

## The Role of the Arts in Shaping Europe's Future: Intercultural Communication in Art Education

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In reflecting upon the role of arts in shaping Europe's future, two questions come to mind. First, what do we mean by art? And second, what is it about art that makes us want to give it such an important role? With regard to the first, I feel it is important not to be too narrow in defining art. For example, if we only consider art as works of art hanging in museums, or a saleable commodity in today's art market, I am not sure how far we will get. I would suggest instead considering art as both as product and as action or process. In the Italian language, one verb – the multipurpose *fare*, as in *fare arte* – indicates both make and do. In doing art, it is performing, producing, engaging in cognitive processes, language, ritual and gesture; in making it, it is all we achieve, from manufactured goods to theatrical productions to street art. Art is life.

Why, then, art should be given such an important role? Some might answer with the commonly held notion that art is a universal language and hence well-suited to intercultural communication. By virtue of this universality, art is one of the most effective ways to learn about other cultures.

Art historians emphasize the fact that the earliest records of man are not written, but images. Prehistoric man has left us figures carved in stone, statuettes, paintings – to cite two well-known examples, the paintings in the caves in Lascaux (France), or in Altamira (Spain) of 15,000-10,000 years ago. Although we do not know precisely what they were used for, we have no difficulty identifying the figures as animals or human beings, and in looking at them, we automatically begin to wonder about these people and to draw conclusions about how they lived.<sup>1</sup> As children, we all must develop drawing and writing skills, and eventually learn to distinguish between the two.<sup>2</sup> I'm reminded of one of the final scenes from *Not One Less* by Chinese director Zhang Yimou (1999), when young substitute teacher Wei Minzhi triumphantly returns from her odyssey trying to retrieve a troublesome student who had runaway to the nearest town to find work. To celebrate their good fortune and the return of the classmate, she presents the class with several boxes of colored chalk, and asks each child to write one character on the board. A very small pupil who is too young to know how to write steps forward and participates by drawing a picture instead. Although she can't write yet, she can still communicate through images. All over the world, we use pictograms for any number of purposes: sports; picture instructions on the underground asking passengers not to lean on the doors so that they don't fall out; picture instructions on airplanes for emergency exits; signs in airports or train stations showing travelers where facilities like toilets and pharmacies are. Images are one of our most basic ways to communicate.

And perhaps even more than a basic way to communicate, art is a universal language and hence most useful for intercultural or even interplanetary communication. In 1977, in fact, two Voyager spacecraft were launched. On board were the Voyager Golden Records, phonograph discs that contain recordings of images, languages and music that supposedly would enable extraterrestrial civilizations to understand our life on Earth. These spacecraft were launched into outer space with no particular destination. Like a sort of intergalactic 'message in a bottle', the sounds and images recorded on the discs were supposed to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth to any

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<sup>1</sup> For a stunning virtual tour of the Lascaux caves, see <http://www.lascaux.culture.fr/#/fr/00.xml>.

<sup>2</sup> See among others, <http://www.learningdesign.com/Portfolio/DrawDev/kiddrawing.html> and <http://www.kidsdevelopment.co.uk/KidsLearningToWrite.html>.

extraterrestrial civilization that might encounter the spacecraft and be able to figure out how to play them, but that's another matter as chances are that such an encounter will not take place for tens of thousands of years. In any event, these records are not only a testimonial to our incredible optimism that life exists beyond our planet; more importantly, they also show our conviction that the most appropriate form to communicate with unknown populations is through the arts.<sup>3</sup> In a funny kind of way, the Voyager Golden Records are not altogether unlike the Lascaux or Altamira cave paintings.

To come back down to earth and address the issue of art and intercultural communication in a more specific manner, travel, exploration and venturing into the unknown have always been tightly bound up with man and his achievements, with the products of human industry and with art in a certain sense. First, let's take trade. Art in the sense of manufactures and precious goods has always been the object of commercial exchange. The first Expos and World's Fairs, beginning in 1851 in the Crystal Palace in London, were conceived of as exhibitions of manufactured products. With time, they eventually came to include other aspects of society, including art and design education, international trade and relations, and tourism. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, the event took on a more heightened cultural significance and stressed cross-cultural dialogue in addition to technological inventions, eventually ending up as the celebration of nation branding that it is today, with countries using their pavilions to boost a strong national image.<sup>4</sup> This carried over into the arts, and similar manifestations were established in architecture, the visual arts and the applied arts, like the Venice Biennale (starting in 1895) and the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts (first held at the World's Fair in 1925). In recent years, the phenomenon of the biennale has witnessed a boom in recent years, and the number of cities hosting them has proliferated, especially among emerging economic and political powers. Since this type of event attracts investment and is a way to burst onto the international scene in competition with other cities, hosting a biennale is one way for an aspiring global city might work to achieve its goal. Moreover, as one critic has put it, the biennale "not only embodies but actively propagandizes the virtues of globalization."<sup>5</sup>

Travel, too, bears heavily on the question of art and intercultural communication, especially if we consider recreational travel or tourism. A fundamental tenet of modern mass tourism is that art is the best way to learn about a country and its people, and this has been in place ever since Baedeker began publishing his tour guides that aimed "...to supply the traveller with some information regarding the culture and art of the people he is about to visit, as well as regarding the national features of the country."<sup>6</sup> The recommended itinerary with a city's noteworthy buildings, monuments and museums is still a prominent feature of any guidebook today, no matter what market it is intended for.

The foregoing considerations show the breadth and scope of my definition of art and its possible role in shaping Europe's future. I come to this seminar with a multi-faceted interest in art (practicing artist, an art educator, a language professional and an active music lover). However, my main research interest at present is in art education. I teach art and art history at a small American university in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland. The students and professors come from all over the world, and our courses are global in perspective and cross-cultural in content. A unique feature of our curriculum is a mandatory academic travel program that gives students the

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://re-lab.net/welcome/> for the contents of the records.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.expomuseum.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 25. See 'Chapter 2: New World Order', pp. 10-49 for a critical analysis of art in our globalized world.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Baedeker, *Handbook for Travellers by Karl Baedeker. First Part: Northern Italy, Including Leghorn, Florence, Ravenna, the Island of Corsica, and Routes Through France, Switzerland, and Austria. With 8 Maps and 32 Plans. Fifth Remodelled Edition* (Leipsic [sic]: Karl Baedeker, 1879).

opportunity to travel to many different countries in the world.<sup>7</sup> Each course has a different focus, and mine takes students to Umbria in Central Italy to experience art firsthand by seeing it and then trying to make it. At present, I am taking part in an ongoing, joint-research project on the nature and goals of this program,<sup>8</sup> and so am administering a series of short surveys on art as a form of knowledge and the role of travel in art education. The research is only in its initial phases, but what has come out of the work so far has yielded observations of some relevance for the subject of this paper.

An anonymous survey consisting of two agree/disagree statements and an open question was administered to a sample of approximately 400 people. The two statements read as follows:

1. One of the best ways to learn about a country and its people(s) is through its art and architecture.
2. Art is a universal language.

Participants were given the following options for the two statements: Strongly agree – Agree – No feelings on the matter – Disagree – Strongly disagree. The overwhelming majority of those who have responded thus far either agreed or strongly agreed with both statements. In an open question at the end of the survey, they were asked to explain how they got their knowledge on art. Most of the participants listed several sources, for example, art courses and extensive travel. However, the overriding majority got their knowledge of art from courses, travel and leisure time reading, and indicated art as one of the subjects they continued to be interested in after their formal education was over.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.fc.edu> for more information.

<sup>8</sup> The interdisciplinary project will be headed by Alison Vogelar (Communication and Media Studies), Marcus Pyka (History) and Ann Gardiner (English).

<sup>9</sup> The results of agree/disagree statements at the time of writing are given below.

“1. One of the best ways to learn about a country and its people(s) is through its art and architecture.” Of a total of 93 responses, 92 answered the question, and 1 skipped it.

28.3% (26)	<b>55.4% (51)</b>	8.7% (8)	6.5% (6)	1.1% (1)
Strongly agree	<b>Agree</b>	No feelings on the matter	Disagree	Strongly disagree

The results of statement 2 (Art is a universal language). Of a total of 93 responses, 92 answered the question, and 1 skipped it.

38.0% (35)	<b>47.8% (44)</b>	5.4% (5)	7.6% (7)	2.2% (2)
Strongly agree	<b>Agree</b>	No feelings on the matter	Disagree	Strongly disagree

As for the open question, all forms of art courses were considered: studio art, art history, high school courses, arts council or city sponsored events, seminars, summer programs, etc. The following is a summary of the sources listed by participants. Most indicated more than one source, so the total number of responses will be greater than the total number of participants:

TRAVEL	(37)
ART COURSES (HISTORY OR STUDIO)	(58)
PERSONAL INTEREST/READING	(15)

In the comments on the first question in my survey, which dealt with the effectiveness of art as a means of learning about a culture, 11% of the participants commented on the question. Some agreed that art was ‘a’ way to learn about other nations, but not necessarily ‘the best’; others thought that art could enhance the study of history or other subject matters, preferably if all the arts – music and literature in particular – were to be included in this definition of ‘art’. Others noted a certain relativism in art as a possible hindrance to its being the ‘best’ way to learn about other cultures: art is only an indication of the latest trends at any particular time in history; art is not representative of all social classes; art is too tightly bound up with individual cultures or time periods in history. Finally, the question of art and manipulation of audiences came up: censorship, art as propaganda, concern with how art is used nowadays or has been used throughout the course of history. In the final analysis, art can break down barriers, but it can also erect others; art can enlighten, but it can also bewilder, or be used as an instrument to confuse or lead astray.<sup>10</sup>

As for the matter of art as a universal language, most participants agreed – only one was “not comfortable” with the word universal. Some pointed out that art is done and made in all parts of the globe, although it may take different forms and require different sensibilities for interpretation and for a complete understanding. Participants also had qualms about ‘universal’ when it came to: 1) descending into particulars, whether it be communicating between different cultures collectively, between individuals in different cultures or between individuals within the same culture; 2) coming to terms with matters inherent in the definition or in the nature of art itself (e.g., art is much more complex than individual dialogue); 3) dealing with culturally bound aspects of the work of art (i.e., art is a product of culture and as such is not self-explanatory and needs informed interpretation).<sup>11</sup>

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VISITING GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS	(14)
HELD ART-RELATED JOB	(9)
RELATED COURSES (AESTHETICS, ETC.)	(2)
FRIENDS OR RELATIVES ARTISTS	(8)
NONE	(2)

<sup>10</sup> Summary of the comments on statement 1 (One of the best ways to learn about a country and its people(s) is through its art and architecture.). Ten participants out of 93 responded; some participants made comments that could be included under more than one of the following generalizations.

ENHANCES STUDY OF HISTORY	3
INSIGHT WITHOUT SPENDING TIME WITH PEOPLE	1
ONLY AN INDICATION OF TRENDS	1
MUST INCLUDE MORE THAN VISUAL ARTS	2
ONLY ONE WAY, NOT NECESSARILY THE BEST	3
UNREPRESENTATIVE OF ALL SOCIAL CLASSES	2
BOUND UP IN CULTURAL IDENTITY	2
NOT WHEN MANIPULATED FOR PROPAGANDA	1

<sup>11</sup> Summary of the comments on statement 2 (Art is a universal language.). Twelve participants out of 93 responded; some participants made comments that could be included under more than one of the following generalizations.

ART NOT THE SAME TO ALL INDIVIDUALS	2
ART NOT THE SAME TO ALL CULTURES	2
ART MUCH MORE COMPLEX THAN COMMUNICATION BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS	1
ALL CULTURES USE ART BUT WITH DIFFERENT NUANCES OF SIGNIFICANCE	2
ART A PRODUCT OF CULTURE	1
ENJOYMENT CAN TRANSCEND CULTURALLY BOUND ASPECTS	1
OBJECTION TO TERM ‘UNIVERSAL’	1
UNIVERSAL ASPECTS BUT MUCH MORE INVOLVED IN UNDERSTANDING ART	1
YES BECAUSE PRODUCED EVERYWHERE	2
PICTURES MORE IMMEDIATE THAN WORDS	1

These are legitimate concerns, as can be illustrated by the case of the highly successful ‘global’ work by Chinese artist Xu Bing *A Book from the Sky*, as cited in Julian Stallabrass’s little work on contemporary art. A room-size installation of 1250 invented characters based on Chinese ideograms but meaning nothing, *A Book from the Sky* evokes scrolls and books, giving the impression of great expanses of meaningful text while it is actually incomprehensible. In its own country, the work was both attacked and defended for a number of reasons, and eventually came to be associated with avant-garde works put under pressure after Tienanmen. Once it was seen outside China, and in particular in America, the association with Tienanmen came to be prevalent, which contributed to a loss of the work’s original nuances and complexities in interpretations:

...as the reading broadened out from the concern with Tienanmen, it was only ever read as a critique of Chinese traditions, institutions and history, and never, for example, and never as a general comment on meaning as such.<sup>12</sup>

Attempting to communicate is one matter; arriving at a mutual understanding is another. There is always a risk that listeners or audiences will not understand a work of art as it was intended, or that the political climate in a country may influence the reception of certain art forms or styles and the history of the arts is full of such examples. Consider, for example, the how Abstract Expressionism was first received in Italy.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly enough in the case of Xu Bing's work, he neither criticized nor rejected these interpretations, and his reaction is an important lesson on the way art communicates: it is not just about what the creator of the work thinks it is all about, it is transformed in the eye of every beholder. Art involves a continual giving and taking, continual reinterpretation. One can look at or listen to a masterpiece and see or hear or feel something different each time. This is one reason why so many works of art can ‘stand the test of time’. It a lesson I learn over and over again with my students in our travels, too. Like western audiences’ reception of Xu Bing’s *A Book from the Sky*, students look at art in ways that we as instructors or the countries we visit haven’t contemplated. However, that lack of understanding can somehow serve to make its meaning clearer. What one doesn’t know about a culture, a country or its art is where its true wealth lies, and discovery of this new realm is what we as artists and educators – and perhaps first of all as communicators – should aim for.

In any event, distinctions can and should be made. In the present paper, I have mentioned a few examples from the international avant-garde, and dealt briefly with one project in art education. Time and space have not permitted me to discuss the applied arts and design, where a great deal of intercultural communication and cooperation is involved. In the private sector, foundations like the Fondazione Cologni dei Mestieri d’Arte<sup>14</sup> in Milan strive to keep traditional *métiers d’art* like instrument making alive, as well as to identify and promote new, emerging ones like comic strip illustration. The work of designers and craftsmen can involve crossing national boundaries to seek out the expertise of individual craftsmen and learn rare and unique techniques and skills. National heritage, territory, customs and traditions, economies, preservation – all contribute to the role of the arts in shaping Europe’s future. Travel, taking goods to other lands – the age old exchange of goods and expertise – this important, ‘interdisciplinary’ coverage of human experience is of the utmost

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UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE NECESSARY TO UNDERSTAND ART	1
YES BUT INTERPRETATIONS OF WORKS CAN LEAD TO CONFUSION	1

<sup>12</sup> Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art*, p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> See Joan M. Marter, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, Rutgers University Press, 2007. p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> See [www.fondazionecologni.it](http://www.fondazionecologni.it). A seminar or arts professions held at the Creative Academy in Milan (19-20 January 2011) included presentations by designers Nils Svejce and Kyoko Inoda and their current creative initiatives, which took them to Japan to learn about the construction of age-old Japanese eating vessels, and by Federica Sala, who talked about the Sevres porcelain factories and projects involving collaboration between master ceramists and designers.

importance in today's global society. In considering the role of the arts in shaping Europe's future, all aspects of art should be considered – artistic genius can find a crucial minute particular that escapes normal experience; the craftsman keeps traditions and skills alive; new talent must be encouraged and nurtured.

In conclusion, art can have an important role in shaping Europe's future through education, first and foremost, in the schools and in institutions for higher education, but of no less importance, in the context of lifelong learning. The intercultural dimension of the educational experience can be greatly enhanced by introducing courses where direct experience (e.g., visits to museums, monuments, architectural complexes; art and trade fairs or travel seminars) takes precedence over classroom situations and frontal lessons. Travel, exploitation of living artistic heritage is necessary in order to keep our society healthy and creative. What is more (and here time and space have not permitted me to develop this aspect), beyond formal schooling, possibilities for continuing education through government-sponsored leisure time programs in the arts, through recreational outlets in the work place, and through non-academic learning programs to foster quality amateur activity – all of which can have an international focus – are only some of the ways in which the arts can play an active role in Europe's future.

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