

Freeland's *Art Theory*

Chapter 3 – “Cultural crossings”

Chapter overview

- Chapter 3 discusses philosophical problems that emerge when one considers art forms and artworks from different cultures.
- The beginning of the chapter advances a view that had already been hinted at in chapter 1. It is not enough to be absorbed in the contemplation of an artwork's perceptual surface. Knowledge of its **context of production**, as well as of the **appreciative practices** that it requires, is important to an adequate understanding of the work.
- The rest of the chapter considers various questions. We shall focus on the problem of **cultural appropriation**, which occurs when outsiders to a culture use or take possession of that culture's heritage.
- This chapter discusses artworks from different cultures. Note that some of these artworks would not be considered as such in a different cultural tradition, at least not obviously.



留园, Suzhou



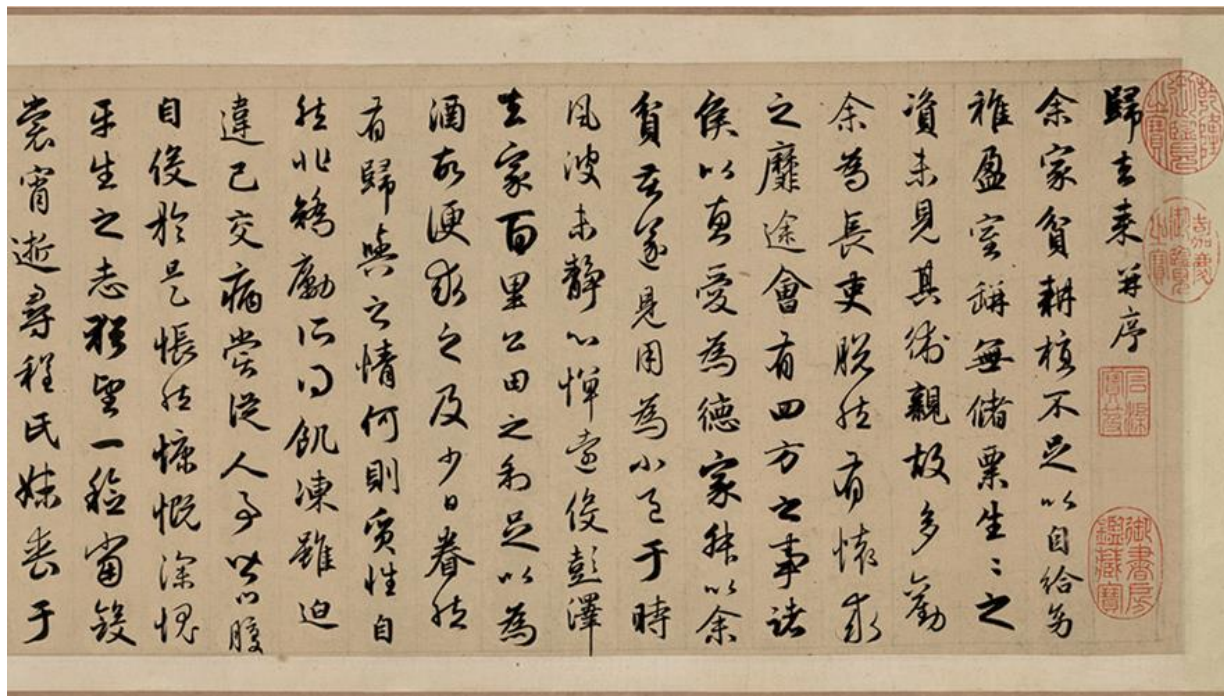
Japanese tea ceremony

Appreciation and context

- What does it mean to say that a work's context of production and appreciation are important to its understanding?
- We evaluate artworks not only on the basis of what we see, but also depending on the actions that we think were necessary to produce it – think of how we are impressed by a meticulously detailed miniature, or moved by the expressiveness of gestural, aggressive brushwork.
- The way we appreciate an artwork depends on the art form it belongs to, as well as on its genre, style, etc. For instance, there is no single appropriate way of looking at a painting.

Appreciation and context

- Consider Chinese calligraphy. What are the elements that may easily be ignored or overlooked by an appreciator who isn't familiar with this art form?



Calligraphy by Zhao Mengfu

Cultural appropriation

- **Cultural appropriation**, occurs when outsiders to a culture use or take possession of that culture's heritage. This heritage could be material (artifacts) or immaterial (traditions, styles, etc.).
- In common parlance, the term 'cultural appropriation' is often used in a **normative** sense that implies the morally reproachable nature of such appropriation. In this sense, all cultural appropriation is **morally wrong** appropriation (the word 'racist' is almost always employed in a similar way).
- By contrast, philosophical discussions of cultural appropriation tend to adopt a **descriptive** concept of cultural appropriation.
- This is because the main philosophical question regarding cultural appropriation is to determine if, and why, cultural appropriation is wrongful. Philosophers need therefore a **value-neutral** notion of cultural appropriation.



Phidias, Parthenon marbles (Elgin marbles), c. 447–438 BCE



The Acropolis in Athens, Greece



Katy Perry performing live her song “Unconditionally”

Cultural appropriation

- Typically, morally controversial cases of cultural appropriation occur at the expenses of a group that is oppressed by the appropriating one, or in general in a subordinate position.
- The idea is that cultural exchanges that are normal and healthy in the case of two cultures that treat each other equally, may instead become unfair to one of the two cultures if this is less powerful than the other.

Rap star Eminem with rapper and producer Dr. Dre



Cultural appropriation

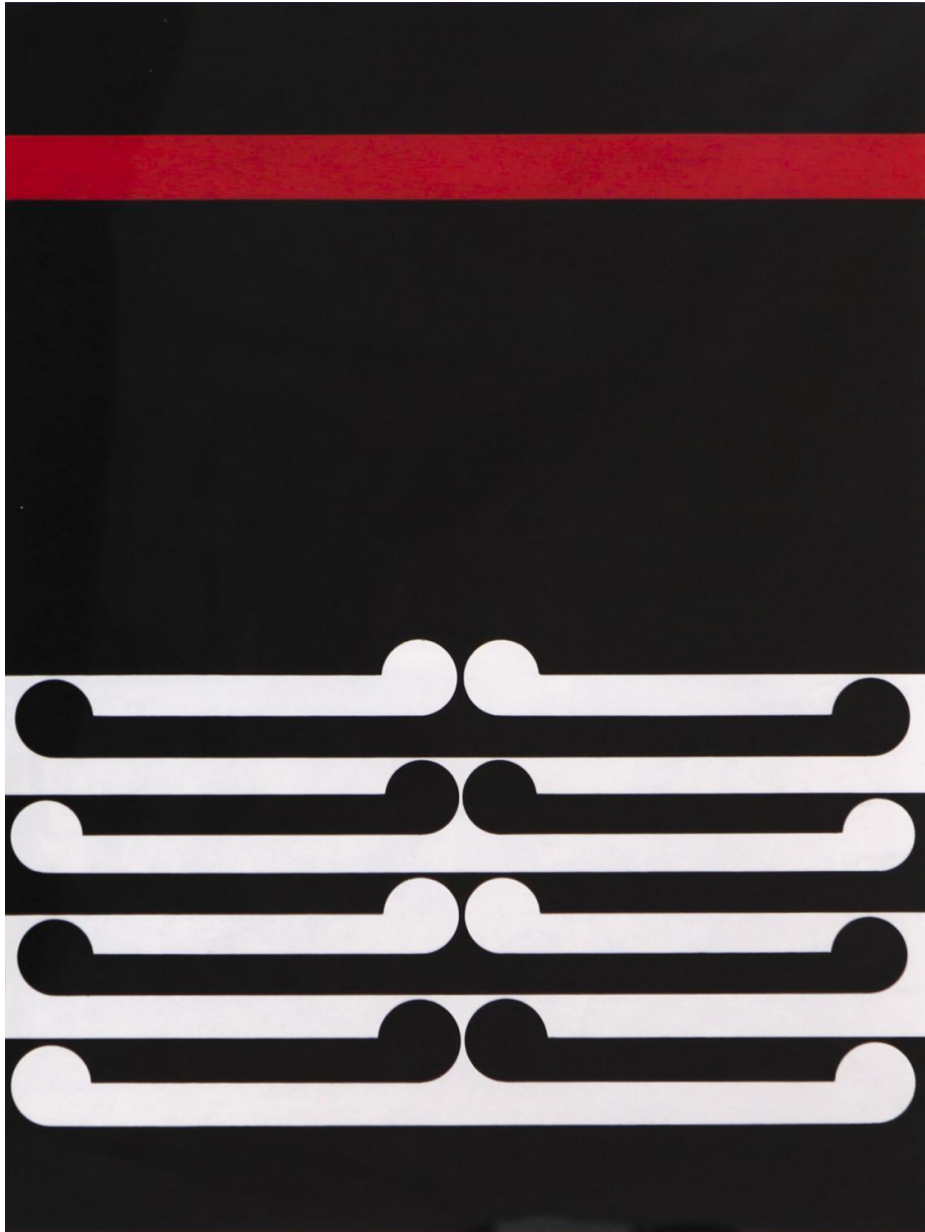
- A first problem with appropriation may be **offense**. Acts of cultural appropriation are at times offensive to individuals of the culture whose heritage is appropriated.
- Some writers distinguish between offence and **profound offense**. While the former is only superficial, the latter impacts a person's values or sense of identity.
- While it is conceded that cultural appropriation may cause both types of offense, it is also normally conceded that offense is acceptable if it is **counterweighed** by valuable features of the appropriation act, such as personal expression, artistic value, social value, freedom of speech, etc.

Cultural appropriation

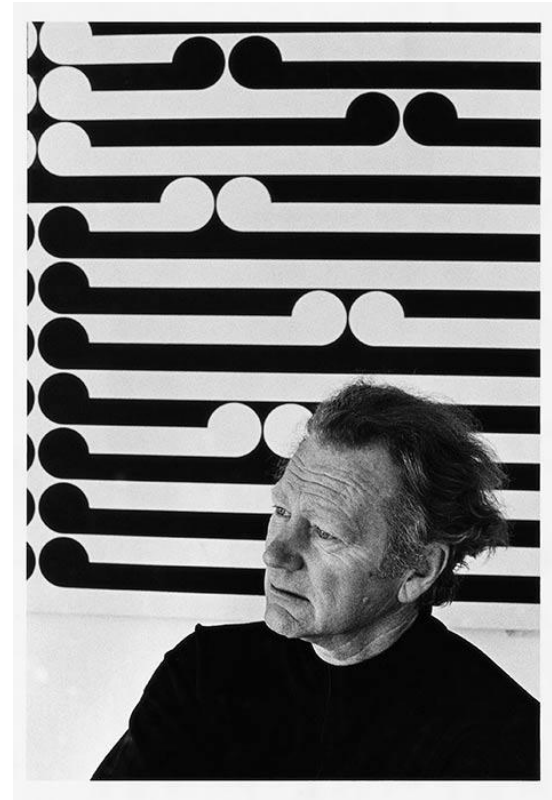
- **Harm** is a more serious concern than mere offense, though it is at times controversial whether something should be described as the one or the other.
- The case of the Elgin marbles may be a case of harm. The economic interests and cultural prestige of Greece are harmed by the displacement of the sculptures.
- Because harm is considered more serious than offense, an act of cultural appropriation that causes harm will normally need to be produce more value than one that causes mere offense, if it is to be considered morally acceptable.

Cultural appropriation

- In addition to harming a group's economic interest or reputation, cultural appropriation may at times harm a group because it **misrepresents** it.
- Think of how Hollywood movies often feature people from minority groups (black people, gay people, etc.) in a way that reflects prejudiced views about them.
- It is of course acceptable, and even valuable, for a group to express their view and **perspective** on another group, even if this does not coincide with the other group's view of itself.
- However, this may become problematic if the members from the misrepresented group do not have many chances to represent themselves in their own terms.



Gordon Walters, *Untitled* (1978)



Gordon Walters

Sketch of Maori
design pattern



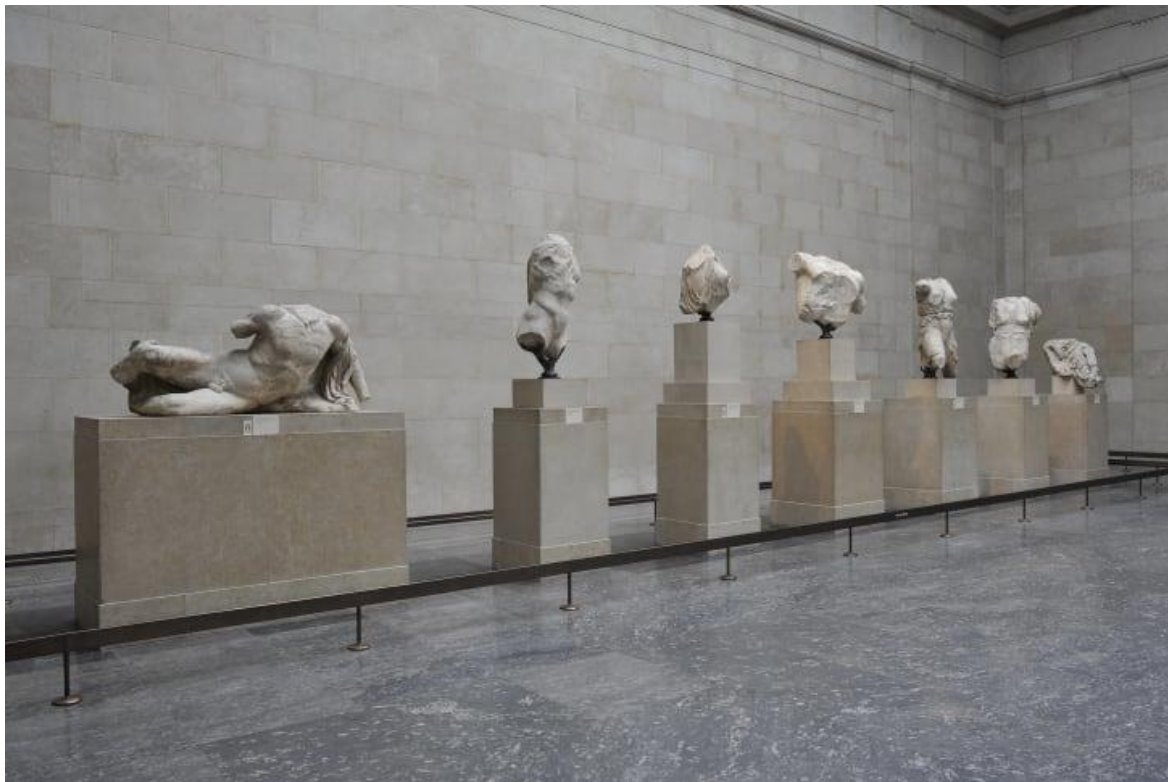
Maori meeting house

“Heavily informed by Thomas McEvilley’s critique of the Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 *Primitivism* show, the New Zealand appropriation debate comes to a head with the exhibition *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art* at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992 (I was one of the curators).⁵ The show willfully presents Walters’s work alongside trailblazer Maori modernists like Para Matchitt (who was clearly influenced by Walters) and Sandy Adsett, in an attempt to reimagine his work as part of a wider national cultural discourse. However, it is less the show than Rangi Panoho’s catalogue essay that generates the furor. Panoho criticises Walters’s ‘programme of abstraction ... which progressively simplified the [koru] form, divesting it of meaning and imperfection and distancing it from its cultural origins.’”

(<http://robertleonard.org/gordon-walters-form-becomes-sign/>)

Class discussion

- Should Elgin's marbles remain in the British Museum, or should they return to Athens? Discuss in small groups.



Some useful facts:

- 1) The Elgin marbles and the rest of the Parthenon marbles in Athens are all part of a single work of art, which was intended to be seen in one piece.
- 2) In London, the marbles are seen by about 6 million visitors per year. The Acropolis Museum has around 1.5 million visitors.
- 3) Lord Elgin likely did not have permission to remove the marbles.
- 4) At the time Elgin took the marbles, Greece was ruled by a foreign power, the Ottomans (奥斯曼). Greece became independent only later (1830), also with the support of Britain.
- 5) Italy, Sweden, the Vatican, Heidelberg University (Germany), and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles have all restituted to Greece other parts of the Parthenon marbles.
- 6) The Acropolis Museum in Athens was built in order to display the marbles in natural sunlight, as they would have been seen originally.
- 7) The Elgin marbles had a considerable influence on British (and more generally European) culture. This was partly due to their prestigious location in London.
- 8) The Acropolis Museum's standards of conservation are presumably as high as those of the British Museum.
- 9) According to a poll, most British people think the marbles should be returned to Greece.
- 10) It would be possible to return the marbles as a long term loan, with the UK still maintaining ownership.