

Globalisation

Leah Clark and Leon Wainwright

LEAH CLARK: Hi.

I'm Leah Clark.

I'm a senior lecturer in art history at the Open University.

And I specialise in the collection and exchange

of art objects at the end of the 15th century.

And I'm here with my colleague, Leon.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Hi.

I'm Leon Wainwright.

I'm a reader in art history here at the Open University.

I'm also interested in art and art objects,

objects, in Britain, in the Caribbean,

in the wider Atlantic world as well as South Asia,

and their movement and their exchange from place to place.

LEAH CLARK: So today we're going to be talking about the term

globalisation.

And I'm interested to hear about how this relates to your work

and why you think it's important for art history.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: OK.

Well, let's start with the term.

Globalisation, or what we might better term globalising

processes, is really central to understanding the two

parts of the world that I've been studying

Britain and the Caribbean.

The interconnections, the way each region

is connected to one another, as well as to the wider world.

How are they connected?

Well, through migration, through trade,

through the movement of objects, images, people,

ideas about art, as well as artworks themselves.

And, in a sense, the movement of those things and those people

from place to place, in a sense, constitutes those two regions,

Britain and the Caribbean, and their history

and the cultural character.

LEAH CLARK: So how essential is the term

Globalisation for your work?

What happens if you just disregarded the term or even

the kind of concepts around it?

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Well, without an understanding

of Globalisation, we wouldn't be in a position

to understand the cultural character,

the history, how Britain or how the Caribbean came about.

These islands, British Isles, have always

been a locus of migration, immigration, migration.

That's very clear.

And in the modern day Britain really

was defined by its status as a controlling metropol

to global peripheries in Africa, Asia, Australasia,

and the wider world.

And so without understanding processes of movement,

we'd really be very hard pressed, indeed,

to understand the cultural
histories and the art

histories of these two regions.

LEAH CLARK: So it's perhaps more
obvious for Britain as a centre

of empire, but
why the Caribbean?

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Well,
the Caribbean has always

been a place of movement.

So for hundreds of years,
these are regions, if you like,

where almost every
continent of the world

has somehow had a point of
contact in those islands

and territories, whether
that be with the displacement

or movement of
people from Africa

during long centuries of
plantation slavery or from,

roughly the early 19th
century, the movement of people

from South Asia as
well as parts of China.

Of course, there's a
presence of Indigenous people

there as well from the Americas.

And then all sorts
of different points

of origin within Europe as
well as in the 20th century,

more obviously, movement of
people from the Middle East.

And all those histories are,
in some way, cohere there.

And it's, in a sense,
for me, an exemplary site

for the study of globalising
change and globalising

processes over a
wide historical span.

LEAH CLARK: So as a
term, I think it's

quite pressing at the moment.

And it's
interesting to see how

art historians in
different time periods

have started thinking about a
more globalised art history.

My own research-- I'm a
15th Century Renaissance

specialist--

but I've started thinking
about actually what

it means to collect objects
from around the world

in the inventories that I
look at in 15th century court

culture.

You can see Chinese
porcelain, for example,

or Syrian metalwork
being collected even

in the 15th century.

So in some ways, the world has
always been somewhat connected.

But why do you think
perhaps, maybe it's

more pressing in art
history more generally?

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Well, this
is a very good example.

I assume that scholars in
the area that you specialise

in conventionally have
tended to disregard

these kinds of movements of
objects and points of contact

with the Italian peninsula
and the images and materials

that you'd find that
originate perhaps

in some other part of the
world, in the Middle East

or along the Silk Road,
all the way to China.

My sense is that the historic
roots, with a double-O,

for Globalisation
are really deep.

And they even predate the period
that you're interested in.

But we need to be quite
careful about differentiating

or distinguishing between
the globalising processes

of the 15th century and
those of subsequent centuries

right up to the present day.

And it's that kind
of specificity

that we really need to
bring out for art history.

LEAH CLARK: Exactly.

In some ways, it has something
to do with actually what

you mentioned to begin with,
is this globalising processes.

Could you say a little
bit more about that?

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Yes, sure.

So you might want
to ask the question,

are we really talking
about Globalisation

in the 15th century in
the same way we are today?

Clearly, we're not.

But we're looking at the
beginnings of something that we

might later come to
recognise as Globalisation.

I do wonder what, in the 15th
century and 16th centuries,

the globe signified, what was
the known world, if you like,

at that point.

So what we find from the 15th
century, what we begin to find,

is the beginning, really,
of European powers extending

their reach and their influence
over a wider geography.

They don't yet extend that to
the entire globe, of course,

but as travellers and
traders and missionaries

begin to travel, many of
those agents and agencies,

kind of underwritten by
royal power and patronage.

And what we see is the
extension of trading networks

out from Europe around coastal
Africa and across into Asia

and, ultimately, of course,
across the Atlantic.

LEAH CLARK: I think it's
also an important point

to note that, in
the 1490s, that's

the moment of
exploration, right?

But before that, we actually
have the monopoly of the spice

traders by the
Mamluks, which is Egypt

and Syria in today's world.

So also this understanding
of European power is also,

perhaps, something more modern.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Yeah.

So what you're seeing
is a connecting up

of networks and sort of
fusing of those networks

and new sorts of possibilities
are then permitted

through those networks.

So trading networks
within Europe

that come to cohere with
those from the wider Middle

East and further east--

LEAH CLARK: Yeah, exactly.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: And
yeah, that's significant.

Is it yes Globalisation?

I don't know, but it's certainly
a process which continues

and extends and gains momentum.

LEAH CLARK: One of the ways
I've been thinking about it too

is how you might get
products customised

for "customers" somewhere else.

It's perhaps the
beginning of those signs.

So just to give you an example
is Chinese porcelain is largely

travelling across the Silk
Roads and then making their way

into Europe through
diplomatic gifts.

But as soon as the Portuguese
opened the sea routes,

Vasco da Gama
discovers those, you

start actually seeing
porcelain objects which

have Portuguese arms on them.

But it's only when that
clear route opens up

that you see that customization.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Exactly so
you see the production of taste

as well in the sense the
demand for objects like this

is established.

What we might describe
as Globalisation now

I think has to be distinguished
from Globalisation

in the 15th century.

And this is obvious.

I mean, in those earlier
centuries of European encounter

and expansion, we saw more
intercontinental-style

exchanges and
movement through trade

and the movement of people,
the circulation of people,

and so on.

In later centuries,
coming up to the present,

one gets more of a
sense of the increased

regulation of those sorts
of movements as well.

So although ideas, capital,
information, and forms

of entertainment,
although, they kind of

seem to flow and move
across national borders

and boundaries, is that entirely
true of people themselves?

Is it not also the case
that, at the same time

in a kind of
contradistinction to that,

that the movement
of human populations

is in some way restricted?

And the answer to
that yes and no.

Certainly, the movement
of people for travel,

international travel,
global travel today,

patterns of resettlement,
the migration of communities,

and so on has happened
on a scale that

just goes well above
and beyond what

we found even 200 years ago.

And I think
Globalisation, in a sense,

needs to be grasped for its
kind of dialectic quality

in that sense.

It's about freedom and flow
as a movement and new sorts

of opportunities
and experiences,

cultural or otherwise, that
seem to come with the expansion

of territories and networks.

But at the same, there's an
underbelly or another story

or a counternarrative.

LEAH CLARK: Do you think this
global approach is so new?

Have we not done something
of this in the past?

LEON WAINWRIGHT: I think,
yes, it always was there.

But what we find by the mid-20th
century is the very clear

bifurcation of an idea of
art that seems to map quite

unevenly onto the world with art
being the province of Western

countries and culture being
the sort of domain of the wider

world, often with the assistance
of sister disciplines like

anthropology and, indeed,
with museum practise.

LEAH CLARK: I think
it's interesting

because one of the critiques
of the global Renaissance

is this emphasis that
somehow we're erasing some

of the problems of the period.

So if we celebrate
a global connection,

we also erase things
like early colonialism,

the problematic relationships
between New World and Old

World.

And I think it
becomes an issue when

we think only in terms of a
positive global Renaissance.

Oh, we could find
Chinese porcelain

in an Italian
Renaissance collection.

What did that
actually mean for, A,

the people who were
looking at these things,

but also what they thought
about the rest of the world.

Did they see themselves
as being somehow superior?

LEON WAINWRIGHT: So I
find that encouraging

that, in the study of a
historical place and period,

if you'd like, those
kinds of much more

measured and, in
a sense, much more

balanced understandings
of these processes

are being brought to bear.

LEAH CLARK: Yeah.

And recognising that there were
misconceptions about the wider

world, that there
were prejudices,

that there was also huge
ignorance about these other

cultures that, somehow, by
collecting things from them,

people felt that they had
access to knowledge or some kind

of knowledge of them,
of those cultures.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Much
of Globalisation theory

in humanities and
social sciences

has tended to focus on the
role of nations and the extent

to which the modern
nation-state becomes

obsolete or irrelevant in
the face of much larger power

blocks, much larger, a
much larger wider scale

of interactions, political,
cultural, economic, and social,

and so on.

Clearly, with regard
to the 15th century,

we're not, at that
point, talking

about the modern nation-state.

But the communities,
nonetheless,

are still imagined
communities in the way

that modern nation-states are.

And ideas about self
and other wealth

will still start to cohere often
with the assistance of material

goods, images, objects.

LEAH CLARK: Right.

And it's interesting
because we often

try to name artists as
from a particular place.

He is a French artist, or
she is a Caribbean artist,

or she is Canadian,
or whatever it is.

But actually, the
movement of people,

you're never necessarily always
rooted to one place, are you?

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Exactly.

And what you've done
there, in a sense,

is compared to different
types of things.

So the French is the
nation of France.

Caribbean is a region made up
of many different nations--

LEAH CLARK: Exactly.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: --as
well as territories.

And Canada, has another
status entirely.

LEAH CLARK: There's First
Nations, there's French,

there's French
Canadian, there's, yeah.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Absolutely.

And in a sense, some
of the labels get lost.

Why does it always
seem necessary--

although one ought to
rush to question that--

that we might apply
the tag of Caribbean

to a Caribbean artists and
not French to an artist

like Matisse who is
implicitly French.

And so the term is
not explicitly stated.

LEAH CLARK: In some ways,
Globalisation, then, really

just offers us an opportunity.

But it also throws up a
whole bunch of debates

and challenges as well as
what we do as art historians.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: The
question for us I suppose,

in art history, is
what role does art

play in both allowing us
a barometer of these sorts

of historical changes in
the contemporary day as well

as, perhaps, offering
a space of critique.

LEAH CLARK: So what I think
is interesting about this term

is I think there's different
levels and the complexities

of the term.

On a more basic level, we
might just see it as a fact

that the world has
always been connected

in some ways over time.

In my example, that you
can find Chinese porcelain

in a Renaissance
collection, but that there

are different ways
of approaching

the term and different levels.

LEON WAINWRIGHT: There are
certainly levels of complexity

when we introduce a
term like Globalisation

into the study of
the history of art.

At the very basic level,
it seems graspable

to every one of us this
idea that, even in a place

where you'd least expect
to find, as it were,

difference and objects and
images from a wider world,

they are, nonetheless, there.

And they're integral.

They're traded, and
they're exchanged,

and they're part of an
everyday kind of visual

or aesthetic cultural
lexicon, if you like.

So the 15th, 16th centuries
are a perfect case

in point for that.

But there's a greater level
of complexity around the term

as the centuries
go by, and we start

to see the rise an
establishment of empires

and imperial networks and then
the extent to which it becomes

clear that there is
a much more joined up

economy of the movement of
those images, objects, goods,

raw materials, commodities,
people, ideas about them,

discourses, languages,
religions, and so on,

and that that takes on a much
greater level of complexity.

But nonetheless, we're
still only ever thinking

about geographical movement.

And yet, much of our
discussion around Globalisation

has been, about how do people
feel in response to that?

Do they feel their
sense of place

is threatened by global change?

What do they do in order to try
to offset or mitigate or halt

the pace of this putatively
progressive development

in world history?

And what we've
certainly seen of late

is a push back against that.

A very obvious
point there would be

that, if you're interested
in contemporary art,

you might find
examples of artists

who seem, to all intents and
purposes, rather nomadic.

They move from one major
art centre to another,

from East Asia to the West Coast
of the United States and North

as well as South.

But what really comes
to change outside

of their networks of movement
for artists in the main

and for communities of artists
who perhaps are left out

of the-- not benefiting from the
opportunities that seem to come

with a globalised art world.

And those are the
sorts of questions

I think that art historians
should begin to ask far more.