

The beauty of mixing: hybridization in advancing art

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Prof's The Beauty of Mixing: Hybridization in Advancing Art There are many people in the world who are devoted to cultural purity. These can range from the hateful (Neo-Nazis and white power people, for instance), to the more thoughtful and concerned, such as people who want to protect indigenous cultures from being overwhelmed by the societies with which they coexist. Such people would certainly try to decry and stop hybridization of art from occurring. This, however, would be a simplistic, uncritical and unproductive view of art. The fact is, that whenever cultures collide they will have to work out a whole host of issues that are brought up by such contact. The hybridization in art can, far from being damaging to either society, allow each of them to deal with the consequences of contact with a new culture, critique the interaction occurring between the two peoples in a way that would not be possible if not for such hybridization. One of the most common critiques of hybridization is that it comes from a negative place - a place of appropriation in which one society seeks to make another society subservient to its own by taking what makes them culturally distinctive and integrating it into the dominant society. This is especially true when societies regard each other as "others" and this "otherness" is one of the main reasons for interest between societies, as was certainly the case in Japan during the era when hybridization of art began (Meech 27). This brings up understandable concerns about issues of colonization, appropriation, and cultural destruction - all things that should be avoided. However, avoiding these things does not necessarily mean avoiding hybridization. Many works owe formal debts to other works despite the fact that they are incredibly original and do many good things to the world of art. James McNeill

Whistler's *Princess in a Land of Porcelain*, and *Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen*, for instance, clearly owe a formal debt to Japanese culture. Almost the entire subject matter of the works are Japanese, from the clothing to the panelling, and though it is certainly an identifiably western painting, the flat nature of both works recalls something of Japanese art. While not necessarily as flat or elegant as Hosada Eishi's *The Geisha Itsutomi*, it is quite apparent that Whistler was drawing on this style of work in concocting his paintings. I would argue, however, that far from being appropriative, they serve as a critical analysis of the way in which the west had been engaging in contact with the East. They show western women adorning themselves with all manner of Japanese trappings, but without an actual understanding of Japanese culture – the works depict women playing dress-up, a scathing critique of the way that people had engaged with Japanese culture at that time. James Tissot's *Young Women Looking at Japanese Articles* shows that such critiques are possible without resorting to hybridization. This painting depicts two women dressed in Western style peering at articles of Japanese culture. All at once this painting cleverly critiques the way that Westerners had been interacting with Japanese culture – from a distance, as a curiosity, to be taken in to and made part of Western culture, or ridiculed from a distance. The fact that the Japanese largely looked at Western culture through a similar lens (Sullivan 122) does not change the fact that this is not a proper appreciation of a different society. Thus hybridization is not required for this type of critique necessarily, which weakens the argument for hybrid art. I would argue, however, that they hybridized counterpoints are more poignant. They not

only critique forms of appreciation that are damaging in terms of inter-society communication, but also demonstrate a form of communication between societies that can be more productive. They must demonstrate some appreciation for the other culture's art in order to be able to use some of its language in their own works, which demonstrates a depth and understanding that should be present in dealing with other societies. Some people will always be upset by clashes of culture. They believe that one culture should remain forever as it is, immovable and so forth. Cultures, however, are highly plastic and will always mold and shift as they come into contact with other cultures. Hybridization is, to some degree, a necessary outcome of such contact. It can provide an appropriate way to both appreciate and critique inter-culture communication, and far from being a bad thing can actually help each culture come to terms with its self and its interaction with others. Works Cited Sullivan, Michael. Eastern and Western Art. Los Angeles: UCLA UP. 1989. Meech, Julia. " Frank Lloyd Wright and the Art of Japan"