Parallels, Contrasts, and Interrelationships of Arts and Institutions, Thoughts and Artifacts in the Seventeenth Century AD

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The arts of the seventeenth century exhibit a remarkable similarity of theme and function in cultures as diverse as Ch'ing China and Bourbon France. This was the unspoken but obvious conclusion of the six contributors to this third annual institute.

It is as if an 'aristocratic network' existed from Japan to Sweden and from Russia to West Africa. Absolutist regimes, whose related or analogous ancestries were signified by the traditional use of the horse in warfare, patronized the arts in deliberate strategies of ideological persuasion. Not surprisingly, then, these arts tended to be exaggerated and exhibitionist in form, and, where appropriate, allegorical in content. Consequently, those forms particularly suited to public display, such as the performing arts, tournaments, processions, and festivals, were especially favoured by dynastic princes of the period. Further, the symbolism of the ruler's control was everywhere extended to include the environs of palace and shrine or church: gardens, fountains, walkways, canals, and streams – even city streets – were important features of the absolutist statement. Finally, the evocation of the ruling caste's glorious past through revivialist styles in the arts – the utilization of the themes, images, and ethos of that past – was a central characteristic of the courts of all cultures considered.

The institute was introduced with a survey of the seventeenth-century arts of Europe, Islam, and the Orient by Alan Gowans, Department of History in Art, University of Victoria, and director of the institute. In a public address and two weeks of classroom lectures, Gowans illustrated in general terms the apparent similarity of social function and analogous stylistic tendencies in the arts of these cultures. He stressed the common purpose of the courts of the time to reinforce the notion of the class-structured state headed by a 'Godly Price,' by patronizing the creation of 'convincing images of dynastic legitimacy.' Focusing on the architecture of seventeenth-century Sweden as a case in point, he demonstrated the efforts of aristocratic families, from the Vasas to their courtiers, to erect mausolea as symbols of divinely sanctioned power independent of the ecclesiastic system. By way of contrast, it was also shown that the contemporaneous art of the rising Protestant bourgeoisie had transformed religious themes. In Rembrandt's work, for example, the familiar Pietas of Giotto and Mantegna became the 'Anatomy Lessons' of Doctors Tulp and Deyman respectively; representations of Christ as a symbol of a hierarchical structure became illustrations of a historic figure; and the traditional Holy Family was replaced by the humble burgher family.

Seventeenth-century China was characterized by 'internal chaos, external disaster,' according to Robert Capp, Department of Asian Studies, University of Washington. In a single public lecture, Capp surveyed the transition from late Ming corruption and political disorder to the establishment of a lasting, relatively peaceful dynasty under the Manchus. He emphasized that the principle of Manchu success was their complete support of traditional, indigenous cultural values and institutions (at the expense of Buddhism) which meant an aggressive return to Confucian pragmatism and subservience. Palace complexes such as the 'Forbidden City' created by the Ming were maintained by the Manchu as highly visible symbols of their divine power. At the same time they were lavish patrons of the traditional arts of ceramics, painting, and literature, thus establishing the dynasty as the embodiment of orthodoxy. While the merchant class of the Yangtze valley did support a vernacular literature and popular art, the period as a whole did not produce revolutions or new social institutions in any way comparable to those in Europe: Manchu absolutism was too firmly entrenched in practice as well as theory.

Labelle Prussin, School of Architecture, University of Washington, marked the assimilation and transformation of Islamic forms, beliefs, and customs within the major indigenous cultures of West Africa. In both public and classroom lectures she noted that traditional African monuments, such as the vitally important 'ancestor pillars' of the Ashanti, were simply incorporated into imposed Islamic architecture. Regardless of the religious function of the minaret to Islam, however, these pillars remained important symbols of ancestry, and in the context of the seventeenth-century African
The autocratic styles of seventeenth-century Japan were introduced in public and classroom lectures by Bunji Kobayashi, Professor of Architectural History at Nihon University. Here too, the ‘universal peace’ established by the Tokugawa dynasty was marked by exaggerated revivals of traditional styles and customs. Within court society, Shinto shrines, with their accompanying beliefs and ceremonies, enjoyed a renewed popularity; the architectural forms of the fourteenth century provided the basis of an ornate ‘baroque’ style; and the so-called minor arts of the tea ceremony, calligraphy and gardening achieved the highest status. Much like Versailles, the capital of the new shogunate at Edo became the cultural focus of a captive aristocracy. As Professor Kobayashi pointed out, it was here that festivals, tournaments, hunting parties and the classical Nô theatre were actively promoted by the shogun to keep the Samurai occupied and thus pre-empt possible rebellions from within their ranks.

‘The baroque can be viewed as the third and final phase of the Renaissance.’ This was the thesis of Horst W. Janson, Chairman of the Fine Arts Department of New York University, who provided a useful perspective on the arts of seventeenth-century Europe by placing them in the context of an historical development. In the institute’s final public and classroom lectures, Janson surveyed works from over forty artists from Masaccio to Carracci in the south, and from Van Eyck to Vermeer in the north. By this means he demonstrated the emergence of the baroque style from fifteenth-century humanism, scientific perspective, and mannerist individualism, followed, after the Council of Trent, by counter-reformation emotionalism. Typical of the baroque were thus sculpture theatrically placed and lighted for maximum subjective effect; architecture conceived in terms of multiple units and dramatic vistas; and painting executed and displayed with an overpowering illusionism. It was the influence of Italian humanism, according to Janson, which led Veronese to transform the Last Supper into a secular, courtly banquet under classical triumphal arches, with a cast of characters dressed in contemporary costumes (e.g. Christ in the House of Levi). On the other hand, the combination of scientific perspective and programmed emotion led to the vast trompe l’œil ceiling paintings of the period. Concurrently, moreover, the uncertainty of the times, in addition to the growth of an open market for art, favoured the emergence of artistic self-expression, beginning in mannerist uncertainty and stylistic rebellion and developing into intensely personal statements like Rembrandt’s self-portraits.

The institute came to a close with a discussion, led by Alan Gowans, of several problems raised during the proceedings. The fourth annual institute, to be held in July and August 1979 at the University of Victoria, will focus on the arts of the first millennium AD, especially the ‘Feudal Age’ of ca. 600-900 AD, in a cross-cultural context.