



Book Review

Annals of Transcultural History of Art: A Story Told in Two Ways

(Salt Lake City: American Academic Press, 2025).

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Abstract: *Annals of Transcultural History of Art: A Story Told in Two Ways*, edited by Li Jun, presents an innovative methodological framework that reimagines global art history through a transcultural lens. Departing from entrenched Eurocentric and Sinocentric narratives, the volume promotes dialogue between Chinese and European artistic traditions. At its core is the “Three Originals” principle—original language, original works, and original cultural context—which calls for direct engagement with primary texts, artworks, and their historical environments. The volume comprises three sections: two featuring original essays on theory and material culture, and a third offering critical reviews of recent scholarship. Through detailed case studies, the volume illustrates how Eastern influences informed Western art—from Renaissance architecture to decorative patterns in Meissen porcelain—highlighting the hybrid and reciprocal nature of artistic development. By emphasizing cultural interaction as a driver of innovation, it advocates a more inclusive and globally attuned art history. This review acknowledges the volume’s significant contribution while also suggesting the need to expand beyond the China–Europe–Islamic world focus to include broader geographic and thematic dimensions. As a pioneering contribution, the volume establishes a foundation for future research into the complexities of transcultural artistic exchange across civilizations.

Keywords: Intercultural, History of Art, Three Originals.

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1. Introduction

Li Jun, a distinguished educator and scholar, presents a pioneering contribution to the discipline of art history through his edited volume *Annals of Transcultural History of Art: A Story Told in Two Ways*. This work departs from the entrenched di-chotomy between Eurocentric and Sinocentric perspectives, proposing instead a synthesized framework that encourages constructive engagement between Chinese and European artistic traditions. By advancing this inclusive methodology, the volume lays the foundation for what professor Li describes as an alternative mode of narrating art history—“the second way of telling the story.”

2. The "Three Originals" Principle

At the heart of this innovative methodology is Li’s “Three Originals” principle: original language, original works, and original cultural context. This principle, rooted in empirical research of material and cultural exchanges along the Silk Road, aims to “trace the transcultural transmission of objects, technologies, ideas, and images, reconstructing the history of human cultural interaction, station by station.” [1] By following the paths of artifacts, it illuminates the shared and intertwined development of human civilization.

The introductory essay, “*Why Every Story Can Be Told in Two Ways*,” elaborates on the “Three Originals.” Original language mandates engagement with the native language of the subject,



mitigating mistranslation and misinterpretation from secondary sources. Original works emphasize direct, embodied engagement with artworks—observing, examining, and, when possible, physically interacting with them to understand their embedded historical and cultural information. Original cultural contexts call for understanding the broader environment of an artwork's creation, guarding against presentist or culturally external assumptions. Together, these principles highlight the volume's commitment to rigorous scholarship, demanding linguistic competence, art historical expertise, and cultural sensitivity from researchers. [2]

3. Structure and Methodological Perspectives

The book is divided into three sections. The first two, "Methodological Perspectives" and "Ornament, Object, and Material Culture," present original scholarly essays and constitute the "first way of telling the story." The third section offers critical reviews of recent works in the fields of transcultural history of art and culture, serving as a "dessert" and representing the "second way of telling the story."

The "Methodological Perspectives" section provides the theoretical foundation for transcultural inquiry. Through compelling case studies, it illustrates how a "second telling" of familiar Western art historical narratives emerges when viewed through a transcultural lens, situating European art within the broader context of Eurasian cultural exchange. This is where the titular "two ways of telling a story"—East and West—are brought into productive tension.

For instance, analyses of Renaissance Italy, often seen as quintessentially Western, reveal subtle Eastern influences. A study of Brunelleschi's dome suggests that a full understanding of its construction requires acknowledging potential technological and material contributions from Persia or China. Similarly, the Medici Porcelain, modeled on Chinese blue-and-white ware, demonstrates the West's active appropriation and localization of Eastern aesthetics. These studies challenge simplistic art historical narratives, emphasizing cultural reciprocity and mutual shaping, and demonstrate that artistic innovation is often the product of intercultural encounters and syncretism. They encourage readers to move beyond nation-bound frameworks toward a truly global art history.

The "Decoration, Objects, and Material Culture" section offers microhistorical enactments of transcultural methodology. It probes the intricate details of decorative motifs and material objects to reveal far-reaching cultural entanglements.

In "*From Chinese Lotus to Pomegranate Motif: The Eastern Origin of Italian Textile Design in the 15th Century*," Shi Liu traces the transformation of the pomegranate motif in Italian textiles, revealing its derivation from Chinese lotus patterns. This study shows how visual forms migrated and were re-imagined across cultures, underscoring the Silk Road's role as a vital corridor for aesthetic exchange.

Li Fan's essay "*The Past and Present of the Meissen Porcelain 'Blue Onion' Pattern*" investigates one of Europe's most iconic ceramic motifs. Through careful visual and textual analysis, it exposes the design's intricate relationship with Chinese Ming and Qing "three-fruit variant," highlighting Western creative reinterpretation, cultural translation, and adaptation.

Wang Jingbo's "*Indian Flower? German Flower? — A Story of the Floral Patterns of Meissen Porcelain in the 18th Century*" further explores hybrid aesthetics. It shows how motifs identified as "Indian" or "German" actually bear the imprint of layered transcultural encounters, demonstrating the mixed and pluralistic nature of artistic styles.

Yang Xiao's essay "*Viewing 'the Décoratif in Painting' in a Transcultural Perspective: Botticelli in Pang Xunqin's Eye*" shifts the focus to painting. By analyzing how a Chinese artist reinterprets Botticelli through a culturally distinct notion of "decorativeness," the essay exemplifies the creative reinterpretation that transcultural art history enables. [3]

Collectively, these studies form the empirical backbone of the book. They present vivid, detailed images of cultural encounter, artistic transformation, and the often-surprising mobility of form and meaning.

4. Impact and Future Directions

The most profound insight offered by the *Annals of Transcultural History of Art* is its radical challenge to inherited paradigms of art historical study. Its insistence on empirical rigor and global interconnectedness shifts the discourse away from linear, unilateral models of influence toward a more dynamic, dialogical understanding of cultural exchange. The "Three Originals" principle provides an effective toolkit for overcoming derivative scholarship and enabling truly original research. It fosters a more nuanced, contextually grounded art history that does justice to the complexities of global artistic interaction.

As a pioneering endeavor, the book leaves room for expansion. While its focus on the China–Europe–Islamic world triad is both rich and revealing, future editions might broaden the geographic scope to include transcultural interactions involving Africa, Oceania, or the Indigenous Americas. Furthermore, although the current volume maintains historiographical balance, future contributions could explore more deeply into asymmetries of power, cultural hegemony, and the politics of exchange—issues essential for a full understanding of transcultural dynamics.

These are not shortcomings, but rather promising directions for further development. As the first scholarly book to reconstruct Eurasian art exchange from a transcultural perspective, *Annals of Transcultural History of Art: A Story Told in Two Ways* represents a significant step forward for Chinese art historical scholarship in its pursuit of global and pluralistic frameworks. It not only introduces a powerful new methodology for cultural studies within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative but also redefines what it means to tell art history's many stories. By advocating for open-minded inquiry and critical rethinking, this volume will inspire scholars to explore the multiple narratives behind artworks and to embrace the equal, peaceful, and co-creative dimensions of cultural encounter. In doing so, it contributes meaningfully to the construction of a shared community of human destiny grounded in political trust, economic integration, and cultural inclusiveness.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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