

The power of World Art

Sainsbury
Centre for
Visual Arts



In 1992 the ‘mysterious objects’ of the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection inspired the creation of a new field of enquiry: World Art Studies. Today the discipline is recognised worldwide and the Sainsbury Centre continues to be at the heart of new developments. By Professor John Onians

When the members of the faculty of the School of Fine Arts and Music first heard that the university had been offered the gift of a major art collection and a building to house it, many anticipated the familiar pleasure of entering a columned portico to view rooms full of oil paintings in gold frames. We looked smugly forward to having a new opportunities to show off our expertise in old masters to our students and to impress our colleagues in other Schools with our knowledge of post-impressionism.

What we got, of course, was different. We were soon wandering, lost, through a vast metal hall looking at a strange assortment of objects ranging from carved walrus tusks from the arctic to textiles and polished stone from the tropics. What we had to admit to ourselves and what we found ourselves showing off to others was our ignorance.

That was a quarter of a century ago, before these mysterious objects started to educate us. We soon became aware of their power, as we found ourselves looking at them much more closely than we would have done had they been the paintings and sculptures with which we were more familiar. For a start they commanded us to ask all sorts of questions. Where were they made and by whom? What they were made of and how? What were they used for originally and why had they ended up in a building by Norman Foster on the edge of Norwich? We began to try and answer our questions, but soon we had to call in new colleagues some who were trained not just in art history, but in anthropology and archaeology and some who were experts in museology. They knew what Malangan assemblages meant to the inhabitants of New Ireland, what Pre-Columbian peoples must have done with flint axes, and how Robert and Lisa Sainsbury had come to create a great museum. But soon they too like us ran out of answers. They couldn't explain why the inhabitants of East Asia made paintings in transparent ink on smooth silk scrolls while those who lived in West Europe daubed sticky oil paints on rough canvas. Nor did they know either why

the artefacts from West Africa looked so different from those from the North West Coast of North America, or why Japanese ceramics were so different from those of nearby China. None of us knew why the people who inhabited the islands of the Aegean five thousand years ago made extraordinarily geometrical small images of the human body in fine marble, while three thousand years ago people in Mexico were making sculptures known as 'hollow babies'. Not only could none of us answer these questions. When we all went into the libraries, hoping that if not our discipline, at least another might be able to answer them, we were disappointed. Not only did nobody have the answers. Nobody had even asked the questions. Nowhere on the planet were scholars dealing with the important issues raised by acknowledging that art has for forty millenia been a worldwide activity.

If these issues were to be confronted, we needed to create a new disciplinary framework, one that would allow us all to go on applying our existing skills but which would also encourage us to develop new ones. This is why, recalling the University's bold establishment of the School of Environmental Sciences thirty years before, in 1992 we created the new field of enquiry of World Art Studies. And three years later, in order to ensure that we directly engage with the issues the designation implied, we set up the World Art Research Programme. One of the main purposes of the Programme was to get rid of two of the principal obstacles to the development of World Art Studies, ignorance and prejudice. We, like others, had assumed that we knew what art was, what was important about it and why. Before we could provide a strong foundation for our project, we needed to find out more about the full extent of the world's art and we needed to find out about the variety of interest it evoked in other cultures and communities. One way to meet these needs was to get funding for a set of inter-related initiatives from the Getty Grant Program. One initiative brought specialists from around the world to tell us about the varied histories of the institutions concerned with art in their different regions. Another brought together on the campus for a month thirty young professionals from twenty different countries for a more elaborate discussion of their perspectives. Still another was the setting up of a World Art Library, a permanent collection of books, ephemera and cd.s, documenting the range of interests in art around the globe. Now stocked with a growing volume of materials from over seventy countries, ones that would normally never get into the research libraries of our competitors from Toronto to Tokyo, it offers direct insight into the thinking of the many institutions, ranging from ministries of culture to tourism enterprises, from national museums to private galleries, from universities to art schools, that now see art as vital to their agendas.

But perhaps the best indication of the timeliness of World Art Studies was our being approached by a publisher who wanted advice on how to produce the first ever Atlas of World Art. Ten years on, the Atlas has now appeared. Effectively a major commercially funded research project involving sixty eight individuals in different countries, it does for a major field of human culture what scientists have

long been used to doing for natural domains, such as geology or botany. Dividing the history of human artistic activity into seven periods, getting shorter as we approach the present, it records it on a series of sets of maps that systematically cover the globe from the Americas, through Europe, Africa and Asia, to the Pacific. It is a measure of how much has been achieved since the School of World Art Studies was inaugurated that this compact resource provides the data to enable researchers and students to at last begin to answer the big questions raised by the extraordinary collection of objects soon to be reinstalled in the Sainsbury Centre.

Prof John Onians is the director of the renowned World Art Research Programme at UEA. His *Atlas of World Art*, published by Laurence King Publishing, includes articles by other UEA academics: Simon Kaner from the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Art and Culture (SISJAC) and Dr Stefan Muthesius from the school of World Art Studies and Museology.