

**Western Aesthetics and Authenticity:
The Canonization of Folk Art in Mexico**

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November 2012

Art history as a discipline has revered the perceived masters, such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Da Vinci. Academics are trained to pay homage to these masters, examine the development through history, and revel in the development that has led to contemporary art. Unsurprisingly, a field that was created by white upper-class males continues to place works from the pinnacle of white male domination in Europe at the zenith of artistic enlightenment. Over the last century, women have begun to carve out a significant role in the field, as have cultures from outside the West; however, the West has continued to propagate Western central ideals in societies where the influence of Western art has little to no impact on the production of art objects. Thus the examination of art from outside the Western sphere rotates around a cycle that determines an art object's authenticity, intention, value, and cultural significance. Art in Mexico, specifically tourist art in Oaxaca, is an excellent example of this cycle.

Authenticity is rooted in the evaluation of indigenous or primitive art. The term authenticity literally means "of undisputed origin; genuine" which translates into the art world as a work that is not influenced by the Western world. Yet once an object has achieved the coveted status of authentic, it is no longer considered art. Rather, the work would be an artifact from a society or civilization, stripping authorship and credibility from the work.

In his article "African Art and Authenticity: A Text With a Shadow", Kasfir discusses the cycle of authenticity and art, as well as the cultural appropriation of art outside Europe. The West, he asserts, has appropriated the *other*, by collecting African art as a hegemonic activity. (Kasfir 42) By appropriating these works, the

West is experiencing *discovery* of these works, and in the process develop an arbitrary canon to evaluate the art of these civilizations, and to determine authenticity of the subject matter. These canons, developed by enthusiastic collectors, had no relation to the intention of a piece, the history of the culture that created it, or the physical location of creation. Instead the canon was developed to suit the interests and preference of the consumers. The result of this is an arbitrary set of principles and evaluations, under which artisans must adhere to create art objects that are profitable.

Otherness is a notion that Western aesthetics has capitalized on. The term refers to the foreignness of an object, its intention, or its social placement. Books such as The Empire Writes Back discuss this notion, detailing the ways in which Otherness in art has affected the West's idea of itself and other cultures, both for the better and worse. (Ashcroft 155) For example, when indigenous art intersects with the West, a cross-cultural interaction occurs where there are indigenous forms of production, such as traditional textiles, incorporating typically Western influences, such as an Escher pattern. Two problems arise from this – the market for these products, and the implications of these products culturally.

In an age of constant cultural interactions, how can one create “authentic” non-Western art? An artist would need to conform to the delineated ideals of the intended audience. Benjamin wrote “authentic art is produced in the context of the religious cult and in response to the demands of tradition.” (Coe 53) Benjamin is positing that in order for an object to be created as authentic, the object has to be based in some ritual, and thus serve a ritual purpose. In the Western world, this

could be an artifact used in the Church, such as a reliquary. The implications for a non-Western civilization, such as wood carvers in Oaxaca, would need to be steeped in the ritual history of Mexico, and inherently exemplify “Mexican-ness”. The Western/White consumer purchasing only works that are perceived to be *authentic*, *primitive*, or *indigenous* creates a market for a specific type of production. In order for an artisan outside the West to support their work, they must then limit their creation to fit within these pre-ordained confines created and perpetuated by a Western observer, who does not necessarily have any idea of the history of the person from whom they purchase the works. Tourists are generally looking for a curious item to bring home from their travels to describe the cultural variety they have experienced. Yet by their participation, conscious or otherwise, tourists contribute to the cycle for artisans that prevent development and a reshaping of the aesthetic system outside the West.

The application of Western aesthetics in the cycle of evaluation for art objects in Mexico is not a recent issue. As early as 1955, Tatiana Proskouriakoff wrote that the murals at Bonampak were “best regarded as colored drawings.” (Coe 53) Proskouriakoff’s notion of Western aesthetics of shading and dimensionality, which she goes on to do, is inapplicable. Mayan art does not fall within the confines of Western aesthetics – it was not created for a Western audience. It would be therefore inaccurate to attempt to compare art from the two civilizations, as they require separate means of interpretation.

The Western aesthetics model has become the standard for the production and evaluation of art outside the Western influence. Applying this methodological

approach to Oaxacan wood carvers, it produces a similar result. In Oaxaca, woodcarvers adhere to a certain style formation of work that imitate the “authentic”, or successful style, rather than independently develop a new style for fear that would not be as marketable to the tourist who has a preconceived notion of “authentic Mexican art”, perpetuated by the West based on a few arbitrarily selected stylistic elements. Michael Chibnik unintentionally reinforces this model in his writings by identifying the artists who are more successful, and therefore more authentic, than others. By continually comparing artists, and elevating some over others, academics have continued to perpetuate the image of the true indigenous in stylistic relevance and authenticity.

Chloe Sayer encourages her tourist readers to come through Mexico with an open mind, to be prepared for the imagery associated with Mexico, and for the departure from the tradition of the West. She attempts to prepare her reader for an experience that is foreign, or steeped in Otherness by praising the iconography and stylistic elements of art of Mexico, but she phrases things in such a way that it reads as a discussion of something quaint, or inferior. Sayer’s book continues to develop an idea that Mexican folk art is inferior to the West’s art. In fact, the words *craft* or *folk art* imply degradation in the styling.

Since a market exists for these products, it can be assumed that tourists are not interested in true art objects from outside the West. Rather, they are interested in the production of works that appeal to Western aesthetics, and adhere to Western conventions of art, albeit in a new physical formation. The reality of the tourists interest completes a cycle that does not permit for artistic development and growth

in non-Western societies. It continues to impress that the West is the zenith of artistic achievement, that art from outside the West is a pale imitation, and that traditional modes of production outside the West, in order to be considered significant or lucrative, must be articulated with the 'safe' patterns or imagery. It removes both the tradition for authentic art, and the potential growth within this work.

Frida Kahlo was managed to transcend slightly the boundaries between folk/indigenous art and 'high' Western art. By incorporating elements of traditional Mexican folk art in a style of self-representation, she was able to break into the Western art market, cultivating interest in the traditional art forms of Mexico. The Western art market is interested in her works and interpretation because of other quality of her paintings. She is captivating and well known as a woman, and she managed to create a role for herself that is strange and exotic. Frequently, she juxtaposed her traditional with her more contemporary elements. By having a dichotomy between the familiar/modern with the Other/primitive, a Western viewer can empathize by attempting to locate the "primitive other" within themselves, imposes a Western ideology upon the piece. However it must be acknowledged that the majority of the interest around Kahlo's work was not global until after her death, and since then has become widely commercialized due to celebrity interest. Additionally if she had not been involved with Diego Rivera, who is credited as one of the masters of Mexican art by the West, Kahlo might never have been granted a platform to the artistic world, and her works would have been overlooked.

To move away from the cycle produced by the Western aesthetic on tourist art outside the West, there needs to be a development of an aesthetic system for each culture and society. In the case of Oaxacan woodcarvers, there should be an emphasis on craftsmanship, intention of the work, significance of the work, and room for growth and cultivation of interests. Art is a transient and growing term: it seems only progressive that works that were created outside the original canonization of Western art should be respected and find a home within the term. Our world is shifting towards an intercultural, connected society. While we are neither a melting pot nor a mosaic, neither should we continue to perpetuate a stratified society, with a scale leveling significance based on whiteness or on Western influences in art.

Works Cited

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