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.