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Critical term: MOBILITY Transcript

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 objects in the Italian courts at the end of the 15th century. And I'm here with my colleague Kathleen.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Hi. I'm Kathleen Christian. I'm also a senior lecturer in art history at the Open University, specialising in Italian Renaissance. And my particular area of expertise is the reception of antiquity in the Renaissance.

LEAH CLARK: And today we're going to be discussing the term mobility and applying it to Renaissance works of art. So for me, the term mobility raises questions about what happens when one work of art moves from one place to another. It also can be related to other types of terms, like hybridity or globalisation or even cultural transfer. It also gives us new insight into the classifications or the categories we often use for objects that are usually rooted in a kind of geographic origin.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: There's been a tendency to look at works of art from the past as belonging to national identities, fixed identities. And there's been a change in art history, which now is more open to the idea that cultures are made by movements, immigration, trade, the fact that war and other kinds of major disruptions cause movements of people.

LEAH CLARK: Right.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So I think that just to talk about mobility, you can talk about maybe two different types of phenomena, which are, first, the fact that works of art and objects move, they travel. They're exchanged between people. They don't stay in one place. And they aren't made to stay in one place. So this is an aspect of mobility as it relates to works of art and other types of objects.

And another aspect of mobility we can talk about is the fact that works of art are created out of the fact that people moved, ideas moved, goods moved, and that society and culture is something that's always in flux. And it's shaped by movements.

LEAH CLARK: I think it's really interesting from my own work, because I look at collecting. But I'm interested in the movement of objects as they go from one collection to another, how they're gifted, how they're pawned, how they're loaned. And it opens up the possibilities, for instance, in the princely courts. These courts are not closed, but they're made up of the movement of people and things.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So a work of Chinese porcelain, how would that make its way to Italy?

LEAH CLARK: They didn't just go directly from China into Italy. It goes via the Silk Roads through Persia. And then they're given us diplomatic guests from the Mamluk sultans, which is the equivalent of Egypt and Syria, and the Ottomans, which is kind of Turkey today, so that these things, as they travel, they leave traces.

And I'm particularly interested in also the movement of motifs. So the objects that move carry with them the things that are represented on them. So you might see the blue and white in Chinese porcelain leaving traces on local production in Persia, in Syria, and then in Italy as well.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So we're talking about the early modern period. And probably most people wouldn't imagine that objects moved so far. Nowadays, movement and global connections are kind of self-evident. But back then they also existed. Trade was something that brought Asia together with Europe, Africa together with Europe in a way that might be, let's say, unexpected or not necessarily recognised in the way that people look at the early modern period until relatively recently.

LEAH CLARK: Exactly. We often think of works of art as having a kind of beginning and an end. So we either focus on the creators, the artists who create these objects, or we think of the commissioner or the patron and the collection as kind of the end. But what often gets lost with those two beginning and end points is the movement.

And so some art historians have looked at anthropology and anthropological approaches around the biography of objects, that just like people, just like humans, objects also have biographies, that they might have different identities over time, which is, I think, quite interesting.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: It's part of recognising the fact that works of art have these histories and identities and biographies, as we're saying, that's linked to where they've been and who saw them and who owned them at different times.

So I think also, it raises an interesting question when you think about what travels, why certain objects travel, why certain objects don't travel, and the differences in different places that these objects have. So how they're received in one place, how they're received in another place. Why certain objects might not be able to cross certain boundaries. Whether they're acceptable or not. Whether it causes tensions when certain objects move.

LEAH CLARK: Right.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So you mentioned the collections that you work on. And I know that in the inventories of these collections, you often get a lot of mistakes made about the origins of different objects.

LEAH CLARK: This is something quite difficult for us to understand today when we can pinpoint something on Google Maps immediately and even look at a Street View or something.

And I think this confusion of over origins is a reflection, also a confusion at a time when there are so many new discoveries taking place, that if a ship is sailing west, is it reaching the East Indies, or is it reaching a whole new world.

And you see that in some of these inventories, where India can refer to anything from, sometimes, even European objects to the New World objects to African objects. And it just shows that actually, it was quite hard to sometimes discern where something necessarily came from.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right, and that everything was filtered through a mentality about the rest of the world that was not accurate.

LEAH CLARK: No.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So people knew that it came from somewhere else. But where it came from was also an invention of their own making, so that the cultural filters that objects went through were very complex.

LEAH CLARK: Exactly. But I also think it's quite interesting too when you've got objects that are starting to be made in Europe to look like something from somewhere else. So one example is Syrian metalwork. So you can see, for example, even in the terminology sometimes situate some things from somewhere, damascena, damascene, which is a reference to Damascus, so the Syrian metalwork that's probably being made in Damascus and entering into Italian collections. But you start seeing that metalwork being copied by Venetians, for example. And then people are actually confused whether they're actually looking at a Venetian object made to look foreign or an authentic foreign object.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So the role of the art historian isn't always just to map in an accurate way where something came from. But we're interested also in the perception of where it came from and how people's incorrect perceptions are also very interesting and also part of the history of these objects.

LEAH CLARK: Exactly. So I think mobility is quite obvious when we're talking about it in terms of global movement. But a little bit perhaps less easy to understand is how mobility might apply within the Italian peninsula. And one thing that I think is interesting when you're talking about the mobility of objects is actually the technology that goes with them. And there's other forms of technology that gets developed at this time that also gives rise to mobility.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. I think if you're talking about the early modern period, the most important is the printing press, because the printing press allowed images, texts, to be disseminated very, very widely and relatively inexpensively. And it was an incredible revolution. It was a revolution in communication. It was a revolution in the arts.

We've, in our lifetime, have seen the internet.

LEAH CLARK: Exactly.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: And it's kind of, that sort of change we've experienced ourselves. Looking back on this period, it was a similar sort of change, that images and ideas could move much more easily and widely than they did before.

I think an example that's interesting to look at is Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel. This is a canonical work of art that is in one of the most sacred places in the Catholic Church. And when Michelangelo painted it, he painted a lot of nude figures.

He was very much interested in the anatomy of the human body. He wanted to show figures in their heroic, glorious nudity. So after Michelangelo painted the *Last Judgement*, a critic named Pietro Aretino wrote a letter about it that criticised the way that he had used nudity. He said, this is more appropriate for a bathhouse than for a chapel.

He wrote about Michelangelo's fresco, even though he had never seen it himself. What he had seen were the prints made after Michelangelo's fresco. So what happened was, Michelangelo painted the *Last Judgement* for a particular audience or a particular setting, a setting in which you would have priests, you would have men, you would have people who were cultural elites seeing nude figures.

What happens with the prints is that suddenly, these images that were supposed to traditionally be in one place are disseminated. And the audience changes. So it's not just men. It's not just priests. It's not just the cultural elite.

And Aretino, when he criticises these images, having seen them in print, he's very much worried about not the audience inside the Sistine Chapel but the audience who would see the prints. It was a time when Rome was very much afraid of the repercussions of the Protestant revolution. And they had to be more careful about the imagery that they were using to represent themselves.

So Aretino says, what happens when the Lutherans see these images of nudity. That's a weapon for them to use against the Catholic Church. So the mobility of the object has changed its meaning. It's changed the way that images are perceived. It's changed the audience.

LEAH CLARK: Right. I think it's also hard for us to even understand the revolution of print when we live in a world of photography, and a hashtag connects the picture of the same image across the world. This is a time when, as you were saying, a work of art was made for a select audience, a select public. And all of a sudden, what print does is it can spread that image. It's the mobility of the image itself.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right.

LEAH CLARK: Mobility also, I think, can be looked at in terms of objects that are actually made to be mobile. And one good example of that is a diptych. So a diptych, of course, is a devotional work of art that has two panels that fold together. And what's interesting about this, of course, then is that the work of art can be folded and moved from one part of the palace to the other in terms of personal devotion, but that you could also bring it with you as you may have travelled.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So the diptych was something that could travel, because it had a particular form. It could fold. It could be taken from one place to another. And you see a lot of works of art from this period that are made to move from one place to another.

LEAH CLARK: Yeah. And I think also, of course, it's a devotional work of art, but it's also a status symbol that you've been able to commission this. You'd have your portrait, often, on the diptych. And so again, I think the mobility kind of highlights the different identities of these objects.

Once someone died, this may be actually placed on their tomb as a kind of tomb marker. And then of course today, we now see them in museums. So they become works of art that are divorced from that original context.

I think mobility though too has allowed us to look at larger paintings that you might think of as being immovable, that are meant for a palace, as also opening up questions around the movement of people and ideas.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. And one of the most canonical works of art from the Renaissance is Holbein's *Ambassadors* in the National Gallery--

LEAH CLARK: In London.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: - in London. And if you look at it, it says a lot about mobility, because you have two Frenchmen standing in a room where they're surrounded by objects that have come from different places. There are objects that show the learning and the past experiences and the knowledge of these very well-travelled men.

It was painted by a German painter. And the two men were ambassadors in England at the court of Henry the VIII. So you get a sense of a German painter in England painting French ambassadors.

Ambassadors were often at the forefront of this mobility that we're talking about. They travelled. They received works of art as gifts. They brought works of art from their place of origin to other places. You can see that mobility here is something that was highly prized in society.

LEAH CLARK: So I was mentioning a mobility as a category of value in terms of works of art. But I think there's also mobility in terms of human value.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. And I think something that portraiture often shows us is what we would call social mobility now.

LEAH CLARK: Right.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So the idea that these men want to climb in society to a higher status. And art is something that is a social mover. It can make people rise in their own status by seeming aristocratic and knowledgeable like these men.

You have something called the theory of self-fashioning, which has been applied to this portrait by Stephen Greenblatt who is an historian of literature at Harvard. Greenblatt is interested in the aspects of the image that just don't neatly fall into place, that have this aspect of mobility and movement to them, the fact that these men are trying to push against the social boundaries that might constrain them or might limit their social status.

And they're choosing to represent themselves in a different way than people have in the past. It's this kind of choice that you have to change your status. And it's a way that the image shows that kind of instability in status and instability in meaning at the same time.

And if you look at the painting, one of the most famous aspects of this painting is the skull that is in anamorphic perspective. You can only see it if you walk to the side of the painting. Looking from the front, it's just kind of a slice through the image.

The skull is part of a tradition of portraits that often have skulls on the back side of them. It's a reminder that death is universal, that no matter how much you have in this world, no matter how successful you are and how alive you seem in the portrait, death is something that will happen to everyone. So if you look at the portrait, it's both a celebration of self-fashioning and mobility and at the same time a reminder that death will conquer everything that these men have achieved.

LEAH CLARK: I think for me then, mobility is really important for art history, because it gets us to think about how objects move, how motifs move, how images move, but also the technologies that allow images to move to open up new publics.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: And it's also recognising the importance of mobility in all of the things that you've just mentioned for the creation of works of art and for artists, so artists who were part of this society where things, people, ideas, technologies were in constant movement. That's something you need to take account of when you're analysing works of art.