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Painting difference: European collections, identities and future histories

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Abstract

Digital tools provide new opportunities to look at cultural data, enabling us to observe our patterns of acquisition and sharing in different ways. Our identity as European draws upon cultural, religious and social practices that have been shaped by migration and diasporic activity from both within and beyond the borders of Europe. Traditional disciplinary models have centuries-old practices and ways of working but new technologies, as with the advent of photography, enable us to look at the manifestations of culture using a different, digital, lens.

Taking national museum collections as a dataset that manifests the social and symbolic values of the cultural gatekeepers of member states, we explore paintings and their makers. Our focus is on the contemporary, taking paintings executed since 1990 and acquired by major public collections across Europe as our source. Through analysis of biographical data on artists and pictorial content, we paint a picture of difference and similarity in objects and creators. We see considerable variation in the gender of collected artists between northern and southern Europe. We see surprising variation in dominant colours used in paintings, and in the scale of works. This paper will also look closely at identity-related matters such as the incorporation of signatures, abstraction and figuration and the lexicon accompanying the paintings through titles and catalogue descriptions.

Our intent is to address European culture without overtly drawing upon our own social and cultural identity as researchers and practitioners of painting. We propose new approaches and methods that demonstrate cross-cultural dialogue and the exchange of transnational symbols from foundational datasets. Our contemporary reading of the field attempts to underpin propositions of unity and difference, with tracking of diaspora through education and professional achievement showing the reality of our multicultural present and providing new ways to see and track future histories.

Keywords: Art collection; paintings; nationality; signature; identity

Introduction

Our identity as a confident and civilised society across Europe is built upon a shared history. In recent times this has included the European Economic Union, established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. This union was built upon a desire to end conflict between close neighbours who, despite centuries of shifting boundaries, shared many aspects of their faith and social practices. The United Kingdom joined the European Union in 1973. Looking back now at the seminal 1969 series “Civilisation”, Kenneth Clark had referred to Ruskin’s view that “Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art” (Clark 1969:1). We can almost see this television series as part of laying a foundation for the UK joining the Union, in the way Clark spoke of how the art we make draws upon the cultural, religious and social practices shaped by migration and diasporic activity from both within and beyond the borders of Europe. He provided us with a manifesto statement for inclusion within the Union. In 2018, when the UK position within the European family has an uncertain future, this paper looks back at the collections of paintings made from the mid-point of the Union to date, to speculate on what facets of commonality or difference might be seen by the historians of the future. We are looking at the book of our art. If our art is seen to reflect, shape or represent our society, can the public collections of art tell us about our aesthetic sensibilities?

To explore this arena, we propose a different sort of exploration of the art works in our national collections than that undertaken by Clark. Instead of looking in detail at individual artworks, with the risk of expertise and familiarity (or its absence) generating interpretive or propositional conjecture, we attempt an analysis drawing on more evident factual data of 250 paintings in five different national collections. The information used is intentionally easily accessible through the online resources which have become a characteristic part of museum and gallery websites. We look at the available biographical data about artists as well as information about the individual artworks. We have restricted our attention to paintings made since 1990 and to collections in Italy, Finland, France, the Netherlands and the UK.

We pay special attention to gender difference, reflecting the concern about equality arising from Helen Gørrill's research on the recognition accorded to contemporary female artists (Gørrill 2019), and the discussion about the call for a "European canon of books and ideas and concepts" (Matthews 2018:15) as part of the network of European Universities proposed by French President Macron in September 2017. The response to the call for this canon (Notaro 2018:29) was that the suggestion by Peter-André Alt, the president of the German Rector's Conference (HRK), was a "dangerous kind of identity politics: white, male, European identity politics". We do ask whether the collections that we look at here are subject to any constraints of this kind also.

Global trends in creative disciplines and local manifestation of creative identity

The ways in which the making or viewing of works of art contributes to the formation of identity within the social context depends partially on those arbiters of what there is to be seen. If we follow Alan Bowness's model of the development of artistic success (Bowness 1989), the sorts of art works which get disseminated are those that gain the approval of various cultural stakeholders. Bowness describes these as at different levels of proximity to the artists and of different import. Early recognition is through peers, then critics and curators. The later stakeholders who cement reputations by the inclusion of art works in public collections are influenced by the critics and curators who comment upon or include works in temporary exhibitions. Global trends are sometimes closely tied to international politics, such as the post-World War II cultural imperialism of the United States, which saw American Abstract Expressionism exported world-wide as the dominant expression of innovation, speaking an "ideology of freedom" and "a true expression of the national will, spirit and character" (Saunders 1999: 254).

By the early 1990s, the role of curator in relation to the formation of identity politics began to be recognised differently (Ramirez 1996). Mari Ramirez suggests that an international surge of exhibitions and collections with a more open position on difference from the dominant canon of "international" art, have seen the role of the curator shift from establishing the "meaning and status of contemporary art" (Ramirez 1996:22) to being that of "broker". In this role they "explicate and uncover how the artistic practices of traditionally subordinate or peripheral groups or emerging communities convey notions of identity" (Ramirez 1996:23). The volume "Thinking about Exhibitions" (Greenberg, Ferguson & Nairne 1996), was published at a point within Western cultural theory when the intellectual elite was working its way through how to account for and distance itself from the legacies of colonialism and hegemonic world views. This thinking provides the backdrop for the period when the paintings addressed by this study were made, although we can make no assumptions about the intentions of the artists with respect to the extent to which their progeny (the paintings themselves) were intended as markers of identity.

Cultural imperialism has stretched across geographic borders in tandem with trade and mobility. We note how curators have engaged with peripheral groups and emerging communities, but there are many other ways by which cultures mix. As well as communities emerging as a result of economic or forced migration, or from a rejection of previous repression, we have the movement of individuals by choice. Alongside the global market and trade in paintings, there is also a global market in education. We have thus also looked at the places of birth and education of the artists represented in our sample. Certain countries in Europe have held particular reputations as the seat of learning in their field at different times for different global audiences. We consider the relationship between our sample and the global indicators that might inform choices for the global education market and relate that to the cultural mix evident within our dataset.

While cultural and social theory can be used to model practice in opposition to dominant ideology, the matter of gender remains to be noted. In their 1986 survey of the gender challenge in collections, activist arts collective the Guerrilla Girls commented "Nearly all the money [European] governments spend on art – which is a lot more than the US spends – goes to only half the population" (Chadwick, 1995:40). More recently, Gørrill (2019) calculated that European collections contained an average of 14 per cent work made by female artists. Finnish collections, however, were an exception and appear amongst the most equal in the world, indicating that even within Europe, there may be different manifestations of identity through the painting collections available to us.

There are various angles from which writers have scripted their views of women's artwork and creative identity. Linda Nochlin (1971:44) suggests there is no such thing as a feminine or masculine style, and notes "no such common qualities of 'femininity' would seem to link the styles of women artists generally". An anti-essentialist denial of the feminine and masculine is offered by Marsha Meskimmon (2003:72, 74, 132-3, 183-5) and Katy Deepwell (1996) also sees problems with the categorisation of paintings as "feminine" (created by women) and "masculine" (created by men). Shirley Kaneda (1991:75-76) argues against subjective and stereotypical gendered assumptions, for example in the use of terms like "structured" and "geometric" for paintings made by men while the terms for the same sort of aesthetic elements might be "sensitive" and "patternistic" when referring to paintings made by women. An alternative viewpoint from Mira Schor (1996:168-169) is particularly critical of women artists who do not adopt a differential aesthetics. She suggests that in order for women to paint, they have to paint differently to men: "I want to [reinvest] painting with the energy of a different politics, a politics of difference, and a different eroticism than that of the monocular penis". There have also

been some more widely reported positions on the difference between paintings made by men and women, such as Tyler Cowen's (1996:10-11) discussion of the feminine and masculine aspects of painting, with smaller domestic works in watercolour or naive work being defined as "feminine", whereas larger religious or historical oil paintings were categorised as "masculine".

The role of the art markets in visible identities

Within Europe, trade in objects like paintings has been relatively unencumbered in respect of the need for licences over the past 50 years, although the movement of such cultural goods beyond the economic area is more constrained. There is free movement of art works made within the last 50 years, with export licences not required. Exports beyond the European Union require licenses for paintings valued over €150,000. If over 50 years old, works valued at less than £180,000 can be exported under an Open General Export License from the UK, as long as the object being exported does not require an EU export license. It is a complex picture for exports and imports and the sorts of objects in the collections that we are looking at in this paper will soon fall into the scope of the 50-year criteria. For those organisations operating within this marketplace, whether from a commercial gallery perspective or from the publicly-funded museum or other exhibition-making organisation, it is generally felt to be easier to work within the European economic envelope than beyond this, although it is very difficult to generalise and there is much variation between the ease of exporting and importing between country whether inside or beyond the Union.

While we have an indication that licensing and tax regimes are not a constraint on the movement of the sorts of paintings that might be found in our collections, and thus their ability to be included in exhibitions or collections in countries other than that in which they are made, the market can have other influences on how art works can contribute to place identity. It is the values accorded to artworks that are accrued through the transactions of the market and, looping back again to Bowness' construction of "success" in the market, it is not just economic values that need to be considered.

We use a framework for this project that seeks to embrace all forms of value rather than just the economic. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) argued that "It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory". Through looking more broadly at the factors associate with increasing visibility in the art world, it is possible to model the symbolic, cultural and social capitals of the contemporary artworld. A symbolic value is a capital based upon honour, prestige or recognition – such as the award of an arts prize, or the inclusion of an artist's work in a museum collection. In this case, symbolic value also considers the relevance of an artist's geographical location, through birthplace, art education and the place an artist chooses to work and live. Such forms of symbolic capital are often referred to as cultural values – usually a qualification, and herein the value ascribed to an art school education. Where an artist lives and works could be defined as a social capital or perhaps a networking capital, although such values are often intertwined and interdependent.

The market also impacts on the extent to which the ideas and values enshrined in different disciplines and different geographies might be shared. Mieke Bal notes the problem of meanings of works of art becoming constrained, as illustrated by the case of Rothko's legacy of works being distributed to many museums all over the world (Bal 1996:204): "one concept of what is 'art,' is repeated and thereby somehow imposed in many different contexts". Within the context of European artists and a distribution around collections in Europe, it could be perceived that such a repetition of encounters with the work of European artists might serve to reinforce an understanding of what such works represent. Bal goes on though to explore the impact of the recognition of similarity upon the ability to discern difference (Bal 1996:205), arguing in support of an increasing awareness of the "linguistic nature" of the objects in museums and the discursive role they take in culture.

This paper takes on that challenge by approaching the structural parameters of a specific class of objects within a museum context: the collections of recent or contemporary painting. We want to see if there are shared characteristics at the level of the physical entities, or if there are striking or subtle differences depending on which part of Europe the work is collected in. In recognition of the legacy of 45 years of the UK being part of the European Union (EU 2016), we anticipate a certain degree of movement – migration of both people and goods traded across a market with varying degrees of porosity. There are no export licences or customs duty for works moving within Europe. But as with so many aspects of culture, does this porosity lead to a dumbing down of regional distinctiveness? Does the Mediterranean cultural context generate any difference in the nature of the objects collected from those acquired in the Baltic region? And what of the characteristics of French, British or Dutch collections?

Previous work by the authors (Gørrill 2016, Gørrill 2019, Mottram & Gørrill 2017) has established that there are some distinct differences in the physical characteristics of paintings accorded cultural or economic capital in different countries, and differences in the artists who are collected. In the context of this conference on what Europe is about, we explore whether some of the fundamental attributes of an object of art could embody any characteristics that can

contribute to an understanding of identity and difference in cultural and social practices. We want to ask what notions of the identity of the artists collected is presented by the public collections of the different countries in Europe? Are our collected artists European or are their origins from elsewhere in the world? Do our cultural organisations have collections policies that reflect current thinking around diversity? Are there any patterns in the physical characteristics of works from European artists in our collections? And do the paintings collected in Europe share any characteristics? This is a project that is starting to explore different ways to ask these questions.

Methodology

The approach we have taken to questioning collections of paintings in Europe is a combination of addressing pictorial content with biographical data using simple statistical methods. The increase in online resources with records of the different objects in museum collections means that the information with which to build datasets for this type of study can be accessed with relative ease. The standardisation of the records that institutions hold has been facilitated by the development of digital collections management tools in the past few decades, so information in standard formats is generally available. Within the field of economics, there have been several studies in recent years utilising this sort of data. These studies have, however, been conducted primarily using statistical analyses, using very large datasets and focused on economic values. Often using records from several million objects (see for example Adams et al 2018, Bocart et al 2018), these databases do not incorporate variables relating to pictorial content nor artist's biographical details. Rather than rely upon any of these previous datasets, this research has instigated the generation of a new database, which includes variables that allow us to explore pictorial content and biographical detail.

The approach we take to the construction of the data records for the study is to emulate the basic information that would be used within collections management databases. Gørrill (2016) has previously described this approach as constituting "partial catalogues raisonnés", in recognition of the role of such catalogues as "[an] essential tool for art historians, curators, and dealers whose research focuses on understanding the development and oeuvres of individual artists" (Catalogue Raisonné Scholars Association). Rather than being a monograph on a single artist's oeuvre, our database contains entries for multiple artists.

The sample comprised of 250 randomly selected paintings drawn from the online resources of five European art museums with contemporary painting collections. The collections were the Bolzano Modern and Contemporary Art Museum (Italy), Kiasma Finnish National Gallery (Finland), Musée de l'Arte Moderne de la Ville De Paris (France), Stedelijk Museum (The Netherlands) and Tate (United Kingdom). A random sample from each museum collection was selected using a number generator through SPSS "select cases" function. For each museum, the selection of post-1990 artworks was made from 50 different artists, each group selection having 50 paintings. The sample size was determined on the basis of total approximate population size (i.e paintings in the collection made since 1990 of which records are online) of 2,516. The available populations are Italy 117, Finland 1,000, France 250, Netherlands 250, and the UK 900. Those selected to be online may not reflect the total collection, and there is concern that artists in collections not presented online may thus feel airbrushed from art history. We are reasonably confident on our sample despite this caveat and note that according to Creswel (2015:76), "it is important to select as large a sample as possible, because with a large sample there is less room for error in how well the sample reflects the characteristics of the population." As this research design involved the sampling of a population which has a defined number of members, the sample size needed is significantly smaller than that for an unlimited population. In order to estimate the prevalence to within 3% of its true value, the required sample size would be 748 (Conroy 2018). However, due to the limited number of paintings available in the Italian group (approximately 50 by different artists) and in order to keep the representative groups at the same size, a sample size of 250 was arrived at. Ronán Conroy confirms this gives a 5.0 to 7.5% prevalence estimation.

Data collection categories were based upon those advised by the J. Paul Getty Foundation "Categories for the Description of Works of Art". Data was extracted from two different sources: the museum collection record available online and the artist's and/or artist representative's website.

Data was entered directly into a Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) database. The 250 paintings in our sample generated 3,250 datapoints across the 13 variables we established: gender, year/date of birth, date of artwork creation/execution, title type, scale, signature (inclusion or not), abstraction/figuration (Tate 2018², Tate 2018³), orientation, subject matter, where artist lives/works, place of birth, place of education, and ethnic origin. We also recorded the artists name and the title of the paintings. Gender was determined by name or by reference in associated texts. Subject matter was categorised using a refinement of the Getty Foundation model (J. Paul Getty Foundation 2016). The fields created for "type of title" and "scale of painting" were generated from textual interpretation and dimension data. Biographic data was supplemented with material from the artist's own or commercial gallery website, if not available from the collection website. All data was double checked upon entry. Data was subsequently analysed through SPSS descriptive statistics and comparison of means. We also ran comparisons across variables to look at difference between artist's gender, country of collection and other variables.

Although most collections databases include information on the medium of an artwork, we decided to omit this as a variable due to earlier work. In Gørrill's (2016) doctoral study of contemporary paintings auctioned in London during 1992-94 and 2012-14 it was found that whilst there are now more artists painting with mixed-media than oil paint, there were no significant findings about the selection of medium in relation to artist gender or nationality. Further transnational comparisons of contemporary painting (Gørrill 2019) repeated this finding.

Different countries, different stories and the difference in things

The 250 artists in the selection generated for this project comprise 64 female artists and 196 male artists. Against this roughly 1:3 ratio, there was some variation within the proportion of the artists of each gender in each country (Fig. 1). Finland demonstrated the most equal distribution of gender representation in the collection, with 44% of the works by female artists, followed by the UK at 32%. Less than 20% of the artists in the sample from Italy, France and the Netherlands were female. It is noted that none of the collection policies (or documentation relating to acquisition) commented upon diversity. In examining the collection policies (or descriptions of collections) for each country, the French and Italian museums actively seek to increase international works (Musée d'Art Moderne 2018, Museion 2018) and the Netherlands collection makes specific reference to collecting "a young generation of artists" (Stedelijk 2018). Both the British and Finnish collections make reference to collecting local national art (Tate 2018¹, Kiasma 2018), with the Finnish collection describing this as "an interaction between local and global culture" (Kiasma 2018). However, Finland does have a longstanding history of gender equality: "In 1906 Finland's national assembly became the first parliament in the world to adopt full gender equality. It earned that distinction by granting equally to all men and women the right not only to vote but also to stand for election" (This is Finland 2017). Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture also stated, "women comprised 53% of all employees in creative industries", and noted that their "national cultural statistics are not disaggregated by sex" (UNESCO 2014).

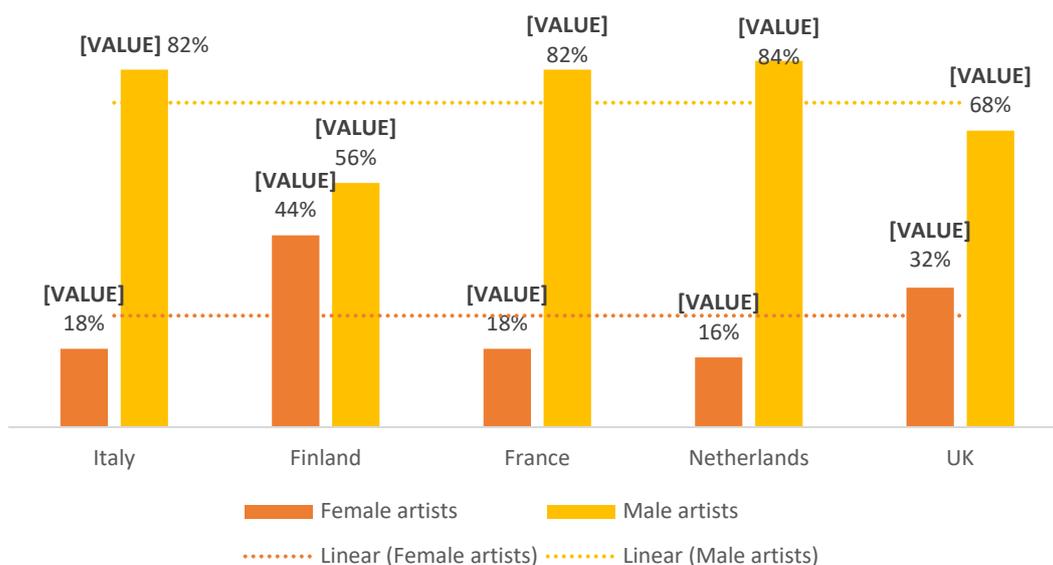


Fig. 1: Gender of artists in each country collection sample

The average age at which the artists in the sample executed the painting in the collection was between 41 and 45 for women and between 44 and 55 for men, with some variation in country (Fig. 2). For Italy and France, the higher ages of men in the collection may reflect a proportionally higher level of males represented in the samples from those countries. It would appear, though, that the output of women artists may be reaching the attention of collectors at an earlier age. In line with their collection policy of acquiring work by younger artists (Stedelijk 2018), the Netherlands have the lowest average age of female artists in the sample (along with Finland), and the lowest average age of male artists in the sample.

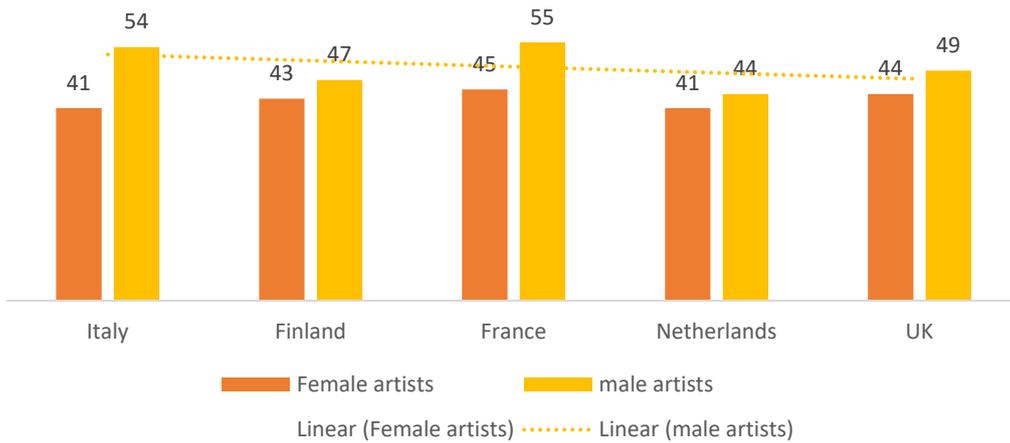


Fig. 2: Average age at execution of painting

There was considerable variation in the use of signatures by artists on the front of the paintings in the selection (Fig. 3). Overall, Finnish and Italian artists were far more likely to sign their works than any other country, but there was some indication of work by female artists being less likely to be signed. Previous research on the secondary market in the UK by Gørrill (2016) found that unsigned paintings made by female artists were shown to be more valuable than those which are signed. If a painting has been made by a male artist, the apparent asset of masculinity could add to the painting’s value. If a painting has been made by a female artist, the apparent liability of femininity could detract from the painting’s value, a detraction that would have a greater impact if the painting contains a legible signature which indicates it has been made by a woman.

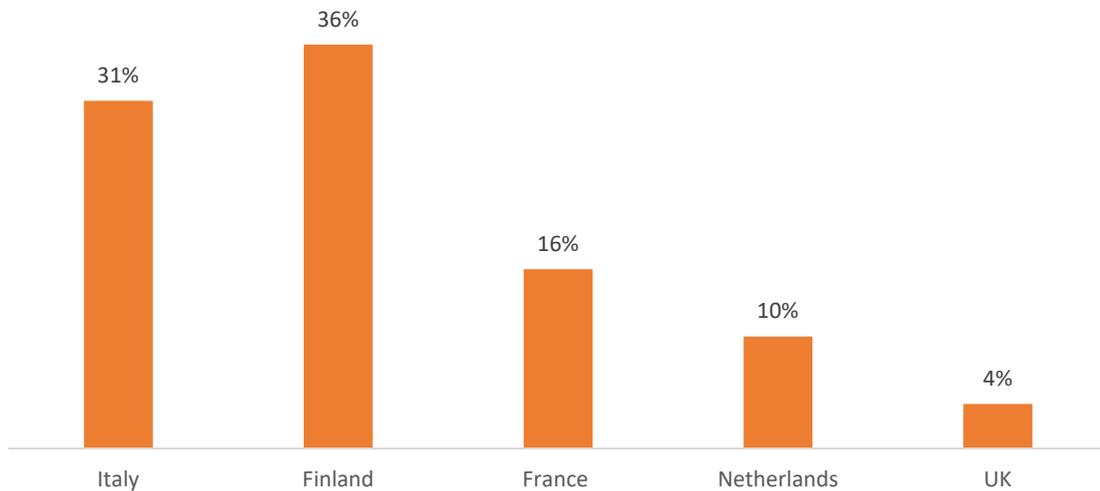


Fig. 3: Percentage of artworks in each country’s collection which contain a visible signature on the front surface

The scale of the works collected does vary, with larger works more common in the French and UK collections (Fig. 4). Works in the Italian and Finnish collections were less than half the size of paintings by male painters in the French and UK sample, although the average scale of paintings by females in the French and Netherlands sample were significantly smaller than their male colleagues. There was minimal data on scale in the collection records from the Netherlands, but data on about half the paintings selected was provided by the curator directly to us. There is a range

of sizes in all the collections, with the smallest works of between 136-480cm² and the largest works, apart from a single wall painting at 800,000cm², being 160,000 to 231,398cm² and in the UK and French collections (Fig. 5).

Paintings in the collections were mostly painted on portrait format, although those selected for the Tate were found to be mostly painted on a landscape format.

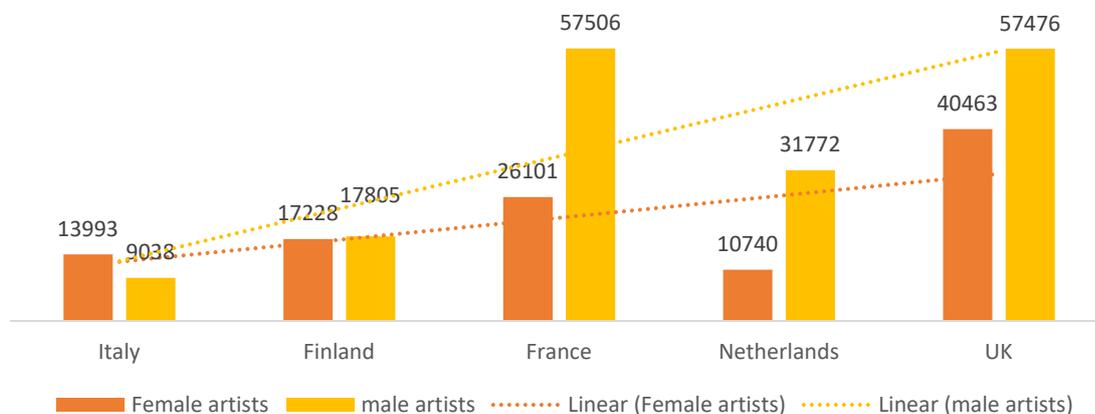


Fig. 4: Average scale of paintings, cm²

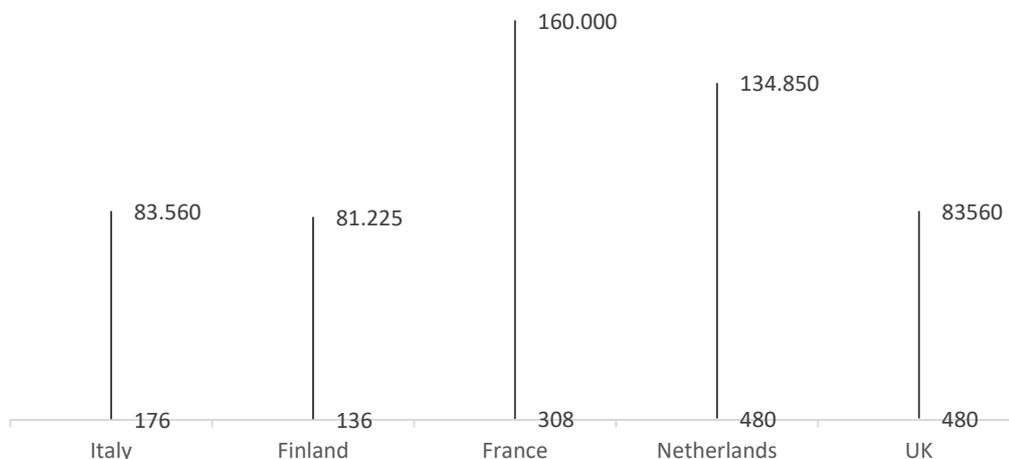


Fig. 5: Range of scale of paintings (omitting one ‘wall painting’ at 800,000cm²)

We looked at levels of representation as well as attempting an analysis of the subject matter in the paintings. These tasks are challenging to experts within the field, bound by familiarity with visual forms, and deeply rooted in contextual understanding. There do appear to be some patterns in the data, with just over 30% of the sample being abstract paintings, and both male and female artists being equally likely to have painted these works. Work including figures, such as portraits, accounted for 26% of the collections. Almost 30% of the paintings by women were in this category, and 26% of the paintings by males. Looking at the data by country of collection, abstract work is most prevalent in the UK collections, and figure work is at a much lower proportion than the other countries. The highest levels of works depicting figures is in the Finnish collection sample, at twice that of the UK sample. Even with relatively low degrees of confidence in the attribution to these categories, there would appear to be marked difference

in the images depicted in the collections of different countries even though levels of abstraction rest at around one third of the samples.

The propensity to depict certain sorts of subject matter and narratives through painting may bear some relationship to cultural background. It was notable that in all of the collections apart from the Finnish sample, over 30% of the artists were born outside the country of the collection. Overall, 76% of female artists in the collection were found to be “white European”, compared to 83% men. France had the highest number of sample artists who were not born in that country although the ethnicity group “white European” accounted for 82% of all artists in the French sample. Artists from the USA accounted for 22% of the artists in the UK sample and 16% of the Netherlands, with none in the Finnish sample and 4% and 8% in the Italian and French. In response to the president of the German Rector’s Conference (Notaro 2018:29) it is argued that the collections looked at here also appear to be reflect a largely white, male, European identity.

We appear to be building a picture where Finnish and Italian artists are more likely to be represented in the collections in their country, but in the sites where there is a more active international art market, as in the UK, France and the Netherlands, there is more variation. A high proportion of the artists in the UK collections were educated outside of Europe and, in France, the numbers educated elsewhere in Europe were almost as high as those educated in France. Over 40% of the artists in the selection were not educated in any of the countries whose collections we sampled.

The global marketplace for contemporary art may relate to the propensity for the titles of artworks to be recorded in English. Where titles were not in English we translated them using Google translate, checking against a Google search to identify if the words of the title referred to a name of a person or thing. By an iterative process, a set of six categories were developed to account for the types of titles given to the art works in the dataset. A number of works were either marked as untitled (as in the artist had not assigned a title to the work), or entitled “Untitled”, where the title of the work had been given this term. There were 16 instances where the term untitled was combined with a number or date or other differentiating text (“untitled +” in Fig. 6 below). Names of people and places were fairly straightforward to categorise, although the use of family relationship referents such as “Uncle”, “Blanche of February” could have been assigned into the category “descriptive”. Other apparent names where categories were not clear included “Arco de Iris”. On viewing the image of the work, the decision was made to categorise as “name of place” rather than “name of person”, as the abstract image was resonant of sky. The category “descriptive” included titles which included an object noun or a verb and were distinguished from more complex titles that may include conceptual references, puns or more explicit allusions to ideas. There was a fine line at the boundary of these categories, with titles such as “Primitive instinct II” and “Demonstration” being determined by viewing the image of the work.

The largest proportion of the titles for works in the dataset, 46.4%, were descriptive, reflecting the proportion of works overall that were figurative or partially figurative. If this category is taken with that of the more complex or conceptually oriented titles, the combined set comprises about two thirds of all titles. There are some differences in the data by country. Reflecting the higher proportion of abstract works in the datasets from the French and Italian collections, untitled works, or works with untitled in conjunction with a numeric or other differentiator accounted for 30% and 28% of the titles respectively, in comparison to the overall average of 20% using these titles, and 8% of the Finnish works. Interestingly, France did have a relatively high proportion of works with titles referring to the names of people or places, at 18%, compared to the average of our dataset of 13%, and the low of the Italian selection with just two instances of a person name in the sample.

	Italy	Finland	France	Netherlands	UK	count	%
complex/concept	11	9	10	10	8	48	19.6
descriptive	23	29	16	21	27	116	46.4
name of place	0	1	6	8	4	19	7.2
name of person	2	7	3	1	3	16	6.4
untitled	12	4	11	5	3	35	14
untitled +	2	0	4	5	5	16	6.4

Fig. 6: Count of title types by country

Coming back to what the paintings depict, we also want to look at whether the same sort of colours are used across Europe. More accurately here, we ask do the people building collections have pattern in their selection of colours? We have thus attempted to look at colour in two ways: firstly the colour that occupies most of the painting’s area; and the other type of measure we examined was the most prominent colour. This was a judgement not made

computationally, but by the researchers, we do claim some expertise. We used the Berlin and Kay's 11 basic colour term model (see for example Hardin 2013).

The first aspect of colour we examined was the overall spatially dominant colour area (Fig. 7). All countries were found to mostly paint with grey. Tate's sample did not contain any yellow as a spatially dominant colours, and both the UK and the Netherlands' samples did not contain any purple. Italy's collection was found to be devoid of purple and pink spatially dominating pictures. In all the collections examined, women are working from a more restricted spatially dominant colour palette than men.

	Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	Blue	Purple	Pink	Brown	Grey	Black	White
Italy	2	1	1	2	5	0	0	3	27	3	6
Finland	2	1	1	4	9	6	2	7	12	2	4
France	3	4	1	2	2	2	2	5	23	3	3
Netherlands	1	2	2	7	4	2	2	3	21	1	5
UK	2	2	0	5	10	0	3	4	20	0	4

Fig.7: Spatially dominant colours in the collections

We also looked at the visually prominent colour in each painting (Fig. 8), that is the colour that immediately struck us as standing out when we first glanced at the artwork. Finland, the UK and Italy's collections were found to contain mostly red as the visually prominent colour. France's collection was predominantly blue, and Italy's collection was predominantly grey. Paintings from the Netherlands collection did not contain any prominent orange, and paintings from Italy did not contain any prominent purple. In all the collections examined, women are working from a more restricted visually dominant colour palette than men.

	Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	Blue	Purple	Pink	Brown	Grey	Black	White
Italy	11	1	3	3	8	0	4	3	6	9	2
Finland	11	3	5	2	7	5	3	5	2	5	2
France	5	3	8	4	11	2	3	2	3	6	3
Netherlands	6	0	3	2	9	2	4	2	15	2	3
UK	9	4	5	2	8	3	2	2	6	6	3

Fig. 8: Visually prominent colours in the collections

Can we explain difference?

The analysis of the data drawn together for this study does suggest some interesting propositions for further enquiry in respect of how collections of paintings may contribute to or reflect different aspects of cultural identity across Europe. The presentation by collections of the gender politics of the region was seen starkly in respect of the very different representation of women in the collection in Finland in comparison to other countries. We are left with the question of what messages do visitors to collections get, or how do women artists feel about their level of recognition, if collections have such a strong focus on paintings by (white) male artists? Interestingly though, women appear to be collected at a younger age across all countries, perhaps reflecting the start of a change where the increasing numbers of females studying in creative arts subjects is beginning to effect change. There appear to be interesting variations in who signs their work. It has been suggested in previous work on auction results that demonstrated the negative influence of gender on prices realised (Gørrill 2016, Gørrill 2019, Bocart et al 2018), that women are disincentivised from signing their work so that it can appear more on its own terms (Gørrill 2016). This notion is not necessarily considered realistic as judgements on the value of works are not made in isolation of contextual details, such as who has already validated the worth and quality of the painting.

The mix of origin of the artists represented in the collections across Europe reflects our continuing role as a destination for education and training, as well as the role played in the international art market. The UK in particular is a major market internationally in the art trade. It is also a significant player in the market for education. In the QS rankings of international universities (QS 2018), the UK and the rest of Europe account for over 30% of the art and design schools in the top 100 universities in the world for the subject. Our data suggests clearly that the identity of our collections must reflect this mix.

The influence of global art markets, particularly the remnants of the “international art” promoted by the USA in the mid-late 20th century, may well account for the scale of works in UK, French and Dutch collections. Both the collection gatekeepers and the artists working in the London, Paris and Amsterdam markets have greater exposure to the works moving through the marketplace, both via commercial galleries and auction houses and through the international museum exhibition circuit. While the cultural imperialism of global collections means that the Louvre and Guggenheim are now international brands, there are indications that collections in country may have distinct variation in respect of subject matter, perhaps reflecting different narrative or symbolic traditions.

Looping back to our initial comments on Clark’s 1969 TV series “Civilisation”, we note that the fragility of civilisations seems to be open to collapse through fear and fright about questioning things. Confidence is required in one’s society, its philosophy and in our mental powers to continue grappling with the questions that challenge us (Clark 1969:4). We have confidence that being specific about characteristics does not mean constraining expectation to repeat – rather it gives awareness of alternatives and a platform for greater creativity. Working blindly without awareness of difference is far more likely to generate stale and prosaic artistic activity. We are left with a number of further questions about how art might be seen to contribute to identity making within the European context and how collections data can provide a useful platform for this. We suggest that there is benefit to undertaking analysis of such data to ask what is it about art itself, rather than the discourses around it, that legitimises political orders or stimulates cross cultural dialogue? How do our representations show difference between cultures? Does this only work if there is some depiction of the recognisable within the painting? Where does that leave abstract art? Is it possible to harness machine learning of image identification and subsequent categorisation, and how much of the identity construction work is carried out by the viewer and how much by the creator?

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