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## Idol – Aura – Art

### New Horizons of Early Modern Europe and the Beginnings of »Global Art History« \*

In Rubens' 1636 painting for the High Altar of the Augustinian church of Saint Thomas in Prague the world appears to be in order. In his attempt to evangelize India, the apostle Thomas had to face his martyrdom and in the painting he is shown on his knees in front of a simple cross with the antagonists of the Christian faith already imagining their victory. The idol on top of the pillar in front of the temple prevails but this triumph is mere illusion, as the heavens already offer Thomas the laurel wreath of eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

In the painting the world appears to be in order because Christendom and pagan worship of idols stood in irreconcilable opposition; the heathen and the Christian concepts and uses of images supposedly did not share common elements. It is a widespread position in scholarship that only in the eighteenth century with the »Enlightenment«, the negative aura of the idol and of non-European anthropomorphic images in general, was challenged by the increasingly scientific analysis of foreign religions and their related artifacts.<sup>2</sup>

Elaborating on this idea I propose that since circa 1600 an alternative conception and use of idols can be demonstrated. At this time there emerged a new kind of scientific appreciation and visual documentation that »domesticated« the idol and curtailed its dangerous aura. This novel perspective resulted in an understanding

that placed idols in relation to all art and images, including European, which to some extent began to challenge Western canons of beauty. Finally, and most importantly, this new perception led to an alternative history of the visual arts – one which was based not on the idea of the progressive imitation of nature and the approximation of an ideal of beauty, but rather advanced a visual history which explored different kinds of human imagination and its relation to the production of images. My central claim here is that the discussion sketched above points to a significant hitherto neglected dimension to our understanding of European ideas about the anthropological foundations of the production of art and global art history.

#### I. Foreign Forms

Rubens did not invent the figure of the peculiarly crouching idol on the pillar. Rather, he seems to have borrowed it from Vincenzo Cartari's popular handbook on ancient mythology. The book was first published in 1556 and the first illustrated edition appeared in 1571. An extended version (Padua 1615) contained in an appendix by Vincenzo Pignoria images of idols from the »New Indies,« which is to say the Americas as well as Asia. In an expanded version of the appendix from 1624 the last four woodcuts show a small idol (fig. 1) from the collection of Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc who had sent a drawing of all four sides of the small sculpture to Pignoria.<sup>3</sup> A mystery to the early modern antiquarians the object has been identified as the knob of a Balinese »buta-rara kris,« a ceremonial dagger which can be found in a number of European collections at least from the turn of the seventeenth century and seems to have been traded as the acme of pagan idols.<sup>4</sup> Three years before Pignoria's appendix, in 1621 a publication by the cabinet of curiosities in Graz displayed another example from two sides, referring to it as a »Zemes,« which was defined as a »diabolical idol.«<sup>5</sup>

Rather than question how a South-American Zemes became confused with an Asian deity,<sup>6</sup> what is important here is that until 1624, at least to my knowledge, no other figure had been so systematically recorded and published from all four sides in Europe in print. Of course there had been drawings in artist's sketchbooks, which recorded objects from different perspectives, as well as several single sheet engravings of the same ancient statue from different angles – but no other similar systematic reproduction in a book.

Insightful in this regard are two antecedent representations. The first reproduction of an ancient statue in anterior and posterior views printed in a book can be found in Apian's and Amantius' »Inscriptiones Sacrosanctae Vetustatis,« a compendium of ancient inscriptions, objects, and statues published 1534 in Southern Germany. The double depiction was so unusual at the time that it was accompanied by an explanation: »As not to leave you, dear reader, in doubt over the attire of this idol, for which a view from the front alone would not have sufficed, we also had it depicted from behind.«<sup>7</sup> The subsequent double view for Giambologna's »Rape of the Sabine Woman« with its new and complex »figura serpentinata« composition in a collection of poems published in Florence in 1583 further emphasizes this proposition.<sup>8</sup>

Three conclusions can be deduced from this brief analysis of the images in Cartari/Pignoria:

1. In the early seventeenth century a handbook on the gods of ancient mythology including depictions of contemporary pagan



Fig. 1 One of four views of a »Zemes,« from Lorenzo Pignoria: *Seconda parte delle imagini de gli dei indiani. Addition to Vincenzo Cartari: Seconda Novissima Editione Delle Imagini De Gli Dei Delli Antichi. Padua 1626, p. 587*



Fig. 2  
 »Seynd lauter Abgötter«, from Adam Olearius:  
 Gottorffische Kunst-Kammer, 1674, pl. 4

gods was published. Therein both the pagan past and the idolatric culture of the seventeenth century beyond Europe were presented, not only as equally foreign and equally in need of explanation, but also comparable in their production and use of images. The more important point, however, is that this approach to these objects was not exceptional. There are several other related examples. In the cabinet of curiosities at Castle Gottorf, for instance, the catalogue of which was published in 1666, a Buddha, an Egyptian Uschabti, and Osiris, as well as an unidentified idol from the Northern parts of Europe were displayed together in front of what was probably a late-medieval Byzantine icon of Saint Nicolas (fig. 2).<sup>9</sup> From the Protestant perspective of the Count of Schleswig and the keeper of the collection, Adam Olearius, all of these images were similar cases of idolatry. For Olearius the Catholic part of contemporary Europe and its northern outskirts formed one continuous group including non-European countries and their past. This attitude can also be observed in a painting manual from 1678 written by Samuel van Hoogstraten, one of the most important Dutch painters of the late seventeenth century, which condemned the trickeries of the illusionistic painting in Egyptian sanctuaries where the idols were arranged in such way that the rising sun appeared to light up their coronae – a practice which, according to Hoogstraten, was also used in Catholic churches.<sup>10</sup>

2. The idolatric sculptures in question were so unfamiliar to European eyes that one view alone would not suffice to reproduce their complexity. A comprehensive visual documentation was necessary, which very interestingly for these artistically untried objects resulted in reproductions of previously unknown detail and quality.
3. What is crucial here is that the cult of ancient gods, non-European idolatry, and the Catholic use of images were all put on the same level in these representations – in the context of religion. Not only in terms of a comparison of cultures, but synoptic image sequences were provided in the text, which were meant to facilitate comparison and underline the simi-

rities. In the edition of Cartari/Pignoria from the beginning of the seventeenth century visual comparison of ancient and non-European images are limited to two plates. Joseph-François Lafitau's »Mœurs des sauvages Ameriquains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps« from 1724 not only evoked the ethnographical comparison explicit in the title, but the illustrations continued to elaborate the idea.

## II. Fanciful Fantasies

All idols are, to put it simply, a result and expression of the human imagination. Already in antiquity this idea was firmly in place. Probably the most frequent quote in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the beginning of Horace's satire I.8, where the wooden statue of Priapus says: »Once I was no more than a stump from a fig-tree, wood with no use. / As the master was in doubt if to make a bench or a Priapus out of it, / he decided for the god. For this reason, I am a god [...]«<sup>11</sup> In Cicero, Lucretius and others the same thought can be found, the idea that human imagination and especially that of the painters and sculptors are the ones that create their own idols. The anthropocentrism of these human products of art and imagination is reflected most clearly by Xenophanes: »When cows, horses and lions had hands, and with these hands could draw and by and large do everything that humans can do with their hands, then horses would cast their gods in the shape of horses and cows theirs in the shape of cows [...]«<sup>12</sup>

An argument could be made then that the Christian pictorial tradition, the perception of icons, the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy, and of course the Reformation, were all concerned with the relationship of the human imagination to the production of idols. Equally it could be demonstrated how the quote from Horace on the statue of Priapus was increasingly referenced in early modernity by authors like Hospinianus or Montaigne, and also in Voltaire's entry on »Idolatry« in the »Encyclopédie.« There Voltaire proclaimed that the term »Idolatry« was out-dated and irrelevant and advocated instead for a historically and culturally differentiated approach to the phenomenon, as the concept always

entailed the denigration of another religion, while no religion would claim itself to practice idolatry.

The argument concerning the imagination, however, could not only be raised against religious images, but – astonishingly enough – in their favour. The logic behind this was that if painters and sculptors managed to create particularly beautiful and convincing idols, these were likely to also be successful with the faithful. To put it differently: the artistic-aesthetic quality of an idol could be of immediate significance for its religious efficacy.

An example from Gerard Audran's popular treatise on the ideal of human proportion and bodily beauty from 1683 can illustrate this point.<sup>13</sup> Audran shows himself comparatively helpless in facing the fact that European artists had not been able to agree upon a common definition of the ideal human body over the last 250 years: »Even our greatest masters cannot find a solution and often disagree among themselves. They create each differing shapes of beauty which commonly result from [the custom] of their country and their temperament.«<sup>14</sup> Audran considered the ideal of beauty to be dependent on regional specificities and a sort of personal inclination and taste. The artists, however, saw an alternative to these unreliable influences by imitating, rather, the art of antiquity. The same unreliable influences would have affected the artists of antiquity of course, but Greece and Italy, as was generally assumed, were particularly blessed with beautiful people, so that the artists of the past would have been less influenced by their own temperament. More importantly, however, artists from antiquity were believed to possess three additional motivations: »It were three reasons that inspired them: religion, glory, and benefit. They considered it a kind of worshipping to adorn and shape their gods so nobly that they

would win the love and devotion of the peoples.«<sup>15</sup> The beauty of the ancient deities also resulted from the fact that for artists artistic production was a form of worship, turning their work into a kind of holy service, and at the same time creating beauty that inspired the belief of others.

Audran does not elaborate on this idea in his short four-page introduction – yet its influence, through its quotation by other art critics like Claude Perrault, are unmistakable. If the aesthetic achievement of the idol resulted in its worship, it was assumed that idols anywhere in the world which were crafted particularly beautifully – and that as such also the exotic non-European idols »in their differing shapes of beauty [...] resulted from the regional art and temperament [of their creators]« – as Audran put it. That means the human imagination and effort occupied with the production of idols would have equally sought to manifest a kind of universal religious effect. Yet if the results differed as much as they did from European perceptions of beauty, which were so distinct themselves, this would have had to result from the fact that perceptions and ideas of beauty were not all the same. Audran was reluctant to openly admit this – but the line of his reasoning implicitly acknowledged the idea.

Finally, if we take a look at what is probably the earliest printed representation of non-European artists/artisans – the Peruvian gold-smiths in the volumes of »India Occidentalis« by Theodor de Bry from 1593, whose gold work had already been praised by Cortez and then Montaigne, we discern idols there as well – these depictions resulted from the imagination of de Brys and his illustrators, who, however, did not have any problems praising the art of exotic idols.<sup>16</sup> And at the end of a sequence of portraits of Italian artists in Joachim von Sandrat's »Teutscher Academie« from 1675 appeared for the first time a likeness of the »Indian Painter« Higiemonte.<sup>17</sup>

### III. A New History of Art

Consideration of the idols of the world beyond Europe resulted not only in a new approach to their documentation and comparison, but also in the emergence of an understanding that idols are also expressions of the human imagination and related to aesthetic perception. Most interestingly, however, it also generated a new perspective on the history of art.

Up until that point the history of art was about the artists' increasing skill in the imitation of nature and the pursuit of an absolute ideal of beauty, which had begun in Egypt or even further away, in the mythical orient, which had then been perfected in Greco-Roman Antiquity. Which was then followed by a period of decline in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, only to rise to new glory in the Renaissance and seventeenth century.

The new history of art, which took idols as an important focus, defined its subject in a wider geographic and historic frame, advancing an analysis of the different steps in the development of the image-production of the human imagination. Apparently people in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and also in parts of Europe first worshipped one or several higher beings without the help of images – while the worshipping of images and idolatry was a later phenomenon. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have different explanations for this – the varying and partly contradictory positions of which would have to be discussed in detail – from postdiluvian decadence to theories of polytheism. Here I can only describe the four levels with a few visual examples.

Initially, as a faint memory of God the Creator, most humans after the flood worshipped a higher being that manifested itself in nature – in the sun, a special tree etc. Columbus described the worship of the Indians in this way. According to Columbus they had neither an



Fig. 3 Different stages of idol-worship, from Gerard J. Vossius: *De theologia gentili et physiologia christiana*. Amsterdam 1668, frontispice

institutionalised religion nor were they idolaters, as they believed that all power and all good originate from the sky. Something similar was hypothesised about China before and up to Confucius.<sup>18</sup>

The transition to the second level is characterised by a more or less coincidental selection of particular objects for worship according to individual imagination. This is especially evident for the African worship of fetishes – but also for example discernable in the northern border regions of Europe. In the words of Godefroy Loyer in his »Relation du voyage du royaume d'Issyny« (1714): »These fetishes are diverse, and are created according to the diverse fantasy of each individual« or, »Everyone makes their own fetishes and chooses them at will.«<sup>19</sup> Not much later, Charles de Brosses wrote the first book-long treatise on these fetish-idols and compared them to an early stage in the Egyptian religion. In a parallel development in the previously idol-free China – according to Athanasius Kircher – religious imagination begins to form collective and uniform images, emerging out of the idolatry of Indians, which itself descended from Egypt. The first Buddha statues were identified as images derived from nature – from mountains and mountain-tops, which looked like a certain god or goddess.<sup>20</sup>

The third level is characterised by artistically crafted idols resulting from a collective, culturally unified, however gravely misled imagination – this is the climax of idolatry. According to reformed authors the Catholic use of images had to be considered among this kind of worship. The human imagination going back to Antiquity, from outside Europe and from different confessions within Europe itself were put in the same category – as can already be observed in the cabinet of curiosities of Gottorff. In 1746 Thomas Astley even compared the use of images within the Catholic church to African idols as he realized that the Catholic church did not actually worship images, but considered them mere media for the transmission of their worship – a concept that Astley claims to have also heard from the inhabitants of the African Gold Coast in defence of their fetishism: »This is the same Apology which the Romish Church and Priests make for their Images, it is plain, [...] that they consider their Fetishes, only as material Objects qualified with certain Virtues and Powers, by the supreme Deity, for the Benefit of his Creatures.«<sup>21</sup> Of course Catholic authors saw a fundamental difference in their use of images to that of idolatry.

The fourth and last level then is again characterised by an almost image-less worship of an advanced human imaginations, which depends on no material object to represent its belief in a god, in as much as this is possible.

It has to be emphasized that the model developed here refers to an ideal composed out of different passages from different texts and does not result from a concise theoretical horizon – to which numerous alternatives could be considered.

The frontispiece of Gerard J. Vossius' »De theologia gentili et physiologia christiana« (1668) and a plate from Lafitau's »Mœurs des Sauvages« (1724), however, offer a strong demonstration of this theory of the history of the idol and the different levels of human imagination beginning in nature-worship up to the production of elaborate idols (figs. 3–4).

It was exactly the discussion of idolatries and concepts of gods around the world – a subject for which a strong gradient in alterity and value from the European point of view would be expected – exactly this discussion of foreign forms, the aesthetic imagination from which they arose, and the new history of art deduced from this,



Fig. 4 The invention and formal development of idols, from Joseph-François Lafitau: *Mœurs des sauvages Américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*. Paris 1724, vol. 1, pl. 4.

that lead to a relativization of European perception and appreciation of artistic imagination and aesthetic value.

Yet this surprisingly advanced analytic approach would not be continued in an art historical context until the middle of the nineteenth century. The next step would be to explore the reasons for this: to consider the disciplinary formation of art history in this light, beginning with Winckelmann and his reductionist definition of art, and the exclusion of alternative approaches (i.e. in the field of the history of religions, and early forms of ethnology). Ideas about the control of unknown powers by way of images and imaginations would come to play a different role, again, in the theoretical approach of Aby Warburg. This, however, does not mean that foreign images could be tamed so easily. In Picasso's »Demoiselles d'Avignon« the other – just as it was in Rubens – continued to represent a foreign threat to the canon of European art.

The challenge now is to begin to follow the trail of this new perspective in images and texts that have, up until now, escaped our purview. As it turns out, taking 'global questions' into consideration for European art history is not as straightforward as it may seem. Inevitably this new outlook will dramatically change our understanding of the world of Early Modernity, not to mention our understanding of European art and art history itself.

## Notes

- \* I am grateful to Victoria Scott who transformed my rough sketch into a readable English text.
- 1 Now Prague, National Gallery; see Lubomír Konečný: Rubensovo Umučení sv. Tomáše: ikonografický komentář. In: *Umění*, 26, 1978, pp. 211–247. – Lubomír Slavíček: *The National Gallery in Prague: Flemish Paintings of the 17th and 18th Centuries. Illustrated Summary Catalogue 1/2*. Prague 2000, pp. 232, cat. 251. – For the broader Early modern context see *The Idol in the Age of Art*. Ed. by Michael W. Cole/Rebecca Zorach. Farnham/Burlington 2009. – The »pre-history« is analyzed by Michael Camille: *The Gothic Idol*. Cambridge, Mass. 1989. – Suzanne Conklin Akbari: *Idols in the East. European Representations of Islam and the Orient 1100–1450*. Ithaca/London 2009.
  - 2 Carmen Bernard/Serge Gruzinski: *De l'idolatrie. Une archéologie des sciences religieuses*. Paris 1988. – Paola von Wyss-Giacosa: *Religionsbilder der frühen Aufklärung. Bernard Picarts Tafeln für die Cérémonies et Coutumes religieuses de tous les Peuples du Monde*. Wabern 2006. – Lynn Hunt/Margaret Jacob/Jacob Mijnhart: *The Book that changed Europe. Picart & Bernard's Religious ceremonies of the world*. Cambridge, Mass. 2010. – Bernard Picart and the first global vision of religion. Lynn Hunt/Margaret Jacob/Jacob Mijnhart. Los Angeles 2010. – For changing aesthetic attitudes cfr. Frances S. Connelly: *The Sleep of Reason. Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics 1725–1907*. University Park (PE) 1995. – An important exception is Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann: *Eurocentrism and Art History? Universal history and the historiography of the arts before Winckelmann*. In: *Memory & Oblivion*. Ed. by Wessel Reininck/Jeroen Stumpel. Dordrecht 1996, pp. 35–42. – The ideas outlined in this essay are developed further in *Götterbilder und Götzendiener in der Frühen Neuzeit. Europas Blick auf fremde Religionen*. Exhb.cat. Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg. Ed. by Maria Effinger/Cornelia Logemann/Ulrich Pfisterer. Heidelberg 2012.
  - 3 Cfr. Jean Seznec: *Un essai de mythologie comparée au début du XVIIIe siècle*. In: *Mélanges d'Histoire et d'Archéologie*, 1931, pp. 268–281. – Elke Bujok: *Neue Welten in europäischen Sammlungen. Africana und Americana in Kunstkammern bis 1670*. Berlin 2004, pp. 89–90.
  - 4 Karsten Sejr Jensen: *Den Indonesiske kris – et symboladnet våben*. Næstved 1998. – The earliest depiction of such a kris may be found in a *Cabinet of a Collector*, painted and signed by Frans Francken the Younger in 1617 (Royal Collection, London); cfr. Desmond Shawe-Taylor/Jennifer Scott: *Bruegel to Rubens. Masters of Flemish Painting*. London 2007, pp. 126–129, cat. 25. Christine Göttler kindly brought this painting to my knowledge.
  - 5 Honorius Philoponus [Kaspar Plautz]: *Nova typis transacta navigatio*. [Linz] 1621, pl. 8. – This »Zemes« on two plates in Abraham Rogerius: *Offne Thür zu dem verborgenen Heydenthum*. Nürnberg 1663, after p. 974. – Cfr. Christian F. Feest: *Zemes Idolum Diabolicum. Surprise and Success in Ethnographic Kunstkammer Research*. In: *Archiv für Völkerkunde*, 40, 1986, pp. 181–198.
  - 6 Alessandra Russo deals with the European notions about Zemes in her essay for these proceedings (part 1, pp. 77–81).
  - 7 Petrus Apianus/Bartholomaeus Amantius: *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis ... Ingolstadt 1534*, pp. CLXX–CLXXI.
  - 8 Published in: *Alcuni composizioni di diversi autori in lode del ritratto della Sabina*. Florence 1583.
  - 9 Adam Olearius: *Gottorffische Kunst-Kammer*. Schleswig (2nd ed.) 1674, p. 5 and pl. IV, all these objects are classified under the heading »These are all idols.«
  - 10 Samuel van Hoogstraten: *Inleyding tot de hoohe schoole der schilderkonst*. Rotterdam 1678, p. 211.
  - 11 For the reception of this passage since the late seventeenth century see Anne Betty Weinschenker: *A God or a Bench. Sculpture as a Problematic Art during the Ancien Régime*. Bern 2008.
  - 12 *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Ed. by Hermann Diels/Walther Kranz. Berlin 1960, p. 21. – For the early modern reception of these ideas and their aesthetic relevance see Silvia Maspoli Genetelli: *Il filosofo e le grotteschie. La pluralità dell'esperienza estetica in Montaigne, Lomazzo e Bruno*. Rome/Padua 2006, pp. 130–141.
  - 13 Gérard Audran: *Les Proportions Du Corps Humain Mesurées sur les plus belles Figures de l'Antiquité*. Paris 1683.
  - 14 Audran 1683 (note 13), Preface [p. 1].
  - 15 Audran 1683 (note 13), Preface [p. 2].
  - 16 *Neuwe und gründtliche Historien von dem nidergängischen Indien ... Part 3: Darinnen warhafftig erzehlet wirdt, wie die Spanier die Goldreiche Landschafften deß Peruanischen Königreichs eyngenommen ...* Ed. by Girolamo Benzoni/Nikolaus Höninger/Dieterich de Bry. Frankfurt a.M. 1597, pl. XXVII.
  - 17 Joachim von Sandrart: *Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste*. Nuremberg 1675–1679, pt. II, bk. ii, p. 100 and pl. T.
  - 18 Louis Cousin: *La morale de Confucius*. Amsterdam 1688, pp. 13–18 (Avertissement).
  - 19 Godefroy Loyer: *Relation du voyage du royaume d'Issyny*. Paris 1714, pp. 213, 217. – For the Northern idols »made by chance« see Johannes Scheffer: *Lapponia, id est regionis Lapponum et gentis nova et verissima descriptio*. Frankfurt a.M. 1673. – For the history of the term and concept of »fetish« in Africa see William Pietz: *The Problem of the Fetish*. In: *RES*, 9, 1985, pp. 5–17; 13, 1987, pp. 23–45 and 16, 1988, pp. 105–123. Cfr. Hartmut Böhme: *Fetischismus und Kultur. Eine andere Theorie der Moderne*. Reinbek bei Hamburg 2006.
  - 20 Cfr. Marcia Reed: *Bernard Picart in China: »Curious« Discourses and Images Taken Principally from Jesuit Sources*. In: Hunt/Jacob/Mijnhart 2010 (note 2), pp. 215–234. – Catherine E. Clark: *Chinese Idols and Religious Art. Questioning Difference in Cérémonies et Coutumes Religieuses*. In: Hunt/Jacob/Mijnhart 2010 (note 2), pp. 235–250.
  - 21 Thomas Astley: *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels*. London 1746, vol. 3, p. 25.

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