

Parallels, Contrasts, and Interrelationships of Arts and Institutions, Thoughts and Artifacts in the Seventeenth Century AD

Report on the 1978 Institute in Cross-Cultural Studies sponsored by the Department of History in Art, University of Victoria in collaboration with the Institute for the Study of Universal History 4 July–16 August 1978

R. Kerry White

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The arts of the seventeenth century exhibit a remarkable similarity of theme and function in cultures as diverse as Ch'ing China and Bourbon France. This was the unspoken but obvious conclusion of the six contributors to this third annual institute.

It is as if an 'aristocratic network' existed from Japan to Sweden and from Russia to West Africa. Absolutist regimes, whose related or analogous ancestries were signified by the traditional use of the horse in warfare, patronized the arts in deliberate strategies of ideological persuasion. Not surprisingly, then, these arts tended to be exaggerated and exhibitionist in form, and, where appropriate, allegorical in content. Consequently, those forms particularly suited to public display, such as the performing arts, tournaments, processions, and festivals, were especially favoured by dynastic princes of the period. Further, the symbolism of the ruler's control was everywhere extended to include the environs of palace and shrine or church: gardens, fountains, walkways, canals, and streams – even city streets – were important features of the absolutist statement. Finally, the evocation of the ruling caste's glorious past through revivalist styles in the arts – the utilization of the themes, images, and ethos of that past – was a central characteristic of the courts of all cultures considered.

The institute was introduced with a survey of the seventeenth-century arts of Europe, Islam, and the Orient by Alan Gowans, Department of History in Art, University of Victoria, and director of the institute. In a public address and two weeks of classroom lectures, Gowans illustrated in general terms the apparent similarity of social function and analogous stylistic tendencies in the arts of these cultures. He stressed the common purpose of the courts of the time to reinforce the notion of the class-structured state headed by a 'Godly Prince,' by patronizing the creation of 'convincing images of dynastic legitimacy.' Focusing on the architecture of seventeenth-century Sweden as a case in point, he demonstrated the efforts of aristocratic families, from the Vasas to their courtiers, to erect mausolea as symbols of divinely sanctioned power independent of the ecclesiastic system. By way of

contrast, it was also shown that the contemporaneous art of the rising Protestant bourgeoisie had transformed religious themes. In Rembrandt's work, for example, the familiar *Pietàs* of Giotto and Mantegna became the 'Anatomy Lessons' of Doctors Tulp and Deyman respectively; representations of Christ as a symbol of a hierarchic structure became illustrations of a historic figure; and the traditional Holy Family was replaced by the humble burgher family.

Seventeenth-century China was characterized by 'internal chaos, external disaster,' according to Robert Capp, Department of Asian Studies, University of Washington. In a single public lecture, Capp surveyed the transition from late Ming corruption and political disorder to the establishment of a lasting, relatively peaceful dynasty under the Manchus. He emphasized that the principle of Manchu success was their complete support of traditional, indigenous cultural values and institutions (at the expense of Buddhism) which meant an aggressive return to Confucian pragmatism and subservience. Palace complexes such as the 'Forbidden City' created by the Ming were maintained by the Manchu as highly visible symbols of their divine power. At the same time they were lavish patrons of the traditional arts of ceramics, painting, and literature, thus establishing the dynasty as the embodiment of orthodoxy. While the merchant class of the Yangtze valley did support a vernacular literature and popular art, the period as a whole did not produce revolutions or new social institutions in any way comparable to those in Europe: Manchu absolutism was too firmly entrenched in practice as well as theory.

Labelle Prussin, School of Architecture, University of Washington, marked the assimilation and transformation of Islamic forms, beliefs, and customs within the major indigenous cultures of West Africa. In both public and classroom lectures she noted that traditional African monuments, such as the vitally important 'ancestor pillars' of the Ashanti, were simply incorporated into imposed Islamic architecture. Regardless of the religious function of the minaret to Islam, however, these pillars remained important symbols of ancestry, and in the context of the seventeenth-century African

king and his palace complex, of dynastic succession. Prussin emphasized that African court arts everywhere demonstrated a concern for the divine status of the king and the minute gradations and symbolic gestures of the class-structured state: decorative bronze plaques on palace walls and the accoutrements of ceremony – jewellery, costumes of Kente cloth, weapons, and even the throne of the king – all testified to their underlying function as vehicles of cultural reinforcement. She noted that the Ashanti myth of the ‘divine stool’ provided a supernatural basis for dynastic succession, while lesser ‘stools’ symbolized the leaders of vassal states within the Ashanti confederacy.

A major departure from the pattern established by the other cultures considered was the lack of a written language among West African societies until the introduction of the Islamic script. Exhibiting characteristics similar to those of Mediterranean societies of the early millennia BC, the conflict between oral traditions and writing in Africa lasted well into the seventeenth century. On the one hand, writing had become an absolute necessity in the conduct of the complex administrations of African kingdoms, while on the other, the ingrained habits of the oral tradition provided resistance. The result was the infiltration of administrative posts by Islamic peoples and the eventual atrophy of indigenous cultures.

Precisely the opposite tendency was evident in the three major centres of Islam in the seventeenth century where the literary arts flourished and calligraphy had achieved the status of a primary visual art. In a survey of the arts of Turkey, Persia, and India, Anthony Welch, Department of History in Art, University of Victoria, stressed the central importance of the Persian language at all three courts which, coupled with their common Islamic heritage and in spite of periodic disputes, facilitated both commercial and cultural exchanges. This period marked the modern climax and decline of Islamic culture in all three areas. In each society the court of the absolutist ruler patronized revivalist art styles which effectively synthesized the past with native forms. Perhaps the chief expression of this programme to promote meaningful symbols of dynastic supremacy were the great monuments built by the Ottoman, Safavid, and Moghul courts: the Top Kapi in Istanbul, the Maiden-i-Shah at Isfahan, and the Taj Mahal at Agra. Here Welch pointed out that the baroque exaggeration, brilliance, and ephemerality of the surface designs were integral to the function of these architectural complexes as symbols of divine power vested in the Shah. In contrast to these conspicuous structures, Welch indicated the development of a more individualized style in painting. Roughly analogous in functional terms to genre painting in Europe, the illuminated manuscripts produced particularly in Persia and India were similarly private and secular, exhibiting a new concern for historical and genre detail.

The autocratic styles of seventeenth-century Japan were introduced in public and classroom lectures by Bunji Kobayashi, Professor of Architectural History at Nihon University. Here too, the ‘universal peace’ established by the Tokugawa dynasty was marked by exaggerated revivals of traditional styles and customs. Within court society, Shinto shrines, with their accompanying beliefs and ceremonies, enjoyed a renewed popularity; the architectural forms of the fourteenth century provided the basis of an ornate ‘baroque’ style; and the so-called minor arts of the tea ceremony, calligraphy and gardening achieved the highest status. Much like Versailles, the capital of the new shogunate at Edo became the cultural focus of a captive aristocracy. As Professor Kobayashi pointed out, it was here that festivals, tournaments, hunting parties and the classical Nō theatre were actively promoted by the shogun to keep the Samurai occupied and thus pre-empt possible rebellions from within their ranks.

‘The baroque can be viewed as the third and final phase of the Renaissance.’ This was the thesis of Horst W. Janson, Chairman of the Fine Arts Department of New York University, who provided a useful perspective on the arts of seventeenth-century Europe by placing them in the context of an historical development. In the institute’s final public and classroom lectures, Janson surveyed works from over forty artists from Masaccio to Carracci in the south, and from Van Eyck to Vermeer in the north. By this means he demonstrated the emergence of the baroque style from fifteenth-century humanism, scientific perspective, and mannerist individualism, followed, after the Council of Trent, by counter-reformation emotionalism. Typical of the baroque were thus sculpture theatrically placed and lighted for maximum subjective effect; architecture conceived in terms of multiple units and dramatic vistas; and painting executed and displayed with an overpowering illusionism. It was the influence of Italian humanism, according to Janson, which led Veronese to transform the *Last Supper* into a secular, courtly banquet under classical triumphal arches, with a cast of characters dressed in contemporary costumes (e.g. *Christ in the House of Levi*). On the other hand, the combination of scientific perspective and programmed emotion led to the vast *trompe l’œil* ceiling paintings of the period. Concurrently, moreover, the uncertainty of the times, in addition to the growth of an open market for art, favoured the emergence of artistic self-expression, beginning in mannerist uncertainty and stylistic rebellion and developing into intensely personal statements like Rembrandt’s self-portraits.

The institute came to a close with a discussion, led by Alan Gowans, of several problems raised during the proceedings. The fourth annual institute, to be held in July and August 1979 at the University of Victoria, will focus on the arts of the first millennium AD, especially the ‘Feudal Age’ of ca. 600-900 AD, in a cross-cultural context.

R. KERRY WHITE
University of Victoria