

Critical Terms - Hybridity

LEAH CLARK: Hi. Today, we're discussing critical terms, and I'm Leah Clark, a Senior Lecturer in Art History at The Open University. And I specialise in the Italian Renaissance with a focus on the collection and exchange of art objects at the end of the 15th century in the Italian courts. And I'm here with my colleague.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: I'm Kathleen Christian. I'm also a Senior Lecturer in Art History at The Open University specialising in the Italian Renaissance. And my specialisation is in the reception of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance and particularly in Renaissance Rome.

LEAH CLARK: So today, we're looking at the term 'hybridity'. And this term really fascinates me, because it, in some ways, gives me a new way of looking at works of art that are familiar to me. So as an Italian Renaissance specialist, we often think of works of art as being very Italian. But actually, looking at the term 'hybridity' opens up cross-cultural dialogues that, actually, artworks are products of not only one culture, but multiple cultures coming together.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Yeah. I think it's a term that's become more prevalent, more interesting now, because art history has taken a global turn. And people are more interested not just in national traditions, say the Italian Renaissance. They're more interested than they used to be in cultural mixings, cultures coming together, and the works of art that are produced from cultural exchange.

LEAH CLARK: And this term, I think, also is really interesting, because it has a long history. It's not something that's just suddenly developed in the 20th century, but it comes out of 18th and 19th century discussions.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: The term becomes more prevalent in the 18th and 19th century in the fields of zoology, botany. You have Charles Darwin most famously talking about the theory of evolution, that species come together and they produce new species. And the term 'hybrid' is something that's produced from two different animals or plants that come together at the same time to produce something new.

And it does take a very negative turn when it's used around the same time for racial mixing. So you have, in colonial societies, the idea that the coloniser is the 'pure race'. And when colonisers mix with the colonised, they produce races that are impure. And so you have, in racial theory, this very negative term, 'hybridity', coming through.

LEAH CLARK: Yeah, but I think what's also interesting is in the 1990s, there's kind of a flip, isn't there, with Homi Bhabha's publication of his book, *The Location of Culture*. And this kind of provides a different way of seeing this relationship between the coloniser and colonised, that actually, all cultures are, in some ways, inauthentic. Or there's no kind of authentic, pure culture, that they are mixings.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. I think what Homi Bhabha was trying to do - in a really interesting and important book - he used the term 'hybridity' to talk about how cultures, when they come together in a colonial situation, the colonised isn't necessarily always in the position of being subjected by the coloniser. They create new hybrid cultural forms, often as

a form of resistance against the coloniser. And these hybrid cultural forms are something creative, something new, and also something that pushes against the coloniser as a kind of, let's say, political force.

So hybridity becomes, in that sense, a creative idea. Every culture has hierarchies that are challenged. Every culture has these kinds of spaces where new forms are created. And I think that's something that hybridity teaches us.

LEAH CLARK: So the term 'hybridity' has also been used in art history. And I think it's quite a creative way of looking at works of art as being products of not just one culture.

And one of the most kind of perfect examples of that, in some ways, is Mesoamerican featherwork. And in particular, when you have these works that are made by indigenous artists in Mesoamerica, which is basically the equivalent of Mexico and Central America today, using an indigenous tradition of featherwork but producing works of art that have iconography that is definitely Christian.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: The feathers aren't painted. They're actually feathers of different birds that have different colours that have been put together sort of as a mosaic.

LEAH CLARK: Yeah. And I think that's the extraordinary thing. I mean, you call them feather pictures or feather paintings or even feather mosaics, because they're local, beautifully colourful feathers that make up these extraordinary pictures. And I think the whole point was for Spanish missionaries were trying to kind of convert the Mesoamericans through this practice of using Christian iconography.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. So it's one of these remarkable combinations - the technique from the native tradition and the imagery coming from Christian missionaries coming together in this image that is creative. It's something new that's never been seen before. So in this sense, the term 'hybridity', it also has a negative and positive sense to it, right?

LEAH CLARK: Yeah. Because in a positive sense, you can see this real kind of creative moment. But I think that we also need to step back and think about the processes, because this was a technique to basically colonise and convert, that there is a power relationship that is not equal here.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Absolutely.

LEAH CLARK: I think there is also the negative quality of this kind of notion of hybridity or a work of art that is seen to be so creative is also the fact that Europeans used this featherwork as a way, of actually, to gauge the humanness of Mesoamerican indigenous people.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So the skill of creating a work of art is seen as a gauge, at that time, of being human. And that's something that shows the starkly unequal power relationships in this work of art.

LEAH CLARK: Yeah, and at that time.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right.

LEAH CLARK: The featherwork, I think, also raises some problems about, actually, how we display objects in today's museums. Museums are built on a 19th-century categorization based on nation states, where there are pure, authentic cultures, whereas where do you display a featherwork? Is it in a Latin American or Mesoamerican or a Mexican gallery? Or is it in a European one?

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right, right. I think the question of categorising works of art is a really interesting one, because you might say a hybrid featherwork, that's something that we don't know where it goes in what part of the museum. But what about an altarpiece by Titian, for example?

So as recent research has shown, Venetian art, even though it's long seemed to be Italian art as a kind of a national tradition, it actually combines many different cultural influences. So Islamic, northern European, Byzantine. So if this work of art is also something that we need to think of as hybrid, how does that change our thinking about the history of art?

LEAH CLARK: Yeah. And I think it also brings to the fore that there are other terms that people use to talk about hybridity that sometimes gets maybe more at the kind of processes, so cultural transfer, cultural translation, even crossed histories, that these are not just one thing being influenced by another or going one way. But actually, there are multiple kind of pathways of being influenced one by one over time.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. I think hybridity is a great way of describing the process. But then the question is, how do you actually get at what's happening when hybrid works of art are created?

So for example, the featherwork. Can we read into that the identity of the people who made it, the identity of the people who commissioned it? Where is agency? Where is identity?

Are some of the mixings accidental? Are some of them about transgression? Are some of them about a personal expression by the artist?

So they're very complex questions that remain to be answered when we look at works of art that we describe as hybrid. Hybrid gets us to a certain point. But then, as you say you have to think about how the processes actually happen, how identity is expressed.

LEAH CLARK: Yeah. And I think the fear is, in some ways, is a kind of looking at it in a very positive light, that these global connections, you know, gloss over some of the very problematic relationships and power dynamics that were at play in this time period.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. So, I mean, from our own perspective, we live in a globalised world. It seems natural for us that things travel, that cultures come together. So we lose a bit of that kind of, let's say, questioning of, was it actually easy? Was it actually successful that these cultures came together and produced something beautiful? No, it wasn't easy. So this is the question of hybridity, how to make it more complex than it seems.

LEAH CLARK: Yeah, exactly.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So another object we can look at is an apothecary jar, which also comes from Mexico. And this jar is interesting, because it combines many different cultural influences. It was made in Mexico by, again, an indigenous artist.

But it contained objects that were being traded globally. So at the time it was made, about 1700, there were ships coming from the Philippines, the Manila galleons, to Mexico and bringing with them objects from the East. And in Mexico, they were traded for silver.

OK, so you have Chinese objects coming to Mexico and Mexican artists responding to Chinese ceramics, as you see in this jar. It's blue and white. It has ornaments that reflect a kind of Chinese porcelain.

But at the same time, it's made by an indigenous artist. So you have many different cultures coming together - Spanish, Mexican, Chinese - all at the same time in this jar.

LEAH CLARK: Well, it's also interesting, because the actual way of making the ceramic, some of that technology transfer, is actually coming probably from Islamic cultures. So hybridity is not just two cultures coming together. You've got Islamic material culture. You've got even Italian and Spanish, who developed some of those lustre techniques. The blue and white, which is originally a Chinese motif.

But then also ceramics, I think, is that perfect example across the globe. There is this constant toing and froing of motifs that get borrowed and then changed and then re-adapted. And so here, you have this, in Puebla, in Mexico, this apothecary jar that actually brings together all these multiple traditions.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. And the jars are actually used for storing goods that moved around the world, which is also why they have this, they pick up cultural influences along the way as people see these things moving from one part of the world to another. So in some ways, the term 'hybridity' really fits this jar. But in other ways, it's a limiting idea in the sense that, I mean, I think, still has that negative connotation. It still has that idea that it's not really pure if it's hybrid, and so somehow, it's not really something we can put into a category. Therefore, it's not as good as other works of art.

And I think another thing that comes out of this is the idea that cultures are pure if they can be identified as, there's Chinese, there's Islamic, there's Spanish. And they mix together. How do we get to the point where we consider the Chinese, the Spanish, the Islamic as hybrid cultures in and of themselves?

So if we pick on this object in particular, we call it hybrid. That's a way of maybe reinforcing the idea that the cultures that are mixing are the pure ones. And this is the kind of anomaly.

LEAH CLARK: Well, and I think the main, key kind of influencer, let's say Chinese porcelain, which is the blue and white, the blue is coming, actually, from cobalt made in Persia. And some of those motifs are actually Persian. So again, the complexities of saying a culture is pure or authentic.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. It's the origin of everything else, when in fact, as you say, all cultures have this internal mixing, this interaction with other peoples and other ideas all the time. So that's one of the problems, I think, with 'hybridity' as a concept.