

The Next Revolution in Art

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Why art matters to us

Art is a perennial human desire. We need and hunger for stories, images, and sounds that are unique, beautiful, self-affirming, and/or profound. We love to immerse ourselves in music, movies, books, paintings, and architecture.

But art has not always flourished in human history. In many times and places, the amount of art has been minimal while the culture focused on other activities—bare survival, military conquest, ascetic spiritualism, for example.

Yet in a few times and places art has flourished magnificently. Those of us who love art, as well as professional art historians, find ourselves drawn to the great eras when art was produced in large quantities, enjoyed by many, many people, and was of such high quality that it survived across the generations and still speaks to us today.

Why is that? Art flourished in Renaissance Florence, for example, but not in nearby Milan. Or further back in time, Athens created a magnificent art culture, but nearby Sparta was an artistic desert. Or more recently, Paris in the nineteenth century was a hotbed of innovative art, while nearby Prussia was largely inert artistically.

Today my goal is to speak of what makes great art cities possible. In part I will speak historically, using a few outstanding examples of cities that have achieved greatness in the history of art. Our question will be: What made it possible for those cities, and not others, to build great art cultures? What can we learn from them?

And of course, we are here today in Hong Kong and Kowloon City, and our question is also about the prospects for Hong Kong and Kowloon City to join those cities that have become world centers for great art.

Cases: A closer look at some great art cities

Athens: `

Great art times are eras of *Innovation*—either in subject matter, or theme, or technique, those techniques often enabled by innovations in technology.

Let's take this statue, *Spear Bearer*, as an example of what made Greek art innovative.

Contrast these earlier pieces: Sumerian, Willendorf fertility female, Egyptian ankh. They are vertical and static. By contrast *Spear Bearer* is dynamic movement.

Further Greek developments in dynamic movement: Nike of Samothrace, Riace Warrior, *Nike adjusting her sandal*, *Discobolus*, *Laocoön and His Sons*.

Note also the *wide* range of subjects in Greek art: not only gods and kings—also heroic women, athletes, everyday life, and of course a full range of mythological subjects.

Why did it happen Athens? (And not, say, in nearby Sparta or Macedon?)

Note the dates of the major artists: the great era of Greek art begin in the 400s BCE with figures such as Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Phidias, Praxiteles, and many others.

Now note developments in Greece and especially Athens in the previous century, i.e., the 500s BCE.

Economics: In the 500s, Athens developed a market economy. It became a leader in international trade all over the Mediterranean. It had very few import or export restrictions. It developed coinage, and preserved its value as a sound currency without debasing it. It welcomed immigrants, skilled ones especially, and visitors with all interests and expertises. As a result, it became spectacularly wealthy.

Politics: Simultaneously in the 500s, Athens developed its democracy. One of its major democratic reformers, Solon, had spent years abroad engaging in business and minor diplomacy. Athens' transition to democracy was not smooth, and throughout the century it oscillated between dictatorship and democracy. Also all throughout this century, as Athens rose in political prominence and wealth, it was in tension with the authoritarian powers, especially Persia, which led to war in 499. After the Persians were defeated, Athens was in increasing political tension with Sparta, another authoritarian power.

Religion and philosophy: Also in the 500s, Greece became the first culture to do philosophy and natural science systematically. It became a worldly culture, with intense interest in all of the world's phenomena. Its philosophical and scientific culture co-existed with a worldly religion of human-like gods and goddesses, as well as a great amount of religious diversity as immigrants and visitors brought many gods and religious practices to Athens and as Athenian travelers encountered many varied religious practices in their journeys.

That was the culture that had been developed in the 500s, and that is the culture the great artists were born into: wealthy, open, dynamic, tolerant.

Here is my claim: Athens developed one of the great art cultures of all times because it *first* had a relatively open, free, commercial economy, a relatively open, democratic politics, and a naturalistic, philosophical culture that was tolerant of a wide variety of viewpoints.

Florence:

Let's try another major historical example: Florence in the Renaissance.

Consider these representative examples of Florentine achievements in art: Donatello's *David*, Michelangelo's *David*, Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*. Michelangelo's *Pietà*, Leonardo's *Virgin*, Raphael's *School of Athens*, Ghirlandaio's *Old Man with Boy*.

A remarkable diversity of subjects. One striking characteristic of Renaissance-era art is its interest in all aspects of the world—from high philosophy to everyday love, male beauty and power, female tenderness and benevolence.

Also characteristic of the era was a rediscovery and extension of technical achievements in art: the use of perspective, dramatic darks and lights, new color pigments, naturalistic detail.

Why did it happen in Florence? (And not, say in nearby Milan or Naples?)

Again, let us look at the dates of the major Florentine artists: they are in the 1400s and 1500s.

Now let us look at what had developed in Florence in the previous century, i.e., the 1300s.

Economics: In the 1300s, Florence became spectacularly rich through manufacturing of high quality goods—and especially through the development of an international banking and finance network. It was the first modern, proto-capitalist economy. As it developed its free economy, it attracted immigrants and visitors from all over Europe and further, and its citizen traveled widely and returned with broadened experience and insight.

Politics: Also in the 1300s, Florence broke decisively with feudalism and transformed itself into a republic, with broad political participation. Its wealth and republican self-identity throughout this century and the next put it in marked tension with the authoritarian regimes in the region, with regular wars involving France, Milan, Naples, and the Vatican.

Religion and philosophy: Also in the 1300s, Florence became perhaps the world center for humanistic philosophy, for a relaxed Catholicism religiously, and for a significant amount of diversity, as the philosophers, natural scientists, and immigrants and visitors with many religions and philosophies lived there.

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Holland:

Let's try another major historical example: the Dutch Golden Age of the 1600s.

Consider these representative examples of Florentine achievements in art: Vermeer *Young Woman with Water Jug*, Rembrandt *Self-portrait*, Vlieger *Estuary at Dawn*.

Again we find a remarkable diversity of subjects—studies of light, intense interest in human character, fascination with the sea and the sky.

Why did it happen in Holland? (And not, say, in nearby Copenhagen or Hamburg?)

Again, let us look at the dates of the major Dutch artists: 1600s.

Now let us look at what had developed in Holland in the previous century, i.e., the 1500s.

Economics: In the 1500s, the western Dutch states, especially in Holland, developed a market economy and engaged in extensive international trade. They were innovative in developing modern corporations (e.g., the Dutch East India Company) and in finance (e.g., its stock exchange). It attracted immigrants from all over Europe, and became spectacularly wealthy.

Politics: In the 1500s, the Dutch were controlled, unhappily, by Spain, and they fought an extended war with Spain to achieve independence. Internally, they broke with their own feudal past and became a republic, with broad political participation and separations of powers. As they became more powerful and prosperous, they struggled internally with religious authoritarianism and externally with England, also a rising commercial power.

Religion and philosophy: After their own internal religious wars and upon achieving independence from Spain, the Dutch became known for their tolerance on religious matters, and for the vigor of their worldly philosophy and science. By 1600, Holland became the place for religious, philosophical, and scientific exiles to go to when they ran into trouble in their own countries, and as a result Holland experiences an extraordinarily diverse and first-rate intellectual life.

That was the culture that had been developed in the 1500s, and that is the culture the great artists of the 1600s were born into: wealthy, open, dynamic, tolerant.

Again my claim: Florence developed a great art culture in the 1600s because it had developed a free, commercial economy, an open, republican politics, and a naturalistic, philosophical culture that was tolerant of a wide variety of viewpoints in philosophy and religion.

Paris:

One more great art culture: Paris in the 1800s, especially the second half of the 1800s.

Consider these art examples: Caillebotte *Rainy Day in Paris*, Monet *Water Lilies*, Pissarro *Chestnut Trees*, Manet *Berthe Morisot*, Degas *Dance Class*, Bazille's *Studio*, Mary Cassat *The Bath*, Renoir *Theater Box*.

Again a remarkable diversity of subjects—street life, water plants, the countryside, the painters' mistresses, their own lifestyles, children learning, the intimacy of parents and their children, nightlife and the high life. The artists of the time exhibited an intense interest in the world in all its manifestations.

Technical achievements: Impressionism is an original style. In part it achieved brilliance by its innovative uses of color—pigments made possible by the rising science of chemistry and chemical engineering in combination with the Industrial Revolution.

Why did it happen Paris? (And why not, say, in nearby Prussia?)

Dates of the major artists—Monet, Pissarro, Degas, and so on: They come of age in the second half of the 1800s.

Again note the developments in the previous century: 1700s and early 1800s.

Politics: France's slower economic development (compared with, say, Britain's and Holland's) was because its politics was much more tense and destructive. Its break with feudalism during the French Revolution (beginning 1789) was wrenching and led to destructive wars, both civil and international. Out of that emerged Napoleon and led to 20 years more of war. But after that, and with much back and forth, France did leave behind its authoritarianism and create a republic. Even so, continued political tensions were the norm (revolutionary 1848, Prussia 1871).

Economics: Over the late 1700s and early 1800s, France slowly developed of a market economy and opened up to international trade. As it did so, it attracted a remarkable variety of immigrants and became wealthy. It also, more slowly than in Britain, absorbed the technical achievements of the Industrial Revolution.

The point is that the revolutions in France in painting, especially Impressionism, occurred in a France that was becoming economically more free, politically more republican, and as a result more open and rich. Indeed, virtually all of the important artists of the era were from families that were successful in the new economy and were able to afford the education, the travel, and to help support lifestyle of their children who wanted to pursue art as a career.

Commonalities:

A summary point: In the last 3,000 years, and in the West, the cultures that have become great have almost always been those that are more free, more commercial, more democratic-republican, more open and tolerant cultures.

They have been dynamical and internally fractious, with much argumentation about religion, politics, economics, love, sex, and everything else important to human life.

But they have created the physical wealth and the psychological freedom that makes possible energetic exploration and creation in the arts.

By contrast, cultures that are more authoritarian politically, economically, and religiously have been poorer, more conformist and, as a result have created art in much lesser quantity and quality. Compare Athens to Sparta, Florence to Naples, Holland to Denmark, Paris to Prussia.

One more case—the USA

Consider the United States of America in the twentieth century.

It has been another art culture of remarkable energy and diversity: the art scene in New York, movies in Los Angeles/Hollywood, and popular music scenes everywhere—Chicago, New Orleans, Memphis, Nashville, and more.

We also find in the USA in the 1900s that its economics was relatively free market and rich, its politics was democratic-republican and vigorous, and its religion and philosophy were marked by a high degree of tolerance and diversity.

To put my thesis more formally: a great art culture seems to require a division of labor—among artists, entrepreneurs, and politicians.

The *Artists* are essential—they must come up with the creative ideas, and have the courage to experiment, to work hard, to risk failure financially, socially, and artistically.

But they must be supported by a culture of *Entrepreneurs*. It is the entrepreneurs who develop the wealth that supports the consumption of art, as well as the wealth that enables young people to have art education, to travel, and the financial security to embark upon a career in the arts.

And both the Artists and the Entrepreneurs must be supported by the *Politicians*—politicians who create and protect artistic freedom and business freedom, so that the artists and entrepreneurs have the creative space they need. As well, the politicians must protect the free flow of ideas and of people, encouraging the visitors and the immigrants from all over the world who bring their energies and their talents, and in many cases their wealth.

One more factor: Successful art cultures typically are marked by a high degree of both *competition* and *cooperation* between the private and the public sectors.

Decisive individuals:

Here I'd like to consider some representative decisive individuals from each of the cultures we have considered so far.

In Athens: Pericles was the most influential politician in Athens during its peak years, and it was through his decision and energy that much of the magnificent Acropolis, including the Parthenon, was built and that much literature, theater, and sculpture was commissioned.

In Florence: Lorenzo de Medici—the banker-politician who supported Michelangelo and a large number of other artists and humanists.

In Holland: Constantijn Huygens—secretary to the Prince of Orange, who was charged with building up Holland's art-and-cultural life, and who discovered the young Rembrandt and other artists, encouraged and commissioned them to help launch their careers, and continued to support them for decades.

In Paris: Paul Durand-Ruel—the entrepreneur who risked his fortune several times to support the Impressionists until they finally achieved critical and commercial success. Georges-Eugène Hausmann—the architect commissioned by the government to modernize central Paris by taking its inefficient, ugly, and often decrepit medieval neighborhoods and redeveloping them into beautiful spaces and structures—the modern Paris we all love.

In New York: Solomon Guggenheim and his niece Peggy Guggenheim used much of their family fortune, by means of a foundation, to support artists they admired and to collect their works—and to create beautiful spaces for art, such as the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

My major claim is: An exciting, innovative, flourishing art world depends on a specific kind of culture—an open politics, a free economy, a worldly and tolerant philosophy—and key, decisive individuals who devote their energies within that culture to making great art possible.

Hong Kong and Kowloon?

This brings us to where we are today—Hong Kong/Kowloon. How does it compare to the other cultures that have achieved artistic greatness? What are its prospects?

In my judgment, there is no question that everything needed is already here.

What I see:

First, Hong Kong has great wealth and great economic freedom. By the measurements of the widely-used Economic Freedom in the World Index, Hong Kong is ranked number one in the world. Nowhere is better.

Also closely related is its excellent infrastructure—in transportation, the Internet, and its access to all new technologies.

Second, with its Basic Law and its inheritance of institutions from British times, Hong Kong has a deep commitment to democratic-republican politics and the rule of law. That is an importantly significant factor—for a small island with very few natural resources—to explaining why it has been able to create and enjoy such wealth and freedom.

Of course, the elephant in the room is mainland China, with its recent highly-authoritarian history and its current semi-controlling aspirations. Of course I cannot predict what Beijing will do or what strategy Hong Kong will pursue to retain its current status. But I *can* say that great art cultures have been created and maintained under threat from authoritarian regimes—the Greeks under threat from the mighty Persians, the Florentines under threat from the powerful French and the Vatican, the Dutch under threat from the expansionist Spanish, the French under threat from the militaristic Prussians.

So authoritarianism is a threat to art—but political tension and uncertainty can also be good fuel for artists, who are passionate creatures often energized by political causes and outrages.

Third, with its religious diversity, its culture of tolerance, and its worldliness, Hong Kong has excellent human capital. It has a large population, and by world standards it is cosmopolitan, it is educated, and it is sophisticated. And like human beings everywhere—especially educated and sophisticated people—the people of Hong Kong need and love art.

My fourth point is about opportunity. Art is a perennial human need, but we are living in a moment of transformation in the art world. For over a century now, modernism and postmodernism have dominated the world of high art, but their time is over. There is a

tiredness about modernism and postmodernism—not only among ordinary art lovers—but even among the elite of the art world there is an agreement that postmodernism is *passé*. We see this in the repetitiveness of what we see at postmodern art showings, and we see this in the resurgence of new forms of representational art and much new experimenting with new technologies and media.

There is a hunger for something new, for innovation—especially among creative, art-loving people. And where there is a hunger, there is an entrepreneurial opportunity.

Many of the world's existing art centers—New York, Basel, London, Tokyo—are locked into postmodernism. They have invested heavily in modernism and postmodernism, both financially and in terms of their reputations. Naturally, they want to protect their investments and so they will remain conservative and attempt to maintain the *status quo*.

So there is an opportunity for a new center to rise and assert itself as the place where the next revolution in art will take place.

Why not Hong Kong?

In addition to its wealth, politics, and human capital, Hong Kong is a *sexy* location. Speaking of course from my Western perspective, it is a place of exoticism with world-class cuisine, history, and dynamism. Anything can happen here.

To wrap up my remarks today: In Hong Kong and Kowloon City, all of the important ingredients are in place for creating a first-class art center for the next generations of art.

Now all that is needed are two things: a self-conscious *strategy*—and a *decision* to make it happen.

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