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Ignorance is Not Bliss

ART AND ITS PLACE IN AUSTRALIA–ASIA RELATIONS

Alison Carroll

“When I hear the word culture, I reach for my revolver”¹

Nothing restores the spirit like being transported by the rapture of another: a lover, a bird on the wing, the joy of a child, or – the only example here specifically made – the great work of art. The brilliance of a piece of music, soaring, lilting or pounding on your senses, the power of a work of art to convey you to another reality, the rhythms of a poem, drilling or lulling you to new insights – all can take you to places in your heart, soul and mind impossible through your own means. It is why we laud Beethoven, Michelangelo and Shakespeare, as has often been said, more than their political or economically talented contemporaries. This experience is wonderful. To the pragmatists reading this, it is also useful – it makes us feel better, more positive, happier, relaxed, perhaps more able to do a better job, recover faster from illness and be better citizens.

1. Attributed to Hermann Goering, amongst others, and, it is said, one of the most popular ‘quotes’ of all time.

Cultural exchange between Australia and Asia follows the same path – transporting in its own right, and useful individually and to all of us as a community.

In its own right – for our artists in particular – it offers new models for creative ideas and interpretation of the world. It is our treasure chest of artistic opportunity. For the community more broadly it offers both personally enriching rewards plus understanding of cultural difference, crucial for our successful engagement in this region, plus rewarding for its revelations to us as part of a wider humanity. Here in Australia, as a western nation, we have a huge advantage in close access to this.

The United States is so big it can live unto itself and even those on the West Coast are physically and intellectually so much further from ‘Asia’ than we are. It is notable that both the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations have downgraded their cultural focus in Asia in the past year. Europeans have made efforts through the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) to encourage their member countries to engage more closely with Asia but they too are big enough to be sufficient unto themselves plus a long, long way away culturally and also again physically. It is notable that currently ASEF is considering removing its Arts and Culture focus under pressure of other programs. It could be argued that this reduction in focus from other Western centres takes the pressure off us. Equally, it can be said this is our opportunity (so small in comparison with these others) to say ‘we are not going away, we are here forever’.

We are already ‘there’ physically. We are especially well placed to take advantage of the cultural wonder around us. We can understand the world works in many ways besides the one already well known. It makes us wiser, richer of imagination, more subtle, more tolerant, more interesting.

Let me take one example from the visual arts, about landscape, that underscores the richness of understanding that is so possible. It is revealing not only about the art itself, but the culture more broadly, and through that gives insights into most other aspects of life. These are five instances (one ‘western’, three Asian and one Australian Indigenous) of how differently we human beings can visualise our world: how we see and interpret place, particularly through depicting landscape, the area in which we live. The desire to depict the place where people live seems universal, but the interpretation is based on the artistic tradition and context of each individual. Though we might expect our way of seeing to be universally understood, we do not see a bush or a tree or a piece of land in the same way at all.

Westerners are used to seeing landscapes as Claude Lorrain (c.1600–1682) painted them in the seventeenth century: an illusion of scientifically-measured

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fig.1
Claude Lorrain
Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba
 1648, oil on canvas
 149.1 x 196.7 cm
 © The National Gallery, London



space with mathematical one-point and atmospheric perspective, often in pictures of horizontal format, made in oil paint that enables this fuzzy light to be recreated, and with the desire – despite the interest in the mathematical precision of the perspective – to create an image of a past golden age, an Elysium (fig.1). The undulating fields and waters around Rome were captured with wide-stretching horizon lines. The light gave just enough clarity for the foreground stage with its myriad events, costumes, gestures, and architectural details to be seen before a golden haze took over in the background.

In contrast, Chinese landscapes painted at a similar time as Claude had a different imperative – not to depict ‘reality’ of a specific contemporary or classical time but rather an ideal state in which to attain an abstract, purer state of being. It was a sentiment well expressed by Lu Xiangshan: “The universe is my mind; my mind is the universe.”² Fourth century artist Zong Bing wrote of his practice:

*And so by living in leisure
By nourishing the spirit
By cleansing the wine-glass
By playing the lute
And by contemplating in silence
Before taking up the brush to paint
Although remaining seated
I travel to the four corners of the world.*³

The Chinese left areas free of paint, believing these spaces encouraged contemplation. They purified and reduced their brushstrokes and colour on the basis of ‘less is more’, a concept little understood in the materialist West. It is a process in tune with the watercolour and paper used, where changes and over-painting look like mistakes.



The Chinese did not want definition, nor care about an illusion of depth – and the landscape they were attracted to (as the Italians were attracted to the plains around Rome) were the Guilin mountains in southern China that seem to hang in the mist. Very often this was directly associated with the wider natural world. Confucius had said “The wise find pleasure in water; the virtuous find pleasure in mountains”⁴ and these mountains provided the perfect subject. They rise perpendicularly, suiting the vertical paper scrolls of China; clouds and mist frequently cut across their crags, making it impossible to anchor them to the ground, as it is impossible to read the space behind and around them. Contemporary works like Korean Moon Beom (b.1955)’s *Slow, same #21015* of 2003 is an elegiac reflection of the qualities of this landscape tradition (fig.2).

fig.2
Moon Beom
Slow, same #21015 2003
acrylic, oilstick on canvas
259 x 194 cm, Collection
Gyeonggido Museum of Art

2. Quoted in Mae Anna Pang, *Mountains and Streams*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2006, p.49. Lu Xiangshan lived 1139–93.

3. Ibid, p.27. Zong Bing lived 375–443.

4. See Mae Anna Pang op.cit. p.74. Confucius (551–479BC) is quoted from his *Analects*, Chapter XXI, Book VI.



fig.3 (left)
**Anak Agung
 Gede Sobrat**
Life in Bali 1931
 pen, ink and
 tempera on board
 180 x 120 cm
 Collection of Museum
 Universitas Pelita
 Harapan, Lippo
 Karawaci, Indonesia

Equally, Balinese patterned landscape painting evolved from the 1930s from drawings and paintings of a mystical world of gods and goddesses, demons and spirits dramatically and energetically engaged in vertically defined space, reinforced by the reality of Bali's tropical environment, with the jungle flat against the viewer's eyes and glimpses of space and human activity interspersed through the lattice of vegetation. In Anuk Agung Gede Sobrat (1911–92)'s *Life in Bali* of 1931 (fig.3), the vegetation and figures at the top of the image are nearly the same size as those at the bottom. One of the first foreigners to make Balinese art known to the world, Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias in his 1937 book *Island of Bali*, said about traditional painting:

*all available space must be covered by the design, even to the blank spaces between intimate groups of figures, which are filled with an all-over pattern of clouds to indicate the atmosphere.*⁵

The gods and goddesses of old are transformed by contemporary Balinese artists into events of local people today, but the presentation of space and place remains true to tradition.

Eighteenth century Rajasthani landscape paintings were intended to be seen laid flat on the floor viewed from all sides, so an illusion of 'distance' was of no interest or use. Special events are painted from this bird's eye view, so horses and carriages appear to 'rear' up around the sides of images presented vertically on current-day gallery walls or book reproductions. The relation of figures' sizes too is dependent on the position of the viewer, as well as the importance of the person painted. As the purpose of the painting was to marvel at the patron's vast estates, as much land as possible was included, and painted with precise and detailed line-work. The land is painted in piercing clarity, nail-hard trees spotted across it – just as it truly looks to the eye in the dry desert air of this north Indian state (fig.4).

fig. 4 (below)
**Jugarsi Maharana
 Ari Singh II**
Hunting boar Udaipur 1762
 opaque watercolour
 gold and silver paint on
 paper, 46.4 x 65.8 cm
 Collection National
 Gallery of Victoria,
 Felton Bequest 1980



5. Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, OUP 1989 (1937), pp.189-190.

An important further distinction of the Balinese and the Rajasthani work is a different depiction of time as well as space. In Bali, it is not what time it is but what kind of time it is that is important. The Balinese use different but concurrent calendars arranged in cycles of differing length with particularly auspicious moments occurring at their intersections. With the world understood as multiple cycles of time, instead of a Western single continuum, paintings in Bali very comfortably show the same person undertaking different activities in the one image.

Australian Aboriginal landscape is, in part, a map of ways to read the land and teach important information for survival. Contemporary Central Desert paintings, like those of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (1932–2002), appear as abstract patterns to outsiders but are as clear to their indigenous readers as Captain Cook's charts were to British mariners (fig.5).

Originally they were made in the sand as a kind of aerial map to both show physical points in the surrounding lands and important cultural information associated with various landmarks. Today, mostly made on canvas and placed on an internal wall, they need interpretation to people from outside this culture, as would Tjapaltjarri's ancestors need interpretation to understand Claude's visions of Rome. Western viewers know how to assess Claude's paintings and are prone to try to think of how to see Tjapaltjarri's landscape in Western terms. It is difficult to step into the Aboriginal artist's footprints and think anew about Claude.

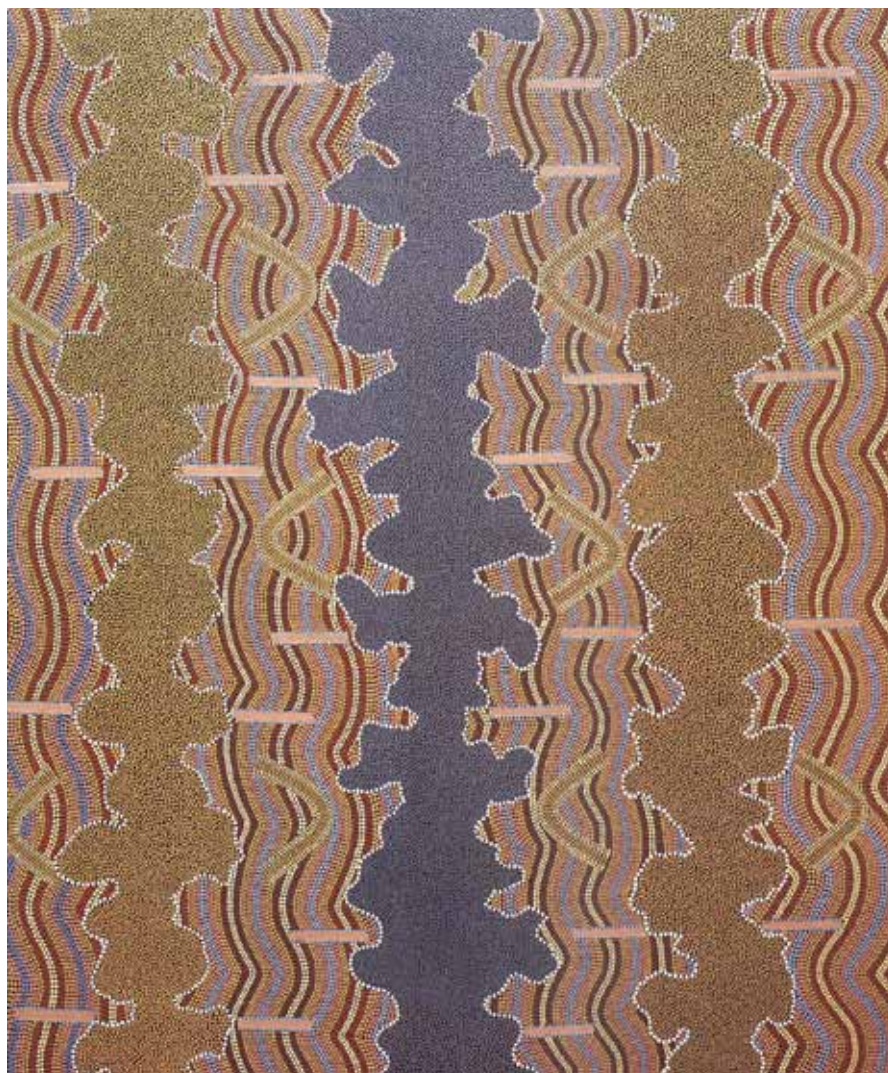


fig. 5
Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri
Water Dreaming at Napperby
 1983, acrylic on canvas
 183 x 155 cm
 Collection Flinders University
 Art Museum, Adelaide
 © estate of the artist 2009
 Licensed by Aboriginal
 Artists Agency

One of the great benefits of seeing other cultures is seeing one's own culture with fresh eyes, and that is one of the possible outcomes, if the viewer is from the West, of looking at Asian art. It means putting aside accepted hierarchies, understanding differences, and acknowledging the influences in understanding of the last millennium that have flowed from East to West and back again.

As in landscape painting, so in life. Different values define us: materialism and glory (the Westerner) in contrast to contemplation and nature (the East Asians), to hierarchy and time (the Indians and Balinese), to survival and belonging (the Aboriginal artists). How rich this is in its variety, how compelling, how reasonable and understandable,

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once we put in a little work to think about why something is so. Today of course many of these values are intertwined throughout our region, but if we understand why someone might be responding to an issue in a particular way, different from our own, and take the trouble to try to find out why, it is both to our advantage in understanding a particular situation and it enriches our own experience of all human life.

The knowledge gained is not to be underestimated as part of our equipment for life itself and for engaging with others in our region. Ignorance is not bliss. Frequently I have been able to build links because I have shown I know something of my host's culture. So I not only can quote, as I did to start, Beethoven, Michelangelo and Shakespeare but also Tatsumi Hijikata (the founder of Butoh), Paik Nam June and Rabindranath Tagore.⁶ In talks in Australia I have frequently quoted from Jose Rizal, the great Filipino nationalist, as his words are so redolent for all colonised people, and in turn for Australians in our attitude to Indigenous people. However Rizal, who lived and worked so close to us, is all but unknown here. Rizal (he took the name, meaning 'rice', to align himself more closely with the centres of Filipino life and was executed by the Spanish in 1896 for his beliefs) wrote:

In order to read the destiny of a people, it is necessary to open the book of its past, and this, for the Philippines may be reduced in general terms to what follows:

Scarcely had they been attached to the Spanish crown than they had to sustain with their blood and the efforts of their sons the wars and ambitions, and conquest of the Spanish people, and in these struggles, in that terrible crisis when a people changes its form of government, its laws, usages, customs, religion and beliefs,

*the Philippines was depopulated, impoverished and retarded — caught in their metamorphosis, without confidence in their past, without faith in their present and with no fond hopes for the years to come.*⁷

This is treasure for all of us.

There is a more particular group of Australians, our artists, who have found special riches in their engagement with Asia. Asialink has run a program which has enabled almost 600 of our leading practitioners to spend up to four months working in Asia, in 18 countries to date, over the last two decades. These artists have been a wonderful example of Australians working often in difficult and certainly demanding circumstances, usually alone, often not speaking the local language, and creating new and inspiring works of art. Their drive and focus, their good humour, and their determination to achieve the best that is possible are all inspirational. I do think their qualities come from our multicultural environment here, tolerance of difference, interest in the unusual and an acceptance from our migrant past that people move and explore other places. I rarely hear of cultural arrogance about Australians overseas. So they are well placed to do well, to be open, to succeed and by and large they do.

Simon Barker is well known to Asialink audiences because he exemplifies this practice: a quiet, self-contained man, passionate about his music – he is a drummer – who has been traveling to and from Korea for the last few years, expanding and experiencing a different seriousness towards percussion and sound, aligned to spiritual strength and the whole body responding to highly developed personal energy – the East Asian core energy called 'chi'. Highly serious, taking many years of learning, relating to the older ideas that Indigenous Australians would understand of the creator or the artist

6. For those of you still on the early steps of this path, Butoh is the 1960s 'dance of the absurd' created in Japan as part of a reaction against Post-War conformity; Paik Nam June (1932–2006) from Korea was the early world leader of art using new technology; and the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore won the 1913 Nobel Prize for Literature.

7. Jose Rizal "The Philippines a century hence", *Selected Writings of Rizal*, Technology Supply Inc, Manila, 1976, p.5.

being the holder of central cultural understanding and accorded necessary respect thereby. Other cultures find this central power in priests or divine rulers, but many also in their artists. Simon Barker talks of his experience of Korean drumming, and unfailingly takes his audience along that path of understanding too.

Pat HOFFIE likes to paint but she can never resist the broader ideas around image-making and the role of the community in building pictures literally and metaphorically. She went to Manila on an Asialink residency many years ago, and immediately was taken by the giant billboards advertising movies, still hand-painted in the melodramatic hell and brimstone style of the local Catholic experience, and transported this to her own politically potent ideas about art. Her “Level playing field?” huge banner, painted by Filipino movie-banner artists in Manila, of the young Aboriginal batsman, proudly flew high over the Adelaide Oval at the 2002 Adelaide Arts Festival. Pat likes this melodrama, it suits her own style, but this response to the Filipino capacity, expertise and visualisation extended her own ideas and possibilities as had not been possible before.

Gillian Rubenstein is better known as Lian Hearn, author of “young adult” books, notably the *Tales of the Otori*, which have sold all around the world extremely well, including in Japan. Her books re-create earlier times in Japan, enabling the reader to imagine the people, place and their way of life, a re-creation made possible by much research in that country. This research was helped in the early days by an Asialink residency, which Gillian graciously acknowledges in her books. She said the residency, because it had support from the Australian

Government, helped to open doors in her research quest, a snippet of cultural understanding in itself: the knowledge that official channels in Australia respected her work meant courtesy and acknowledgement of this was reciprocated in a hierarchical culture like Japan’s.

Danius Kesminas went to Yogyakarta, got fascinated by the acronyms of Indonesian society and with young men from the art school there started a punk rock band, as you do, and based their songs on these acronyms. As he says, he doesn’t understand Indonesian, but that helped because meaning wasn’t able to get in the way. They have performed their music all over the world, making people laugh and think. That is another special quality of Indonesian culture: that even serious political messages can be transmitted through often very humorous performances. The band is called Punkasila, after the Indonesian credo Pancasila⁸, which was further retranslated into Spanish for the recent Havana Biennale as Panca Salsa. How can we not laugh and enjoy that? It takes a bit of the heat out of the solemnity of how we engage with Indonesia.

So, some examples of joy in our relations with Asia: a serious response to spirit and sound of East Asia, the melodramatic scale of the Filipino vision, knowledge of life in old Japan, the affectionate expressive exuberance of youth in acronym-laden Southeast Asia.

Australia’s recent trajectory of cultural engagement with Asia is mixed. The last 100 years have seen Western culture dominant around the world, but it isn’t as clear cut as we might imagine. Western culture is made up of all sorts of appropriations from elsewhere, as ‘eastern’ culture is today. Paul Gauguin not only lived in Tahiti but copied, through photographs,

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8. Pancasila is the five inseparable principles underlying the Indonesian state: belief in one God, a just and civilised humanity, the unity of the country, democracy and social justice, announced by President Sukarno and included in the Constitution in 1945. To treat it humorously, as here, is a little shocking in Indonesia.

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bas-reliefs from Borobodur in Java, which in turn influenced much of German Expressionism. That story isn't often told, as many other stories also are pared of their 'foreign' inputs. Australia has been a bit player in the story – a staging post for chintzes going to China, and a source of missionaries (and mercenaries and misfits) who in turn brought back fine collections of Chinese art (viz the National Gallery of Victoria's holdings). But our sights, with very few exceptions, jumped over Asia making a beeline for London usually. An exception to this was painter Margaret Preston who wrote with remarkable foresight in 1942:

Australia will find herself at the corner of a triangle: the East, as represented by China, India and Japan, will be at one point, the other will have the United States of America representing the West.⁹

Since the 1990s, there has been a change in the depth of engagement between Australia and Asia culturally, but it is still marginal and fleeting. We have been keen to establish an Indonesian centre for Australian culture (the British, French, Italians, Spanish, Germans, Dutch, Russians, Japanese, Koreans and Indians have already done), but it hasn't happened and seems, even today, far off. Indonesia is not a focus country for the Australia Council for the Arts, despite its rich cultural life, closeness and importance to us, because it isn't seen as a key 'market'.

A recent idea coming from Asialink's work is called The Utopia Project: a biennial, multi-layered visual arts event that is hosted by a different city of the Asia-Pacific region every two years. A small committee decides on the host city which agrees to provide the local infrastructure; all other member cities of the Project agree to support getting their artists and works to the city; and then the whole project moves elsewhere.

Administratively easy, not expensive anyway, and encouraging a real and growing sense of regional cohesion, understanding and comradeship: A sort of non-competitive Asia-Pacific Olympic Games of art. Rewarding, useful, and a third word to throw in here, fun.

Things are changing in Asia. I was recently the only Australian at the Asian Art Museum Directors' Forum in Seoul, the fourth iteration of this meeting. The others met as old friends. The Koreans put on a wonderful experience of good humour, goodwill, and insight into Korean culture. I was invited through the intervention of Dr Caroline Turner of ANU who had been the only Australian the previous year. It was a salutary example of personal intervention so necessary because we are not obviously part of that group. Unless we are proactive in Asia, such meetings will only grow in number, complexity and internal goodwill, and we will remain forever on the edge. I smiled to myself as I talked on my panel with the representative of the Japan Foundation – silently comparing their millions spent on cultural engagement in Asia with the tiny amount in Australia. We have to spend more, focus more, do more. It is to our advantage.

Looking forward, we could:

1. Make some harder decisions and follow through on them, including re-looking at the Australia Council's quota of half its international funding being for Asian projects. That quota, set in the early 1990s, was never met. It reached 35 per cent around 1993, and has since quietly fallen away.
2. Ensure that senior members of the arts community here are knowledgeable and easy in their engagement with Asia. We could send delegations for example to Indonesia to see how rich that culture really is. This might include making sure that public servants travel in Asia.

9. Margaret Preston, "The Orientation of Art in the Post War Pacific" Society of Artists Book, Sydney, 1942, p.7.

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3. Make harder decisions about including *contemporary* Asian content in our education institutions, particularly secondary and tertiary, because that is what the kids are interested in. No more batik and kites, ever. That means investing in training arts teachers, especially at tertiary level. The talk is talked but the walk is not taken.
4. Be proactive in our activities of always inviting colleagues from Asia here for conferences, talks, meetings. And they will invite us back. If we are proactive, people in Asia will be proactive back. This is just human nature.

Part of my purpose in writing this essay was to focus attention on alternative ways of building a regional community. In the arts in Asia it is being built already, by people there. The issue for us is us – Australia is increasingly not included in that community. First, we have to be proactive about us.

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