

How to Write a More Global, More Inclusive History of Art?

An Ancient Egyptian Sculpture and Its Six Lessons

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Abstract

Since its beginnings, art history has been torn between a tendency to remain inside local or national boundaries and a more transnational orientation; it has also veered between addressing only the creations of well-recognized white European male solitary artists and assessing the importance of female, anonymous, or collective creators of less highly prized objects-images. The long overdue process of writing art histories that are more global (less European-centered) and more inclusive (less focused on overprized

masterpieces) is underway. For professional art historians, the multiplicity of narratives thus offered can be a blessing. For a more general public, though, as well as students and maybe even many professionals it still clashes with an implied master narrative that has been left barely untouched. The necessity for a new master narrative that meets the standards of contemporary scholarly research leads to pressing questions: How do we write it? Who will write it? Is it worth trying?

Introduction: An Encounter

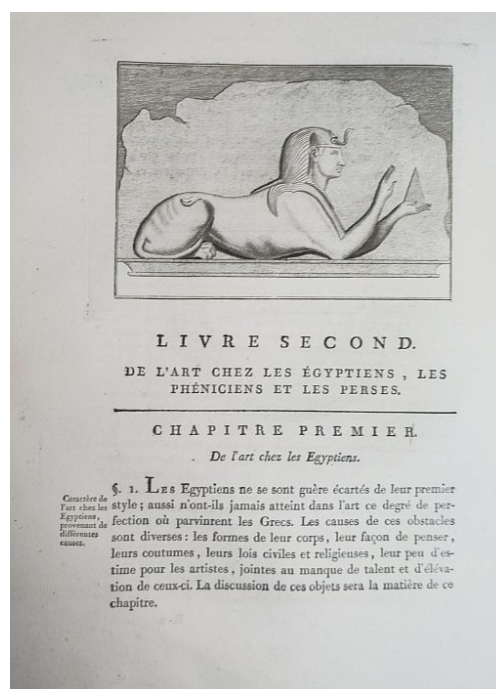
[1] In 2019, I saw a sculpture at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond (USA) (Fig. 1). It is not particularly well known but has stayed on my mind ever since. I find it fitting to start with this sculpture, instead of a rhetorical question, because I think it necessary to emphasize that the main specificity of art history – what makes it different from all other fields of inquiry, and constitutes its potential additional value in terms of questions and answers – is that it deals with objects-images¹, potentially with any object that has a visual dimension, or with images that have a concrete and material dimension: Images that were made at a certain time, in a certain context, for certain uses and needs, and which are still available to us (even if they were physically destroyed and only remain as images), having aged, travelled, changed contexts, and are still producing effects on viewers today. This sculpture is an ancient Egyptian male head, probably dating from the 30th Dynasty (c. 380–342 BCE), in red and black granite, measuring 24,1 × 14,6 × 20 cm. It encapsulates, in a way, several issues that are crucial when considering the possibility of writing a more global, more inclusive history of art.



1 Unidentified sculptor, *Male Head*, c. 380–342 BCE (Egypt, 30th Dynasty), red and black granite, 24,1 × 14,6 × 20 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (photo: author)

¹ I am using the phrase "object-image" in order to emphasize the fact that what art historians deal with are not disembodied images, but images that are intrinsically congruent with their materiality.

[2] I also find it fitting that this object-image originates from ancient Egypt for two reasons. First, because this is where Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), the first author of an international art history, pluricultural although limited in scope and largely Eurocentric, started the inquiry which, in a way, is the basis of all subsequent art histories written in the Western world (Fig. 2).² And secondly, because Egypt is a contested area, relevant in terms of what is global and what is not, as it has been variously considered Western, non-Western, Barbarian, African, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Near Eastern, even European in a way...



2 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Histoire de l'art chez les anciens*, vol. 1, Paris: Jansen 1802, 76. Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris (photo: author)

1 – Global Is Not New

[3] This is an ancient Egyptian sculpture that I encountered by chance at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), an important "universal" or "encyclopedic" museum,³ modelled on European 19th century precedents. Like many museums in the Western world, it proposes a global art history in a concrete form, going from Ancient to the present, albeit in a slightly anachronistic

² Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* [first ed. Dresden 1764, second ed. Vienna 1776], eds. Adolf H. Borbein and Thomas W. Gaethgens, Mainz 2002 (= *Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Schriften und Nachlaß*. Herausgegeben von der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz, dem Deutschen Archäologischen Institut und der Winckelmann-Gesellschaft, vol. 4,1).

³ The phrase "universal museum" is usually used in a French context, whereas "encyclopedic museum" is more commonly used in English-speaking countries. As Donatien Grau, who edited an anthology of interviews on the subject, stated, "the term *encyclopedic museum* conveys a very specific meaning: it is a museum that includes as many cultures as possible as well as one – and this is a new current – that brings these cultures into a dialogue, and perhaps even includes them in a narrative." See Donatien Grau, "Introduction. The Encyclopedic Museum: A Catchphrase, a Concept, a History", in: Donatien Grau, ed., *Under Discussion: The Encyclopedic Museum*, Los Angeles 2021, 1-15: 5.

order because the architecture makes it impossible to follow a completely logical path. I stumbled upon this sculpture amidst the "Ancient: Egyptian" room, which is located between the "Ancient: Greek, Etruscan and Roman" and "European: Renaissance" rooms.

[4] **Lesson 1:** Global art history has been there for a long time, in our "universal" or "encyclopedic" histories of art, embodied in books or museums, which have been starting, since the 18th century and Winckelmann or Dominique Vivant Denon (1747–1825) (resumed by largely forgotten German art historians of the turn of the 19th century⁴), with Egyptian or Mesopotamian art (thus limiting their scope to what can be called a "Biblical universal"⁵). These histories of art strive to find logic in their chronology of objects and collections while trying now to include what was, not so long ago, considered marginal, and hence not worthy of showing.⁶ The reason for the implicit or explicit hierarchy that long prevailed in "universal" museums is to be found in the power dynamics of the societies that created them, including war and colonization processes. These were prevalent even in the case of Egyptian art, as shown by Cheikh Anta Diop's analysis of the fluctuation of early 19th century discourses on the context in which to place it – Western "universal" or African "primitive".⁷ A moral imperative of global art history is that it has to consider the fact that some human groups were subjected to an exceptional degree of violence throughout history, that it would be adding insult to injury if the last word was left to the persecutors.⁸ At the VMFA, like in many other museums, the taking into account of this necessity was symbolized, for instance, at the time of my visit, by the parallel hanging of two large portraits by British 18th-century artist Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) and contemporary African-American artist Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977) in the "Tapestry Hall", at the junction of the European and African, Native American and Precolumbian rooms (Fig. 3).

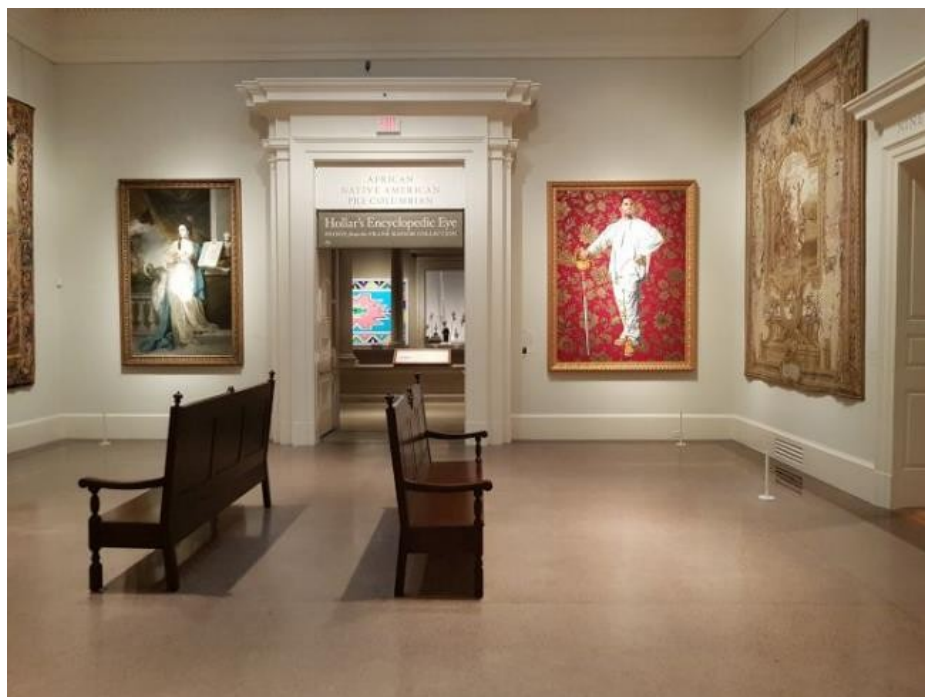
⁴ See Ulrich Pfisterer, "Origins and Principles of World Art History, 1900 (and 2000)", in: Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam 2008, 69-89.

⁵ The limitation to the "Biblical" world of the "universal" museum has been identified by Neil MacGregor in *À monde nouveau, nouveaux musées. Les musées, les monuments et la communauté réinventée*, Paris 2021.

⁶ In one of the most convincing examples of global art history, Finbarr Barry Flood and Beate Fricke have studied "objects [...] chosen for their ability to highlight segmented circuits of exchange between northern Europe, the Mediterranean, the central Islamic lands that were the heartlands of the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258), East Africa, and Asia", trying to understand them "as part of entangled spatio-temporal networks, rather than products of a single place or time" (*Tales Things Tell: Material Histories of Early Globalisms*, Princeton 2024, 2, 9).

⁷ Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook, New York/Westport 1974 [orig. *Antériorité des civilisations nègres, mythe ou vérité historique?*, Paris 1967], 46-57.

⁸ As a reaction to the presentation of an early version of this paper, Zahia Rahmani wrote (email to the author, April 13, 2021): "Writing a history of world art is risky, because taking the world into account as a common political space doesn't appeal to everyone. By this I mean that it is obviously necessary to distinguish and recall the exceptionality of the violence that has been done to certain human groups (and a large number of artistic acts that claim "an elsewhere" work in this direction). It is even necessary because it responds to a need to speak – sometimes like a cure – but that, in no way this need should obliterate the possibility of thinking and constituting a common world in equality."



3 View of a room at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, juxtaposing [Maria, Lady Broughton](#), by Joshua Reynolds, 1765–1769, and [Willem van Heythuysen](#), by Kehinde Wiley, 2006 (photo: author, 2019)

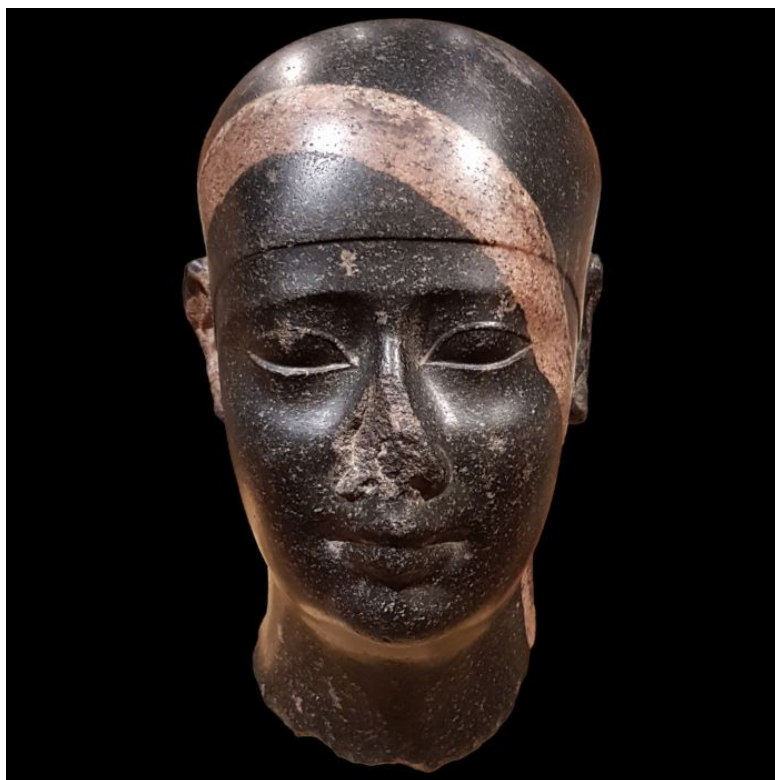
2 – Aesthetic Pleasures

[5] I was struck by the sculpture at the VMFA (Fig. 4) in (what I experienced as) an epiphany, an immediate aesthetic rapture, as I knew nothing or almost nothing about its context at the time when I saw it. As I am not a specialist of ancient Egyptian art, far from it, my knowledge in this field is perforce rather limited. I admit that, at the time of my encounter with this object-image, I knew nearly nothing of the 30th Dynasty (380–343 BCE), the period when this sculpture is now supposed to be made (some scholars assign it also to a broader time frame: "Late [Period] through Roman" or "from the end of the Twenty-Seventh Dynasty ... through the Ptolemaic Period",⁹ or, conversely, to a later and shorter time frame, namely the "Macedonian Period" (332–304 BCE)¹⁰. I did not know much about the Late Period in general. It is the concrete encounter with this sculpture that determined my further readings – which are still cursory, and actually depend on a rather limited historiography and scholarship as the Late Period of Egyptian art has been long neglected.¹¹

⁹ Donald Spanel, *Through Ancient Eyes: Egyptian Portraiture*, exh. cat., Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Museum of Art, Seattle 1988, 122–123. I thank Peter J. Schertz, Jack and Mary Ann Frable Curator of Ancient Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, for his help on this sculpture's bibliography and provenance.

¹⁰ Margaret Ellen Mayo and Heather S. Russell, *Ancient Art: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*, Richmond, VA, 1998, 24–25.

¹¹ A recent addition to the literature is Annie Forgeau, *Nectanébo. La dernière dynastie égyptienne*, Paris 2018.



4 Unidentified sculptor, *Male Head*, c. 380–342 BCE (Egypt, 30th Dynasty), red and black granite, 24,1 × 14,6 × 20 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (photo: author)

[6] I accept that I grasped something of the sculpture's quality – if I dare use that word, which art historians tend to avoid when they consider their own objects, while using it without remorse when they talk about other artistic fields, such as music or cinema, as long as it is for their private pleasure – by placing it against what I knew of ancient Egyptian sculpture. I perhaps saw in it something that reminded me of formal qualities I have long been in love with: the harmonious perfection of the geometry of its "egg-head" shape and, in particular, the more exceptional curved pink streak that unfurls across its surface indeed have something in common with abstract paintings and collages made in the late 1950s and early 1960s by US artist Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2015), who was indeed fascinated early on by ancient Egyptian art – such as *Running White* (1959; Fig. 5), with its double white curve playing with the black rectangle of the canvas.¹²

¹² Eugene C. Goossen wrote that "in his first months in Paris, for example, he [Kelly] recalls returning again and again to the Louvre to look at the Egyptian *Stele of the Serpent King*". See Eugene C. Goossen, *Ellsworth Kelly*, exh. cat., New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1973, 97.



5 Ellsworth Kelly, *Running White*, 1959, oil on canvas, 223,6 × 172,2 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (© Ellsworth Kelly Foundation)

[7] In its aestheticized generalization and idealism, this particular Egyptian sculpture seems to achieve its specificity through a renegotiation of an old tradition: it shows what Olivier Perdu called a "neo-archaism",¹³ which imitates and transforms models from the 26th Dynasty (Fig. 6), made 200 years before, as if no evolutions in sculpture had taken place in the meantime, these models themselves dialoguing with much older precedents, from the 12th Dynasty, around 1900–1800 BCE.

¹³ Olivier Perdu, *Le crépuscule des pharaons. Chefs-d'œuvre des dernières dynasties égyptiennes*, exh. cat., Paris: Musée Jacquemart-André, Brussels 2012, 196.



6 Unidentified sculptor, *Head of a Statue of Psammetich II*, 595–589 BCE (Egypt, 26th Dynasty), bronze, ht. 12,5 cm. Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris (photo: author)

And it carries off this renegotiation through new collective precepts (such as the deep drill holes at the corners of the mouth) and the individual doings of an artist. It testifies to the specificity of the human representation of the period, where artists merged a pervasive idealization (notably the egg-head shape which became "firmly established among the various workshops throughout Egypt" in the 4th century BCE¹⁴) with elements of individuation ("to this schema the artist has applied specific details which are so individualistic among the group of egg-heads that a particular individual must be behind the representation"¹⁵). As a specialist of high modernism, I must have been particularly attracted to this merging.

¹⁴ Robert S. Bianchi, "The Egg-Heads: One Type of Generic Portrait from the Egyptian Late Period", in: *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe* 31 (1982), no. 2/3, 149-151: 149. Bianchi, *ibid.*, describes the specificities of the egg-head, that one finds in the VMFA sculpture: "The facial features are developed within the lower two-thirds of the head and are framed by the eyebrows which separate them from the enormously wide dome of the skull. This wide dome is approximately twice the circumference of the chin and these two features, taken together, produce the characteristic egg-shape by which the type is both recognized and described."

¹⁵ Bianchi (1982), 150.

[8] As an old reader of Pierre Bourdieu, though, I do know that my "love of art" is conditioned,¹⁶ even if I have met numerous artists, much less privileged and conditioned than me, whose entire career was premised on an unexpected aesthetic encounter. The French artist Djamel Tatah (b. 1959; Fig. 7), for instance, has recounted how, as a child born in an immigrant family who came to France in the 1950s and for whom there was no interest nor knowledge of any kind of artistic creation, except for "objects, clothes and fabrics with Berber motifs in our house", his first encounter with art took place, without any preparation, on a specific day, around the age of ten, when, by chance, he saw paintings in the local townhall of his native Saint-Chamond, which immediately made him start to draw with pencils and pastels that he asked his father to buy, thinking he too could become an artist – which he later became, against all odds.¹⁷



7 Djamel Tatah, *Untitled: Self-Portrait at Mansourah* [Sans titre: Autoportrait à la Mansoura], 1986, oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm. Collection of the artist (© Djamel Tatah, photo: author)

[9] **Lesson 2:** Aesthetic pleasure counts in art history, even if it is not enough, because if we think that such a thing as art exists, it lies precisely in the possibility of experiencing the effects of a specific configuration in the here and now, even if what causes this experience has been created in a distant context. An artwork embodies a world view (which should not be reduced to a conscious intentionality, as Michael Baxandall taught us)¹⁸ that is at least partially transmitted, and does not always need to be translated in order to be efficient. Its meanings, always unstable,

¹⁶ See Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art. European Art Museums and Their Public*, trans. Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman, Cambridge, UK, 1997 [orig. *L'amour de l'art. Les musées d'art européens et leur public*, Paris 1969].

¹⁷ Djamel Tatah, "Conversations between Djamel Tatah and Michel Hilaire", in: Michel Hilaire and Maud Marron-Wojewódzki, eds., *Djamel Tatah, le théâtre du silence*, exh. cat., Montpellier: Musée Fabre, Ghent 2022, 196-205: 198.

¹⁸ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: on the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, London/New Haven 1985.

are the result of such encounters and we can only try to explain how they made us, or others, interested in the first place. What is crucial is the visual dimension of an encounter, which, in a way, accounts for the specificity of art history, if we care about adding something to history or aesthetics.

[10] This attitude might lead us into some traps, as it clearly depends on the accumulated knowledge, prejudices and aesthetic experiences of singular viewers. We are peculiarly susceptible to pseudomorphisms¹⁹, as so many examples in art history books and everyday experience show. The pitfalls can nevertheless be addressed by getting access to scientific resources, which are now, fortunately, widely available through digital means and libraries, although their accessibility depends more than is commonly realized on the location of the individual researcher.²⁰ When faced with unfamiliar objects-images, art historians who are trained in Western art should also compare their viewpoint with colleagues who have a thorough command of more unfamiliar and plural contexts. As much as possible, they should follow these colleagues, but they should not in principle mistrust their own intuitions, provided they acknowledge where they speak from.

3 – The Importance of Materiality

[11] What particularly struck me about the VMFA's piece (Fig. 8) was the way the sculptor carefully chose a block of black granite with a diagonal pink-coloured vein to carve this head. This is only a fragment, and we do not know how the rest of the sculpture might have looked like (whether the head was attached to a bust, a standing or a kneeling figure).²¹ But we do know that this kind of material, not only hard stones but irregularly veined or spotted stones – at the same time as their opposites, finely polished and immaculate black basalts or greywackes – was frequently favoured by artists of the Late Period; however, I do not know any other Egyptian sculpture which makes use of this found feature of a stone to such spectacular effects.²² The pink vein circles the egg-shaped head on three sides and creates an internal movement that plays with

¹⁹ "Pseudomorphism, a term adapted to art history by Erwin Panofsky, refers to the ostensible similarity between two works of art that actually emerge from distinct historical and artistic lineages." (Tobias Rosen and Luise Mörke, "Editorial", in: *re:visions*, no. 4: *Pseudomorphism*, April 2024: <https://revisionsjournal.de/Editorial-Pseudomorphism>). See Yve-Alain Bois, "On the Uses and Abuses of Look-alikes", in: *October*, no. 154 (Fall 2015), 127-149.

²⁰ See James Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives*, Berlin/Boston 2021, 23-25, 51-52.

²¹ Visually, the material of the sculpture appears to be granodiorite, with insertion of a pink vein in granite. Only a microscopic analysis could establish the exact nature of the granitic stone. See Thierry De Putter and Christina Karlshausen, *Pierres de l'Égypte ancienne: Guide des matériaux de l'architecture, de la sculpture et de la joaillerie*, Brussels 2022, 125-142, which also gives the Egyptian names of granitic stones.

²² In Bernard V. Bothmer, ed., *Egyptian Sculpture of the Late Period: 700 B.C. to A.D. 100*, exh. cat., Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, New York 1960, p. 24, this sculpture, then owned by the Textile Museum in Washington, is cited when speaking about this characteristic: "Since a number of Late sculptures in hard, dark stones show similar veins (Alexandria 26298; Washington, Textile Museum 07.3), it may be that, to the craftsman of those times (unlike those of earlier periods, who apparently chose perfect blocks), the irregularities of the stone had some aesthetic or other appeal."

the overall curves of the stylized head, as well as with the softness of the cheeks and neckline, a movement which is integral to its effect on any viewer – and contradicts the frontality which usually characterizes Egyptian sculpture. It cannot be fully grasped in a reproduction.²³



8 Unidentified sculptor, *Male Head*, c. 380–342 BCE (Egypt, 30th Dynasty), red and black granite, 24,1 × 14,6 × 20 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (photo: VFMA)

Nor are psychological interpretations of the sculpture possible without seeing it concretely, in the flesh, so to speak, as depending on how it is photographed, it appears to display a slight smile or looks very stern. This has led one writer to even describe it as "expressionless", otherwise interpreting the pink streak as a "migraine line", "as if to denote an ancient headache".²⁴

[12] **Lesson 3:** Materiality counts in art history and the feasibility of a more global art history depends heavily on the possibility for art historians to travel and be able to experience it firsthand. One of the most obvious problems of a global art history is that all art historians are not equal in this regard. Western art historians affiliated with rich institutions, such as West European and North American universities and museums, are incredibly privileged, compared with their

²³ Historians of art have long warned against the use of 'bad' photographic reproductions to gauge a sculpture. Heinrich Wölfflin was one of the first to do so, in 1896, albeit erroneously advocating the use of one principal view: "The public buys these photographs in good faith, [believing] that with a mechanically-made illustration nothing of the original could be lost; it does not know that an old figure has a particular main view, that one destroys its effectiveness when one takes away its main silhouette; without batting an eye, present-day people allow their uncultivated eyes to put up with the most disagreeable overlaps and lack of clarity." Wölfflin, "How One Should Photograph Sculpture", trans. Geraldine A. Johnson, in: *Art History* 36 (2013), no. 1, 52-71: 52 [orig. "Wie man Skulpturen aufnehmen soll (I.)", in: *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, Neue Folge, 7 (1896), 224-228: 224, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007671>].

²⁴ Spanel (1988), 122-124.

colleagues from other regions of the world, for whom it is difficult to travel widely, be it because of the lack of financial means, travel or visa restrictions that target certain nationalities, war, etc.

[13] Another, provisional, solution is to ensure a wider circulation of collections, through temporary exhibitions which should not be exclusive to rich Western countries, or through extended loans from privileged parts of the world. This encompasses the repatriation and restitution of artworks, a possibility which has gained currency since the publication in 2018 by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy of the report commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron on the subject.²⁵ Such an action would foster the globalization of art history, as it would provide the basis for a more general availability of artworks in countries that are deprived of them because they were plundered by those (especially the old colonial powers) who have since enjoyed and utilised them.

[14] The dissemination of universal museums throughout the world – even though it is a Western concept – could be a solution rather than a problem, provided their model is revised, opened up, both from within and from without. The Louvre Abu Dhabi, which opened in 2017, although located in a country which is inaccessible to most, is a step in the right direction, with its chronological and thematic rooms adopting a globalized view, juxtaposing (for the opening installation) Egyptian sculptures from the New Kingdom with Mesopotamian pottery and Chinese bronzes from the Shang dynasty (all made in the same centuries), or Benin bronzes with French and Italian paintings from the 17th century (Fig. 9).



9 Louvre Abu Dhabi, inaugural display 2017, view of a room with *Benin Bronzes*, c. 1500–1850, by unidentified sculptors; *Saint John Baptizing the People* [*Saint Jean baptisant le peuple*], 1635–1637, by Nicolas Poussin; and *Theseus Finding his Father's Weapons* [*Thésée retrouvant les armes de son père*], 1639–1641, by Laurent de La Hyre (photo: author)

²⁵ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, trans. Drew S. Burk, Paris 2018, https://www.about-africa.de/images/sonstiges/2018/sarr_savoy_en.pdf [orig. *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, Paris 2018].

It could go even further if its collection and organization are truly co-developed by Emirati, French and international art historians, thus advancing what has been called by Avinoam Shalem the "global connectivity component".²⁶

4 – Artification

[15] When visiting the VMFA, I encountered the Egyptian head (Fig. 10) as a work of art, although I am conscious that the formalized concept of art is not universal. Its presence in a museum *de facto* made it an artwork. As Philippe de Montebello has argued, "the museum is in fact the inventor of art by very virtue of the transfer of objects to the museum, separated from their original use, whether in a cult, a Buddhist temple, a Catholic church, a monument, or a political setting".²⁷ It was my first encounter with this object-image, and that in itself is meaningful. Thereby, the singular artefact was placed against the background of all the other artefacts that I am used to consider artworks, whatever their dates and original contexts. This doesn't prevent me from inquiring about the meanings it could have had when it was created, and about the way it could have been used, according to archaeologists – quite the contrary.



10 Unidentified sculptor, *Male Head*, c. 380–342 BCE (Egypt, 30th Dynasty), red and black granite, 24,1 × 14,6 × 20 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (photo: VFMA)

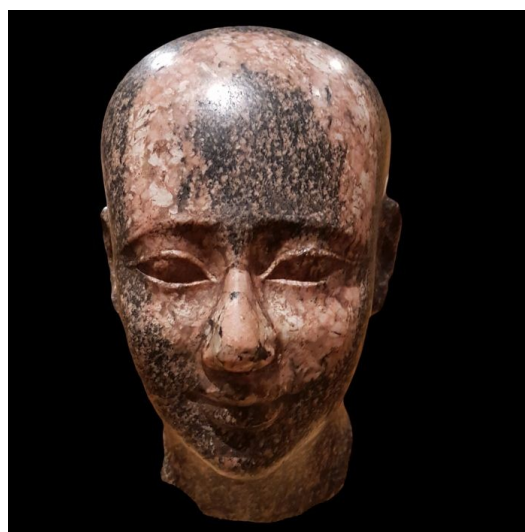
²⁶ Avinoam Shalem, "Dangerous Claims: On the 'Othering' of Islamic Art History and How It Operates within Global Art History", in: *Kritische Berichte. Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften* 40 (2012), no. 2, 69-86: 79, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/kb.2012.2.87859>.

²⁷ Philippe de Montebello, in: Donatien Grau, ed., *Under Discussion: The Encyclopedic Museum*, Los Angeles 2021, 39-45: 42.

[16] Once I considered it an artwork, I was stimulated to better understand how it functioned in its original context and how its creator or creators came to be seen as artists rather than craftsmen through historically grounded processes of appropriation – literal and figurative, violent and peaceful. In particular, although it has no non-idealized features (such as one can find in the so-called [Berlin](#), Brooklyn and [Boston](#) "green heads" of elder men from the 30th dynasty and early Ptolemaic periods;²⁸ see Fig. 11), it is clearly a portrait, differing in details from similar heads from the same period, such as a *Head of a Priest*, also in the VMFA (Fig. 12), or a [Male Head](#) in the Museo Nazionale Romano at Palazzo Altemps in Rome.



11 Unidentified sculptor, *Head of Man (Berliner Grüner Kopf)*, c. 350 BCE (Egypt, 30th Dynasty), grauwacke, 23 × 14 × 20 cm. Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin (photo: author)



12 Unidentified sculptor, *Head of a Priest*, ca 380–342 BCE (Egypt, 30th Dynasty), red and black granite, 21,3 × 13,3 × 15,9 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (photo: author)

²⁸ On the "green heads", see Spanel (1988), 26-29.

Like them, it has been severed from the rest of the statue, which must have held the inscription with the name of the individual it represents. It isn't a portrait in the current, Westernized, acceptance of the notion, but a portrait as it was conceived in ancient Egypt, i.e., to quote Dimitri Laboury, as a

*vectorial combination, a tension, or a dialectic between an analogical reference to visual perception of outer or phenomenological reality and a consciously managed departure from this perceptual reality, in order to create meaning or extra-meaning, beyond the simple reproduction of visual appearances and sometimes, if necessary, despite them.*²⁹

[17] **Lesson 4:** We should trust our impulse to potentially transform anything we see into an artwork (i.e. to participate in a process of *artification*, in the sense introduced and theorized by sociologist Roberta Shapiro³⁰), even though it might not have been conceived as such. This is, of course, a hotly debated topic, especially in the context of the repatriation of artefacts that were stolen or looted in a colonial situation, but in no way should it hinder the possibility of thinking and building a common world, based on equality. One of the most exposed arguments is that these objects should be returned to their original context, where they were seen, or experienced, not as artworks but as ritual, or utilitarian, objects.³¹ Artification might be a trap for a global art history, because it necessarily obeys a tendency to homogenize diverse experiences of objects-images, but it should be recalled that it is not specific to non-Western artefacts: in a way, the vast majority of artefacts that have been the subjects and objects of art history, even when they were created in a context where the notion of art was or is relevant, were not conceived as such, as proven by the vast majority of paintings, sculptures and objects which had a liturgical function, or by images devised to be disseminated through reproduction. It might be a matter of belief, but I, for one, am convinced that there is something to be gained in considering, if anachronistically, that the will to art (*Kunstwollen*) has been a common feature of all human beings since the first *Homo sapiens sapiens*, if only because of our neuronal apparatus, as shown by John Onians in his convincing demonstration of how the role of mirror neurons and neurochemical rewards might explain the specificity of the images produced 350 centuries ago in the Chauvet cave.³²

[18] I differ from Onians, though, in that I think that we need to take into account the diversity of formulation of this will to art, including when it is present under various guises and allied to other preoccupations. We just need, as Sally Price emphasized in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, in which she studies the arts made by the Bushinenge of Suriname and French Guiana and the way Western commentators have wrongly insisted on giving them religious or symbolic meanings, to

²⁹ Dimitri Laboury, "Portrait versus Ideal Image" (30 October 2010), in: Willeke Wendrich, ed., *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9370v0rz>, 18 pp., 13-14.

³⁰ Roberta Shapiro, "Qu'est-ce que l'artification?", in: *XVIIème Congrès de l'Association internationale de sociologie de langue française: "L'individu social"*, Tours, July 2004, <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00010486v2>, 9 pp., 1: "Artification is the transformation of non-art into art. This consists of a complex social process of transfiguration of people, things and practices. Artification not only has to do with symbolic change, shifting hierarchies and legitimacy. It also implies very concrete modifications [...]."

³¹ Sarr and Savoy (2018), 32-35.

³² John Onians, *European Art: A Neuroarthistory*, New Haven/London 2016, 23-44.

"take seriously the aesthetic conceptual frames" which differ from the ones that were slowly built by the Western world.³³ I think that art history, embodied in studies or in museums, is one of the most neutral tools to take into consideration the diversity of functions and effects of an object-image, in a non-exclusive way. All other tools seem to reinforce what I would call the assignment to a closed identity and not the circulation of meanings that should be our goal in a global world. This does not do away with the aim of the universal but qualifies, diversifies and de-Europeanizes it, transforming it into what Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant called "diversality", i.e. "the possibility of a defracted yet recomposed world, the conscious harmonization of preserved diversities".³⁴ (Please note that every word is important here.)

5 – The Importance of History

[19] My cursory readings have enabled me to understand better the historical context in which the VMFA's sculpture (Fig. 13) could have been made, and thus to understand it better and enrich my experience of it. As I am not an Egyptologist, I won't try here to give an interpretation of this sculpture, but suffice it to say that I believe – and otherwise I would not waste my time with art history – that we understand objects-images better when we place them in their historical context, or rather many contexts. It is not sufficient to understand as much as possible the original contexts of this Egyptian head, as there are: The political context: it was probably made at the time when Nectanebo I or II, or Teos were pharaohs, although, "because no inscription appears on the back, the only criteria for dating are stylistic features".³⁵ The social context: it is the head of a man – there seems to be no three-dimensional representation of women at the time, except when they were queens or goddesses – of an elevated social status, wearing a short wig or a close-fitting cap.³⁶ The religious context: it is of a type usually found in the "Late Period" in the public part of temples or in a funerary context.³⁷ Etc.

³³ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago/London 1989, 138.

³⁴ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité / In Praise of Creoleness*, trans. M.M. Taleb-Khyar, Paris 1991, 114.

³⁵ Spanel (1988), 123.

³⁶ Margaret Ellen Mayo and Heather S. Russell (1998), 24, state: "As the body below the neck and most of the supporting pillar are missing, and no inscription survives, we can only assume that the person represented was wealthy and important enough to be able to afford such an expensive sculpture." Note how the argument slips from lack of concrete information to social interpretation which rests on at least two unprovable facts: that the sculpture was commissioned by its model; and that it is representing a living person.

³⁷ "[...] in the Late Period *all* sculptures were destined for the temples and meant to be seen by those who came to worship. For this reason, attempts were made, time and again, to endow the face of a statue with something more than a benign and idealizing expression, to give it the features of a definite person, to imbue it with the character and inner life of the subject." (Bernard V. Bothmer [1960], p. XXXIII). Jack A. Josephson has noted that some sculptures have since been shown to have been made for tombs; see Josephson, "Egyptian Sculpture of the Late Period Revisited", in: *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 34 (1997), 1-20: 2.



13 Unidentified sculptor, *Male Head*, c. 380–342 BCE (Egypt, 30th Dynasty), red and black granite, 24,1 × 14,6 × 20 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (photo: author)

[20] We also have to take into account how time and displacements accrued its meanings and possibly its agency, for instance by its artification or by inserting it into the "portraiture" category. Most of all, we have to avoid at all cost judging criteria that are based on changing assumptions about what counts in art history. For instance, authors writing about the type of heads of which our sculpture is an example almost always tend to dismiss idealization in portraiture as intrinsically inferior to mimetic realism, or *verism*, using the term "conformism" as if it could not come from a deliberate choice, and as if there were only one sort of idealization.³⁸ After all, the reevaluation of the art of the "Late Period" is rather recent. Once expeditions to Egypt, starting with Bonaparte and his cohort of archaeologists, had expanded the knowledge of Egyptian art beyond the examples that had been translocated to Italy after the Roman occupation and rediscovered from the Renaissance onwards, the Late Period was deemed inferior to the art of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms for two centuries. It was not until 1960 that an influential exhibition on this period at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, curated by Bernard Bothmer, awakened an interest, which today, however, remains slightly marginal.³⁹

[21] **Lesson 5:** Art history makes use of history to better understand its objects. It shapes its own histories, if only because, as Edward Said (1935–2003) demonstrated, "ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their

³⁸ The basic assumption that pervades all the literature on sculpted heads from the Thirtieth Dynasty is thus formulated by Jean Leclant: "Besides a certain idealizing conformism, some realistic portraits emphasize the [sitter's] individuality." ("Introduction", in: Jean Leclant et al., *L'Égypte du crépuscule. De Tanis à Méroé, 1070 av. J.-C. – IVe siècle apr. J.-C.*, Paris 1980, 8).

³⁹ See Josephson (1997).

configurations of power, also being studied".⁴⁰ The way we look at art and connect it with the past is not only Western. It is a very ancient preoccupation that can be traced back, as Alain Schnapp recently demonstrated in his global history of ruins, *Une histoire universelle des ruines*, to ancient Mesopotamia, Song dynasty China or Late Period Egypt. In the 7th century BCE, the Neo-Babylonian king Nabopolassar thus preserved in a pottery box a tablet depicting a scene of worship dating from the 9th century and had it cast to place it in a temple. In the 12th century CE, the poetess Li Qingzhao wrote about the collection of vases, painting albums and epigraphy dating back to the Shan dynasty (2nd millennium BCE), that she and her husband Zhao Mingcheng built up and lost.⁴¹ In ancient Egypt too, there was a preoccupation with assessing and preserving the past, or a certain past at least. I spoke earlier about the way that artists from the 30th Dynasty looked back at artefacts from the Saite 26th Dynasty, but this was a constant preoccupation of the period, as can be seen in the so-called Canopus decree of Ptolemy III, written in 238 BCE, which stated: "the king marched out and brought back safe to Egypt the sacred images, which had been carried out from the country by the Persians, and he returned them to the temples whence each had originally been taken away."⁴²

[22] One particular difficulty presented by writing a global art history lies precisely in the fact that its writer or writers should not only have a deep and diversified visual culture: they should also be able to command enormous and unfamiliar bibliographies and historiographies, frequently available in unfamiliar languages only. Here again, the solution seems to be in the collective, just so as to avoid factual and interpretational mistakes, which are inevitable for a singular human being.

[23] While I am writing about this question of history, please forgive me for stating a truism: when taking history into account, teleology must be avoided at all cost. Teleology is, I think, generally unsuitable, because even national or local identities are constructed, and do not exist *a priori*.⁴³ It might still seem possible when writing the history of the arts of one part of the world as if it were continuous, as Ernst Gombrich did in his *Story of Art*, presenting it as the gradual emergence of naturalistic mimetic representation – with side-step excursions into non-Western art in separate and autonomous chapters.⁴⁴ But it becomes entirely impossible when dealing with histories and regions which are not synchronically paced. Suffice it to point out how the Western division of

⁴⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* [1978], in: Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, eds., *The Selected Works of Edward Said, 1966–2006*, New York 2019, 63-114: 72.

⁴¹ Alain Schnapp, *Une histoire universelle des ruines*, Paris 2020.

⁴² Decree of Ptolemy III, quoted in Schnapp (2020), 71; English translation in Jan Krzysztof Winnicki, "Carrying off and Bringing Home the Statues of the Gods: On an Aspect of the Religious Policy of the Ptolemies Towards the Egyptians", in: *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 24 (1994), 149-190: 176.

⁴³ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann insists rightly: "When identities are far from fixed or unchanging, to search for something as complicated and contradictory as national or even regional identity in art thus seems more than questionable." DaCosta Kaufmann, "The Geography of Art: Historiography, Issues, and Perspectives", in: Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam 2008, 167-182: 176.

⁴⁴ Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London 2006 [first ed. 1950].

time in centuries and the Chinese one in dynasties seem irreconcilable, not to mention the broad periodizations of "ancient", "precolonial", or "precontemporary" African art⁴⁵: it should definitely lead us into reciprocally questioning our customary periodizations.⁴⁶ To remain with my Egyptian example (Fig. 1), it is no longer possible to write seriously, as Bothmer did in his pioneering study: "From then on, the search for man's soul in the shape and expression of his countenance was never to cease until the end of ancient Egyptian civilization; and Greece and eventually Rome soon joined in the quest."⁴⁷ When considering the possibility of a global art history, it is necessary to ponder the question of succession and simultaneity.

6 – Doing Away with Nationalistic Biases

[24] One striking aspect of all comments on the VMFA's sculpture (Fig. 14) is that it was made, if the latest dating is accurate, at the time of the "final native dynasty", when "the return to the great styles of the past was carried on with renewed fervor; the repertoire of models was accrued by the art of the Saite period [of the 26th dynasty], which was seen as a golden age flourished under native pharaohs, before the catastrophe [of foreign invasions]."⁴⁸ One should recognize the implicit nationalism that lies in this simple sentence: artworks have long been seen as 'better' when they are 'purer' – and the notion of 'purity' is most often linked with non-'contamination' by foreign inputs.⁴⁹ In this case, as always, purity though is an inappropriate concept. We are dealing with a period in which Egypt was not separated from the rest of the Mediterranean world, and it had just been under a Persian rule, and its art was connected with what was happening in Greece as well as Nubia, even if "confronted with the multiple chocs of foreign conquests, with the pressure of radically alien cultures, Egypt stiffened on its own values".⁵⁰

⁴⁵ On this topic, see Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Peter Mark, "Towards an Art History of Precontemporary Africa. Preliminary Thoughts for a State-of-the-Art Assessment", in: *Afriques* [online] 10 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.2496>.

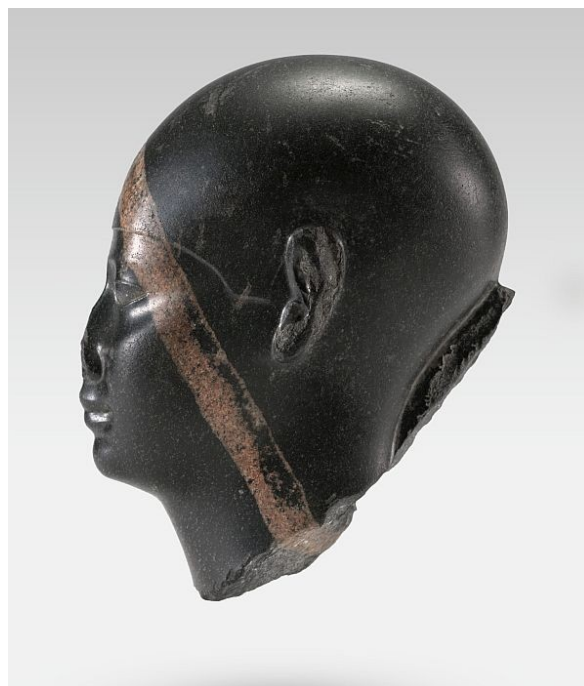
⁴⁶ See James Elkins, *Stories of Art*, New York/London (2002), 11-38.

⁴⁷ Bothmer (1960), p. XXXVIII.

⁴⁸ Cyril Aldred, "Statuaire", in: Leclant et al. (1980), 153.

⁴⁹ Some recent writers are contrarily praising hybridization, such as Suzanne Preston Blier, who conflates in one sentence the idea that the Ptolemaic Dynasty period, being "a truly international art period", produced "strikingly empowered objects" (Suzanne Preston Blier, *The History of African Art*, London/New York 2023, 47).

⁵⁰ Jean Leclant, "L'Égypte du crépuscule. Postface", in: Leclant et al. (1980), 267.



14 Unidentified sculptor, *Male Head*, c. 380–342 BCE (Egypt, 30th Dynasty), red and black granite, 24,1 × 14,6 × 20 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (photo: VFMA)

[25] Purity is also most often linked with ethnicity or race. As far as the head of the VMFA is concerned, I have found no trace in the essays that would attempt to determine the ethnicity of the model, certainly because historians generally agree that "'being Egyptian' was not primarily a question of ethnicity but of Egyptian-like or non-Egyptian-like behavior"⁵¹. The almond-shaped eyes are a typical trait of ancient Egyptian sculpture; they clearly are the result of an idealization and geometrization process. But they also made Winckelmann write about the "kind of Chinese form" that characterizes the Egyptians.⁵² What remains of the sculpture's nose can be seen as non-white, especially for those of us who concur with the conclusions of Cheikh Anta Diop (1923–1986), who emphasized the presence of "negroid" characteristics in Egyptian representation, in a frenzied quest for racial identity, that he summed up by writing: "Ancient Egypt was a Negro civilization"⁵³.

[26] These observations should not be over-interpreted. Even in the 18th century, the "blackness" of ancient Egypt generated opposite conclusions. Winckelmann, who saw Egyptian art mainly through Late Period examples, wrote: "The art of drawing among the Egyptians is to be compared to a tree which, though well cultivated, has been checked and arrested in its growth by a worm, or other casualties; for it remained unchanged, precisely the same, yet without attaining its perfection, until the period when Greek kings held sway over them."⁵⁴ But twenty years later,

⁵¹ Laboury (2010), 4.

⁵² Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, Dresden 1764, 32.

⁵³ Diop (1974), p. XIV.

⁵⁴ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art [1764]*, transl. G. Henry Lodge, in: Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Writings on Art*, selected and ed. by David Irwin, London 1972, 104-144: 106.

Constantin de Volney (1757–1820) wrote: "Just think [...] that this race of Black men, today our slave and the object of our scorn, is the very race to which we owe our arts, sciences, and even the use of speech!"⁵⁵

[27] Even if eschewing the question of race – which I think preferable – it is nevertheless fruitful to consider the possibility of an African reading of ancient Egyptian art, placing it in an African rather than a European context (though the two are not, in fact, mutually exclusive). Trials in this direction have been numerous in the past few years, especially in the US context (it might change quickly). Harvard professor Suzanne Preston Blier's 2023 survey, *The History of African Art*, explicitly includes Ancient Egyptian art and compares it with Sub-Saharan objects of later periods. Some American museums have placed their Ancient Egyptian collection in their Arts of Africa department (instead of the Ancient art department, predominantly Mediterranean, which has been the most common practice since the 18th century). One of the most convincing attempts at this recontextualization might be the way in which the display of the Laura and James J. Ross Gallery of African Art at Yale University Art Gallery opened (in 2018) with a shelf holding several sculptures made concurrently in Egypt and in Sub-Saharan Africa (a Katsina *Human Figure*, dated 200 BCE–500 CE, next to an Egyptian *Kneeling Statue of an Official*, dated 525–404 BCE, for example; Fig. 15).



15 Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, view of the Laura and James J. Ross Gallery of African Art, with works by unidentified sculptors: (second figure from the left) *Human Figure* (Katsina, Nigeria), 200 BCE–500 CE, terracotta, 69,2 × 21,6 cm; (third figure from the left) *Kneeling Statue of an Official*, 525–404 BCE (Egypt, 27th Dynasty), quartzite, 38 × 13,6 × 12 cm (photo: author, 2018)

⁵⁵ Constantin de Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte, pendant les années 1783, 1784 & 1785*, Paris 1787, 74.

This is not a question of obeying ideological dictates, but simply of interrogating the same works from different approaches, that can enrich the more traditional views and complement each other. There, looking at Sub-Saharan ancient art might enrich our understanding of ancient Egyptian art, and vice-versa. As Frederick John Lamp wrote in 2011:

*In the known corpus of both Nok and Sokoto works, there are numerous suggestions of visual affinities with another culture in Africa, which overlapped in time with these Nigerian cultures [...]—that of ancient Egypt. [...] I would like to suggest not that Egyptians and the people of ancient Nigeria necessarily knew each other, or had direct contact, but that a pan-Saharan set of conventions may have spread along the trade routes.*⁵⁶

[28] **Lesson 6:** Writing a more global art history means doing away with usual assumptions about hierarchies based on nationalistic or ethnocentric biases, redefining our traditional notions, exploring the prospects of a connected art history which would follow the principle of "xenology" put forward by Sanjay Subrahmanyam,⁵⁷ but with a strong attention to specific objects-images, focusing on circulations and relations between them and not only between artists and institutions.⁵⁸ (Using the word *relation*, I obviously think of Glissant's "poetics of relation",⁵⁹ which should protect us from any retrograde essentialism and puritanism). We all know that nationalism and racism were two of the original sins of art history, which developed as a discipline at the time of the rise of nationalism, colonialism and slavery. In *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art*, Éric Michaud has demonstrated the biological and racist models on which our discipline is based.⁶⁰

[29] We are faced with a choice here. We either discard art history and the very notion of art because we think that they are fundamentally Eurocentric and racist tools; however, I fear that this would entail a radical break with the past, which might lead to a de-complexification of the past, and thus serve the aims of neo-capitalism, especially as, to quote Paul Wood, "the period in

⁵⁶ Frederick John Lamp, "Ancient Terracotta Figures from Northern Nigeria", in: *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* 2011, 48-57: 52. Questions of chronology are important here: it is simply misleading to show together Ancient Egyptian and Sub-Saharan artefacts from centuries or millennia apart, thus emphasizing pseudomorphism and false continuities that are more ideological and crowd-pleasing than art historical.

⁵⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Aux origines de l'histoire globale*, Paris 2014 (= *Leçons inaugurales du Collège de France*, 240), 24.

⁵⁸ The lack of emphasis on singular objects-images is, according to me, the greatest flaw in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Catherine Dossin, eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, New York 2015.

⁵⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 1997 [orig. *Poétique de la relation*, Paris 1990].

⁶⁰ Éric Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art*, trans. Nicholas Huckle, Cambridge, MA/London 2019 [orig. *Les invasions barbares*, Paris 2015]. Speaking about acquisitions of Pre-Hispanic, African, and Egyptian art by US museums, Mary Miller rightly notes that "the encyclopedic museum in the USA sometimes speaks from a position of racism and economic colonialism" (email to the author, April 14, 2021).

which the West really achieved global domination is considerably shorter than it is often reckoned to be".⁶¹ I think we should better do just what the great Algerian-Kabyle writer Kateb Yacine (1929–1989) did with the French language that he had learned when his country was a colony: use art and art history as "the spoils of the war of independence". We shouldn't downplay the violence of the process: they are spoils (the French word is *butin*), it is a conflictual situation, and it has to be transformed (Kateb stopped writing in French from 1970 to the mid-1980s, favoring dialectal Arab and Amazigh). Here, it is useful to quote Kateb more at length, applying to art history what he had to say about the French language:

*The few Algerians who acquired knowledge of the French language do not forget easily that they conquered it through a hard-fought battle, despite social and religious barriers that the colonial system built between our two people. [...] You do not use a universal language and culture with impunity to humiliate a people and its soul. Sooner or later, this people takes possession of this language, this culture, and transforms them into long-range weapons for its liberation.*⁶²

Conclusion: Decentering

[30] Therefore, I am waiting for a global art history that will be written in this spirit. It can only be produced under the direction of non-Western scholars, with or without participation from and collaboration with Western-trained scholars – and, may I say, by non-Western scholars who are not too dependent on the Western academy or museum systems. But I do think that they need to be fluent in the languages and methods of the latter, because it would just be stupid to waste the knowledge and diversity of approaches that have accumulated there through the centuries. Otherwise, this art history, although non-Western, will always be ethnocentric, essentialist in one way or another, whatever the legitimate effort put into decolonizing it, as Parul Dave Mukherji (b. 1962) showed, in an Indian context which can be generalized:

*It [the adherence to ethnicity] 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.*⁶³

[31] It is not enough to recruit just a few non-Western voices, as did Phaidon's *30,000 Years of Art: The Story of Human Creativity Across Time and Space*, first published in 2007, in which there are indeed few surprises. We should not be satisfied with fragmentary, national or regional

⁶¹ Paul Wood, *Western Art and the Wider World*, London 2014, 106.

⁶² Kateb Yacine, in an interview by Geneviève Serreau, "La situation de l'écrivain algérien", in: *Les Lettres nouvelles* 40 (July–August 1956), 107–112: 107–108.

⁶³ Parul Dave Mukherji, "Whither Art History in a Globalizing World", in: *Art Bulletin* 96, no. 2 (June 2014), 151–155: 153.

narratives, because non-specialists crave for grand narratives. And they are left with Gombrich's *Story of Art*, conceived in 1950, or *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (first ed. 1926), as the sole valid examples of global – or rather 'universal' – art history, if they do not fall prey to the algorithms of social media or the pride and wealth wars of the art market, which are fast reshaping periodization and art geographies.

[32] I see specific promise in contexts where the colonial oppression has left a complex heritage and any return to a 'pure' past or purification of the future are dangerous lures, so that, to take the example of Algeria again, the present encompasses "what in me is Roman, Amazigh, Ottoman, Spanish or French and Arab", to use the words of Kamel Daoud (b. 1970).⁶⁴ Edward Said stated clearly the consequences of this situation in the introduction to his *Culture and Imperialism*:

*I have no patience with the position that 'we' should only or mainly be concerned with what is 'ours', any more than I can condone reactions to such a view that require Arabs to read Arab books, use Arab methods, and the like. As C.L.R. James used to say, Beethoven belongs as much to West Indians as he does to Germans, since his music is now part of the human heritage.*⁶⁵

I am particularly looking for this to happen in countries which have 'universal' museums. It is there in particular that people can be fully aware of the fact that – to quote Paul Wood again – "traditions have not, in history, been equivalent in their relations with each other".⁶⁶

[33] This is the case, e.g., in Mumbai, where the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya museum (CSMVS; founded as Prince of Wales Museum of Western India in 1905) concentrates its narrative on the art of South Asia but also features a Western art gallery (Fig. 16), based on the European collection bequeathed to it by Sir Dorabji Tata (1859–1932). In the special exhibition *India and the World*, curated by Naman P. Ahuja and Jeremy David Hill in 2017–2018, visitors could begin their tour from different starting points, moving from what they were familiar with, depending on their personal history, to what they knew less or not at all.⁶⁷ As Sabyasachi Mukherjee, director of CSMVS since 2007, stated: "We are trying to create a converging scene between East and West through our collection, through our activities and programs."⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Kamel Daoud, "Décoloniser le corps, la langue et la mer", in: *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, 17 July 2010, reprinted in: Kamel Daoud, *Mes indépendances. Chroniques 2010–2016*, Arles 2017, 23.

⁶⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage Books 1994 [orig. New York: Knopf 1993], p. XXV.

⁶⁶ Wood (2014), 5.

⁶⁷ See the accompanying catalogue by Naman P. Ahuja and Jeremy David Hill, *India & the World. A History in Nine Stories*, Gurgaon 2017.

⁶⁸ Sabyasachi Mukherjee, in: Donatien Grau, ed., *Under Discussion: The Encyclopedic Museum*, Los Angeles 2021, 117–125: 122.



16 Mumbai, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), view of the Sir Dorab Tata Gallery (photo: author, 2018)

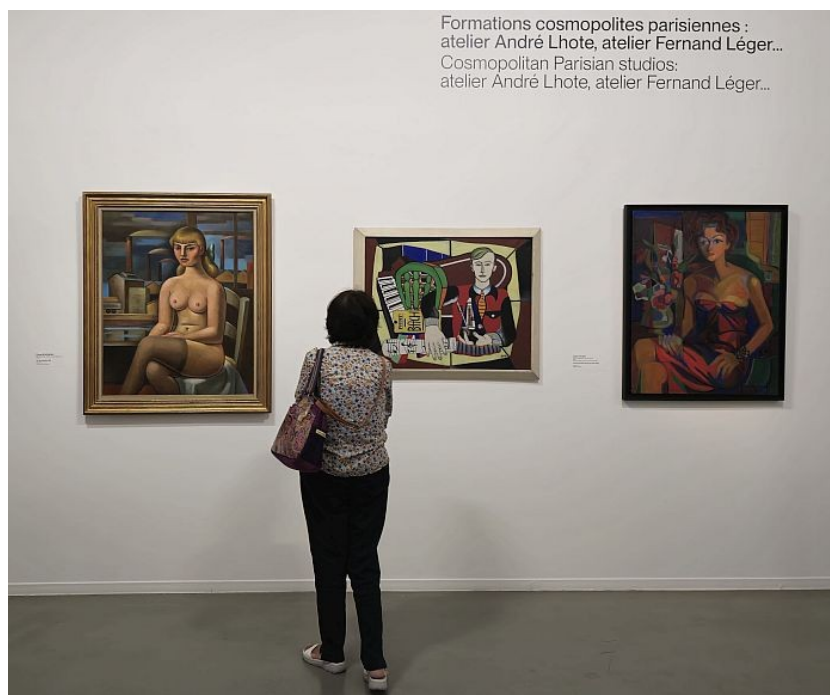
As another example, I would like to mention the Musée national des beaux-arts in Algiers. There, for instance, you find one of the versions of the portrait of Alessandro de' Medici called "il Moro" painted by Pontormo, Orientalist paintings created by European artists, paintings and miniatures made by Algerian nationals, etc.

[34] This decentering should also happen in the Western world itself, where it could lead to writing a real history of art in Europe, instead of the current piecing together, at best, of various national narratives, with a strong tendency to oppose, separate and hierarchize Western (once again) Europe and Central and Eastern Europe.⁶⁹ Gothic cathedrals are still represented by Saint-Denis, Strasbourg and Cologne, while the examples of Riga or Famagusta are at best mentioned and usually simply ignored. European art of the 1940s and the 1950s is still believed to have been made mostly in France and Italy, while Polish artists like Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957) and Maria Jarema (1908–1958) are known only in their native country.

[35] Two exhibitions that took place in 2024 epitomised both the expectations that such endeavors can raise and the fact that it is much more interesting when the new narrative that is attempted is a shared one rather than an exclusive one. Curated by Zamân Books & Curating (Morad Montazami and Madeleine de Colnet) and Odile Burluraux, *Présences arabes*, that took place at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (Fig. 17), offered a narrative that looked at what happened in the 20th century both in the North (the presence of Arab artists in Paris) and in the global South (local Arab scenes, which sometimes were pluri-national, including the colonial

⁶⁹ The project "Visual Arts in Europe: An Open History" (EVA), affiliated with the Research Institutes in the History of Art (RIHA) network, was launched in 2019 by 42 research institutes and museums in Europe.

context).⁷⁰ On the contrary, *Stranieri ovunque*, the international exhibition of the Venice Biennial, curated by Adriano Pedrosa with a team, presented what has been created in the South without taking into account how it was shaped by a dialogue with the North.⁷¹



17 Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, view of the exhibition *Présences arabes*, 2024, displaying from left to right: Pierre Boucherle, *Nude in the Studio* [*Nu dans l'atelier*], 1951 (© Adagp, Paris, 2025); Georges Koskas, *Portrait of a Musician* [*Portrait d'un musicien*], 1947 (© Adagp, Paris, 2025); Salah Yousry, *Portrait of Odette Bourgeois* [*Portrait d'Odette Bourgeois*], 1947–1950 (photo: author)

[36] Shortly before her untimely death, Indian art historian Kavita Singh (1964–2023) viewed the prospect of a global art history as a legacy of European Enlightenment – at a time when such a legacy is attacked from all sides. She concluded: "Rather than rejecting the Enlightenment, what we must be alert to is the gap that always exists between the promise and the practice of a system that promises equal opportunities and universal rights."⁷² Bridging this gap is now the task of art historians, all around the world, who recognize the necessity – and the fruitfulness – of writing a more global, more inclusive art history.

⁷⁰ Odile Burluraux, Madeleine de Colnet and Morad Montazami, eds., *Présences arabes. Art moderne et décolonisation: Paris, 1908–1988*, exh. cat., Paris 2024.

⁷¹ *Foreigners Everywhere / Stranieri ovunque: Biennale Arte 2024*, 2 vols., ed. coordination Maddalena Pietragnoli, Venice 2024.

⁷² Kavita Singh, in: Donatien Grau, ed., *Under Discussion: The Encyclopedic Museum*, Los Angeles 2021, 178–184: 179.

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