

1-20-2000

## Arts, Crafts, and Globalization: Databases of art and crafts will be more complete and in greater richness than was possible

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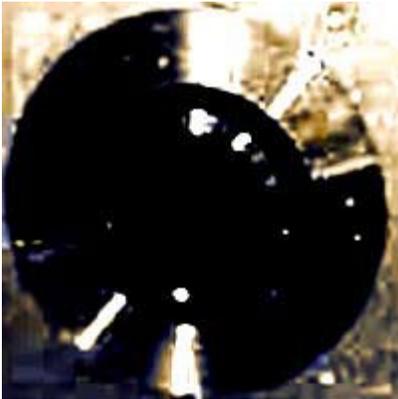
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### Recommended Citation

Cisler, Steve (2000) "Arts, Crafts, and Globalization: Databases of art and crafts will be more complete and in greater richness than was possible," *SWITCH*: Vol. 13 : No. 1 , Article 3.  
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## Arts, Crafts, and Globalization

**Databases of art and crafts will be more complete and in greater richness than was possible**

Steve Cisler on Jan 20 2000

issue 13

**Manuel Castells influential trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* describes the events that are shaping the end of this century and the beginning of the next: the technological revolution, interdependent economies, the end of the Soviet experiment, and networked and decentralized capitalism. The age is characterized by an increasingly rapid and rich interchange of ideas, technology, food, media, consumer items, weapons, drugs, and people. Original Article**

Manuel Castells influential trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* describes the events that are shaping the end of this century and the beginning of the next: the technological revolution, interdependent economies, the end of the Soviet experiment, and networked and decentralized capitalism. The age is characterized by an increasingly rapid and rich interchange of ideas, technology, food, media, consumer items, weapons, drugs, and people. The flows of people include massive numbers of refugees fleeing regional wars, itinerant labor, tourists, students, business people, economic emigrants, and professionals attending meetings and conferences. We fight a war far from our shores, and the only apparent effect that most Americans notice at the end of the conflict is an increase in restaurants opening in our towns. An airline ticket from the West Coast to Europe is less expensive than a trip to America's heartland. Our shirts and blouses are from Mauritius and Bangladesh, as well as Milan. Our conference bags are from Sri Lanka. Chilean wine competes in most stores with California products, and usually at a lower price. American culture is so popular that ministries of culture in Canada and the European Union (at the insistence of the French) are forming alliances to safeguard local film and music production and artistic endeavors. Automobiles are made from parts manufactured in three continents and assembled in a fourth one. Everyone in the world using desktop computers depends on an operating system from the West Coast of the U.S. (Sun, Microsoft, Apple, and even Linus Torvalds reigns over the Linux clan from Silicon Valley). The demand for mind-altering drugs in our schools and neighborhoods and workplaces employs not only the DEA forces and their armorers, but also the Taliban tax collectors in Afghanistan, farmers in the tropics of Bolivia and Colombia, and middlemen from Nigeria, Russia, and Mexico. Trade in people, ideas, weapons, food, and consumer items dominates the end of the century.

Humans have always traded. Trade has been primarily local, yet archeologists are still finding evidence of ancient global commerce: shards of Chinese pottery in Africa, Ashanti gold in medieval Europe, and vestiges of South American psychotropic drugs in Egyptian tombs. Artisans in New Mexico hundreds of years ago used coral and mother of pearl brought on foot from the Pacific coast. Ideas have flowed from China and the world of Islam and American Indian culture into Europe, just as they have from the U.S. and Europe into the rest of the world. What is different in 2000 is the speed and volume of the exchanges. The local is losing its dominance, partly because distance is less of a factor. Technologies allow us to work and play far from home, and towns and companies are trading more across borders and further from traditional markets. This is causing enormous dislocations even as the market flows increase. The recent events

in Seattle, Washington, where the World Trade Organization, met to discuss controversial expansion of the free trade agenda, was a success for small NGOs resisting some of these trends and an organizational failure for the WTO. My own observations <http://www.firstmonday.org> led me to think about this in relations to the art trade.

We have always believed art to be a core ingredient in the identity of an individual or a culture, and again we refer to Castells who believes that "in a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity...becomes the fundamental source of social meaning." This artistic search for identity is not independent of the globalizing forces, especially international trade and the use of computer internetworking that has changed the creation, collection, and dissemination of art, specifically folk art.

We will start our journey near the Gunung Batur volcano in Bali, Indonesia. A steep grade from the rim quickly eases into a gentle straight road. In May 1999, I was coasting down this grade toward the art center of the island in Ubud. The road descended for miles, and I thought I had reached the outskirts of this village when I came to the first woodworking shop. In these shops there may be a variety of masks or furniture or statues carved, painted, and sold. Because I was on a bicycle, I decided to wait until I reached Ubud to stow my luggage and then look seriously at items to buy. Every guide book and travel video and web site names this as a haven for artists and crafts people from Bali and elsewhere. Casual tourists believe it is a busy but authentic mecca of Balinese expression, catering to tourists but still maintaining centuries old traditions in its many art forms. After another five miles, I was still passing dozens and dozens of woodworking shops lining the road. I realized I was on the edge of a huge web of art production facilities, that centered on Ubud. Finally I stopped at a lone compound at the edge of the forest. There a family of five sat on the damp, smooth clay and on the stairs, carving, sanding, and painting wooden objects, whose only motif was that of a white skull. Skull boxes, full-length skeletons, skulls on a stick, skull wall-hangings, all in the style of the Mexican *dia de los muertos*--Day of the Dead. We had no language in common, so I just smiled to hide that I was mainly puzzled.

Why Mexican folk crafts in Indonesia? Another thirty minutes of riding and I arrived in Ubud. There, after checking into a hotel, I began a foot tour of the galleries and market stalls, all fed by products manufactured in the hundreds of compounds and villages surrounding the town. Not just wood products, but also oil paintings, silver work, woven goods, pottery, and a full array of antique stores that freely advertised "Sumatran antiques--made to order" (or Lombok or Timor or Sulawesi). The silver displays included jewelry from the southwest of the United States, Agades crosses from Niger, and any other popular motif from previously successful folk cultures. European artists Walter Spies and Rudolph Bonnet founded the Pita Mah Artists Cooperative in Bali in the 1930's, and this pump-primed the local talent, which is still producing a stunning array of group produced and individually signed paintings and sculpture.

More recently, these outside influences are the results of a steady growth in various classes of tourists since the 1970's, Indonesia's growing economy (until 1998), and the awareness of arts and crafts dealers who found that the skills of the Balinese metalworkers, for example, were not only cheaper but also could hand large orders with a more even flow of goods for the retail demand than could the artisans of whose designs and culture were appropriated and streamlined by the Balinese.

"Assembly Line" is a story by B. Traven, the famous and mysterious German radical who settled in Mexico in the early part of the 20th century. In the short story the American entrepreneur and traveler, E. L. Winthrop finds an Indian artisan near Oaxaca whose superb decorated baskets are rarely sold in the outdoor market for more than a few centavos profit. Winthrop agrees to the asking price of 50 centavos and then asks what the cost would be if he bought all the sixteen remaining ones. The *Indio* calculates and says 40 centavos each, at which point Winthrop buys them all and returns to America. There he shows them to a candy maker who offer him \$1.75 apiece if he can supply at least 10,000 baskets. Winthrop agrees and calculates his profits will be at least \$15,000.

When he returns to the village in Mexico and meets the Indian again, he explains the deal, thinking the Indian will be ecstatic to land such a large order. Instead, the artist tells how hard the work will be, how long each basket will take, and quotes fifteen pesos each for ten thousand baskets. The American is outraged, but the Indian explains:

*"You see, my good lordy and caballero, I've to make these canastitas my own way and with my song in them and with bits of my soul woven into them. If I were to make them in great numbers there would no longer be my soul in each, or my songs. Each would look*

*like the other with no difference whatever and such a thing would slowly eat up my heart. Each has to be another song which I hear in the morning when the sun rises and when the birds begin to chirp and the butterflies come and sit down on my baskets so that I may see a new beauty, because, you see, the butterflies like my baskets and the pretty colors on them, that's why they come and sit down, and I can make my canastitas after them."*

This artist realizes that wrenching art from its context and put into production line mode changes the whole equation, one that is very different from the economies of scale that drive the production of crafts in Bali (and elsewhere). What should be cheaper by the reasoning of the American becomes more costly for the Oaxacan.

This loss of context has been a concern of collectors and curators and the artists themselves. They are trying various ways to inject or include the context with the object. In 1993, I was doing a talk on the Internet in Melbourne, Australia, and I visited Aboriginal Gallery of Dreaming, a gallery that represented various aboriginal artists working in acrylic and wood. As a novice I listened to the low key explanations of various styles as well as introductions to strange objects used by the artists in their spiritual lives. The gallery owner explained that usually a painting was sold with a video of the artist talking about her work. This narrative was paraphrased or translated into English. Were all the artists women, I asked. No, but in this one women's group they did not spend their earnings on alcohol and were far more productive and careful than most of the men who lived in or near the art center in Utopia cattle station in Kurrejong near Alice Springs. **image**

I took this attempt at selling art, using video to keep it is some kind of context, at face value. The video, the documentation by the gallery owner also increased the value for resale. Now, seven years later, the Australian gallery has a large web site with a sales representative and warehouse in Seattle to handle the new business in high tech Washington state.

The increased global markets have resulted in unusual partnerships and business deals to keep the supplies of arts and crafts flowing to the customers. In the United States, some Amish stores catering to the tourist retail trade have contracted with Hmong (Lao) women to produce the fine quilts in early American motifs. These designs are now sold in northern Thailand as well as Pennsylvania and Ohio. The Mohawk first nation near Montreal, Quebec, Canada, planned to contract with Zapotec artists near Oaxaca for the production and export of "authentic Indian artifacts" in the style of older Mohawk items, but it was rejected by other influential tribal leaders. In a gallery in the mining town of Jerome, Arizona, the owner sells a bamboo curtain where each small cylinder of bamboo is painted 360 degrees. Assembling the pieces carefully, the artists form the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe. **image** This elegant curtain is made in Vietnam, shipped to Mexico, imported to Austin, Texas and then wholesaled to the gallery in Arizona.

Other travelers are taken in by attempts to put other works of art for sale into another and sometimes false context: one where the illicit origin causes the buyer to think he had found a bargain. Here are two scenarios:

In San Jose, Costa Rica, there is a large plaza where restaurants are located. They are wonderful places to enjoy the passing crowds and the fine tropical weather. Frequently, peasants in rustic dress would approach the tables where tourists are sitting and explain they were digging in the field when they accidentally found something, and perhaps the tourist would like to take a look and perhaps help identify it. He then unwraps an old newspaper and an aged and crusty object is displayed. To the novice it looks like a pre-Columbian artifact, and sometimes the greedy buyer will try to make a deal with the peasant. Of course, the objects are counterfeit and cleverly aged and usually worth far less than what the visitor pays.

1995: In a fancy shopping mall near the river in Bangkok, Thailand, there are floors of shops selling manufactured goods, silks, rugs, furniture, and a number of art galleries. Most of these galleries have old bronzes, figures of the Buddha, tapestries, and fine objects of bone and metal. What is much more fascinating are the photograph albums of larger sculptures, mostly outdoors, located in temples, usually in Cambodia. The idea is that you pick an object and the gallery obtains it for you at some later date, much as you might approach an agent for a Los Angeles car theft ring and order a Corvette or a Lexus or Land Cruiser (British racing green, please). The photographs I saw had "X's" across some of the heads, indicating that that part of the statue had been sold but the torso remained.

Certainly, the buyers and sellers and mediaries (the market) function because of increased tourist trade, an expansion of interest in other kinds of art, the fear that

authentic art is disappearing, but also because of low paid border officials in Cambodia and Thailand, the need to supplement farm incomes with sales of fake pottery and figurines to rich Europeans and Americans, and a less than robust infrastructure for preserving and protecting the patrimony of a country (or culture within another country).

One of the forces of globalization is the increased movement of laborers and refugees fleeing government oppression or war or economic austerity. Many Mexicans have emigrated to the U.S., bringing with them old traditions. At the 1998 American folklife festival in Washington, D.C. the motif was the state of Wisconsin. Surprisingly, a group of Mexican artists in Milwaukee were exhibiting the crafts they were preserving and practicing including a rare carving of corn stalks into lightweight statues which traditionally were carried into battle. Now they are being made far from their origins and with more care because of the need of the distant artist to preserve this special mode of expression from the distant past.

## Computer networks and databases

With the Internet available in almost every capital of the developing world, and the explosive growth of e-commerce systems with robust back-ends and sophisticated fulfillment channels, the display of art collections and the sale of some arts and crafts through a web site has changed the economics of art. The first art for sale I saw on a web site was from Haiti and from southwestern United States in late 1993. Now, there are hundreds of collections and virtual galleries displaying or selling everything from Tibetan rugs to Chilean jewelry. One of the most unusual collections on the Internet is the t-shirt database of Professor Howard Besser of U.C.L.A.

<http://sunsite.Berkeley.EDU/T-Shirts/> As Professor Lev Manovich of the University of California San Diego states, "After the novel, and subsequently cinema privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate - database." **Database as a Symbolic Form. Nettime December 14**

Dr. Besser <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/~howard/> is experienced in the conversion of art objects into digital databases, and he has written on many subjects, including the longevity of digital media. (Anthropologists may very well wonder what sort of civilization existed in Silicon Valley in a few hundred years, much as they ponder the demise of the ancient Mayans. Our media is short-lived, and the efforts in this area are geared to the future, not to the preservation of the past or the present). As part of a class at a graduate library school, Dr. Besser used his t-shirt collection as the raw material for the construction of an online database of images. Switch interviewed him on December 5, 1999.

### How did you decide to collect t-shirts?

It happened without me noticing it. In the early 80s I was living in Haight Ashbury in San Francisco with people who produced political tracts. They started making t shirts, once every three or four weeks. So I had to have one of each (political slogans). I was wearing them all the time. I started traveling and found myself in interesting places where they had t shirts. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago had conceptual and avant garde t-shirts for sale in the store. Their store collection grew and grew. They might have had 40 kinds around the late 80s.

### when did you decide to focus on certain topics or genres?

I always collected political and then it was art reproductions. Most were not reproductions; they were art pieces themselves. The producers saw the t-shirt as both a canvas and a medium. I had some Ken Brown and Jennifer Berman works that were put on shirts and postcards. They were into low press runs and interesting images.

### Are there other t-shirt collectors with whom you trade or network?

The other collectors I know about are people who indiscriminately collect t-shirts. A DJ in SF has a big one, larger than mine, but he takes everything. Some people collect for me. A woman at the Getty just brought one back from an art university in Thailand.

### Tell me about your scanning and database project

I taught an image database class about five years ago at the University of Michigan. I thought it would be a good way for the students to figure out a cataloging scheme for my collection and figure out the scanning resolutions. We talked about what field names, what attributes, controlled vocabulary for the dabs, and we went through this

iterative process to develop a full cataloging scheme.

We used a flatbed scanner, but some images were too large and we had to mosaic them together. We solved a variety of problems to smooth out the whole process..

### **What kinds of web databases are you using?**

We used Filemaker as the database because it was easiest for input. A programmer in the class helped to write cgi scripts for the query. I'm way behind with only 550 in the dabs, but I got 150 on a recent trip to Vietnam and Thailand. Now I have over 1300.

It's on the Berkeley Sun Site, and Roy Tennant has made some interesting changes.

### **What value does the database add to your collection?**

It helps me find things! I have so many that I can know where the main ones are. I only wear t-shirts now, but about three or four years ago, I was at a gentleman's club in England where I had to wear a button shirt and tie upon entering and leaving the club. However, when I gave the talk I changed into my t-shirt.

### **Some people are reluctant to put their collections in the public eye for security reasons. Is this a problem for you?**

I don't think so. Nobody has ripped them off, but they have borrowed them for extended periods.

### **How do electronic databases change art?**

If you think about postmodern art, it's about taking existing things and reorganizing them and finding new links between them, then forming a collection and finding themes within. This recombinant process is really art-making. **image**

## **WorldBoard**

Some combinations of present technologies are being used for prototypes of small portable systems that may affect the world of art. WorldBoard <http://www.worldboard.com> is a collaborative project to build wireless, portable systems that link web objects with place. Using GPS, html, Java, and TCP/IP, devices are being modelled to provide "augmented reality" or a rich context for an object in a fixed location: a cave painting, an object in a museum, a sculpture, or at a higher level, a building that houses an artists cooperative or a gallery or archive. Using an integrated bar code reader, the device owner will approach the object and be linked to varying levels of information and narrative. Though not in production, to my knowledge, the teams are working on standards for all parts of this project: input devices, publishing standards, wearable computers, wireless integration, and GPS technology. The web site is running on an integrated web server and database developed with FileMaker Pro. For more information and a free template check out <http://www.eoe.org/>

## **Conclusion**

With collection resources and expertise, plus the tools I have described, databases of art and crafts will be more complete and in greater richness than was possible at many of the places where the art was created. There will be relationships and attributes assigned to the objects, historical background, and the ability to view them in the context of neighboring or similar objects. In addition, the same tools can be used to probe distant markets, set prices, arrange sales and auctions, or search for new additions to the collection. Like so many of the forces of globalization, some power will be re-centralized, even as the proponents say it will be dispersed and equal. For this reason, putting the tools in the hands of the artists and craftmakers will help to keep the equation closer to a balanced environment.



## **::CrossReference**

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