

I Questions and debates

The topics and case studies selected for inclusion in this book emerge out of lively debates that have accelerated since the 1990s and 2000s, when numerous publications, conferences and exhibitions addressed the ‘global’ dimensions of European Renaissance art. The shift occurred within a time which has seen the rise of global political and economic powers outside Europe, as well as a sharpening of public debate around issues of trade, consumption and globalisation.

A significant increase of interest in ‘material culture’, as well, has opened up the study of objects and images that in the past were overlooked in favour of ‘fine art’ (painting, sculpture and architecture) and were infrequently studied in their own right.²³ Material culture in its broadest sense includes any physical traces of the past, but in this book it will generally refer to the so-called decorative arts: ceramics, textiles and objects. Refined examples of foreign craftsmanship were greatly prized and seamlessly integrated with fine art in this period. And it is in this realm that one can most clearly read the direct impact of imports from Asia, Africa and America on many different artistic, technical and commercial aspects of the European Renaissance. Objects and goods imported from around the world – or which arrived via diplomatic gift-giving – inspired admiration, imitation and creative response among European artists and craftsmen. This phenomenon has been studied particularly in the context of Italy, the most important European port of entry for global goods in the fifteenth century.²⁴ Of late, however, the scope of interest in Europe’s globalised material culture has broadened to other parts of Europe, for example to Antwerp, which grew into a major hub of global trade in the first half of the sixteenth century, or to Portugal and particularly Lisbon, which from the end of the fifteenth century rapidly emerged as the centre of a vast commercial empire and colonial enterprise.²⁵

Numerous museum exhibitions have begun to showcase objects and works of art which speak of the interconnected relationships that bound Europe together with the wider world.²⁶ The exhibition *Bellini and the East* (2005–06), for example, joined a number of ground breaking studies on the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Venice.²⁷ Within the

field of Italian Renaissance art history, Venice – given its close political and economic ties with the Mamluk Sultanate and Ottoman Empire – was the first point of departure for discussions about cultural exchange. The topic was brought to the fore in Deborah Howard’s book, *Venice and the East* (2000), on the impact of the Islamic world on Venetian architecture.²⁸ Since then historians and art historians have continued to focus attention on the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Europe, arguing for example that the Ottomans should be considered not as an entity posited against Europe, but as an integral part of Renaissance history and art history.²⁹ Others have stressed the common cultural heritage of the Mediterranean and the ethnic, linguistic, religious and political diversity that constitutes its very identity.³⁰ It has become increasingly clear, however, that Europe’s global connections stretched far beyond the Mediterranean, and attention has also turned to other networks and nodes of trade such as the Indian Ocean, the Baltic Sea and the Persian Gulf.

While recent approaches are by no means singular or congruent, all of them have sought alternatives to the histories of nations or monolithic, isolated cultures. Attention is given instead to the complexity of cultural relationships, as well as to the inequalities built into these relationships, which in some cases make terms such as ‘cultural encounter’ or ‘cultural exchange’ seem too neutral, simple or benign. Among the concepts that are now widely used, though still much debated, are ‘cultural transfer’ and ‘hybridity’.

Cultural transfer was a concept developed in the 1980s to break down the rigid separation of national histories and the historical model of comparing cultures one to one, stressing instead cross-cultural communication and shared ideas, travel and a sense of mutual curiosity.³¹ It describes something more than the simple movement of objects, ideas or technologies from one place to another, but instead focuses on how, why and under what conditions cultural goods cross boundaries and acquire new identities.³² To take an example, paper was invented in China, likely by the second century BCE. After it was adopted and perfected by Islamic cultures in central Asia, it reached Islamic north Africa and Spain, where artists began to use it to make patterns, draw sketches or create illustrated

books. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, paper was transferred from Islamic to Christian Europe. It then brought about revolutionary cultural change when in the 1450s Johannes Gutenberg first began to print books on paper with his printing press.³³ It became, furthermore, an important agent of artistic innovation, as reproductive images printed on paper vastly increased the movement of visual ideas around the world. It was also only by means of extensive drawing on paper that Leonardo da Vinci developed scientific inventions and carefully planned, harmonious compositions out of interlocking ideal geometric shapes.

These examples illustrate one of the themes that will be explored throughout this book: as technologies, ideas and images travelled from place to place, they underwent change, cultural transfer and repurposing, often leading to innovation and creative insight. This was the case when objects – textiles, glass, ceramics and metalwork – moved from one place to another, often across great distances, acquiring complex histories of reception and imitation in multiple contexts.³⁴ For instance, European altarpieces (Chapter 1, Plate 1.14) often included images of oriental carpets at the foot of the Virgin Mary's throne. Although Western artists painted these objects realistically, after closely observing imported rugs, 'the oriental rug' did not simply move intact from one culture to another. Instead, each step along the way brought about shifts in meaning and purpose. In this case, European artists, who probably would not have known exactly where oriental carpets came from, responded to them imaginatively; they depicted them in paint using European artistic techniques of illusionism, perspective and realism, inserting them into a framework of Christian symbolism that was meaningful in a new context, but entirely alien to their culture of origin.

Another concept employed in this book is hybridity, a term developed in post-colonial studies to describe the mixed nature of global relationships. Originally used in biology to describe the combination of two species of plants or animals to produce a new specimen, it was then employed in a derogatory sense during the colonial period to refer to miscegenation

or the mixing of the white races (the coloniser) with the dark-skinned (the colonised). It was then famously used in the work of Homi Bhabha to reflect the interdependence of coloniser and colonised and to underline that there is no 'pure' racial or national identity.³⁵ More recently, it has been applied to cultural artefacts, from texts to works of art. For instance, Meso-Americans were asked by Spanish missionaries attempting to convert them to Christianity to use their indigenous art of featherwork to portray Christian subjects.³⁶ A famous example of featherwork depicts the Christian subject of the *Mass of Saint Gregory* and was made for Pope Paul III (r.1534–49) (Chapter 2, Plate 2.23). The quality and skill of the work was even used by Europeans as a gauge of the 'humanity' of the craftsmen who had made it. These hybrid objects thus emerge out of a process whereby two artistic traditions conjoin, emerging out of an interdependent, though starkly unequal, relationship between coloniser and the colonised.

The discussion above has only briefly and selectively introduced new challenges to the field of Renaissance art history. Even the question of how to refer to or define the chronological boundaries of this period remains unresolved, and 'early modern' is sometimes used to avoid the outmoded concepts that the term 'Renaissance' still carries with it. Jerry Brotton has employed the term 'global Renaissance', preserving the traditional term for the period as a point of entry to challenge its precepts and expand its scope.³⁷ Others have questioned the timespan usually associated with the Renaissance, c.1400–1600: from a global perspective, on the one hand, c.1400 seems too late, since it excludes the very long history of global exchange that came before it. On the other hand, the term 'first global age' has been used to refer to a longer period, c.1400–1800, when exploration gave way to large-scale global interaction. This book begins in the fourteenth century to recognise the impact of Eurasian trade at that time. It does not use the word Renaissance since the focus is not on unpacking the concept, but on the two themes introduced above, which will now be discussed in more detail: global connections brought about by travel and trade, and the visual arts of Christian Europe as a mediator of imagined ideas about the wider world.

2 Trade and travelling objects

The connected world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was, as has been mentioned, very long in the making. Since antiquity, silks, spices and other goods had travelled from different parts of the Asian continent into Europe.³⁸ Their demand and supply intensified with the emergence of prosperous and sophisticated cities in Islamic western and central Asia: long-distance trade supplied these global entrepôts with desirable commodities from sub-Saharan Africa, India, Indonesia and China. Thus in the ninth century, Europeans could only envy the splendour of Abbasid Baghdad when its caliph, Harun al-Rashid (r.786–809), sent stunning diplomatic gifts to the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (r.768–814), including silk textiles, spices, medicines, balsams, perfumes, monkeys and even an elephant.³⁹

This list of gifts epitomises the wealth and sophistication of urban capitals in Asia at a time when Europe remained, by comparison, barren and provincial. A powerful and enduring European fantasy image of ‘the East’ – a vaguely understood, ill-defined geographic expanse that was considered a place of luxury and wealth – developed out of this disparity. Europe’s access to these riches improved, however, from the time of the Crusades in the eleventh century, when rival European trading powers – notably, the merchant mariner cities of Pisa, Genoa and Venice – fought competitively among one another to claim their share of the East and its wealth. During the Crusades, Europe entered the eastern Mediterranean, establishing an important model for the future of overseas colonisation and ushering in a new era of prosperity and cultural revival.⁴⁰

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a temporary period of unity across the Eurasian continent facilitated European participation in global trade. In the early thirteenth century, the descendants of Genghis Khan (r.1206–27) took control of China, and within decades almost all of Asia was brought together under loosely allied khanates – kingdoms ruled by Genghis’s descendants – creating what is called the ‘Pax Mongolica’.⁴¹ Over the next century the khanates opened up trade and diplomacy with foreigners and promoted cross-cultural fertilisation in the craft industries across Asia, bringing about rapid

innovations through the movement of luxury goods from place to place, notably textiles.⁴² During this time, European travellers and merchants were able to cross all of Asia; a journey from Venice to China in the 1260s is famously described by the Venetian Marco Polo, even if his account is largely, if not wholly, fictitious.⁴³ His traveller’s tale evokes bustling hubs of trade such as Tabriz, the glittering capital of the Il-Khanid dynasty and a ‘market for merchandise from India and Baghdad, from Mosul and Hormuz ... [where] Latin merchants come’.⁴⁴

The Pax Mongolica began to collapse in the mid-fourteenth century, and direct travel and trade between Europe and Asia were further curtailed by the rise of the Ottoman Empire and its expansion westward. Sultan Mehmed II brought about the final conquest of the former Byzantine Empire and, in 1453, its capital Constantinople. In the aftermath of this momentous event, trade formerly conducted through Byzantium and the Black Sea was all but blocked to Europeans. By the end of the fifteenth century, Mamluk Alexandria in Egypt had emerged as a fulcrum between Venice and India, a key trading partner of the Mamluks and a source of goods from China and the rest of Asia.⁴⁵ Iberian monarchs, however, mounted a direct challenge to the Venetian–Mamluk trading axis. The kings of Portugal initiated a new era of overseas expansion and colonisation in 1415, when they captured Ceuta on the north coast of Morocco. Then, under the sponsorship of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460), further raids, conquests and commercial alliances extended Portugal’s influence on the west coast of Africa, where they traded in gold and African slaves.⁴⁶ Eventually, Vasco da Gama navigated the Cape of Good Hope, reaching the Persian Gulf and finally Calicut in 1498, causing panic among Portugal’s rivals in the Mediterranean.⁴⁷

It was probably by accident, on his way to India in 1500, that the Portuguese explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral landed in Brazil. He could claim it for the Portuguese since it lay to the east of an imaginary line established by the Treaty of Tordesillas, negotiated between the rival kingdoms of Castile and Portugal in 1494 to divide new discoveries between them. This line is shown in the Cantino Planisphere of 1502 (Plate 0.4), which

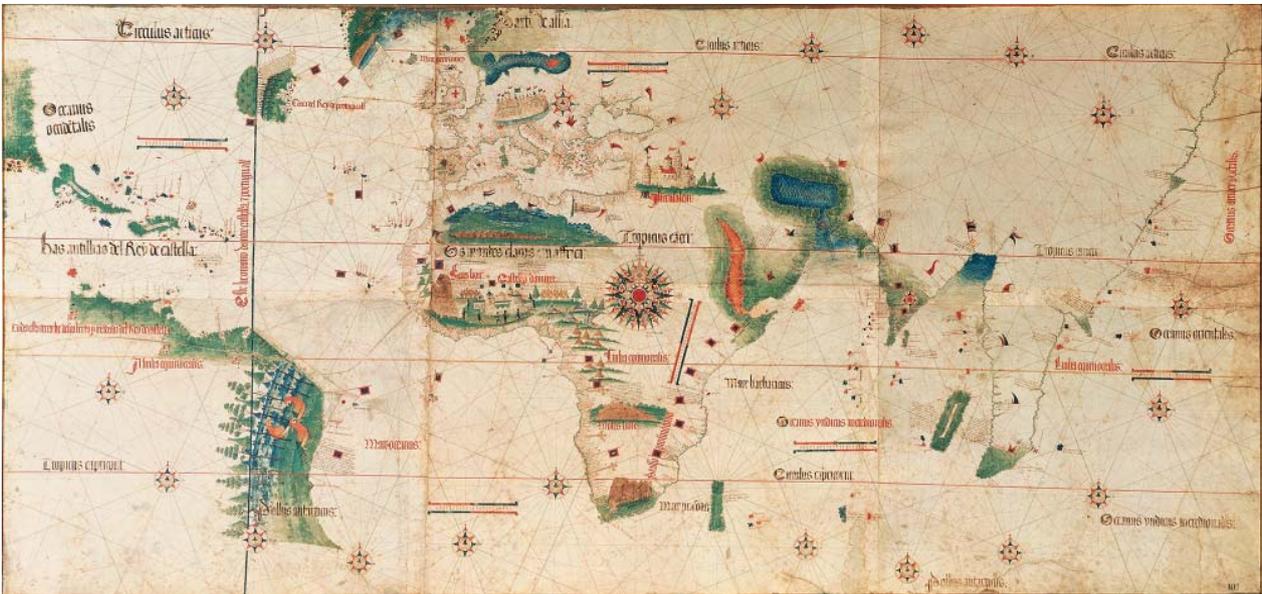


Plate 0.4 Cantino Planisphere, showing the line of the Treaty of Tordesillas and explorations to Central America, Newfoundland, India and Brazil, 1502. Biblioteca Estense, Modena. Photo: © DEA PICTURE LIBRARY/age fotostock.

an Italian duke covertly obtained from a Portuguese cartographer at a time when navigational knowledge was a valuable state secret. Here the coastlines of Brazil, Africa and Asia, even Ceylon (Sri Lanka), which the Portuguese reached only in 1506, are shown emerging into European consciousness. Captions on the map give details of international trade networks, noting for example the cloves, sandalwood, ivory, precious stones, pearls and porcelain available on the Malay Peninsula. By 1511, the Portuguese were already trading there; by the 1520s they were in China and by 1543 in Japan.⁴⁸

Portugal's rivals, the Catholic Monarchs of Castile and Aragon, attempted to reach Asia by sailing west, with the voyages of the Italian Christopher Columbus they sponsored from 1492; in the sixteenth century the era of the conquistadores saw the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire in Mexico (from 1517) and the Inca Empire in Peru (from 1532). The dramatic coming together of Europe and the Americas set in motion the 'Columbian exchange', the back and forth movement of people, technology, agriculture and diseases that transformed the history of the globe, vastly expanded African slavery and, ultimately, decimated the population of the Americas.

Around the time of the Pax Mongolica, European centres – in dialogue with and in imitation of the sort of goods that had been imported via long-distance trade – improved their own production of commodities, luxuries and crafts. In the process, Europe began to compete more successfully in global markets. By the fourteenth century, Flemish textiles made with English wool were being exported to Syria,⁴⁹ while the Venetians were producing enamelled glasswork using techniques that had originated in the Islamic world. Spanish and Italian potters imitated Islamic lustreware (ceramics with an iridescent glaze), and in the sixteenth century the Genoese became successful producers of blue-and-white maiolica, a less expensive alternative to Chinese porcelain.⁵⁰ Whereas previously, luxury textiles had been overwhelmingly imported from Asia, by the sixteenth century, European fabrics were in demand in Ottoman markets: at that time, Ottoman kaftans could be made from European cloth, such as one possibly made for the sultan which is still preserved in the Topkapı Palace (Plate 0.5).⁵¹ The kaftan can be compared to what seems its twin, the sumptuous silk, velvet and gold dress worn by the Duchess of Florence Eleonora di Toledo in her portrait with her son Giovanni, painted by Bronzino (Plate 0.6).⁵²



Plate 0.5 Ottoman kaftan made of European cloth, seventeenth century, velvet stitches on gold cloth with blue velvet decoration and stylised lotus pattern. Topkapı Palace, Istanbul, inv. I 2/360 vs. Photo: Banri Namikawa.



Plate 0.6 Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Eleanor of Toledo and her Son Giovanni de Medici*, c. 1545, oil on panel, 115 × 96 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. © 2017. Photo: Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali.