

Art Without Borders: Transcultural Adaptation, Hybridity, and Cultural Dialogue in Visual Arts

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ABSTRACT

Transcultural adaptation in visual arts has emerged as a significant field of inquiry in an increasingly interconnected cultural landscape. Unlike approaches that understand artistic influence primarily through the binary categories of source and derivative, transcultural adaptation foregrounds movement, negotiation, reinterpretation, hybridity, and cultural dialogue. Artists working across geographical, linguistic, historical, and ideological boundaries frequently transform images, symbols, techniques, narratives, materials, and aesthetic traditions from different cultural contexts to produce new visual languages. Such practices complicate conventional assumptions about cultural authenticity and artistic ownership while simultaneously creating opportunities for dialogue and contestation.

This paper examines transcultural adaptation as a creative and critical practice through which artists negotiate cultural identity, migration, colonial histories, globalization, gender, race, memory, and belonging. Drawing upon adaptation theory, particularly the work of Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam, and connecting it with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "Third Space," the paper proposes that adaptation should not be understood as a subordinate relationship between an original and a copy. Rather, adaptation is a productive process of transformation in which meaning is relocated, recontextualized, and renegotiated. The paper traces the historical roots of transcultural exchange through trade, religion, empire, colonialism, migration, and modernism before examining contemporary practices through selected artists including El Anatsui, Yinka Shonibare, Chitra Ganesh, and Kehinde Wiley.

Particular attention is given to the ethical tensions surrounding cultural appropriation, unequal power relations, authenticity, representation, and ownership. The paper further investigates the digital and technological transformation of transcultural creativity, including social media, virtual exhibitions, algorithmic art, and artificial intelligence. It argues that AI-generated visual culture creates a new form of transcultural adaptation while simultaneously raising questions concerning datasets, authorship, cultural bias, consent, and the ownership of collective cultural knowledge. Ultimately, the paper contends that transcultural adaptation can function as a transformative form of visual dialogue when it acknowledges historical power structures and treats cultural difference not as a resource for extraction but as a space for reciprocal engagement.

Keywords: transcultural adaptation, visual arts, hybridity, intertextuality, cultural appropriation, globalization, diaspora, identity, digital art, artificial intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Art has rarely existed within completely isolated cultural boundaries. Images, motifs, stories, techniques, materials, symbols, and aesthetic practices have travelled with people across geographical and political borders for centuries. The history of visual culture is therefore also a history of movement. What may appear to belong exclusively to one cultural tradition often contains traces of encounters with other cultures. Objects, techniques, narratives, and visual forms have been continuously transformed as they moved through trade routes, religious networks, migration, conquest, colonialism, education, diplomacy, and technological exchange.

In the contemporary world, such cultural movement has become more visible and more rapid. Global communication technologies have made images available almost instantaneously across continents. Artists can encounter visual traditions that were previously geographically distant, collaborate with practitioners in other countries, access digitized museum collections, participate in international exhibitions, and circulate their work to global audiences. Consequently, contemporary visual creativity increasingly takes place in spaces where cultural boundaries overlap.

This phenomenon may be described through the concept of **transcultural adaptation**. The term suggests more than the simple movement of an artistic form from one culture into another. It indicates a process through which cultural materials are selected, translated, transformed, combined, challenged, and given new meanings. Transcultural adaptation therefore involves both continuity and rupture. A cultural form may retain traces of its historical identity while simultaneously acquiring meanings that could not have existed in its original context.

The concept is particularly important for adaptation studies. Traditionally, adaptation scholarship was strongly associated with the transformation of literary works into films and other media. Such approaches often generated questions of fidelity: Is the adaptation faithful to the source? What has been lost? What has been changed? Which version is superior? Contemporary adaptation theory has challenged this hierarchical model. Linda Hutcheon, for example, conceptualizes adaptation as a process of repetition without exact replication, emphasizing that adaptation involves reinterpretation and recontextualization. Robert Stam similarly challenges the notion that an adaptation should be judged primarily by its fidelity to an original text, instead emphasizing intertextuality and dialogue among texts and cultural forms.

When adaptation theory is extended beyond literature and cinema into visual culture, it becomes possible to examine cultural transformation itself as an adaptive process. An artist who incorporates a historical visual vocabulary from another culture does not necessarily reproduce it. The artist may alter its scale, material, symbolism, political meaning, gender representation, or historical context. The resulting artwork becomes a new cultural statement.

This process becomes particularly significant in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. Artists whose identities are shaped by multiple cultural locations frequently work within what Homi K. Bhabha famously describes as a “Third Space,” a site where cultural meanings are negotiated rather than simply inherited. Hybridity, in this framework, is not merely the mixture of two stable cultures. It is a condition in which cultural identities themselves become fluid and relational.

The present paper therefore approaches transcultural adaptation through three interconnected questions:

1. How do visual artists transform cultural forms when they move across geographical and historical boundaries?
2. How does transcultural adaptation negotiate identity, hybridity, memory, and power?
3. What ethical challenges arise when artists adapt cultural forms belonging to communities other than their own, particularly within globalized and digital environments?

The paper argues that transcultural adaptation should be understood neither as unrestricted cultural borrowing nor as an inherently problematic form of appropriation. Its significance depends upon the circumstances of exchange, the historical relationship between cultures, the artist's intentions and practices, the distribution of power, the degree of contextual understanding, and the meanings produced by the resulting artwork.

2. Conceptualizing Transcultural Adaptation

The concept of transcultural adaptation emerges at the intersection of adaptation studies, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, visual studies, and globalization studies. Although these fields employ different vocabularies, they share an interest in how cultural forms change when they encounter new contexts.

The prefix “**trans-**” is particularly significant. It implies movement across, through, or beyond. Culture is therefore not treated as a sealed container. Instead, cultures are understood as dynamic systems that constantly encounter and influence one another.

Transcultural adaptation may consequently be defined as:

the creative transformation of cultural forms, narratives, symbols, materials, techniques, or aesthetic conventions across cultural contexts, resulting in new meanings produced through processes of negotiation, reinterpretation, and hybridity.

his definition distinguishes transcultural adaptation from straightforward imitation. Imitation attempts to reproduce an existing form, whereas adaptation introduces difference. The adapted work remains connected to previous cultural material but does not simply repeat it.

Linda Hutcheon’s understanding of adaptation is particularly useful here. Adaptation can be understood as both a product and a process. As a product, it is a recognizable transformation of an existing work or cultural form; as a process, it involves interpretation and creation. This framework can be extended to visual culture, where adaptation may involve transforming an iconographic tradition, historical image, artistic technique, material practice, or narrative structure.

Robert Stam’s emphasis on intertextuality is equally important. Rather than imagining one artwork as the original and another as its inferior copy, intertextual approaches recognize that cultural works exist within networks of references and influences. Adaptation thus becomes dialogic rather than hierarchical. Stam’s adaptation theory explicitly moves away from the language of loss and fidelity toward intertextual relationships.

This approach is particularly productive for transcultural visual art because an artwork may simultaneously refer to multiple cultural traditions. It can contain historical references, popular culture, religious imagery, colonial symbols, contemporary fashion, digital aesthetics, and personal memories.

Transcultural adaptation is therefore not necessarily a movement from **Culture A** → **Culture B**. It may instead involve:

Culture A + Culture B + personal experience + historical memory + contemporary politics → new visual meaning.

The adapted artwork occupies a space between recognizable traditions without belonging completely to any single one.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Adaptation Theory

Adaptation theory provides the primary conceptual foundation for this study. Traditional adaptation criticism often privileged the source text and evaluated subsequent works according to fidelity. Such a model creates an implicit hierarchy: the original is considered authentic, while the adaptation becomes derivative.

Contemporary adaptation studies have questioned this hierarchy. Hutcheon argues that adaptation is inherently creative because the adapter interprets an existing work and transforms it for another context. Adaptation is therefore simultaneously repetition and difference.

This perspective is especially useful for visual arts. A visual artwork may adapt an earlier artwork without reproducing its exact appearance. Instead, it may reproduce its compositional structure while changing the characters, political meaning, cultural context, or medium.

Adaptation can therefore be understood as a form of **creative interpretation**.

The adapted artwork asks not simply, “What was the earlier work?” but also:

- What does the earlier work mean now?
- Who was represented in the original?
- Who was excluded?
- What happens when the image is relocated?
- What happens when its original power structure is reversed?
- What new audience encounters it?
- What historical memory does the adaptation activate?

These questions make adaptation a critical practice rather than a merely technical one.

Intertextuality and Dialogism

The concept of intertextuality further destabilizes the idea of originality. Every cultural work exists in relation to other works, traditions, conventions, and discourses.

Robert Stam draws upon Bakhtinian dialogism and theories of intertextuality to conceptualize adaptation as an interaction among multiple cultural texts rather than a one-to-one transfer.

In visual culture, intertextuality can be seen when an artist reworks:

- classical portraiture;
- religious iconography;
- colonial imagery;
- mythology;
- popular cinema;
- advertisements;
- fashion photography;
- political monuments;
- folk traditions;
- digital memes.

The artwork becomes a visual conversation.

Homi K. Bhabha and Cultural Hybridity

Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity provides another essential dimension. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha challenges the idea that cultures possess completely stable and pure identities. Cultural meaning is produced through encounters and negotiations.

His concept of the **Third Space** is especially relevant to transcultural art. The Third Space is not simply halfway between two cultures. It is a new space of enunciation in which meanings are renegotiated.

For diasporic artists, the Third Space can represent the experience of simultaneously inhabiting multiple cultural worlds. An artist may inherit one cultural tradition, live within another, and create work that belongs fully to neither.

Transcultural visual art therefore becomes a manifestation of cultural hybridity.

Historical Roots of Transcultural Artistic Exchange

Transcultural adaptation is not a purely contemporary phenomenon. Its historical roots are extensive.

Trade Routes and Artistic Exchange

The Silk Road and maritime trade networks connected regions of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Alongside commodities, artistic techniques, decorative motifs, materials, and technologies travelled.

Chinese porcelain, for example, became highly influential in Islamic and European decorative traditions. Persian artistic conventions influenced the development of Mughal miniature painting in South Asia. These developments demonstrate that artistic traditions frequently emerge through interaction rather than isolation.

The Mughal artistic tradition itself offers a particularly significant example. Persian manuscript traditions encountered Indian visual conventions and local materials, producing an artistic language that was neither simply Persian nor simply indigenous. The result was a hybrid courtly aesthetic.

Such examples challenge the assumption that cultures develop in isolation and only later begin to borrow from one another.

Religious Movement and Visual Transformation

Religion has historically been another powerful mechanism of transcultural exchange.

The spread of Buddhism from India to Central, East, and Southeast Asia resulted not in the simple duplication of Indian forms but in their transformation according to local cultural systems. Buddhist images in different geographical regions developed distinct facial features, clothing, bodily proportions, iconographic details, and aesthetic conventions.

The same religious narrative could therefore acquire different visual identities.

This demonstrates an important characteristic of adaptation: **movement produces transformation**.

Colonialism and Unequal Exchange

Colonial encounters, however, require a more critical interpretation.

Not all cultural exchanges are voluntary or equal. Colonialism created systems in which European powers acquired, collected, classified, displayed, and commercially exploited the cultural materials of colonized societies.

European modernism provides several examples of artistic engagement with non-European forms. African sculptures, masks, Oceanic art, Asian prints, and other visual traditions entered European artistic circles. These encounters contributed to the development of modernist experimentation.

However, describing these encounters simply as “inspiration” risks concealing the unequal political and economic conditions through which cultural objects circulated.

This is where transcultural adaptation must be distinguished from cultural appropriation.

The question is not merely:

“Who influenced whom?”

It is also:

“Under what conditions did that influence occur?”

“Who had the authority to interpret the cultural material?”

“Who received recognition and economic benefit?”

“Who was represented as primitive, modern, civilized, or exotic?”

These questions transform the study of transcultural adaptation from an aesthetic inquiry into a political one.

Modernism and the Global Visual Imagination

European modernism frequently incorporated visual forms originating outside Europe. Japanese woodblock prints influenced artists associated with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. African visual traditions influenced European modernists.

Such exchanges contributed to the breakdown of nineteenth-century European conventions of representation.

Yet the history is contradictory. Non-Western art could simultaneously be celebrated for its formal innovation and marginalized through colonial stereotypes.

The modernist fascination with the “primitive” illustrates this contradiction. European artists often valued non-Western objects for their perceived authenticity while ignoring the sophisticated social, religious, and philosophical systems from which those objects emerged.

Thus, transcultural adaptation has always contained a double possibility:

dialogue and domination.

This tension remains central to contemporary visual culture.

Transcultural Adaptation in Contemporary Visual Arts

Contemporary artists increasingly work across cultural, geographical, and disciplinary boundaries. Their practices often involve migration, diaspora, globalization, memory, gender, race, and colonial history.

Four artists are particularly useful for examining these processes: **El Anatsui, Yinka Shonibare, Chitra Ganesh, and Kehinde Wiley.**

El Anatsui: Material Transformation and Global Memory

Ghanaian artist El Anatsui's large-scale sculptural installations made from discarded bottle caps and metal fragments demonstrate how transcultural adaptation can occur through material transformation.

His works frequently resemble enormous textiles, folds, curtains, or woven surfaces. The material itself carries multiple histories: industrial production, global consumption, alcohol trade, waste, African craft traditions, and contemporary ecological concerns.

The significance of Anatsui's work lies partly in its refusal to maintain a rigid separation between traditional African craft and contemporary global art.

The metal pieces are not merely recycled objects. Through arrangement and repetition, they become a new visual language.

This transformation can be interpreted as an adaptive process:

industrial waste → material transformation → textile-like structure → cultural memory → contemporary sculpture.

The work therefore connects local histories with global systems of consumption.

Anatsui's practice also challenges the Western distinction between “craft” and “fine art.” By creating monumental works that resemble woven textiles, he recalls African traditions while simultaneously participating in the international contemporary art world.

The result is not a simple return to tradition. It is a reconfiguration of tradition.

Yinka Shonibare and the Performance of Hybridity

Yinka Shonibare's work provides another important example of transcultural adaptation.

His artworks frequently combine European historical imagery with African-associated textiles. The juxtaposition creates an intentionally unstable cultural identity.

The historical costumes may evoke eighteenth- or nineteenth-century European aristocracy, while the textiles disrupt the apparent European identity of the figures.

The effect is intellectually productive because the viewer is forced to question categories such as:

- European;
- African;
- authentic;
- artificial;
- traditional;
- modern;
- colonizer;
- colonized.

Shonibare's work demonstrates that cultural identity is not necessarily singular.

His figures perform cultural hybridity.

The clothing becomes an adaptive language through which colonial history is reconsidered. Rather than allowing European historical imagery to remain culturally exclusive, Shonibare relocates it within a broader transnational context.

His work therefore exemplifies Bhabha's Third Space: cultural meaning is generated through the interaction of apparently incompatible traditions.

Chitra Ganesh: Mythology, Feminism, Queerness and Reinterpretation

Chitra Ganesh offers a particularly compelling example of transcultural adaptation because her practice moves across Indian mythology, literature, popular culture, feminism, queer theory, comics, science fiction, and contemporary visual art.

The Smithsonian describes Ganesh as an artist who draws upon Indian mythology, literature, and popular culture to recover feminist and queer narratives and imagine alternative futures.

Her work demonstrates that adaptation does not necessarily move between two clearly defined cultures. Instead, multiple discourses can converge within one visual practice.

Ganesh's artistic vocabulary frequently combines:

- South Asian mythology;
- comic-book aesthetics;
- feminist theory;
- queer narratives;
- science fiction;
- archival material;
- contemporary activism.

Her figures challenge conventional representations of femininity and inherited cultural narratives. Her own account of the practice emphasizes marginalized queer and femme subjects and the creation of alternative relationships, technologies, and futures.

Her work is therefore significant because it illustrates **internal transculturality** as well as geographical transculturality.

The artist does not simply transport Indian mythology into Western contemporary art. She transforms mythology through feminist and queer interpretive frameworks.

This creates a new visual vocabulary in which the past becomes material for imagining the future.

Kehinde Wiley: Rewriting the Visual Politics of Power

Kehinde Wiley's *Rumors of War* offers another important example of adaptive visual practice.

Wiley draws upon the tradition of European equestrian portraiture, historically associated with military power, aristocracy, empire, and political authority. He replaces the conventional heroic figure with a contemporary Black subject dressed in streetwear.

The resulting image retains the visual language of power while changing its social meaning.

Wiley's studio describes *Rumors of War* as an extension of his engagement with equestrian portraiture, representation, race, gender, and power.

The work is particularly significant because it demonstrates that adaptation can be an act of **visual reclamation**.

The traditional equestrian monument communicates:

horse + rider + monumental scale + heroic pose = authority.

Wiley retains much of this visual grammar but changes the identity of the rider.

The adaptation therefore asks:

Who is allowed to appear heroic?

Whose body is monumentalized?

Whose history is represented in public space?

Who has historically been excluded from visual narratives of power?

The sculpture was also created in dialogue with Richmond's Confederate monument landscape, making the work an intervention into contested historical memory.

Thus, adaptation becomes a strategy for rewriting cultural memory.

Diaspora and the Transcultural Self

Diasporic artists occupy a particularly important position within transcultural visibility.

Migration often creates a condition of cultural doubleness. The artist may experience one culture as inherited and another as lived. Memories of homeland may coexist with contemporary realities in the host society.

Diasporic art therefore frequently explores:

- nostalgia;
- displacement;
- language;
- memory;
- belonging;
- cultural translation;
- alienation;
- home;
- racial identity;
- inherited traditions.

The diasporic artist is not necessarily attempting to preserve an untouched cultural identity. Instead, the artist often creates a new identity from fragments.

This makes the concept of hybridity particularly relevant.

A diasporic artwork may contain a family photograph, a traditional motif, contemporary fashion, popular music, digital imagery, and political symbolism simultaneously.

The artwork becomes an archive of movement.

Authenticity and the Myth of Cultural Purity

One of the most difficult questions surrounding transcultural adaptation is the question of authenticity.

Who decides whether an artwork is authentically “Indian,” “African,” “European,” “American,” or “Asian”?

The problem becomes more complicated because cultural traditions themselves are historically hybrid.

There is no single frozen version of a culture. Languages change. Religious practices evolve. Food travels. Clothing transforms. Music incorporates new instruments. Visual traditions borrow materials and techniques.

Consequently, cultural purity is often more ideological than historical.

However, rejecting cultural purity does not mean rejecting cultural ownership.

A community can possess legitimate claims over sacred symbols, ceremonial practices, traditional knowledge, or culturally significant objects. The critique of purity must therefore be balanced with an understanding of cultural rights.

This distinction is essential:

Cultural hybridity does not mean cultural dispossession is acceptable.

Transcultural Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation

The ethical debate surrounding transcultural adaptation cannot be separated from cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation generally becomes problematic when cultural elements are extracted from a marginalized community, detached from their historical significance, commodified, stereotyped, or used without acknowledgment while the originating community receives little recognition or benefit.

However, not every cross-cultural influence is appropriation.

The following factors are important:

Context

What is the historical relationship between the cultures?

Power

Does the adapting artist belong to a dominant or marginalized cultural group?

Intent

Is the artist attempting to understand, collaborate, critique, commodify, or exoticize?

Process

Was there meaningful engagement with members of the culture?

Recognition

Are sources and cultural contributors acknowledged?

Benefit

Who gains social, institutional, or financial value?

Transformation

Has the artist critically transformed the source, or simply reproduced recognizable cultural symbols for aesthetic consumption?

These questions allow a more nuanced understanding of transcultural art.

From Appropriation to Dialogue

The ethical goal of transcultural practice should therefore not necessarily be cultural isolation.

Instead, it should be **responsible dialogue**.

Dialogue requires listening as well as speaking.

Collaborative artistic projects can provide one possible model. When artists from different cultural contexts work together as partners rather than treating one culture as raw material for another, the creative process becomes more reciprocal.

Museums and galleries also have responsibilities. They can provide contextual information, acknowledge histories of colonial collection, involve communities in curatorial decisions, and challenge Eurocentric systems of classification.

Transcultural adaptation becomes most productive when it recognizes that cultural exchange takes place within histories of unequal power.

Digitalization and the Transcultural Turn

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed cultural exchange.

An artist working in India can encounter an African textile archive, Japanese print collection, European painting, Latin American mural, or Indigenous visual tradition within seconds.

Digital platforms have therefore accelerated transcultural adaptation.

Social media has transformed cultural circulation from a primarily institutional process into a participatory one. Artists no longer depend exclusively upon museums, galleries, publishers, or academic institutions to reach audiences.

This democratization has significant advantages.

It allows:

- independent artists to reach international audiences;
- marginalized communities to represent themselves;
- archives to become globally accessible;

- collaborative projects to operate across borders;
- audiences to encounter unfamiliar artistic traditions.

Yet digital circulation also creates risks.

Images can be removed from their cultural contexts and circulated without attribution. Traditional designs can be reproduced commercially. Algorithms can amplify stereotypical representations. Cultural knowledge can become data.

The digital environment therefore intensifies the ethical questions already associated with transcultural adaptation.

Virtual Exhibitions and Digital Cultural Spaces

Virtual galleries and online exhibitions have expanded the meaning of the museum.

A physical museum traditionally determines:

- what is displayed;
- where it is displayed;
- how it is interpreted;
- who can access it.

Digital environments redistribute some of this authority.

A viewer can move between cultural archives without physically travelling. A student in India can explore collections in Europe, Africa, or North America. A diasporic community can access visual materials connected to its cultural history.

However, digital accessibility does not automatically equal cultural democracy.

The technologies through which cultural materials circulate remain controlled by institutions and corporations. Algorithms determine visibility. Search systems determine discoverability. Platforms determine monetization.

Therefore, digital transculturalism must be examined not only as an artistic phenomenon but also as a technological and economic system.

Artificial Intelligence and Transcultural Adaptation

Artificial intelligence introduces an unprecedented dimension to transcultural visual creativity.

Generative AI systems can produce images by learning statistical relationships from enormous collections of visual material. A user can request an image that combines aesthetic features associated with different regions, periods, or artistic traditions.

For example, an AI prompt might request an image combining:

- Mughal miniature aesthetics;
- Japanese woodblock composition;
- African textile patterns;

- European Renaissance portraiture;
- contemporary digital surrealism.

The resulting image can be understood as a form of **algorithmic transcultural adaptation**.

However, this process differs fundamentally from human adaptation.

A human artist may possess personal memories, cultural affiliations, historical knowledge, and emotional relationships to the traditions being combined. An AI system does not experience culture in this way.

It identifies patterns within data.

This distinction raises an important theoretical question:

Can algorithmic recombination be considered cultural adaptation if there is no cultural subjectivity behind the process?

The answer is not straightforward.

AI can generate transcultural visual combinations, but the cultural meaning of those combinations ultimately remains connected to human interpretation, authorship, institutional context, and reception.

AI, Cultural Data and the Question of Ownership

The use of AI introduces a new ethical dimension: **dataset ownership**.

If cultural images are incorporated into datasets without the knowledge or consent of their creators or communities, AI-generated cultural combinations may reproduce the historical inequalities of earlier forms of cultural appropriation.

The problem can be expressed as:

Cultural material → digitization → dataset → algorithmic learning → generated image → commercial circulation.

At each stage, questions arise concerning:

- consent;
- copyright;
- attribution;
- compensation;
- cultural sensitivity;
- community ownership;
- representation.

UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence emphasizes human dignity, human rights, diversity, inclusion, transparency, fairness, sustainability, and human oversight. It also recognizes that AI can reproduce and amplify existing biases.

These principles are particularly relevant to AI-generated transcultural art.

If AI systems reproduce cultural stereotypes because those stereotypes are statistically prominent in their training data, technological neutrality becomes impossible.

The algorithm may appear to create something new while reproducing historical inequalities.

AI as Collaborator Rather Than Author

One possible approach is to understand AI as a **creative collaborator** rather than an autonomous cultural author.

Under this model:

Human artist = cultural intention + interpretation + ethical responsibility

AI system = computational generation + variation + recombination

The artist remains responsible for deciding:

- which cultural references are used;
- how they are contextualized;
- whether they are ethically appropriate;
- how the generated image is modified;
- how sources are acknowledged;
- how the final work is presented.

Such an approach retains human accountability while recognizing the creative possibilities of technology.

AI may therefore extend transcultural adaptation rather than replace human cultural interpretation.

The Politics of Representation

Transcultural art is also deeply connected to representation.

Historically, marginalized cultures were often represented by outsiders. Colonial museums, ethnographic photography, travel literature, painting, and cinema frequently constructed images of “the Other.”

Contemporary transcultural artists increasingly challenge this pattern.

They do not merely ask:

How has my culture been represented?

They also ask:

Who has the authority to represent it?

This shift from representation to self-representation is politically significant.

An artist from a historically marginalized community can appropriate the visual conventions of the dominant culture in order to expose its exclusions.

Kehinde Wiley's practice demonstrates this strategy. By placing Black bodies within traditions of European monumental portraiture, he disrupts the historical distribution of visibility and authority.

Similarly, Chitra Ganesh reworks mythology to foreground figures and identities marginalized by dominant interpretations.

Thus, adaptation can function as a form of **counter-representation**.

Gender and Transcultural Adaptation

Gender is another important dimension of transcultural visual practice.

Traditional artistic canons have frequently represented women through male-centered visual conventions. Cultural traditions can also contain gender roles that are selectively interpreted or institutionalized.

Contemporary artists challenge these conventions by adapting cultural narratives from feminist perspectives.

Chitra Ganesh's work is particularly relevant because it transforms mythological and literary materials through queer and feminist perspectives. Her practice demonstrates that adaptation can reveal meanings that were marginalized or suppressed within earlier interpretive frameworks.

Thus, transcultural adaptation does not merely move cultural materials geographically. It can also move them **ideologically**.

A myth can move:

from patriarchy → feminism

from heterosexual normativity → queer interpretation

from passive representation → active subjectivity

This makes adaptation a tool of cultural critique.

Transcultural Adaptation and Cultural Memory

Visual art often functions as a repository of memory.

When artists adapt historical images, monuments, myths, costumes, or symbols, they activate collective memories.

This is particularly important in societies shaped by:

- colonialism;
- slavery;
- migration;
- war;
- partition;
- displacement;
- religious conflict;
- racial discrimination.

Adaptation can therefore become an act of remembering.

Wiley's Rumors of War demonstrates how a historical visual language associated with military and political authority can be reconfigured to address contemporary racial representation and contested monuments.

The past is not simply reproduced.

It is **reinterpreted in the present**.

Museums, Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy

Museums and international exhibitions play a major role in transcultural exchange.

International exhibitions can introduce audiences to artistic traditions beyond their immediate cultural environment. Cultural diplomacy can similarly use artistic exchange to create relationships between nations.

However, museums must confront their own histories.

Many collections were formed during colonial periods. Cultural objects were frequently removed from their communities and displayed within Western institutions.

Consequently, contemporary transcultural exhibitions must consider:

- provenance;
- restitution;
- repatriation;
- community participation;
- indigenous knowledge;
- curatorial authority.

The future of transcultural visual culture therefore depends not only upon creating new hybrid artworks but also upon transforming the institutions through which cultural objects circulate.

Transcultural Adaptation as a Pedagogical Tool

Transcultural art also has considerable educational value.

In literature and visual arts classrooms, students can compare how the same cultural narrative changes across:

- painting;
- sculpture;
- cinema;
- photography;
- comics;
- digital media;
- installation;
- AI-generated imagery.

Such comparison develops critical visual literacy.

Students can learn to ask:

1. What is the source?
2. What has changed?
3. Why has it changed?
4. Who is represented?
5. Who is absent?
6. What cultural assumptions shape the adaptation?
7. What new audience receives the work?
8. Does the adaptation challenge or reproduce stereotypes?

This approach connects adaptation studies with cultural education.

Transcultural Adaptation and Globalization

Globalization has intensified cultural interaction but has not eliminated cultural inequality.

Globalization can create opportunities for cultural exchange while simultaneously producing cultural homogenization.

The international art market can encourage artists to produce recognizable forms of “cultural difference” for global consumption.

This creates a paradox.

The global art world celebrates diversity, but it may also commodify diversity.

An artist may be expected to produce work that visibly signals cultural identity because cultural difference has market value.

Therefore, transcultural artists operate within complex institutional structures.

Their work may challenge cultural stereotypes while simultaneously being exhibited and marketed through systems that depend upon cultural categorization.

This contradiction deserves greater attention within transcultural art studies.

Toward a Model of Ethical Transcultural Adaptation

The discussion above suggests that ethical transcultural adaptation can be understood through five principles.

1. Contextual Awareness

Artists should understand the historical and cultural significance of the materials they adapt.

2. Reflexivity

Artists should acknowledge their own position and relationship to the culture being represented.

3. Reciprocity

Where possible, transcultural projects should create meaningful forms of collaboration and exchange.

4. Attribution

Cultural sources, artists, communities, and traditions should receive appropriate recognition.

5. Transformation with Responsibility

Adaptation should involve creative transformation without erasing the historical identity or significance of the source material.

These principles do not create an absolute formula for ethical art. Instead, they provide a framework for critical reflection.

Transcultural Adaptation as a Form of Cultural Translation

The concept of cultural translation offers another useful way to understand transcultural adaptation.

Translation does not reproduce a text word-for-word. It negotiates meaning between languages.

Similarly, transcultural art negotiates meaning between cultural systems.

A symbol may have one meaning in its original context and another in the adapted context.

The process may involve:

recognition → interpretation → transformation → relocation → reinterpretation.

The adapted artwork therefore becomes a cultural translation.

But, like linguistic translation, cultural translation is never neutral.

The translator makes choices.

The artist makes choices.

Institutions make choices.

Audiences make choices.

Meaning is produced through this chain of interpretation.

Audience Reception and the Meaning of Adaptation

An artwork does not have a single fixed meaning.

Audiences from different cultural contexts may interpret the same transcultural artwork differently.

A viewer familiar with the source tradition may recognize historical references that another viewer misses.

A community member may interpret a symbol as sacred, while an external viewer may perceive it primarily as decorative.

This demonstrates that transcultural adaptation is also a matter of reception.

The meaning of an adapted artwork depends upon:

- cultural knowledge;
- historical memory;
- audience identity;
- institutional context;
- media coverage;
- exhibition location;
- political circumstances.

Thus, transcultural adaptation should be studied not only through artists and artworks but also through audiences.

DISCUSSION

The examples discussed in this paper reveal that transcultural adaptation is neither a simple celebration of globalization nor an inherently unethical practice.

It is a complex cultural process shaped by history and power.

El Anatsui demonstrates how material transformation can connect African artistic traditions with global systems of consumption and contemporary sculpture.

Yinka Shonibare uses cultural hybridity to destabilize fixed distinctions between Europe and Africa.

Chitra Ganesh transforms mythology and cultural memory through feminist and queer perspectives.

Kehinde Wiley adapts historical visual conventions of power to challenge the racial exclusions of monumental representation.

Despite their differences, these artists share a crucial characteristic: they do not merely borrow forms. They **recontextualize them**.

Their practices demonstrate that adaptation can produce new cultural meanings.

At the same time, the ethical discussion demonstrates that not all transcultural exchange is equal. Historical colonial relationships continue to shape contemporary cultural circulation. Digital technologies may democratize access while simultaneously creating new systems of extraction. Artificial intelligence may enable unprecedented visual hybridity while reproducing biases embedded within its training data.

Consequently, the future of transcultural adaptation requires both **creative openness and ethical responsibility**.

Major Findings

The study arrives at several major findings.

First, transcultural adaptation is historically continuous.

Cultural exchange has always contributed to the development of artistic traditions. What is new today is the speed, scale, visibility, and technological infrastructure of such exchange.

Second, adaptation is fundamentally transformative.

An adapted cultural form is not necessarily a weakened version of an original. Transformation can generate meanings that did not exist in the source context.

Third, hybridity is central to contemporary artistic identity.

Artists increasingly occupy cultural spaces that cannot be explained through singular national or ethnic categories.

Fourth, power must remain central to the analysis.

Cross-cultural exchange takes place within historical structures shaped by colonialism, racism, economic inequality, and institutional authority.

Fifth, transcultural adaptation can become a form of resistance.

By rewriting established visual conventions, marginalized artists can challenge dominant representations and reclaim cultural visibility.

Sixth, digital technologies have accelerated transcultural creativity.

Social media, digital archives, virtual exhibitions, and online collaborations have expanded the possibilities of cultural exchange.

Seventh, artificial intelligence introduces a new form of algorithmic transcultural adaptation.

AI can combine visual traditions at unprecedented speed, but its use also raises questions concerning authorship, datasets, cultural ownership, representation, and algorithmic bias.

Eighth, ethical transcultural practice requires contextual understanding.

Cultural exchange becomes more responsible when artists acknowledge historical contexts, power differences, sources, and communities.

CONCLUSION

Transcultural adaptation in visual arts reveals that culture is not a fixed possession but a continually evolving field of encounters. Images travel. Materials travel. Stories travel. People travel. Memories travel. Artistic traditions therefore change as they encounter new places, technologies, identities, and political circumstances.

The contemporary visual artist works within this movement.

To adapt is not necessarily to imitate. To adapt is to interpret.

This distinction is fundamental.

An artwork may borrow a historical visual language but transform its politics. It may employ a traditional material while questioning its historical associations. It may reinterpret mythology through feminist or queer perspectives. It may relocate European portraiture into the experience of Black identity. It may combine local traditions with digital technologies. It may even use artificial intelligence to generate new combinations of cultural forms.

Such practices demonstrate that adaptation can become an active mode of cultural thinking.

At the same time, transcultural exchange cannot be separated from questions of power. The history of colonialism reminds us that cultural movement has not always been voluntary or reciprocal. Objects have been appropriated, communities have been represented by outsiders, and cultural knowledge has often been transformed into commodities without appropriate recognition or compensation.

The challenge for contemporary transcultural art is therefore not to prevent cultural exchange but to make exchange more conscious, reciprocal, and ethically responsible.

The distinction between **adaptation and appropriation** becomes particularly important in this context. Adaptation can create dialogue when it recognizes the history and agency of the culture from which it draws. Appropriation becomes problematic when cultural forms are detached from their communities, stripped of meaning, commodified, or reproduced through unequal relations of power.

The digital age intensifies these concerns. Global networks have made cultural exchange almost instantaneous, while algorithms determine which images become visible and which disappear. Artificial intelligence adds another layer by transforming cultural materials into datasets and enabling machines to recombine them into new visual forms. UNESCO's ethical framework for AI emphasizes diversity, inclusion, human dignity, transparency, fairness, and human oversight, principles that are especially relevant when cultural knowledge becomes computational material.

The future of transcultural visual creativity will therefore depend upon a balance between **openness and responsibility**.

Artists should be free to encounter cultures beyond their own. Cultural traditions should not be treated as museum objects incapable of transformation. At the same time, cultural openness should not become a justification for extraction.

The most productive transcultural artworks are those that recognize difference without turning difference into spectacle; that transform inherited forms without erasing their histories; and that allow multiple cultural voices to remain visible within the new work.

Transcultural adaptation ultimately demonstrates that artistic identity is not produced only through inheritance. It is also produced through encounter.

In this sense, the border is not simply a line separating one culture from another. It is a creative space—a place where memories meet, where traditions are questioned, where identities are negotiated, and where new forms become possible.

Art without borders, therefore, does not mean art without histories.

It means art capable of **crossing borders while remembering where those borders came from**.

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