds P. R. Abramson and S. D. Pinkerton, Chicago, London, 1995, pp.80-118; Joseph Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory*. Columbia, London, 1995) may well contribute to laying a firm foundation for a true 'anthropology of art and aesthetics' that should also include the results of scholarship in 'world aesthetics', focusing on what the human mind has produced in terms of *thinking* about the arts and their qualities.

- 14 It is true that important features of the approach offered by anthropology have been developed via the study of the cultures of especially Africa, Indonesia, Oceania, and the Americas. As far as the study of art is concerned, in view of attaching the adjective 'anthropological' it should be observed that the art forms of these cultures have for the last few decades been studied by (Western) art historians at least as much as by anthropologists, whose theories and methods they have indeed wedded in studying art *in situ* and in interpreting the obtained data. It should also be noted that studies applying an anthropological approach to Western or Eastern art forms are indeed rare.
- 15 Several of these points are illustrated by the following and telling observation: 'The practice adopted by some Europeans of representing the faces of individuals on boards and canvases, using such media as egg or oil, and then fastening them to the inner walls of houses is just as intriguing and strange as the making and ritual destruction of a New Guinea mask composed of grass, blood, and feathers' (Onians p.207).
- 16 In his brief introduction Onians does not explicitly mention this dimension of world art studies, which of course does not mean he is not aware of the important contribution that the study of philosophies of art and aesthetics can provide. His interest in these matters can also be inferred from his remark that 'It is as important to understand why many Europeans disregard arts that they consider decorative, why many Chinese disregard painting that is not by literati, and why many other peoples disregard that which is old and so not functional within their social order, as it is to study the materials that they neglect' (p.206).
- 17 See Graeme F. Chalmers, *Celebrating Pluralism: Art, Education, and*

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Cultural Diversity. Los Angeles: The Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1996 for his survey of the field. Although the title of his work may suggest otherwise, Chalmers is also much interested in laying bare commonalities in the world's cultures' various views on the arts and their qualities, and in the development of what he calls cross-cultural art theories that would systematically deal with such unity within diversity. My own work on aesthetic preference from a global perspective may serve as an example of the latter.

- 18 Patrick Hutchings, 'Others' Art & Others' God/Gods', in *Proceedings of the Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics*, pp.127-43 [publication on disk].