

# Rethinking Art History

Accidental Canons, Failed Canons, Counter Canons

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In recent decades, the established canons and narratives of art history have faced significant challenges. Conventional methods of defining periods and genres – often rooted in notions of national specificity and linear progress – have become highly questionable amid evolving political, societal, and cultural landscapes. Global and transnational perspectives not only question national canons but also challenge supposedly universal narratives, such as the progression towards modernism. Yet, notions like nationalism and progress remain central and extremely powerful aspects of contemporary political culture. Hence, the greatest challenge presented to art historical scholarship in these turbulent times is to find ways of engaging with these issues in a manner that is sensitive, productive, and societally relevant.

In November 2023, Helsinki served as the venue for an international gathering of over one hundred scholars, aimed at exploring

these themes through diverse art historical and contemporary lenses. The conference, titled *Rethinking Art Historical Narratives and Canons*, was a collaborative initiative between the Society for Art History in Finland and the University of Helsinki's Department of Cultures, discipline of Art History. Discussions at the conference encompassed a broad array of topics, including global and postcolonial perspectives, queer and gender issues, marginalisation, cultural memory and forgetting, as well as the dynamics of nationalism and transnationalism.

The special issue “Rethinking Art Historical Canons” extends the dialogue initiated at the conference, presenting a collection of articles that engage with an extensive variety of materials and viewpoints to cultivate critical insights into art historiography. For instance, Margot Renard's article suggests an art historical approach to comics, a medium that has traditionally received scant attention within art historical scholarship. Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanus, on the other hand, delves into a politically charged field in

her article on Polish art history, explaining how entrenched conservative paradigms, influenced by socio-political dynamics and the rise of populist politics, have hindered the adoption of critical methodologies.

The contributors to this issue examine concepts such as “accidental canons,” “failed canons,” and “counter canons,” which reveal the often-overlooked narratives that exist alongside established art historical accounts. Kaija Kaitavuori’s exploration of a “counter canon” highlights the reciprocal influences between Western and non-Western art that have been largely neglected in mainstream art history. While it is widely acknowledged that Picasso and his contemporaries were inspired by African and Oceanic art, the reciprocal impact of Western art on Nigerian artist Aina Onabolu has remained marginal within art historical discourse. The prevailing narrative often celebrates Picasso’s engagement with “tribal art” as a pivotal moment in modernism while interpreting Onabolu’s assimilation of Western influences as passive or even detrimental.

Kaitavuori’s examination of this complex and multifaceted issue underscores the necessity for art historians to reflect critically on their own training and on the potential perpetuation of distorted views. The difficulties of engaging with marginalised perspectives and materials do not necessarily stem from a conscious desire for dominance but rather from the uncritical repetition of learned narratives. Recognising this tendency is a crucial first step; thereafter, scholars can engage in a process of unlearning and relearning, which, as Kaitavuori suggests, necessitates not only the augmentation of knowledge but also a fundamental restructuring of perceptions.

Charlotte Ashby and Bente Aass Solbakken also explore topics connected to the colonial histories of Europe. Ashby discusses the emergence of new art professions and the evolving roles of

collectors and critics in response to the influx of Chinese artefacts in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain. Her analysis reveals how these objects challenged and enriched British art discourse while also examining the intricate networks of individuals and institutions that shaped the appreciation of Chinese art within Britain.

Solbakken’s article on the Norwegian architect Kjell Borgen opens with a question: “What defines Sámi architecture?” The article presents an exploration of Borgen’s works in Sápmi and his engagement with these issues in his role as a scholar of traditional Sámi architecture. Borgen strove to integrate traditional Sámi elements into modern architectural practices, thus significantly contributing to the conceptualisation of Sámi architecture. However, it is also indisputable that his efforts exist within a broader historical context of Norwegian dominance over Sámi cultural expressions. Solbakken’s analysis of Borgen’s work as an architect and scholar exemplifies the immense complexities of colonial power dynamics.

The significance of Sámi heritage is further illuminated in Maarit Magga’s *lectio praecursoria*, which discusses the historical and cultural importance of Sámi *duodji* (crafts). Magga’s research examines the multisensory visuality and aesthetics of Sámi crafts within ecclesiastical settings, thereby emphasizing the integration of indigenous knowledge and the cultural dimensions of Sámi craftsmanship.

Maija Koskinen and Patricia G. Berman address the role of exhibition history within art historical inquiry. Koskinen critiques the overlooked impact of international art exhibitions in Finland during the Cold War era, arguing that these events have been marginalised within the Finnish art historical canon due to political and cultural biases. By reassessing significant exhibitions from Eastern Europe and the United States exhibitions, Koskinen’s article advocates for a

broader understanding of Finnish art history and its transnational influences.

Berman's case study of the 1982–1983 exhibition “Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880–1910” illustrates how this exhibition inadvertently established a canonical framework for understanding Nordic art in the Anglophone world. A young graduate student at the time, Berman was present at the birth of this exhibition in the role of a research assistant. Her analysis constructs an insider view of the process, describing the exhibition's rapid organization which was influenced by national and cultural diplomacy. Even though the initial aim was not to create a definitive art-historical canon, the exhibition has had a lasting impact on academic and museum practices regarding Nordic art. The article emphasizes the role of canon formation as a contingent and dynamic process shaped by institutional, cultural, and political forces, demonstrating how an ephemeral exhibition can influence enduring narratives and stereotypes in art history.

While Berman explores the formation of an “accidental canon,” Jane Boddy's article examines a “failed canon.” She reflects on the power struggle between two influential art critics at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ferdinand Avenarius and Julius Meier-Graefe. Boddy argues that their conflicting visions of modern art contributed to the marginalisation of the artist Katherine Schöffner who, despite Avenarius's efforts, remains absent from broader art history. The term “failed canons” refers here to artists or artistic movements that, despite being promoted or having potential significance, did not become part of the widely accepted art historical narrative or canon.

The articles presented in this issue collectively illuminate the intricate complexities of art historical narratives within a transnational and global framework. By questioning established canons and embracing alternative viewpoints,

the authors enrich our understanding of art history, reflecting its diverse and multifaceted nature. The vibrant dialogue sparked at the conference and carried forward in this special issue is crucial for advancing art historical scholarship and ensuring its relevance in today's rapidly evolving cultural landscape.

As museums and art galleries draw larger audiences than ever before, it is imperative for art historians to recognize the profound influence and opportunities we possess to make a meaningful impact. We bear a responsibility to harness this power for positive change, using our insights to shape more inclusive, enriching, and transformative narratives.

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