

# Culture without borders

People, images and ideas have always moved vast distances, writes **David Elliott**

**I**T is a pernicious and relatively recent idea that cultures can be separated from each other; that they are hermetic, even pure. In fact, the reverse is true.

Since the 18th-century Enlightenment this delusion has been fanned by the viruses of religion, nationalism and empire that have led us to believe that culture has a natural hierarchy and manifest destiny in which power equals dominion.

When once we believed that universal values would propagate Western civilisation across the world, now, in the West, we try to make amends and, policed by the dogma of political correctness, use tired ciphers such as multiculturalism or cultural diversity to give form to, or communicate with, the world beyond.

But our sense of solitude and alienation is insurmountable. It is as if these mantra-like expressions could give us permission to look at something other than ourselves, to relinquish, without pain, a little of what we think is our hard-won power, to come down a little from our so civilised heights when, in fact, we have little intention of doing so.

The myth of cultural supremacy and separation is one of the great hoaxes of history, a discipline that until very recently was little more than propaganda, written by victors. The unsettling truth is that people, images and things have always moved vast distances across the world.

The horned figure on the famous silver Gundestrup Cauldron in the National Museum in Copenhagen, for example, was originally thought to represent a Viking when it was excavated from a Danish peat bog at the end of the 19th century; later it was thought to have been made by Celts.

We now understand that this masterpiece of 2nd century BC metalwork was probably made in what is now Romania by itinerant metalworking Aryans (Thracians) who had originated from the Indus Valley and that the cross-legged, horned figure represents not a man wearing a Viking helmet but Pashupati, lord of the animals, a folk god who evolved into Shiva, one of whose physical attributes was antlers.

Throughout the Enlightenment, Europe was willingly bombarded by styles of art and design from India and China; in the 19th century Japan became all the rage; and by the 20th century it was Africa.

It did not matter whether anyone understood or respected the cultural influences they were adopting; they provided novel ideas and starting points that enriched the local cultural gene pool and led to new possibilities. And just think what artists living in India, China, Japan and Africa made out of European influences.

But the West traditionally consigned the East and South to backwardness, antiquity or exoticism in the clear conviction that the whole idea and reality of modernity were a Western invention.

Nevertheless, in opposition to the colonising tendencies of the West, many artists and theorists in Asia, Latin America and Africa sought to articulate specifically regional modernities that took into account local traditions and conditions.

Lu Xun, a writer and theorist whose activities in Shanghai in the 1920s culmi-



**No limits to art:** David Elliott

nated in the politically active Chinese woodcut movement, sought influences from far afield.

His early realist stories were strongly influenced by Charles Dickens and Maxim Gorky, and his later awareness of the possibilities of a politically engaged art were stimulated by an encounter with the graphic art of the German expressionists and artists such as Frans Masereel, George Grosz and Kathe Kollwitz. Although he died in 1936, Lu was adopted as the father of modern Chinese art by Mao Zedong's communist government after it came to power in 1949.

In Brazil the development of modernity took another route. Writer, essayist and playwright Oswald de Andrade played a vital role in synthesising and presenting a specifically Brazilian form of modernism. His key work, the *Antropofago Manifesto* (1928), takes cannibalism as a central metaphor to describe the dilemmas facing his country's post-colonial stasis.

Building on Freud's essay *Totem and Taboo* (1912), he makes it clear that the ex-slaves (the Brazilians) must consume their former masters (the Europeans) to absorb and transcend their power. This effectively reverses Rousseau's passive idea of the noble savage. Andrade's metaphor showed how the Other — colonialism — could be effectively and decisively removed through the primordial process of digestion.

In Africa, any idea of indigenous modernity had first to struggle under the yoke of colonial rule. Leopold Senghor, poet, politician, cultural theorist and, from 1960, first president of Senegal, developed the aesthetic concept of negritude that has influenced the modern idea of culture throughout the whole continent.

Far from being the elevation of blackness above whiteness, as it has often been characterised, it searches for common ground by regarding sub-Saharan culture as part of the same cultural continuum as ancient Egypt, and therefore values its relationship to the art of ancient Greece and

from this to the whole European tradition.

The appreciation of art of all kinds, from wherever it may originate, is dependent on the recognition of aesthetic quality. On what other basis could we wish to consider and enjoy art as art?

We now accept that the recognition of quality comes down neither from God nor the academy and is the result of a constant discussion in which its borders need to be regularly tried and tested.

Inevitably, in a world of many cultures, quality can take many different forms because it has been moulded by and expresses different traditions.

Wherever we come from, as we have grown up, and our brains have got bigger, we have absorbed culture along with language. Any appreciation of art is learned rather than innate, although I would argue that the capacity for its appreciation is undoubtedly universal.

No Austrian was born a lover of the operas of Mozart and some will never be, yet others will learn to love Mozart as well as the subtleties of Indian ragas or the strangely dynamic stasis of Japanese kabuki.

And of course it is also true the other way around: wherever you come from, it takes application to learn about and enjoy culture but, if one is motivated, it is a rewarding effort without any risk involved.

Sadly, our world has developed into such an unhappy place that we have come to regard the differences that we share as more a threat than a cause for celebration and, in the process, our many similarities have been almost completely submerged. We all have the capacity to be positive and negative, to be open or closed in our attitudes to the world. The choice is ours. Contemporary art, if it is any good, respects no limits and may touch on all our experiences and emotions. Because it is both separate and distanced from politics and everyday life, there is no real risk in opening ourselves to its complex and at times ambiguous suggestions. But still we hold back.

In the final analysis our appreciation of culture — any culture — is conditioned only by our desire. There can be no limits to this, unless of course we are all so insecure that we feel the need to create them.

David Elliott is artistic director of the 17th Biennale of Sydney. This is an extract from the Rudolph Arnheim professorial lecture given at Humboldt University, Berlin.

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