

5-2017

Cultural Biases in the West and the Disadvantages Created for Eastern and Eastern-Influenced Art

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***CULTURAL BIASES IN THE WEST AND THE DISADVANTAGES CREATED FOR
EASTERN AND EASTERN-INFLUENCED ART***

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Fine Arts
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts, with Honors in Fine Art

by

Taylor Bowie

May 2017

Acknowledgement

I believe it would first be sufficient to thank my family, particularly my parents, for a great many things. Firstly, I would like to thank them for raising me with a heart to please God, as He leads my steps in my journey through life. I would also like to thank them for not only putting up with my passions and rants about identity, race, and how it relates to life and art, but also for teaching me how insignificant color is in comparison to the heart of a person. This has instilled in me a greater sense of being, not only as a person, but as a person of mixed heritage.

I would also like to thank all the friends and family who have stuck with me and piled on encouragement during this process, though it has been a lifelong observation.

A huge thank you goes to Alexa Arroyo, my thesis advisor, for all the guidance and advice given to me during this contemplative time. It was through her leadership that I was able to make this reflection as coherent as possible, and also her encouragement that helped me dig deep to truly focus on the task I had ahead of me. I'd also like to acknowledge her patience with my constant anxiety and badgering, something I know was frustrating. I'd also like to include my second reader Cheryl Hayes for all her advice and help on this project, as well, as her keen insight into the world of art was and still is invaluable.

I must also thank those in particular who offered unending support such as the Honors staff. Thank you to my friends in the international community represented in my life that helped contribute to this project, particularly my friends like Hala Iseed, Ane Jurisic, and Eliana Fernandez, who, through many cultural conversations, provided me with much needed international perspectives on art and supported me through this journey. This includes my friend Zoë Johnson, whose works inspired a great deal of how I formed my thoughts.

Lastly, I want to thank God for helping me through this last year of my undergraduate experience, as I could not have done anything coherent in nature without His eternal peace pressing on me at all times. Surely, I would have had a breakdown without this support.

Foreword

A lot of thought has gone into not only this foreword, but in this statement as whole. I've gone through an entire range of ideas for what I wanted to culminate through this project, and it has taken me nearly two years to truly hone in on what I have been trying to say. When I look back on my prospectus, I think that I was too eager to make a bold, yet generalizing view on how the world consumes products, particularly things like art. I didn't know what to do with that at first because—despite have intangible evidence that there was a clear and, in some cases, undeserved bias within the arts in the West—I couldn't truly give hard facts on those statistics due to the range in which art is taught and perceived in the US. I knew something was missing, but I was too blinded in my search for evidence. It was only through reading the statement of fellow Honors thesis writer that I understood what I was lacking. Zoë Johnson's *Black Reflections* had the idea what I was trying to get across: a battle of identity within a culture and how it pertains to the fruit we bare. Though her project was a work of film, and mine is more visual-arts based, it helped me capture the essence of what I was trying to get across: how my own sub-culture, and Western culture as a whole provides biases against the people and products of other cultures. It must be noted that by Western culture, I mean in particular that of the United States, though, for all intents and purposes, I have a sneaking suspicion that many other parts of the West represent the same point of view. In any case, I hope that you enjoy the fruits of my labor as much as I enjoyed toiling away at this.

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Abstract

Culture has always had a substantial influence on how art is perceived and executed. Artists have, more often than not, let their own backgrounds and experiences influence the way their art is produced; those who merely view art form opinions about works through their own cultural understanding. What makes art and what their own backgrounds allow them to distinguish art as is often defined by cultural origins. My observation is that, in this new age, there are distinct cultural biases, particularly within the U.S., that create social pressures to produce certain types of art, and anyone who operates outside that realm is disadvantaged. I have created imagery to highlight the distress that cultural biases have caused in my own life—as an artist who follows a style outside my culture—and in the lives of other artists who share my struggles, in an allegorical and comical sense.

Keywords: art, digital painting, culture, cultural bias, anime, manga, fine art

Introduction

Art is not new. Art is not unfamiliar. Art is engraved into our humanity, because art is the most basic form of human expression beyond the physical gesture. Just like humanity, art comes in many different shapes and forms, each piece being influenced by each artists' environment and their own personal characteristics. So, it is reasonable to postulate that cultural perspective could influence art and how people view its aesthetic value. Just as cultures, nations, and this world have evolved, devolved, and subdivided, so has art. The art of the United States is a curious case, however. The States' culture is an amalgamation of many other cultures to which emigrants, slaves, and a variety of others contributed during various points in history, the breadth of which few other countries can boast. The viewpoints on art in the US are varied and unique, indeed.

The United States, as a nation has been and still is, ideally, a haven for people of a variety of backgrounds and origins. While two-thirds of the population of the United States is ethnically Caucasian¹, one third is composed of an ethnically diverse group. For a country with hundreds of millions of people calling it home, even a third is substantial enough to keep other nations guessing about exactly what makes up American culture, or, at least, a cumulative cultural aesthetic. However, portrayal of what it is to be American is heavily skewed, not only this nation's history, but by its social standards today. These precedents are very much influenced by the ideals of Western Europe; beauty, food, race, cultural superiority and a plethora of other topics are all subject to the general public's opinion of what it is to be American, including art. This country has long been dominated by those who were ethnically white, and what they found important; their values have trickled down into every crevice, including, but not limited to, what constitutes as art and what methods, techniques, and standard practices in art are taught in

¹ "Population Estimates, July 1, 2015, (V2015)." *UNITED STATES QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau*. N.p., n.d. 2015.

schools across this great nation. It could be difficult to argue that many art sensibilities today in the U.S. did not stem from those who first emigrated and then resided here, such as the English, French and Spanish. Even with a surge in diversity, most of the fine art world and its history is still dominated by those of historically ethnically white backgrounds, namely Western Europeans. Though it was not their ideals that necessarily brought them here, they certainly did not leave them back in Europe.

Cultural Bias in the West—Primarily in America

Holland Cotter, writer for the New York Times, rather elegantly states, “...our encyclopedic museums — the ones that most people visit, and look to as repositories of what we most value in art — are rarely doing ambitiously scaled, big-idea shows of older non-Western art, and American art historians of the rising generation aren’t studying it these days... In the craze for the new, certain areas of Western art are being neglected too. But it’s non-Western art, chronically marginalized, that is especially vulnerable.”² As I read more into the article, I can conclude that he is making an observation about not only traditional non-Western art being marginalized, but also recognizably foreign contemporary works not sharing the same acclaim or public interest as Western pieces.

This “cultural bias” affects how art is consumed and judged in the West, and it matters because those that don’t conform to the fashionable path are at a distinct disadvantage—despite the fact that inclusion of diversity grows ever more popular. This is not to say that there isn’t still cross-cultural strife across the globe, however; I’ve observed that some areas haven’t yet conformed to this idea, particularly when it comes to art as defined by Western standards. Despite being an American national, I’m a visual artist who has taken on a style of art foreign to my background: the comic style, Manga, predominantly used in Japan and recently in the Republic of Korea. Studying these cultures has been an active and important pastime of mine, and while I wasn’t born into that environment, their art has been very influential on me and many others. During my academic studies, I have always been told that part of the key to success is having a well-rounded education, including courses about art and its history. This being the case, I have found that, in my experience, art from regions like Africa, West and East Asia is

² Cotter, Holland. “Under Threat: The Shock of the Old.” (New York: *NYTimes.com*, 2011)

marginalized. Even historically American art is typically "specialized knowledge." Schools other than mine might have more access to non-Western art studies, and I have found that this is typically due to access to personal expertise—such as a school's art program possessing *one* teacher who has trained in non-western art. Even within my critiques from some art teachers, there have been abject biases over what is considered art and what is not. While I understand that fewer art historians in the West study non-Western art, I believe it is important to learn about other cultures (including their art), to have a well-balanced art education; this view is concurrent with the globalist frame of mind. This is not to say that the Western In my own experience, the cascading pagodas of the Far East don't get the time they deserve, just as the lofty and intricate tapestries of the Middle East and West Asia do not. I believe they are masterful and worthy as the paintings of Picasso and the sculptures of Michelangelo are. While it is reasonable to assume that art from these regions are taught in their native countries, the American art system possesses the "luxury" of choosing the standards of what art is able to bask in the limelight. However, it is reasonable to assume that those who "decide" the artistic standards for our culture will choose Western art predominantly, as it is often more accessible and more "familiar." I find that, however, there is increasingly more access to more non-Western art due to resources like the internet; so, to say that these countries are so "other" is almost self-refuting, considering America's culture is a melting pot of many of the cultures that are often glanced-over in our education and daily lives.

As Americans, our perimeters for accessing what constitutes as art comes from those Europeans who settled here long ago, bringing with them their cultural interests and perceptions, and having a more accessible system of literature on both history and art. For those of other ethnicities, it has been a struggle to not assimilate into more Western culture and lose the culture

of their ancestors. Either way, it was then that the precedent for what classifies successfully as art was set. For centuries, Renaissance art, and what followed soon after, was the pinnacle of art production. At that point, it was rare for Westerners to have a true opinion on Eastern art, because it was out of reach in most cases. However, everything began to change in the 20th century, when Modern and Contemporary art movements took a foothold. These were eras in which artists broke the rules of what makes art art. The foundations of art laid by America's European predecessors were turned on their head in many cases, bringing a new definition to the meaning of aesthetics. However, most of the non-western works I'm referring to in this manuscript are those that are "culturally obvious," or, in other words, that can be identified as having connections with/originating within a certain culture or place. I find that Contemporary art in particular has a way of breaking down cultural and political identifiers unless they are specifically referring to an origin point. It has the sense of being globally-recognizable, which is something that would have been harder to do in the past, particularly since many cultures have followed their own style or have placed cultural markers in their works. For instance, some of the oldest comics we know of were produced in late 18th century (1775 and on, to be precise) Japan by Koikawa Harumachi, in which he drew and wrote about daily Japanese life, folk tales, history, and so on³. Though it did not evolve into the comics many think of today until the 20th century, works like these have obvious origins, and even set the precedent for today's comics⁴. However, it can be said that most American comics fans probably would not recognize these origins, nor would they be aware of their artistic, historical, and social value.

³ Shirane, Haruo, Suzuki, Tomi. *The Cambridge History of Japanese Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 515.

⁴ Kern, Adam L. "Kibyōshi in the Harvard-Yenching Library: A Guided Tour." (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

Unfortunately, contemporary American, and Western Culture as a whole, does not perceive most comics or cartoons as fine art. Just as with video games, comic art and cartoons (including manga and anime) are seen as mere entertainment, despite the work, skill, and thought that go into each. American comics have reached a bit more acclaim, I believe, due to the advent of superhero movies, but there still isn't much to be said about how much artistic value the general public gives them. We are far past the age where art from more distant cultures is unattainable, so, I believe that why there are such huge biases against more Eastern art can often be attributed to cultural pride. It is something that happens every day, all over the globe: differing ethnic groups believing that what they produce is superior in some way to whatever any "outsider" can produce. This sense of "other," or "not the same as us" is not necessarily promoted, but it certainly understandable when considering how homogenous many countries other than America are. On the other hand, Americans do not often have the excuse being ethnically tied to their nationality. That leads me to wonder why there is often little room for a more culturally-inclusive view of art, and why there is such a resistance to surpass the concept of "other" in this melting pot of a nation.

The purpose of my piece is to highlight, in an almost comical way, this very notion that there is a pressure to perform and produce work abiding by cultural precedents. As I've mentioned before, I mainly work in a manga-influenced style, though most pieces I've produced I've heard referred to as "realistic manga." This is due to a more realistic and in-depth use of traditional techniques like lighting and more "proportional" anatomy. Most of the subject matter I broach is not political or political like this piece, but rather fantastic and filled with lore and characters I have designed—of varied ethnic backgrounds, colors, motivations, personalities, etc. However, all that makes this piece even more important to me: I wanted to take the time to

portray cultural sensitivity and pressure, a subject important to me that I speak of often, with my own image at the heart of the issue since it effects me often. In the piece, I depict myself as racially ambiguous, embracing various items—some art pieces, some just cultural icons—that represent some cultures from the non-western world. For holding so tightly to these articles, I am accusingly pointed at by artworks that serve as foundations of art in the West, impressing on my caricature a feeling of panic and pressure. When I think about the struggle of producing foreign-influenced art in my native environment, the same feeling my audience sees in my image's face wells up in me.

My Own Cultural Experiences

My own cultural heritage is sometimes a mystery even to me, as I am of mixed heritage, which, in and of itself, poses many questions. I was born and raised in southern Louisiana, and most of my cultural heritage has been identified as Creole. There are many features of being a Louisianan, particularly in the art scene. New Orleans is a city known for jazz music, Mardi Gras, food, and the colorful works of art that line every corner, whether it be graffiti, corner galleries, or vendors selling their work along the streets. I've grown up seeing and experiencing this culture full of easy-going, artistic people. However, the silhouettes of streetlamps and romantic scenes of steamboats on the Mississippi had not created the attraction for which I had been searching. My interest was captured instead by the art represented in Japanese and Korean video games and "cartoons," namely that of anime and manga. However, I am very aware that I am not, nor will I ever be, fully immersed into those cultures, no matter, how well-versed in the subject or talented I might be. I will always be a foreigner, an outsider, and "other," but in no way squashes my appreciation and attraction to the style before me.

Manga/anime are mainly productions of Japanese culture, and are often quite beyond our own culture as Americans, much less all Louisianan culture; in many cases there are the sensibilities of and references to the culture of origin. In some cases, the culture represented in these depictions is a complete contradiction to my own American sensibilities, though it nonetheless inspired me to work in that style. Even American comics have not had the enticement that its Eastern counterpart presents to me. Besides being different stylistically, the flexibility and story-telling prowess I've delved into over the years is refreshingly different than how many American comics are presented, such as a clean balance between humor and solemnity, the latter of which I've found rampant in American comics. Much of the approach

and mood has to do with the cultural influence the Japanese and Koreans imbue in their work and how they approach life, and, consequently, art; because I enjoy much of what the East Asian/non-western culture presents and represents, I have a inclination towards their art. The problem lies within the fact that my own interests as an artist conflict with what I'm expected to produce, as a citizen of American culture. I can recall several times when I was growing up that my father would ask when I would "outgrow" the anime-inspired style and "do more" or "get serious." In high school, I had classmates and companions who, after seeing my work, would ask if I made "real art," referring to portraiture and realism. Throughout my college career, I continue to encounter those who question the validity of my work based on my stylistic origins, seemingly believing that I will not and cannot be a successful artist if all I produce is manga-styled art, particularly because I am not part of the culture. This very subject and ones related to it has been at the heart of many discussions and disputes between me and those in my environment.

Statement of Intentions and Stylistic Analysis

My primary reason for undertaking of this project—and how and why I came up with these concepts—is due to the lack of acute multicultural awareness and appreciation of my environment. Despite all of our advances, somehow it seems (and perhaps it *is* due to my immediate environment) that many people still see culture as black and white. “That is your culture; this is mine.” For someone like me, who is ethnically mixed, the concept that my interest in other cultures—particularly ones that are not my own—is unfounded, has always been a hard pill to swallow. Though I have always possessed a healthy reverence for my own culture, there are many points on which I much prefer the way of other cultures. As a whole, I believe multiculturalism has become more distinct and accepted. However, the ways in which we as people, particularly in the United States, accept it are not all-consuming. Not all areas are touched on, in a sense. These untouched areas include art.

One aspect of my work that fits a global trend is that it’s created digitally. With the advent of tools like drawing tablets and digital painting programs, some people never utilize traditional mediums again. There are some who would argue that in creating digital art, you lose the integrity of what it is to create art, or that the program does it for you, but that is not true. Hundreds (or thousands) of artists—myself included—know that though there are some very convenient tools in the digital world, most of the self same talent and finesse needed to create traditional drawings and paintings is needed to produce art in the digital realm. Part of that same problem of non-western art acceptance is that a good portion of the Eastern art like manga, anime, comic books, art for video games, and so on is created digitally. Those are two of the principle obstacles that those who choose to work in an Eastern-inspired style face, and play into why many in the West don’t consider Eastern art to be “fine art.” Though there is no true

consensus, there is a greater appreciating for the manga style in its native sphere—whether it's due to cultural pride or not. At the least, it is not considered “weird” to have a gallery full of manga-styled paintings. The challenge of presenting manga in the West is something I myself face frequently; I've been assured that unless I “catch a lucky break” in one of the aforementioned fields, there is almost no chance of me supporting myself in the field, particularly because I am not part of their culture. Maybe that's true—but it should not be because Eastern styles (my adopted style) has less merit than any other, despite the fact that many believe it so. Part of it stems from the eclectic nature of contemporary art—it does not follow a specific path or style. In theory, this should not stop Eastern styles from being fine art, but more often than not, I have found that styles like manga/anime do not quite align with the sensibilities of popular contemporary art.

Despite technically being a contemporary artist, my attention is typically not captured by the breadth of the Contemporary and Modern Western art that I've viewed. However, my piece touches more on the cultural side of the issue rather than concern for era, though it obviously plays into the problem. I wanted to depict the present situation in a comical way, displayed through the almost cartoonish rendering though having the point be more or less direct. I positioned a caricature of myself at the forefront. Though I'm not particularly used to doing caricatures or depicting myself in my pieces, I felt it was important to place myself there; this is due to the fact that it possesses more meaning, as it is personal, but it also gives the viewer a jumping point to make connections to my statement. My decision to make the immediate background a flat and loud color is directly related to the color I decided to use for my own skin. The saturated yellow is intense and almost jarring, but its brightness helps my figure and the others to stand out. The red skin I gave my image is almost highlighted against the yellow. I

chose this deep red for a couple of reasons, the first being that red has often been considered *the* color of passion; that is a word that has been used to describe me and my own reactions to the very topic of multiculturalism many times. The color also serves as the ambiguity of ethnicity, hinting that, if this person is anything, it is not Caucasian, or at least, not in full. I believe this ambiguity also gives my audience a chance to insert themselves into the situation without much worry of lack of racial identification. That motivation is also the reason I have chosen not to classify the accusatory hands by race, but rather by topic. Despite the social, political, and ethnic implications that travel with these images as a consequence of their creation, my reason for them appearing in this piece is to stress the pressure their existence as “masterworks” place on those just emerging into the field. It is not to say that I don’t personally enjoy some of the works of the past, as I do, but it is important to admit that I recognize the value in some pieces from the past far more than others. For instance, I am not a fan of Van Gogh’s work, nor Pollock’s, but I often partake in viewing the sculptures of Michelangelo, and the paintings of men like Caravaggio and John William Waterhouse. Recognition for the impacts all of these pieces have left on the art world is due and certainly paid, but it does not give me the impetus to stop critique on what I find to be the negative sides of their fame. Lastly, I found that my point would be moot if there were no markers of Eastern influence besides that of my style. In my arms are cradled various references to Eastern culture and tradition, including a video game controller, an “anime poster,” a katana (Japanese sword), a Chinese script scroll, the Republic of Korea’s flag, and a very simple Hindu-inspired tapestry. While my focus rest markedly on the productions of The Republic of Korea and Japan, I felt it was important to include pieces that represent other parts of East, such as China and India; I felt it would be too much to add much more, though there are many individual places that could be accounted for. These items not only relate to the under-

recognized art present, but to their cultures as a whole, such as having the Korean flag present, though it is not a particular indication of art.

As I mentioned before, this piece is an indication of my personal turmoil as an artist. All of these elements combined—the pointing hands, the tight grip on my items—give an air of unease, accented of course by the panic in the character’s face along with her disheveled glasses and shrinking, helpless body language. In some ways, she has a right to be panicked; there is not a high chance of the current views on Eastern art changing at this pace, though there is hope with globalization becoming the new standard.

Conclusion

Commitment to any art style is laden with challenges and obstacles. The disadvantage of working in a style foreign to my environment is one that I, and many like me, face are simply an obstacle. Despite not following a traditionally Western style, I don't feel any distinct lack in connection with my own self and culture, but, rather, that I am enriched. Cultural diversity, particularly in art, can only serve to expand views: not only on the value of a variety of art types, but life in general. We, as Americans, do not have to sacrifice our own perceived culture to appreciate and, in some ways, "practice" other cultures. There are many areas in which this is already common practice: you would be hard-pressed to visit a major city and not be able to find a sushi bars, yoga studios, Asian markets, Middle Eastern restaurants, and so much more. Keeping a cultural awareness in mind, we could in theory do the same for art, and hopefully create a time in which art isn't diminished because of its ethnic/cultural origins. I believe that's the kind of movement that will be indicative of a step forward for mankind.

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Illustrations

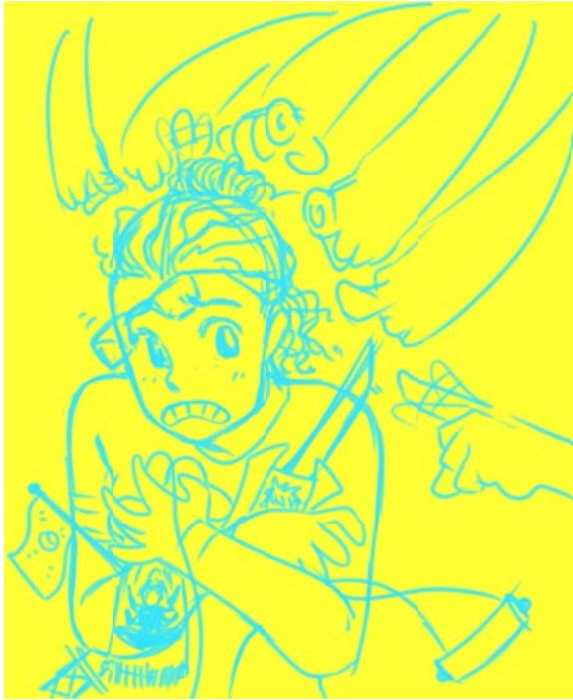


Figure 1. *NOT FOR US*, First draft, 2016. Digital.



Figure 2. *NOT FOR US*, Work in Progress with flat colors, 2016. Digital.



Figure 3. *NOT FOR US*, Work in progress with figure completed, 2017. Digital.



Figure 4. *NOT FOR US*, 2017. Digital.