

# Writing About Modernist Painting Outside Western Europe and North America

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Modernist painting, broadly construed, follows a trajectory from David, Manet, and Cézanne to Picasso, expressionism, surrealism, and abstract expressionism, and this trajectory is widely shared by art historians in various countries. The uncertain path of painting after World War II forms much of contemporary critical writing, but prior to minimalism and conceptualism the principal works, places, and concepts continue to comprise a *lingua franca* in which deeper discussions of modernism take place.<sup>1</sup>

This general story is itself contentious, and it is probably best understood as an uneasy confluence of several master narratives.<sup>2</sup> But, for my immediate purposes here, those differences are internal to a larger issue. The enormous amount of art literature produced around the world can give the impression that modernist painting outside this main trajectory is well studied, and that it can be considered a global phenomenon. Yet this conclusion obscures a profound problem for an art historical study that is interested in modernist and late-twentieth century practices in painting, and that intends to look beyond Western Europe and North America. (When painting practices become international at the end of the twentieth century, or when they are effectively global through international exhibitions, the issues I am addressing here become less important and sometimes disappear entirely.)<sup>3</sup>

When modernist painting made outside the main trajectory is introduced into contexts wherein the cardinal moments of modernism are taken for granted, the unfamiliar work can appear unequal for at least four reasons. First, it can seem limited when it is directed to a particular market that is outside the mainstreams of modernist interest, as, for example, with harbor-front and marine painting done in modernist styles. Second, modernist painting outside the trajectory can appear uninteresting when the pressing problems of modernism appear to be played out elsewhere, for example in the case of the Panamanian primitive and naïve artists who stand at the beginning of Panamanian modernism: their naïveté cannot appear as exemplary as, say, Rousseau's. Panama's principal self-taught early modernist is Ignacio Núñez Soler (1891-1983), whose work is exhibited at the Museo del Barro in Asunción.



*Fig. 1: Ignacio Nuñez Soler (Paraguay, 1891 - 1983), Mis personajes (Serie), Oil on canvas, Centro de Artes Visuales/Museo del Barro (Asunción).*

His work touches on several themes also present in the art of Henri Rousseau and the Montmartre “primitifs.” Third, painting outside the trajectory can seem misinformed when it is the result of limited communication between a major artistic center and a local one. An example is the short-lived phenomenon of Chilean cubism, practiced essentially by only one Chilean artist in Paris, Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948), who was primarily a poet and critic rather than a painter.<sup>4</sup> Cubism in Chile never developed much beyond a few echoes of Picasso, Georges Braque and their circle, plus the work Huidobro did while he was in that circle in Paris from 1916 to 1918. It remains Chile’s principal example of cubist practice. Fourth, such painting is often done later than similar art in the centers, so that it necessarily appears belated, and therefore, in the logic of modernism, of slightly but distinctly lesser value.

Judgments like those prevent histories of modernist painting from being more inclusive, unless they are also histories of individual nations’ painting—in which case they are not likely to be widely read in North America, Western Europe, and in university departments elsewhere that are committed to the main trajectory.

Negative or neutral valuations of art outside the trajectory effectively corral the existing textbooks of modernism to a narrow field of canonical—if debated—works and masters, virtually all of them in North America and Western Europe, with particular and traditional exceptions, such as Scandinavian expressionism and Russian cubo-futurism.

The profusion of current art-critical writing and curatorial projects throughout the world would seem, at first, to solve this problem. The inclusion of other modernist practices, such as Brazilian modernism, Chinese communist-era oil and mural painting, and Australian modernism, is sometimes pointed to as a sign that the exclusions are increasingly a thing of the past, but I am skeptical of that line of argument because it assumes that such practices are fully integrated and not just annexed; it implies that the problems that led to the exclusivity of the main trajectory are themselves not structural but simply traditional and therefore easy to jettison. There is far more documentation on modernist painting around the world than any one scholar can possibly read—and yet the material is scattered, local, and not usually linked to wider conversations about modernism. The art-critical and curatorial literature is strongly multicultural but seldom assays the link between its specialized objects of interest and worldwide issues of modernist painting.

New textbooks have not solved the problem, either. A truly even-handed multinational history of modernism would include modernist artists from countries such as Panama, Chile, Tibet, Indonesia, and Kenya. It could appear willful, idiosyncratic, or misguided, because it would risk compressing the principal moments of modernism or even losing them in a sea of apparently secondary examples. Such a text would be hard to market, and in fact none has yet been produced. On the contrary, the best text on modernist painting, *Art Since 1900*, is almost exclusively concerned with adjustments to the main trajectory.<sup>5</sup> Virtually none of the artworks mentioned in the book come from outside Western Europe and North America.<sup>6</sup>

The same obstacles can be observed in periodicals; *The Art Bulletin* and *Art History* publish relatively few articles on modernist painting outside the main trajectory and few articles on non-Western modernism in general. It can be difficult, from an editor's point of view, to find moments outside the trajectory that will be of compelling interest to scholars who work on the central problems of modernist painting. Partly that is because it is difficult to locate first-rate scholarship outside the main trajectory, although there are many exceptions; and partly it is due to the discursive structure of art history, which is built around and for the interpretation of works within the

main trajectory. Editors of journals such as *The Art Bulletin* are increasingly sensitive to this issue, and the proportion of essays on “unusual” modernist initiatives increases each year. But as in politics, sometimes efforts at inclusion are not enough, because the effort at inclusion is made in a type of language, or from an institutional and historical affiliation, that prevents real integration.

The problem is structural, not merely political. These issues do not appear outside of art history, in journals like *boundary 2* and *Third Text*, which regularly publish essays on non-Western modernist practices. It has been suggested that the relative lack of unconventional modernisms in art history is just a result of the discipline’s resistance to narratives outside the main trajectory. It has also been said that a political and institutional critique of the kinds of art history that privilege the main trajectory reveals its limitations in interpreting non-canonical modernisms. But in this case, a reliance on political critique may be a blind spot in postcolonial critique. The problem is deeper than politics, because it involves the reasons why it seems important to attempt the critique at all. A journal such as *Third Text* has no difficulty admitting specialized studies of modernist practices outside North America and Western Europe because postcolonial and other approaches do not engage the narratives of modernist art history. From their point of view, these narratives are over-determined and historically limited, and it would be best restart them in a different place. That would be the happy ending of the story I want to tell here, except that the values and interests of modernist art history are much more pervasive than it may seem, and there is no critical approach to modernist painting that is effectively free of them. It is crucial to continue engaging the main trajectory and the entire institutional, critical, and historiographic apparatus that supports it, as outmoded and ideologically limited as they may seem, because they still underwrite the conditions under which modernist practices can appear as history.

It is important to see what can be done to expand the roster of modernism. Otherwise entire practices of modernist painting will continue to be marginalized or wholly absent from curricula outside the countries they were made, and the historical study of twentieth-century painting will continue to be centered on just a very small fraction of the actual output of modernist painting.

The purpose of this essay is to collect the approaches that are currently in use, in order to further conversation on the subject. Before I begin, I will give an example of the problems posed by “unusual” art outside the expected canons of modernism. I will offer more general theoretical observations in an afterword.

**Introductory case: Albert Namatjira.**

One of the most contested domains of twentieth-century painting outside of Western Europe and North America is Australian Aboriginal acrylic painting. It is a recent tradition, having begun only in 1974, but in the last quarter of the twentieth century it has grown to the point at which it supports several Aboriginal communities, and is represented in at least a hundred galleries worldwide.<sup>7</sup> At least five distinct interpretive agendas have been brought to bear on individual paintings: that of the artist and his or her relatives and community; of anthropologists interested in Aboriginal culture; of gallerists invested in the paintings' market value; of art historians concerned with the works' relation to Western art; and of curators interested in finding acceptable ways of presenting the works alongside non-Aboriginal Australian painting.<sup>8</sup>

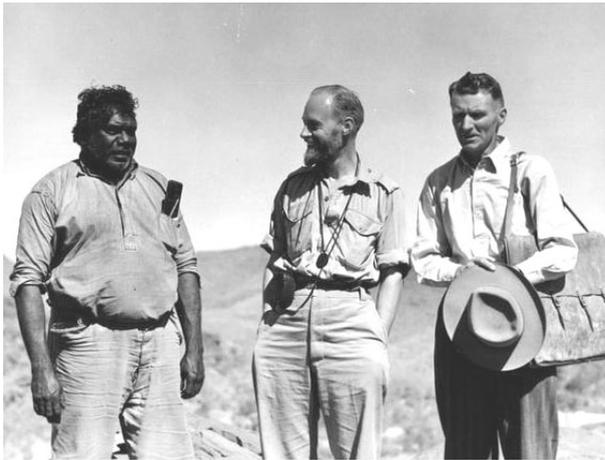


*Fig. 2: Albert Namatjira painting ghost gum trees.*

*Photo courtesy of The Hermannsburg School, <http://hermannsburgschool.com>*

In this vexing field, where the contest for interpretive power has such high political and artistic stakes, one of the most intriguing figures is the Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira (1902-1959), who is a kind of inverted precursor of late twentieth-century Aboriginal painting. I am not proposing Namatjira as a modernist; rather, I want to take some problems about the interpretation of his work as examples of the issues I will be exploring later.<sup>9</sup> Namatjira's work does not set a straightforward precedent for the

later development of Aboriginal acrylic painting because he had adopted a Western watercolor style instead of transferring Aboriginal motifs and images to acrylic and canvas as the later artists did. His landscape watercolors, made mainly in the area around Alice Springs, are strongly reminiscent of watercolors made by his teacher, Rex Battarbee (1893-1973). The comparison is often made and as often questioned, because if Namatjira's work were to be seen simply as a version of Battarbee's, then his oeuvre would no longer be Aboriginal, or represent an Aboriginal perspective. The modern history of Aboriginal painting would have begun with a case of full assimilation to the West, and Namatjira would have set Aboriginal meanings aside in the name of success: not a helpful precedent for a movement whose authenticity is its imprimatur in the art market, or for the many White Australians who work with Aboriginal communities trying to ensure that traditions are not diluted or forgotten. In the 1950s Namatjira was celebrated, widely exhibited, and even granted Australian citizenship, so the incentive for him to adopt a Western manner was strong.<sup>10</sup> His work was exhibited, in the anthropologist Howard Morphy's words, "partly as a sign of what Aborigines were capable of achieving once 'civilized.'"<sup>11</sup> In 1944 Battarbee himself proposed that "Aboriginal painters could paint in the French style without any criticism," just as Namatjira managed to paint in the "European style."<sup>12</sup> The contrary position, first articulated in the 1950s, was that Namatjira's art wasn't Western but Aboriginal, and that "every brush stroke was influenced by a tribal way of thinking."<sup>13</sup>



*Fig. 3: Albert Namatjira (left) and Rex Battarbee (right). Photo courtesy of the National Library of Australia*

By the end of the century his reception had become considerably more complex because the older interpretations were complicated by a growing awareness that promoting Namatjira was, in Morphy's words, as much "a denial of Aboriginal art as a recognition of it".<sup>14</sup> Increasingly elaborate attempts were made to demonstrate the mixed Westernness and Aboriginality of Arrernte watercolors. Some writers have stressed the particular circumstances in which Namatjira painted, suggesting he and other Arrernte Aboriginal watercolorists of the 1950s "be understood in relation to the particular circumstances of their own history and the motivations of the artists."<sup>15</sup> Another kind of interpretation emphasized the topographic accuracy of Namatjira's paintings—their baked color, stark light, and apparently uncanny fidelity to the landscape around Alice Springs, where Namatjira lived. There have also been attempts to dissect the paintings in order to distinguish Westernness and Aboriginality. In an essay in the 1992 book *The Heritage of Namatjira*, Ian Burn and Ann Stephen argue that there are particular qualities of the paintings that can be assigned to Namatjira's ethnicity, including the absence of balanced compositions, the unexpected distribution of emphases throughout the scene, the attention given to the edges, and a decorative impulse that led Namatjira to make his landscapes into collections of distinct textures.<sup>16</sup>

I mention these competing interpretations to illustrate the suspension of ideas that characterizes current interpretive discourse. Each of the perspectives I have mentioned leads to problems. Parsing the formal properties of the paintings, as Burn and Stephen do, assigns cultural difference to a series of incremental formal properties. For me, that is not a convincing strategy. One would hope that painting embodies thoughts about ethnicity in ways more interesting than imbalanced compositions. The difficulty with the first interpretation, in which Namatjira's art is seen as a product of his particular circumstances, is that it sidesteps the question of whether the art expresses something inherently Aboriginal: a question that, in many nuanced forms, comprises the central object of interest in Namatjira's painting. Saying his paintings are topographically faithful reduces them to realist documents, and shrinks his culturally-specific contribution to an interest in geological and botanical accuracy.

Each of the three interpretations I have sampled—topographic, anthropological, and formal—rehearses in microcosm issues that recur, in many forms, in writing about twentieth-century painting throughout the world. I will return to each of them later. What I want to emphasize here is that the literature on Namatjira cannot be exported; it remains of compelling interest in the context of Australian modernism, but not outside it. The reason is not only that Aboriginal culture is a particular

concern in Australia; it is also that Battarbee himself, the source of Namatjira's practice, is a minor figure even within the history of early twentieth-century realist watercolor landscape painting. In Australian literature on the subject, Battarbee remains largely unstudied. His practice descends from a generation of academic English watercolorists whose interest today is mainly historical. The early twentieth-century English watercolor tradition, including Battarbee himself, is minor in the sense that the work does not contribute to wider practices of twentieth-century landscape painting. The particular formal properties Burn and Stephen attribute to Namatjira, including asymmetry and attention to texture, were common in English landscape watercolor from Cotman onward. To value Namatjira's work it is to some degree necessary to avoid placing Battarbee in the history of twentieth-century painting, otherwise his student Namatjira will be seen as the student of a painter who was himself provincial and *retardataire*.<sup>17</sup>

Does it matter that one of the first modern Aboriginal painters happened to take as his model a rear-guard modernist? It does not, until it becomes of interest to say what place Namatjira might have in the overall history of twentieth-century painting. In that wider arena, his work appears isolated and, in most contexts, irrelevant. This may not seem like a problem; after all, each country and region has its own history of art practices that respond to the local situation. But the coherence of modernist painting as a whole is compromised, unless there is a way to include Namatjira in the same conversations that address modernists elsewhere. If the world's production of modernist painting were judged according to the crucial works and critical concepts of modernist discourse, most of it would be excluded. And yet what sense does the phrase "the history of modernist painting" have when it excludes so much of the world, and so much of the practice that comprises modernism? This problem is the Sphinx that has to be answered before it will be possible to imagine a truly inclusive multicultural history of twentieth-century painting.

### **First answer: Add new avant-garde practices to the main trajectory**

A common strategy in art history scholarship is to report on times and places that can figure as avant-garde in relation to modernist painting in Western Europe and North America. Recent studies of avant-garde painting in Brazil, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Russia, and Poland have made use of this approach. New scholarship on avant-gardes outside Western Europe and North America is promising, although there are still only a few specialists

in such subjects in North American and Western European universities. In 2002, the most recent year for which I have this information, there were no tenured art historians in North American universities who worked in southeast European modernism or South American modernism. The reasons are complex, but tied to the value accorded to moments in modernist practice that are understood as avant-garde, and therefore essential.

The most common supplements to the main trajectory of modernism, both in terms of faculty hires and published work, are Central and Eastern European painting (mainly Polish and Russian cubo-futurism and constructivism), in part because of their strong connections with innovative moments in Western European modernism. In North America, it has become traditional for larger art history departments to supplement their modernist scholars with a specialist in Polish or Russian avant-gardes. The choice largely reflects, I think, the dissemination of the interests exemplified by the journal *October*. One would hope that universities with such positions would be engaged in ongoing discussions about the historical reasons underlying their choices of specialist hires, but in my experience most of the talk has to do with the notion that hiring should promote as diverse a coverage of world art as possible, with no thought of the historical specificity of the choices that are made. (How interesting, that the Russian avant-garde is considered a priority in North American art history in 2010.)

The focus on modernism's innovative moments is subject to strong limitations for two reasons, one practical and the other ideological. In practical terms it becomes difficult to justify the inclusion of a large number of relatively unstudied avant-gardes in the primary sequence of modernist painting. The new instances tend increasingly to be minor in comparison to events in Western Europe and North America.<sup>18</sup> They can even serve, indirectly, to justify work that concentrates on the Western modernist sequence at the exclusion of what are taken to be inessential movements elsewhere. There are many examples of painters who have been the subjects of scholarly studies designed to bring out the painters' avant-garde qualities and make them relevant to the Western narrative. In Bratislava in 2003, I was urged to study the work of Štefan Bartušek Prukner (b. 1931). His painting is broadly expressionist, and he has tried his hand at many styles, from Polish-style expressionism to a kind of primitivism *à la* Emil Nolde. The work is wild and colorful, but not innovative by international standards. In a catalog essay, the critic Dušan Brozman compares Prukner to Pollock, saying that Prukner avoids the usual symmetries and orientations of other artists in favor of a kind of all-over painting.<sup>19</sup> The comparison is stretched, because Prukner's painting is not all-over, and his figures observe the laws of gravity. Even the scruffy, anthropomorphized insects in his *Summertime on the Sea* (1995)

prance on a horizontal dance floor. The case for Prukner as an avant-garde modernist is weak, but the efficacy of the argument depends on the public it is intended to convince. For a gallerist or a collector Brozman's argument might be helpful; but for an art historian pondering which artists to include in an undergraduate course on modernism it probably will not be persuasive. A large number of relatively unstudied painters could lay claim to being genuinely innovative and essential for the main trajectory of modernism. If the unclassifiable Czech painter Jan Zrzavý (1890-1977) were to be taken into the mainstream narrative, he might change its terms entirely.<sup>20</sup> He is odd and wild enough, to stand alongside or even replace painters such as Ernst, Klee, or Dalí in introductory accounts of the century. (Each of them is very different, of course, and none are similar to Zrzavý. I am only signaling Zrzavý's potential to displace accepted artists in the standard narrative.) Perhaps unhappily, it is not very likely that anyone will write a textbook from which Klee has been omitted to make room for Zrzavý.



Fig. 4: Jan Zrzavý, *Kleopatra*, 1942-1957, oil and gold on canvas, 202 cm x 181 cm, Národní Galerie Praha.

In researching this article I have deliberately tried not to report on new, “important” painters. Part of the reason not to do so is to avoid the now-customary mining of “exotic” places, and the entire imperialist agenda that it involves. Another reason is more philosophic. In Adorno’s formulation of the avant-garde, it must remain possible that an avant-garde practice is initially unrecognizable. A recognizable avant-garde, one ready to be “discovered,” is also one whose criteria of innovation are already in place. If I find someone like Zrzavý, and decide he is a potentially important artist, I am using criteria that I have learned elsewhere, and my “discovery” is really only a recognition of things I have already known, presented to me in a new combination or in an unfamiliar cultural context. This creates a contradiction that is itself formative for the inclusion of unfamiliar artists in the main trajectory. On the one hand, the prevailing rhetoric of multiculturalism and multiple modernities enjoins art historians to expand the canon; on the other hand, the only tools for achieving that expansion are themselves derived from avant-garde moments that are already part of the canon.



*Fig. 5: Kleopatra on a Czech postage stamp. Photograph by the Author*

For these reasons, when I encounter promising artists who are, by Western European standards, unknown, I try to resist the temptation to represent them to the West, or to nominate them as important discoveries. The philosophic grounds of my “discoveries,” and the ideological interest that drives the “discoveries,” are both suspect.

## **Second answer: Acknowledge the Westernness of the avant-garde and of modernism**

The interest accorded to avant-garde moments is not capricious, but built into the structure of modernism itself. In other words, the main trajectory and the conversations that make it significant impel Western scholars to pay attention to whatever can be taken as avant-garde. A good illustration of the dilemma this creates is the work of the Japanese scholar

Shigemi Inaga, who has written on Japonisme and on Japan's reception of Japonisme. He has described his feelings as a student in Paris in 1987, where he saw the exhibition *Le Japon des Avant-gardes* at the Pompidou Center.<sup>21</sup> He recalls that he felt "awkward" for three different reasons.

First, in the West, products (usually crafts), which are not categorized as art, are excluded from the avant-garde. Second, Western art historians assign these elements to the "Japanese tradition" so that Japanese art is disallowed from participating in modernism and the avant-garde. This can be called a consistent logical violence [*shyubi ikkan shita bouryokusei*]. And third, the West selects those modern Japanese arts which already have a similarity to the [Western] avant-garde, and then searches for their Japanese-ness...<sup>22</sup>

Inaga could not bring himself to accept this "perverse" [*tousaku*] logic in the name of "cross-cultural sociability," but neither did he want to allow himself to simply feel "pain looking at a distorted image of my home country as a faithful patriot" might. The conjunction of two impossible positions left him uncomfortable [*igogochi no warusa*]: "Who am I," he asks, "talking about this gap, and where am I located?" Inaga has also put the dilemma in a more elaborate form, arguing that the discomfort is actually double, with both sides compounded: the awkward relation between the excitement and guilt of telling other people about one's culture, and the awkward alteration between superiority and guilt that comes from allowing oneself to interpret other cultures.

The initial cause of Inaga's discomfort at *Le Japon des Avant-gardes* was the fact that Western scholarship excludes crafts from fine art, which involves excluding much of modern Japanese art from the category of the avant-garde. The "violence" [*bouryokusei*] of the historical tradition that excludes Japanese craft, and that "perversely" [*tousaku*] searches for Japanese-ness in those remnants of the tradition that can be considered sufficiently modern—i.e., Western—is irreparable. Post-Renaissance Western thinking on art is predicated on the distinction between art and craft, whether the craft is Western or non-Western, so it is not possible simply to right the imbalance and begin again. The only "solution," if it can be called that, is to foster awareness akin to Inaga's "discomfort" [*warusa*].

A heightened awareness of the writer's dislocated and ambiguous position may be an optimal strategy for writing about modernism outside of the mainstream. It can be adapted to each scholar's viewpoint, and changed

as conditions change. It also has the advantage of being well attested in the literature of cultural studies, from V. S. Naipaul to Homi Bhabha. Yet it also begs the question of the relation between the standard trajectory and the material under consideration. By suspending or rejecting the judgments of modernist discourse, an approach such as Inaga's defers the "logical" clash of systems and postpones difficult questions concerning the value and place of the unfamiliar work. By the modernist logic of *Le Japon des Avant-gardes*, Japanese crafts simply cannot be valued in the way that modernist paintings are, and Japanese avant-garde paintings, in turn, are found wanting. Faced with those unacceptable conclusions, Inaga is impelled to reflect on the dilemma of choice. His work is exemplary of non-Western scholarship on Western art, and his account is an exemplary reaction to *Le Japon des Avant-gardes*, but it is an open question whether a meditation on the dilemmas of choice and judgment contributes to the understanding of modernist art. The "consistent logical violence" of modernist discourse demands that new material be evaluated, and the longer that valuation is postponed, the more artificial and elaborate such meditations become. The impetus behind Inaga's anguish can only be a belief in certain core concepts of modernism, even when he seeks to dissolve or at least complicate modernism's harsh judgments about what is not Western. It is not accidental that Inaga's own scholarship is often reticent when it comes to conclusions and claims. He is a strong observer and historiographer, and, perhaps, a weaker participant.

Writing about cultural dilemmas—like Inaga's meditations, like this essay—can be an optimal strategy for avoiding "logical violence," but it defers participation and revision of the narratives it addresses. Scholarship that acknowledges the Westernness of the avant-garde and of modernism must still negotiate the fact that the impetus to write about modernist painting comes primarily from the West, and brings with it concepts of the avant-garde. Inaga's meditation is a pause in the search for a working answer, not—as he knows—an answer.

### Third answer: Follow the local critical tradition

It may seem more appropriate to focus on the local reception of the work, rather than on the large-scale problems of its possible relations to the mainstreams of modernism. That approach seems reasonable. After all, artwork finds its meaning and significance in the context in which it is made and exhibited. The overwhelming majority of modernist paintings, those done by little-known artists, have minimal critical contexts, but when there is textual evidence associated with the work—a newspaper review, a catalogue essay—then the work has at least the elements of a local critical tradition. A newspaper review or a mention in an exhibition brochure is enough to provide the means for an art historian to understand how the work is understood in its own setting.

Metka Krašovec is a Slovenian painter who teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana, Slovenia. In the late 1980s she painted neoclassical faces of women, but when I saw her work in the Galerija Equrna in January 2003, she was represented by several surrealist landscapes.<sup>23</sup> One depicted a French garden, set on a height over the ocean. In the painting, two lovers stand alone next to a fountain. Beyond them is an ocean, delimited by the curve of the Earth. The picture has the stillness associated with de Chirico's metaphysical style, a solid functional sense of illumination as in Delvaux, and the hyper-realistic crystalline detail normally exemplified for the later twentieth century by Dalí. And yet, so the owner of the Equrna Gallery informed me, Krašovec does not think of herself as a descendent of any of those painters. The owner opened a copy of the *Oxford History of Western Art*, published in 2000, and turned to page 497, where Krašovec's paintings are described as "a new mannerism."<sup>24</sup> That English-language reference is about the only description of Krašovec's work in a language other than Slovenian, and the owner offered it as proof that a non-Slovenian observer would agree that Krašovec is not a principally a surrealist. The author of that section of the *Oxford History of Western Art*, Paul Crowther, is not a historian of modern art but an aesthetician, phenomenologist, and expert on Kant. He is given to idiosyncratic aesthetic judgments such as "the key artist in understanding the transition from modern to postmodern is Malcolm Morley."<sup>25</sup> (I do not know any similar claim made on Morley's behalf: he is a photorealist with an uneven reception.)<sup>26</sup> Crowther's appellation, "new mannerism," is only meant in the most informal fashion, and does not imply that the work is not indebted to surrealism.



*Fig. 6: Metka Krašovec, Trojno ogledalo (Triple Mirror), acrylic on canvas, 1992, 145 cm x 160 cm.*



*Fig. 7: Metka Krašovec, Čas (Time), acrylic on linen, 1992, 81 cm x 100 cm.*

The owner then showed me the Slovenian press clippings for Krašovec's work, which avoid the word surrealism in favor of general references to Slovenian "feeling—what is in other contexts referred to as "utmetnostni dialekt" (artistic dialect). The expression was apparently first coined in the 1961 Congress of Slovenian Art History, partly as a way of describing a difference, and a national character, without spelling out what exactly the difference or character might be.<sup>27</sup> In the press notices of Krašovec's work, descriptions of the work imply a kind of utmetnostni dialekt, and a non-Western genealogy, without stating it in so many words.

The strength of the local historical tradition is that it remains faithful to the particular constellation, the feel and detail, of the local scene. The successful reception of Krašovec's work in Ljubljana depends on not dwelling too much on names such as de Chirico, and also not saying too precisely what alternate influences might be. This is a common situation wherever the work itself is perceived, rightly or wrongly, to have a quality that might be damaged by too close an association with obvious and famous forbears.

The critical notices of Krašovec's work are enough to begin a history of reception, but if I were to follow these leads in her case, I would be unable to link her paintings to the Western stories of art history. They would float free in their own elusive, evasive genealogy. The work would appear disconnected from the main trajectory of Western modernism. Such a description would preserve the work for its local context, but defer the moment when Western modernism could be brought to bear.

#### **Fourth answer: Disregard the context and describe the work sympathetically**

It may seem better to leave the local historical sense of an artist to one side, and try to describe the work on its own terms. If I were to write about the historical terms according to which Krašovec's work has been understood, I still might not have an account that would make sense for a reader interested in the wider histories of art in other countries. It is dubious to insist that her practice be given a new genealogy distinct from de Chirico's metaphysical style, or that she be discussed in terms of the meanings of national style in Slovenia, rather than in terms of the international practices of surrealism. Although it is not my immediate

concern here, it would be evasive to avoid all mention of previous styles in favor of an analysis of the Galerija Eqrna's place in Ljubljana's art scene, because that would avoid coming to terms with either the local or the international critical writing. So perhaps it is better to leave aside the historical settings proffered by critics and historians, and try to describe the work on its own terms.



Fig. 8: Ivan Grohar, *Sejalec (The Sower)*, Oil on canvas, 1907, courtesy of the National Gallery of Slovenia.

The first-generation Slovenian impressionist Ivan Grohar (1862-1911) is a good candidate for this fourth possibility, because the historical reception of his work within Slovenia has stressed his uniqueness. He is taken as a foundation for Slovenian modernism, and so his affinities with van Gogh or Giovanni Segantini are played down in favor of an appreciation of qualities that are uniquely his—and therefore uniquely Slovenian. His painting *The Sower (Sejalec, 1907)* is one of dozens of the same motif that were made throughout Europe beginning with

the Barbizon School. It can seem that each country has its own sower, who is interpreted in terms of each country's sense of its heritage. In Austria, for example, there is Albin Egger-Lienz's (1868-1926) powerful *The Sower* (*Der Sämann*, 1908). The coincidence in dates is often remarkable. In this case, Egger-Lienz was six years younger than Grohar, and painted *The Sower* one year later. In Grohar's case, the subject is associated with Slovenian work ethic. A sower is seen less as a symbol of the country's fertility than of the hard work necessary to make it fertile.



Fig. 9: Vincent Willem van Gogh (Schilder), *The Sower*. Arles, November 1888, oil on canvas, 32 cm x 40 cm, courtesy of the Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

Grohar painted several canvases around the same time as *The Sower*. Another of equal importance, which hangs next to it in the Narodna Galerija in Ljubljana, is *The Larch* (*Macasen*, 1904). A larch bisects the canvas, and beyond it is a view to a steep field. Toward the top of the frame the field gives way to forests and there is a view of mountains beyond. The exact location of the scene has been verified by photography, and what appears to be snow on the mountains is actually characteristic whitish

scree slopes. Grohar cut the canvas down, and Andrei Smrekar, director of the Narodna Galerija, tells me that Grohar also erased most of his native village in order to make the scene more modernist. He left a single farm building on the slope and some barely discernible houses on a hill at the top left. The result is not only flatter and more modern-looking, but also more directly about the wild country. Grohar painted his name carved in the larch, placing himself in that exact spot, and the painted carving mimics the sculpted look of his paint. Both are thick, pasty, and nearly wooden. Like *The Sower*, *The Larch* is a wild subspecies of postimpressionism. The marks are dense and heavy-handed, sometimes even scrappy, like Adolphe Monticelli's. In places, Grohar let the raw red-brown burlap show through between patches of paint.

Grohar is the most important of a small group of seminal Slovenian postimpressionists that also includes Rihard Jakopič (1869-1943), who mounted the first modernist exhibition in 1910, Matej Sternen (1870-1949), and Matija Jama (1872-1947), who was more faithful to Grohar's manner. They are understood as characteristically Slovenian, and for that reason the scholarship they have attracted has not made much of their debt to non-Slovenian art. Jakopič in particular played an important role in defining Slovenian art; he reinterpreted the region's art as going back to the eighteenth century and was once caricatured as Moses.

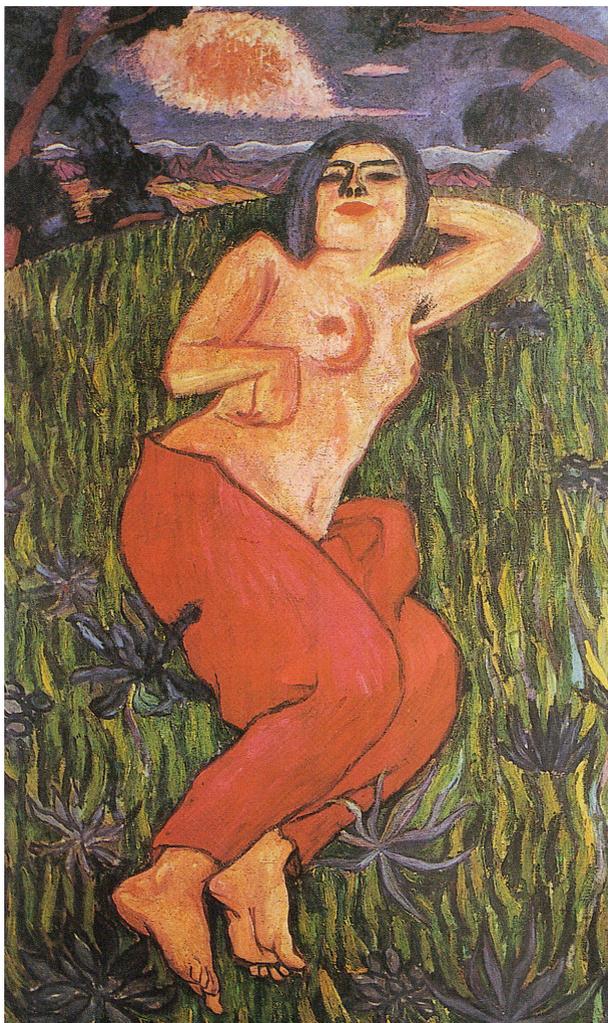
In these last paragraphs I have paid attention to the paintings themselves, rather than their indebtedness to non-Slovenian art. I have not said much about the local historiographic tradition, which stresses Grohar's nearly complete independence of Segantini. (One Slovenian historian told me that for Grohar, Segantini just "meant modernism.") It is entirely possible to go on in this vein and write monographic treatments of artists focusing on their works. Such writing exists wherever art history is a developed discipline. By focusing on what are understood as intrinsic properties of the art, this kind of writing replicates the concerns of art historians who have tried to write about Western artworks on their own terms. Yet there is a difference: Grohar's *The Sower* is not a unique painting, but one of dozens like it in several European countries. A monograph on Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* might be justified in keeping rather strictly to the object itself, but a monograph on Grohar's *The Sower* would not. Writing about the object itself has a significant and eventually crippling limitation: it ignores history.

This fourth solution has resulted in some wonderful writing, but in comparison to art historical narratives about canonical figures, it is not history. It can be reflective and evocative, and it can propose links to all sorts of cultural events and ideas within the region or nation. However, if such writing does not investigate the painting's link with the broader history of painting, it is not art history in a full sense. When the writing is thoroughly researched it can be significant as local history (the third option), and when it is less well researched it can work as an evocation of the art (the fourth option). Whatever it is, such writing is not clearly part of the larger collection of texts that are aware of one another and of the sequences of art and ideas that comprise modernism.

### **Fifth answer: Write the histories of institutions**

John Clark's *Modern Asian Art* surveys about twelve countries, from the inception of modernism to contemporary art.<sup>28</sup> He is skeptical of the search for avant-gardes, and he presents his book as what I would call institutional history; he is interested in the individual occasions for the making and reception of art, and in theory he is equally interested in whether the work contributes to an avant-garde or not.

In his methodological Introduction, Clark considers the work of the Japanese painter Yorozu Tetsugorō (1885-1927), a prominent Japanese modernist. Of Yorozu's painting *Naked Beauty* (1912), Clark writes: it "could be interpreted... as evidence of the vain longing to be up to date at the periphery, whose position is always constructed as dystopic by its very distance from the utopian centre."<sup>29</sup> ("Nude Beauty", the translation Clark prefers, is probably closer to the painter's intentions, but the museum uses the translation "Naked Beauty".)



*Fig. 10: Yorozu Tetsugorō, Naked Beauty (裸体美人), oil on canvas 162 cm × 97 cm, 1912, courtesy of National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.*

Yorozu's *Portrait of a Woman* (1910) would be similarly "positioned" by the "critique of 'Orientalism,' which has now become orthodox in the Euramerican academy... as a poor and inauthentic copy." Clark calls that kind of interpretation "Orientalist" (in quotation marks, perhaps to signal that this orientalism is an illegitimate extension of the original French orientalism, which was directed at the Middle East), and he wants to correct it by considering the Japanese perspective. "In fact," he continues, the painting "marks the re-situation of discourse that has already been entirely assimilated": Yorozu took what he knew, and what he needed, and put it to work in a new context. It is that new context that matters—its "local discourse needs," its goals and meanings. Clark prefers a "deliberately neutral" approach, one that "consciously stands aside from the search for what is modern or radical."<sup>30</sup>

A sign of this neutral attitude is that Clark considers the avant-garde in just one chapter of his book, about two-thirds the way through, between chapters on the salon and on nationalism. The avant-garde, he says, is really only a modernist value, and it refers to those who are "ideologically equipped to criticize earlier positions in the discourse." It names a certain position taken in regard to history; a position that demands innovation and seeks to understand previous ideas in a comprehensive sense.<sup>31</sup> Because it "draws its authority from origination," the avant-garde "becomes forced to absolutely privilege the new."<sup>32</sup> These definitions make it possible for Clark to analyze the modernism of Tokyo around 1900, in which Yorozu worked, as just a modernism among others, with an avant-garde among others—different, but potentially comparable, to avant-gardes elsewhere. "What appears derivative from a Euramerican perspective," Clark concludes, "has its quite originating avant-garde function within that Japanese context."<sup>33</sup>

There are many such formulations in *Modern Asian Art*, and some detailed considerations of the level of awareness of the West that was obtained in the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Contact between Paris and the Tokyo School of Fine Arts was exceptionally close in the first two decades of the twentieth century. *The Futurist Manifesto* was translated in 1909, and Yorozu's teacher, the modernist painter Kuroda Seiki (b. 1866), mentioned in 1912 that he had just been sent a recent Futurist exhibition catalogue. In March 1914 there was an exhibition of *Der Sturm* prints, and Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger's *Du cubisme* (1912) was translated into Japanese in 1915, just two years after the English translation. These facts contribute to the sense that Yorozu and Kuroda were well in control of the reception of the Western avant-garde, and therefore that they should

be evaluated by different criteria rather than being considered as belated post-impressionists. *Naked Beauty* was, Clark says, a “deliberately provocative display of recently received post-impressionist mannerisms.” What matters for its appreciation is the contemporaneous Japanese sense of certain French modernism, and the economic, political, and strategic reasons why elements of French practice were adopted.

The devaluation of non-Western avant-gardes, Clark says, stems from “an ideological debate about authority,” and ignores “the relativizing function of the avant-garde.” For example, the appearance of *Der Sturm* prints in Tokyo in 1914 “should be seen as the functioning of the avant-garde as a transcultural group in communicating among themselves.” Japanese artists such as Yorozu and Kuroda were not derivative because they were “actors in an international movement where cultural origin provided only a context of origination not of authentication.”<sup>34</sup> The phenomenon of the avant-garde, together with its concept of originality, should be seen as an ideology shared by many cultures. Even the concept of originality might be relative, because it might be different from one place to another.<sup>35</sup>

Just to be clear, I think three arguments are entwined here: the claim that avant-gardes are relative to their contexts, so that one may be as interesting as another; that Yorozu was thoroughly familiar with the European precedents and was playing a “mannerist” game with them; and that he was part of an international avant-garde that traded ideas back and forth. I am only concerned here with the first of these.

The difficulty with accounts like Clark’s, I find, is that after a while they become counter-intuitive. I can read with interest about Yorozu and Kuroda for fifteen or twenty pages, but after that it becomes increasingly difficult for me to remain engaged by their paintings. Yorozu’s and Kuroda’s works clearly depend on simplified or impoverished versions of Van Gogh and other European painters, and as much as I may want to undermine that judgment, it returns insistently. It becomes difficult for me to sustain interest in Yorozu’s paintings as independent works, comprehensible and viable without their Western references. The work looks derivative, and so does the art scene in Tokyo. Clark could say that such an opinion is just a repetition of Western orientalist prejudices, and that it is a consequence of the thrall of the ideology of Western avant-guardism. But I wonder if the Western perspective is quite so easy to discount. The art practice at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts is certainly specific to its time and place, and I agree that it constitutes an avant-garde that is identifiably different from the one in Paris in those years. But the ideological, economic, and

cultural differences are not enough to prevent the work from being seen as derivative, and that will be true not only for Western observers but for anyone who studies modernism in the West. I may prefer Yorozu's *Naked Beauty* to a painting by van Gogh, but that does not erase Yorozu's dependence on van Gogh. I may devalue the very notion of dependence as a Western construction, but that does not prevent me from experiencing Yorozu's painting as dependent. I may not care about the direction of influence. If Yorozu influenced van Gogh, instead of the other way around, I would not particularly care—but that does not stop me from experiencing the direction of influence as part of the work's character.

Clark wants to change the terms of the conversation in modernist art history so that works like *Naked Beauty* will not be devalued or ignored, but there is a severe obstacle in the way of that entirely admirable goal: the very structure of art history and modernism. There is no sense to modernism without the privileging of innovation and of the avant-garde: you cannot subtract away those terms, or claim they are relative, without dismantling the very idea of modernism. Clark would like to rewrite the concept of the avant-garde so it can be sensitive to differing cultural contexts, but that cannot be done by claiming that originality is relative, or that new contexts rewrite the notion of what is innovative. The avant-garde in the non-relative sense, the sense to which Clark objects, is like a vital organ. It cannot be removed without destroying modernism's sense of itself. It seems to me that if *Modern Asian Art* were to succeed in relativizing the avant-garde, it would no longer be called *Modern Asian Art*, because there would no longer be any sense in writing about modernism. Or, to put this another way: if Clark's strategies were effective, then art historians would be equally interested in avant-garde practices wherever they have occurred, whether it was Tokyo in 1912 or Samoa in 1990. (American Samoa had one of the more belated modernist moments in world art.) In fact historians remain interested in the times and places where innovation—the avant-garde—was strongest, and it is no small part of Clark's interest that the people in the Tokyo School of Fine Art were virtually neck-and-neck with European theorists. Art historians are not interested in avant-gardes just because each one is economically and ideologically unique: they are interested because the work itself seems original.

It enriches art history to be asked to reconsider Western values, and to think about concepts such as belatedness as the conceptually narrow concern of a naïve Western historiography. I find a great deal of interest in Clark's discussions of particular avant-gardes, and it is especially significant that after reading a postcolonial account, a run-of-the-mill Western text may

well seem unreflective. I just do not think it is as easy as Clark supposes to rethink concepts such as originality and innovation, to redefine ideas such as dependence and influence, or to relativize ideas like the avant-garde. It is not enough to stress local historical situations, because that only defers the moment when it is necessary to come to terms with the fact that the work is dependent on Western models.

If I subtract concepts like “belated” and “dependent,” and try to redefine the avant-garde as an “international movement,” then I end up with a maimed concept of modernism. The full game of art history is significantly more challenging. It requires me to be sensitive to the unique characteristics of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts around 1900, and it certainly asks me to be understanding and sympathetic with paintings like *Naked Beauty*, but it also reminds me that Yorozu’s paintings cannot compete with van Gogh’s. In theory, in a scholarly world where socioeconomic differences are what matters, and not specifically art, Yorozu’s painting could certainly be understood to be just as interesting as van Gogh’s. But that world does not yet exist, and the proof is very simple: Clark’s *Modern Asian Art* is a work of Western art history, shot through with Western postcolonial theory, Western protocols for the writing and research of art history, Western interpretive methods, and a very Western concern with modernism. To imagine otherwise, as Clark does, is invigorating but unpersuasive.

### **Sixth answer: Define the work per negationem**

I showed an outline version of these first five solutions to the Slovenian scholar Tomaž Brejc, who teaches art history and theory at the Academy in Ljubljana. He proposed a sixth answer, taking as an example the Slovenian painter Rihard Jakopič (1869-1943). How, Brejc asked me, should I write about this painter, who is one of the seminal figures of Slovenian modernism? Take for example *Memories* (1912) in the Narodna Galerija, which hangs one room away from Grohar’s *The Larch* and *The Sower*. The painting is certainly indebted to Intimist work, but it is not mistakable for a Vuillard. In a broad sense, it is impressionist, and that is the way Jakopič is usually identified in Slovenian art criticism (and, for that matter, on the 100 Tolar banknote issued in 1992). Yet Jakopič is not an Impressionist in the way that Monet or even Sisley are, nor is he very close to German or Hungarian impressionists.

Brejc has written a book on Slovenian modernism, and he told me he has long wrestled with this problem. In the end, he favors to specify the artist by saying what he is not. This definition per negationem, as he calls it, has

the virtue of being very faithful to whatever the painting at hand actually is. Memories is not Vuillard, Monet, early Nolde, or early Schmidt-Rottluff, or any number of others. Jakopič was never a Fauve, even though he used complementary contrasts in his painting. Something in *Memories* builds from the Slovenian reception of Signac, and later there was also the influence of Kandinsky. It is possible to work through the possible antecedents and say, in each case, what Jakopič was not.

I am impressed by Brejc's application of this method, which seems to me ideally sensitive to the often unnamable differences between painters and their prototypes. Brejc's book, unfortunately not translated from the Slovenian, could be exemplary in that regard. Yet, I also wonder if the definition *per negationem* is not compelled to depend, at every point, on existing Western descriptions. Without the existing literature on the Fauves, for example, it would not be possible to make sense of the claim that Jakopič adopted Fauve's color practice but not their other concerns. Brejc's *via negativa* is promising, but I do not think it can be a model for the description of non-Western work.

### **Seventh answer: Adjust the stress**

Several times, when discussing this problem with friends and colleagues, it has been suggested to me that the question is not so much one of theory, but of emphasis. Place less stress on Western painters, people say, and the problem will eventually be ameliorated or solved. If the plurality of art historians in all countries spent more time on lesser-known artists, then the burden of art history's emphasis would shift and finally the margins would become a new center. In effect, my friends have told me that the problem is only a question of the privilege that has historically been given to canonical Western modernists, and that the next generations of art historians can solve it passively, by refusing to contribute to the growing mass of scholarship on the major figures.

One way of paying attention differently would be to give up the metaphor of the family tree of modernism, where the sturdy trunk is Western European and North American modernism. The metaphor of rhizomes, made popular by Gilles Deleuze, might be a substitute. Rhizomes, according to Deleuze, proliferate in all directions, so that there is no preferred direction or central node. Deleuze's metaphor is not quite accurate because rhizomes are offshoots of root processes, so no matter how tangled they are, they lead into a large central plant. Still, the many modernist practices that

flourished throughout the world in the first half of the twentieth century could be pictured as rhizomes, distantly or indirectly connected to the massive central core of modernism in Western Europe.

A better model might be mycelia, the vegetative bodies of fungi, because they are truly without a center. They branch and divide through the soil with no pattern whatsoever, and they grow from spores that might be scattered anywhere. A mycelial model of modernism would let each local center be as important as every other center, and there would be no central body—no equivalent, in this fungal metaphor, of the mushroom.

It is worth considering the options seriously. A rhizomatic model, in which a cloud of tiny randomly oriented shoots surrounds a central stalk, is a fairly good way of picturing the situation in the first three decades of the twentieth century. It reflects the fact that artists on the margins did not always imagine their relation to the center as if they were branches of a tree, but in more complicated ways. It also does justice to the fact that artists in the center—for example Picasso working in Paris in the 1910s—knew of the existence of many modernisms, even if they might not have had a clear understanding of some of them. From Picasso's perspective, the many offshoots of modern art must have appeared as a halo or cloud of minor interests. The difference in weight is also well modelled by the rhizome theory, a massive and compact art scene in the West, and a widely dispersed but lightweight system of interrelated art scenes elsewhere. The mycelium model, on the other hand, replaces the center in the name of equality, and posits a world filled with labyrinthine connections to equally weighted centers. It models the situation within some regions, but it is not an accurate model when it comes to the influence of the main trajectory.

There could be many more models, as many as there are ways of paying attention to different art practices. I mention the rhizome and mycelium metaphors because they capture two major alternatives. All such options, I think, are ultimately unrealistic. It is idealistic to say that the problem of the overbearing influence of the West can be mitigated by paying more attention to the margins. The overwhelming influence of the center, or centers, was a historical fact over much of the twentieth century, and in order to overcome it, more will be required than just shifting the emphasis. Even if art historians decided, on a worldwide basis, to stop writing about Picasso and Matisse, the presence of those artists in art historical discourse would still inform future accounts of other artists. That is the root-level problem that is not solved by paying attention differently.

I have often found myself fascinated by artists I discover for the first time, and as I study them, their works become richer and loom in my imagination. I was introduced to Fujita Tsuguharu (1886-1968) by Clark's account; he was an artist with very divided loyalties, and his works seem to reflect that fact. He graduated from the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1910, and went to Paris. He was back in Japan during the China War in 1938, working as a war artist. During the war in the Pacific he was back in Paris; and even though he was barred from exhibiting there after the war, he eventually became a citizen in 1955. Clark makes some sensitive observations on Fujita's dour graduation self-portrait of 1910, wondering if his "domineering downward-looking stance" might mean he already has begun to "disown" his culture. Clark wonders about the white background in a self-portrait done in Paris in 1926: is this "the past turned to nothing, or is it the nothingness of the past that the (Parisian) world he inhabits cannot recognise except in the elaborate play of brushwork?"<sup>36</sup>

Often Tsuguharu seems to avoid the question, making popular and middle-brow decorative pictures for the Parisian and Japanese art markets. But those markets fluctuated over the years, and his own sense of them was apparently just as variable. It is seldom clear, in Fujita's works, where his alliances and affinities lie, and that makes his work a good subject for a study on identity and its relation to painted signs. It makes him grow in my imagination, until he seems a better indicator of those ideas than any French artist living in Paris in those same years. And yet I know that behind those questions are the expectations and norms against which Fujita measures himself—the 1910 self-portrait is a species of late Western academic painting, and its hauteur works in that context; the 1926 painting is a light concoction of Klee, Dufy, and Matisse, and its virtuoso line and airy white emptiness are expressive on account of those particular precedents. In other words, paying attention differently is rewarding and historically specific, but it defers the question of wider connections.

**Eighth answer: Just give up**

What to do? Some kinds of painting are especially far removed from the discourses of modernism, for example the debased landscapes offered to tourists on Montmartre, or paintings of jungles and coral reefs on the walls of shopping malls. Such work probably cannot be well described in the language of modernism or serious art history. It needs to be appreciated differently—"on its own terms," as people say—and the whole project of historical writing should probably be set to one side. It could be argued that such work is not only a major component of the sum total of modernist painting, but the majority of all painting done in the last century.

An interesting place to think about this is the Leopold Museum in Vienna. Because it is the result of Rudolf Leopold's personal sense of Austrian modernism, and because the display space is extensive, it raises sharp questions about what can, what might be, and what should not be recuperated for the history of twentieth-century painting. The collection includes major painters, essential in any account of modernism, among them Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, and Lovis Corinth. The collection also includes work by followers, who figure in accounts of Austrian modernism: for example, Koloman Moser (1868-1918), a more decoratively-minded member of the Secession, and Anton Kolig (1886-1950), a member of the movement called Carinthian Kolorismus.

But among them, Leopold has hung painters whose contribution to European, and even Austrian, modernism is dubious. In the winter of 2003, Gustav Hessing (1909-1981) was prominently displayed, but his loose adaptations of cubism are unconvincing, and his long career only seems to make that point over and over again. Josef Dobrowski (1889-1964) is represented by several dark, overwrought adaptations of Breughel, a painter whose work has long been an important presence in the nearby Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum. But Dobrowsky's paintings, even as a record of the historical reception of Breughel, are not very interesting. Another such artist is Leopold Blauensteiner (1880-1947); he was an extremely literal-minded pointillist who preferred his dots in neat rows as if they had been painted with an inked comb.



*Fig. 11: Gustav HESSING, Landschaft (landscape), gouache on paper, 23,8 cm x 38 cm, 1980, courtesy of the Leopold Museum, Vienna.*

In one room Leopold has hung a series of flower paintings, including one by Egge Sturm-Skrila (1894-1943), another by Anton Faistauer (1887-1930), and a third by Anton Kolig (1886-1950), which shows evidence that Kolig was looking at Matisse. The pictures are modernist, but in parts also indifferent to modernism, as if they were answers to the question: If you like flowers, and you are a modernist in Austria in the 1930s, how can you paint? Together with Schiele, Faistauer and Kolig comprised the short-lived Neukunstgruppe, and that is enough to ensure their presence in art history. Sturm-Skrila is a more obscure painter.

The canvases in the Leopold Museum are grouped, however, as flower paintings, making the difference less visible. Each of them is lovely. They have a particular solidity that I take as an echo of Courbet, an important progenitor for expressionism. They also share a rich crimson that is typical of the decade in much of Central European modernist painting; it occurs again in the Carinthian Kolorismus painters. Kolig taught in the Wiener Akademie along with Josef Dobrowsky, who also painted flowers, and one of their students was Karl Josef Gunsam (1900-1972) who also painted modernist flower arrangements. But if I go on like this, I am only distracting myself. These paintings do not belong in art

history: they belong to the private moments I have on my way from one historical encounter to another. These paintings take themselves out of history, they are a hiatus from thinking about Vienna, or about Austria's contribution to modernism, and I imagine that may have been Leopold's intention.

The private enjoyment of flower paintings is not at all a poor thing. Anyone who loves painting knows that it very often works by producing just such incommunicable feelings that seem detached from historical meaning. I forget myself in front of Sturm-Skrila's mediocre bouquet, and then I remember myself in the next gallery. That lull in cognitive intensity, that aesthetic encounter, that lapse into subjective space—call it whatever you like—is utterly central to what some modernist painting is about. I do not want to parody it, devalue it, or criticize it at all. But it is not relevant to the problem at hand, which is the production of historical meaning. If I give up trying to write a historical account of Yorozu, Grohar, and the others, then my task does not necessarily become simpler: I am still faced with the challenge of trying to put my personal reaction into words. But my task is different, and it no longer has to do with the problems I am pursuing.

An insidious and tremendously difficult question lurks here. It makes sense not to consider Sturm-Skrila, Faistauer, Kolig, Dobrowsky, and Gunsam in terms of the history of modernism, to exclude them from the essential canons of the history of art. Their flower paintings are simply not necessary for a serious consideration of modernism. It would be artificial to try to find a place for their flower paintings in a history of twentieth-century painting. If I did so, I would be misusing the paintings and misunderstanding their intended public. But if I exclude those paintings, where do I stop? Can I then say flower painting as a whole is not part of twentieth-century painting? On what grounds? Are there not ambitious and important flower paintings by Matisse, Nolde, Mondrian, Picasso, Bonnard, and Lucian Freud? Weren't the Pop appropriations by Warhol, Tom Wesselman, Alex Katz, and Wayne Thiebaud made possible by the earlier history of modernist still life paintings? And should we not doubt any attempt to exclude flower paintings, because after all their low value is a leftover from the Baroque hierarchies of genres? Once I begin to exclude certain paintings and types of paintings, there is no way to know how to stop. If a single painting can somehow be granted exemption from being considered historically, then all paintings can be. My simple judgment that Sturm-Skrila is not appropriate for a historical account raises questions that are lodged deep within the discipline.

## Afterword

There is no simple solution to the problem of writing art historical accounts of the world's modernist painting. We should take heart from that, because if there were a single answer, it would mean there are no significant differences between painting made in different regions or countries and that all modernist painting was a massive world-wide project, something akin to modern physics, and therefore suitable to a single explanatory model. Happily, that is not true. But the lack of a single answer should also be regarded as a serious challenge. If we do not continue to work on this problem, then paintings made in smaller countries, marginal places, and neglected regions, will be lost to the international dialogue on art history. Their voices will grow even fainter, and the trumpeting of the Picassos and Pollocks will get stronger each year.

The larger book project, of which this article is part, will pursue two different approaches: First, it will consider a number of case studies in more depth, bringing the requisite historical details and context that are necessarily missing here. I agree entirely with scholars such as Iftikhar Dadi (author of a recent book on Pakistani modernism) that what Tim Clark calls the "matter," the historical particularities of any art, is crucial for any plausible account.<sup>37</sup> I hope my schematism here has not made the theoretical possibilities less persuasive.

Secondly, the book will explore the current theorizing on types, locations or streams of modernism. A growing body of scholarly writing addresses the idea that there have been multiple modernisms. From the point of view of this project, these texts are sometimes problematic. When the subject is modernism in relation to international contemporary art, then there is less of a problem for the subject pursued here, because varying manifestations of modernisms in contemporary practice can be studied together: an echo of Paraguayan modernism in a contemporary Paraguayan installation piece, for example, does not require a discussion of the relation of Paraguayan modernism and other modernisms. Terry Smith's new work on contemporaneities is a good case in point. The overlapping senses of temporality and art practice that he observes are not mutually incompatible; none of them contains claims of precedence over others, or seeks to exclude others.<sup>38</sup> But where the subject is modernist practices before the rise of international postmodern or contemporary art, i.e. during the decades in which modernist practices were more or less isolated from one another—the mid-century decades that produced

most of the work I have considered in this essay—then scholarship that proposes multiple modernisms is, I think, more problematic. Work by Andrea Huyssen and others on multiple modernisms runs the risk of omitting modernism's claims on universality.<sup>39</sup> It is entirely possible to rewrite the history of twentieth-century painting in a more inclusive manner, welcoming regional and national practices, and speaking of multiple modernisms, but that inclusivity comes at a high price. It entails the omission, the erasure, or the bracketing of modernism's claims to universality. The abovementioned book *Art Since 1900* has good reasons for its nearly exclusive focus on North America and Western Europe: they lie in the self-description of the artists and critics. More inclusive, multicultural or multiple accounts, in which modernisms proliferate and co-exist in a world that is newly, or belatedly, acknowledged to be international, play false with the sense that the avant-garde normally had of itself. It is a trade-off, and there is no easy solution. I only wish to signal the fact that the work of writing about modern art is harder than postcolonial theory, and accounts of multiple modernisms, sometimes wish to make it.

I will end with descriptions of two projects, one just completed and another underway. The first is the book *Art and Globalization*, just out at the time of writing (autumn 2010).<sup>40</sup> At the moment, it is the most comprehensive international attempt to gather the pertinent literature in art history, postcolonial studies, and political theory, to understand what it means to say that art has become, or is becoming, global. The contributors bring a wide number of references to bear on the problem, and end, without reaching a consensus, on the problem of bridging the socio-economic analyses of postcolonial theory with the value-based, often aesthetic concerns of art history. I think that *Art and Globalization* makes it clear that there is in fact a profound difference of discourses between the two sides, and that they have not, so far, produced a new synthesis or even a useful dialectic. That difficult fact has often been obscured by the euphoria of the contemporary art world and by the thousands of individual essays on particular cultural contexts, which can make it seem as if the world is slowly being attended to, moment by moment, artist by artist, and that there is no need to be concerned about the compatibility of different accounts.

The second project is one I am working on: a response to *Art Since 1900*. That book has been controversial since its launch (more accurately, multiple launches), and it has become a commonplace in art history to complain about it. The criticism is often aimed at the consolidation of the concerns of the writers who are identified, more or less, with North

American poststructuralist art criticism. Despite the four authors' sometimes wide and candidly voiced differences, they all belong to the critical field exemplified by the journal *October* (it may be described, roughly, as students of Rosalind Krauss, students of her students, other authors associated with the journal, scholars whose work is informed by accounts in and around *October*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and some other journals); their model has become dominant in North American and Western European academia. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that any person presenting him- or herself for a position as a modernist art historian at a major university in Western Europe or North America will be expected to be somewhere within the field of influence that centers on *October*. This is rarely articulated because it is so difficult to put fairly. Art historians at North American and Western European universities who specialize in twentieth-century art speak from a very wide range of perspectives, and have divergent interests. But it remains true that in the principal institutions all are indebted to the *October* model.

The *October* model, as it is embodied in *Art Since 1900*, relies on a narrow and by now predictable canon of artists and artworks: Duchamp, some Picasso, Pollock, surrealist photography, early experimental film, conceptual art, minimalism, and perhaps a dozen others. The list of artists and movements of interest is also recognizable by what it excludes, even within North America and Western Europe: Neoexpressionism (vilified in one page in *Art Since 1900*), Francis Bacon (several of the authors of *Art Since 1900* do not consider him a major figural artist of the postwar period), the School of Paris (entirely omitted from *Art Since 1900*), and many others.

In research universities in the United States, *Art Since 1900* is currently the de facto undergraduate textbook. Along with several other scholars, I am working on a response to it so as to provide a book that is inclusive, both within the areas of North America and Western Europe, and also outside of them. Currently, students of twentieth-century art have two choices: either they focus on the canonical stories of modernism, as exemplified by *Art Since 1900*; alternatively they study multiple modernisms, in which case they either face some of the issues I have tried to sketch in this essay, otherwise they move, in some degree, from art history to postcolonial studies or other social and economic interpretations. It is not easy to see how to construct a book that will augment and complement *Art Since 1900* and at the same time remain of compelling interest to art historians interested in the canonical narratives and locations of modernism. But it is an important project, with consequences for the next generations of historians. I am as puzzled about this as anyone, and I would be happy to hear from readers with further ideas.

- 1 This essay is a draft for a chapter of a work in progress called *The Project of Painting: 1900-2000*. A first sketch was published under "Writing about Modernist Painting outside Western Europe and North America" in *Compression vs. Expression: Containing the World's Art*, ed. John Onians (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 188-214. This version offers an afterword that considers the place of this kind of inquiry in the growing field of global art history.
- 2 See, James Elkins, *Master Narratives and Their Discontents*. With an introduction by Anna Arnar. *Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts*, vol. 1. (Cork: University College Cork Press, 2005).
- 3 That difference is explored in *Art and Globalization*, The Stone Theory Seminars, vol. 1, James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska and Alice Kim (eds.), (University Park: Penn State Press, 2010).
- 4 See Milan Ivelic and Gaspar Galaz, *Chile: Art actual* (Valparaiso, Chile: Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaiso, 1988), 27-60; also *1900-1950: Modelo y representación*, ed. Milan Ivelic (Santiago de Chile: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2000). I thank Ivelic, then Director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago de Chile, for this information.
- 5 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005)
- 6 In this regard see the excellent review by Pepe Karmel, *Art in America* 93, no. 10 (November 2005): 61, 63, 65, 67.
- 7 This figure is an estimate extrapolated from the number of galleries in Melbourne in 2003 (over twenty) and the number in Alice Springs in 1998 (thirty-three). For the latter figure see Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998).
- 8 In the enormous literature see, Fred Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). I thank Nigel Lendon, Howard Morphy, Terry Smith, and Charles Green for advice on this section.
- 9 I thank Terry Smith for pointing out this framing problem.
- 10 The citizenship resulted only in increased hardship.
- 11 Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 22.
- 12 Quoted in Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 272.
- 13 "When Albert started exhibiting some critics labeled him as a copyist. They said he was mimicking a western style. What they were trying to say was that his works were un-Aboriginal. This statement has no credibility. The critics were blinded by their western ideals. What they couldn't realize was that behind these works was an Aboriginal mind, every brush stroke was influenced by a tribal way of thinking...." Christopher Hunter, "The Critics," accessed July 25, 2003, [www.hermannsburgschool.com/index.html](http://www.hermannsburgschool.com/index.html).
- 14 Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 22.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 272.
- 16 Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, "Namatjira's White Mask: A Political Interpretation," in *The Heritage of Namatjira*, ed. Jane Hardy, Vincent Megaw, and Ruth Megaw (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1992), 249-82.
- 17 For more on the modernist uses of Australian landscape watercolors, see Graham Coulter-Smith's account of Imant Tillers's appropriations. Tillers's works, unlike Namatjira's, have an unambiguous and readily identifiable take on their originals. Graham Coulter-Smith, *The Postmodern Art of Imants Tillers: Appropriation En Abyeme, 1971-2001* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2002).
- 18 This is the case, for example, with those passages in Steven Mansbach's *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: from the Baltic to the Balkans*, ca. 1890-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) that are concerned with the disclosure of significantly avant-garde moments in Eastern European painting. This is, however, only one of three concerns of Mansbach's book. For a full discussion see my review of Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, in *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 4 (2000): 781-85; and "Response [to Anthony Alofsin's letter regarding the review of Mansbach's *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*]," *Art Bulletin* 84, no. 3 (2002): 539.

- 19 Dušan Brozman, [untitled essay,] Štefan Bartušek Prukner (Banská Bystrica, 1996), 13.
- 20 Karel Srp, *Jan Zrzavý* (Prague: Academia, 2003); I thank Karel Srp for the gift of this book.
- 21 *Le Japon des Avant-gardes* ran from 1986 to 1987.
- 22 Inaga Shigemi, "La peinture moderne en Occident et son extérieur," in *Kaiga no Tōhō: orientarizumu kara japonisumu (L'Orient de la peinture: de l'orientalisme au Japonisme)*. (Nagoya: Nagoyadaigaku syuppankai, 1999), 2-3.
- 23 For the older work: Metka Krasovec's works on Netgallery-Slovenia, accessed November 17, 2010, <http://yellow3.eunet.si/yellowpage/netgalle/kraswork.html>.
- 24 Paul Crowther, "Postmodernism," in *Oxford History of Western Art*, ed. Martin Kemp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 497. Crowther's books include *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 25 Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics*, 159, 187.
- 26 For samples see Artcyclopedia, accessed November 9, 2010, [http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/morley\\_malcolm.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/morley_malcolm.html).
- 27 I thank Nadja Zgonik for this information.
- 28 John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).
- 29 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 217.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 219.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 225.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 225.
- 35 "The avant-garde becomes forced to absolutely privilege the new when it draws its authority from originality," he writes: but how could any avant-garde be understood apart from a privileging of originality? Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 222.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 231.
- 37 See Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Dadi's review of Partha Mitter's *Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947* in *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 652-54.
- 38 See, for example, Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 681-707; Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 39 See, for example, Andreas Huyssen, "Modernism at Large," in *Modernism*, ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), 53-66.
- 40 Elkins, *Art and Globalization*.