

Introduction

A Revolution in Thought

It is the fluvial port of Seville, in the sixteenth century. Since 1493, at least once a year, a multitude of people witness the unloading of the fleets arriving from across the Atlantic, after stopovers in the Azores, Lisbon, Sanlucar, or Palos. The ships are full of “so many and such different pieces and of such refinement, and inventiveness, that have never been seen in the world”: musical instruments made of shells and wood; cotton and alpaca textiles and embroideries; polychromatic ceramics; turquoise masks; feather garments and insignia; multimetered accordion-folded manuscripts painted on deerskin, maguey, or bark paper; gold and silver jewelry; vases of all sizes and shapes; tiny figurines of precious stone; and so on (fig. 1).¹ Soon enough, sculptures, images, textiles, jewels, and books mixing American, European, African, and even Asian materials, techniques, and uses also arrive from the “West Indies.” An “idol” made in Hispaniola already combines cotton, feathers, and shells of the island with European wood, glass beads, and mirrors, and even African or Asian rhinoceros horn (fig. 2).² “A chasuble of white cloth from the Indies,” originally made for Pope Clement VII, ends up in the Low Countries in the 1520s.³ A few years after conquering Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Hernán Cortés sends Charles V “a coiled snake with a greenstone and a pearl in the middle, and a cross on the back with its pendants.”⁴

When the House of Trade is established in 1503, this panoply of different objects is carried through the streets of the city to pass through customs, often one item at a time on men’s shoulders, *a cargas*. In 1534, the twenty-seven boxes arriving from Peru on the





FIGURE 1 | opposite | Mask, Mixtec, Mexico, fifteenth to sixteenth century. Turquoise, spondylus, resin, and mother-of-pearl mosaic on wood, 24 × 15.8 cm. Rome, Museo delle Civiltà, inv. 4213. © Museo delle Civiltà. Photo: Davide Domenici.

FIGURE 2 | *Çemi*, Hispaniola, fifteenth to sixteenth century. Wood with a mask of rhinoceros horn, green glass, and shell beads, mirror, each figure: 31.5 × 24.5 cm. Rome, Museo delle Civiltà, inv. 4190. © Museo delle Civiltà. Photo: Joanna Ostapkowicz.

vessel *Santa Maria del Campo* are so big and heavy that a cart drawn by two oxen could only transport two of them.⁵

Before crossing the ocean, these objects were observed and described in situ—in Hispaniola, Mexico, Cuzco, Michoacán, Lima, Veracruz, Panama, Nombre de Dios, or Brazil. In fact, they often traveled to Europe accompanied by texts, such as letters, inventories, or chronicles. These were penned while in the Americas by conquistadors, missionaries, and administrators, who narrated how they obtained them—mostly by extreme force, even when presented as gifts or exchanges. The context is that of the violent conquest, colonization, and Christianization of an entire continent.

A vast array of aesthetic experiences elicited by all sorts of “artifacts” (pieces “made with art”), buildings, and monuments unexpectedly filter through these accounts.⁶ For instance, the hundreds of gold and silver vases loaded on the *Santa Maria del Campo* were delivered to the Spaniards in Cajamarca by an imprisoned Sapa Inka hoping to be freed. After betraying Atahualpa and brutally murdering him, Francisco Pizarro sent the looted artifacts to Charles V. They arrived in Seville with a copy of the letter that Francisco’s brother Hernando, who was also traveling on the ship, had written in response to the judges of the court of Santo Domingo. In this legal document, aimed at legitimizing the sanguinary conquest of the Spaniards, we learn how the ransom was extorted

during the war. The document, however, also reports how, since their arrival, the conquistadors were dazzled by the creativity and wit of the Andean populations. Pizarro recalls the dances performed before their eyes, the architecture of the vast ceremonial complexes they visited, and the construction techniques of the ingenious rope bridges they crossed while traveling (and spying) through an extremely elaborate road system. He also points to what he considered to be the different degrees of “art” observed in the Inca provinces, venturing that the inhabitants of the Highlands were particularly gifted: “The lords and people of the mountains possess more art than those living in the plains” (*Estos caciques de la sierra e gente tienen más arte que no los de los llanos*).⁷ It is not easy to disentangle what immediately emerges as a paradox, in which artistic sophistication is measured by the arrogance and brutality of those who first lauded and then burned those laced bridges.

In many regards, this is history repeating itself. In 1520, Cortés had enthusiastically described the architectural splendor of Tenochtitlan while strategically planning the final attack on the Mexica city. The line between creation and destruction was extremely fine. Yet, inscribed in that fine line, there are also unexpected clues. When the variety of golden and silver pieces looted in Cajamarca arrived in Seville, for instance, Charles V asked the House of Trade to mint everything except “the most unusual” ones, implying that aesthetic innovation could salvage an artifact from being returned to mere metal.⁸ Imperial voracity seems to have been at least limited by those “piezas de las más extrañas” (most unusual pieces).⁹ Another clue: it is surprising that the very term *art* popped up in Hernando Pizarro’s letter, a legal document justifying colonization. Let us be cautious and assume that, according to its use at the time, the term *art* denoted a human activity ordered according to rational principles. “Ars est recta ratio rerum faciendarum” (art is the way to do things with reason), as Calepino’s *Dictionary* points out in a popular edition contemporary to Pizarro’s document.¹⁰ Art is defined as a rational and purposeful activity. This is precisely what bears major theoretical implications.

Subtle “Artistic” Intelligence

After their ports of entry in Spain or Portugal, the extraordinary objects from the New World branch off to destinations across all of Europe, by boat or by land. Offered, gifted, and pirated, they are repacked and unboxed to parade in courts, festivals, and collections.¹¹ Who will see them and what effect they will have on their onlookers is unpredictable. In March 1493, a nine-year-old named Bartolomé is in Seville when Columbus returns from his first voyage with captives wearing astonishing collars and belts. The boy stares at the “Indians” posing on an arch of the city, having pushed through the crowds to get

a closer view. There, he probably realizes that what he had thought were pearls were, in fact, minute beads of different colors. This young, incredulous observer would eventually mature into the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who wrote groundbreaking meditations on the rationality of the American creators, capable of manufacturing aesthetic preciousness with ordinary materials and simple tools.¹² A coeval of Bartolomé's, Columbus's five-year-old son Ferdinand, was also present to see his father's return. The Sevillian library that he gradually gathered throughout his whole life would come to be filled with texts describing objects like those he may have first witnessed that day.¹³ Just a few weeks after the navigator's arrival, Columbus moves on to Barcelona, and the city celebrates; its streets are crowded with people eager to see the physical proofs of a new land. Another young man, the fourteen-year-old royal page of Prince Juan, also makes his way to the captives and sees how they are baptized with new names, plausibly still wearing those beautiful parures.¹⁴ The visual effects that those "things" had on the inquisitive adolescent—no less than raw gold and multicolored parrots—will be recalled several decades later by a now-experienced chronicler and naturalist of the Indies, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés.

Generation after generation, the power of the encounter with previously unimaginable artistry proves galvanizing. When, in summer 1520, a variety of Mexican objects, initially received by Charles V in Spain, travel north and are displayed in the town hall of Brussels, Albrecht Dürer happened to be in the audience. In a passage of his diary that is frequently quoted, he fondly celebrates the outstanding quality of those artifacts, listing them by type and material, even recording their monetary value. But, most important, Dürer pays homage to "the subtle ingenuity of people in foreign lands" (*der subtilen Ingenia der Menschen in fremden Landen*)—to the inventiveness of his past and present fellow artists from the Americas.¹⁵ Dürer's personal conversations with Ferdinand Columbus (Columbus's son) in the Low Countries must have augmented his impressions. In those same years, both Albrecht and Ferdinand were acquainted with Erasmus of Rotterdam.¹⁶ The German artist, the Spanish collector, and the Dutch humanist will all visit the display of New World artifacts that the governor of the Habsburg Netherlands, Margaret of Austria, was assembling in Mechelen.¹⁷ It is tempting to seek clues of these material encounters and exchanges in intellectual circles that have too often been studied as being impermeable to the new artistic realities. If it has been stated until now that Erasmus "hardly let an allusion to the New World pass his pen" and that "there is virtually no impact in Dürer's work of his encounter" with the American objects, can we read between the lines of what has ultimately been reified as "European thought" in search of a different story?¹⁸ And, what, in fact, is this different story? My sense is that it can be a different art history: literally, a different history of what is considered the European concept of art that might actually be rooted in the *piezas más estrañas* and in the *subtilen Ingenia der*

Menschen in fremden Landen. How did the unfamiliar objects (as Miguel de Covarrubias pointed out in his *Tesoro* of 1611, *estraño* means “qui ex nostra familia non est” [not from our family]) and the people “of foreign lands” (*fremden*, according to Dürer’s language) exert a generative power in the European definition of art?

Clues Everywhere

All over Europe, artists, historians, collectors, naturalists, kings, popes, nobles, and cardinals received, exchanged, and craved these objects of “unfamiliar” beauty, leaving testimonies of their aesthetic experiences. The phenomenon was immediately polycentric as the artifacts traveled everywhere, quickly, and through the most diverse of networks. For instance, the Italian peninsula was inundated, from north to south, by masterpieces arriving through diplomatic, familial, missionary, and scholarly channels, as well as through piracy.¹⁹ By 1500, the king of Naples, Federico de Aragón, received via Spain a panoply of artworks from the Antilles. In the countryside of Lombardy, in 1521, a gathering of nobles observed several “idols masterfully made with mosaic technique” (*idoli maestrevolmente lavorati di mosaico*), which were brought to the Sforza-Bentivoglio court of Pandino by Francesco Chiericati, the papal nuncio in Portugal and patron of Antonio Pigafetta’s travel account.²⁰ In 1535, the pictographic Mexican manuscript known as the Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I arrived in Capua as part of the collection of its cardinal, Nicholas Schönberg.²¹ In 1569, in the port of Livorno, a Sicilian sea captain, formerly imprisoned by the Turks, got his hands on a distinctive Mexican “painting”—a *ritratto di penne* of Moctezuma (a portrait of the Mexica governor, made with feathers)—and secured it for Prince Francesco de’ Medici, continuing to feed a long-standing passion for New World objects in Florence.²² In 1573, the Calabrese geographer Lorenzo de Anania published in Naples enthusiastic commentaries on the “admirable artifice” of several Mexican objects that he personally saw in the southern parts of Spanish Italy. Scrutinizing a painted manuscript, he compared Mesoamerican pictography to alphabetic writing and saluted the technical innovation obtained with previously unknown botanic species. The Mexicans, he stated, used an oil medium derived from chia (*Salvia hispanica*), which provided both quality and waterproof durability to their pictorial books.²³

Archival evidence of such thought-stimulating objects spans from hastily handwritten notes (sometimes a single word in an inventory or the marginalia of a book) to an overlooked verse of an epigram by a famous Northern humanist, to a chapter in a best-seller republished over the years, such as Anania’s *La universal fabrica del mondo*.

And this is not just a Euro-American story. In the 1560s, a feather painting representing an *Ecce Homo*, which arrived from New Spain to the Spanish Court and was then

given as a gift by Philip II to his young nephew Sebastian of Portugal, was dispatched by the latter's grandmother as a "great present" to the king of Mozambique.²⁴ In the same years, American objects crossed the Pacific and reached the Moluccas, Japan, China, and the Philippines. Written documents record these journeys. From southeast Africa, a Jesuit saluted the natural twist given to Christian iconography by the plumes of Mexican birds and the subtlety of a unique art piece ("mostrando muy ao natural a imagem do Cristo").²⁵ From China, an ideographic text accompanying Matteo Ricci's world map published in 1602 praises the pictorial prowess of the Mexicans and the textile finesse of the Brazilians, observed through the marvels that had arrived to the court of Wan Li.²⁶ Aesthetic refinement is meandering throughout the globe.

The Question

Though rarely seen in such a broad perspective, the importance that New World artifacts and materials had for the history of collections and for the development of scientific knowledge has been mostly studied through the category of "curiosity."²⁷ The diverse impacts of their global circulation have been discussed from a broad variety of perspectives and through the aid of various metaphors, like that—particularly compelling—of nomadism.²⁸ Their political and geographical agency is also largely recognized today, participating in what scholarship has framed as the impact that the New World had on the Old.²⁹ We also know better today how the New World's artifacts and their circulation were instrumental for shaping a concrete idea of new territories, for promoting a world image of Habsburg domination, and for allowing those rulers, who were not directly involved in the colonization of the Americas, like the Medici, to participate in the symbolic possession of a new continent.³⁰ Observed under the lens of "pagan objects," their entanglement with the birth of a comparative history of religions has equally borne interesting fruits.³¹ Scholars have also studied how their descriptions and display participated in the dawn of ethnography and in the foundations of a "human science," and they have tackled the artifacts' stories in the biographical terms of their "global lives."³²

However, when one tries to tackle the question from the perspective of art history and, more specifically, of art theory, it becomes increasingly challenging to pose the right question. My book originates from this challenge and asks: what has been the *theoretical* impact of these extraordinary artifacts—art made in lands and by people completely unknown before—on the way we think about the arts?

The predictable answer would be: none. In spite of the variety of aesthetic responses recorded since the fifteenth century—underlined in the pioneering study of George Kubler, the first to study a variety of historical, written interactions with pre-Columbian arts—it

has been posited, until now, that if these artifacts had any conceptual significance in the field of art theory, it is that they contributed to shaping the categories of exoticism, the bizarre, and otherness, before eventually being melted down, dismantled, and lost.³³ Daniela Bleichmar has underscored the misleading attributions and provenances of the artifacts in museums' inventories and catalogue descriptions and tackles the creation of what she defines as "undifferentiated, fungible foreignness."³⁴ Salvaged, the artifacts have been displayed since the nineteenth century in national museums or forgotten in storage rooms as uncomfortable relics of the incontrovertible atrocities of colonialism.³⁵ In order to counteract all of the misconceptions they faced through the centuries (mislabeling, oblivion, and so on), it seems that we can only approach these objects by using the double-edged sword of particularism. It is precisely their differences that would need to be cultivated, in a state of isolation from the history of the conquest. Yet, this is the same premise that reinforces the conceptual frontiers between supposedly mutually exclusive worlds: "the West and the rest."³⁶ Even a groundbreaking work, like Eugenio Battisti's *Antirinascimento*, in which the Italian art historian pointed to the close relationship that European art history has with the artifacts coming from the New World, ends up dividing, in antagonistic terms, the supposed canon of (or the historiographic discourse about) a triumphant Western Renaissance from what had been, internally and externally, the rest.³⁷

The answer I propose is radically different. I posit that the subtlety, variety, and inventiveness of a myriad of creations and techniques observed in and coming from the Americas—sculpture, painting, metalwork, mosaic, carving, architecture, masonry, and so forth—actually challenged and revolutionized the definition of both what is art and what it means to be human in the long sixteenth century. The evidence of such singular artifacts made by skillful hands and rational minds, in a previously unthinkable part of the Earth, prompted the redefinition of humanity, precisely as a universal artistic humanity wherever on Earth. This was a veritable revolution in thought, positing that where art is, humans are. My proposal is in dialogue with, and yet distinct from, two fundamental books: David Abulafia's *The Discovery of Mankind* and Surekha Davies's *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human*. Abulafia and Davies point to the fact that, in the Renaissance, humans who were found (or "discovered" or "invented," according to each author's lexicon) around the world were sometimes described in chronicles or depicted in maps as object makers. My reasoning goes the other way around: it was precisely the artistic vitality observed all around the world that redefined humanity. In fact, humanity became less inferred from physical features, geographical locations, or particular social, political, and religious customs than from a universal potential—anywhere and at any moment in time—for artistic rationality. It is the artifacts that, ultimately, embody humanity as a possibility. That universal potential is not a homogenizing tool; it does not mean that everywhere and anywhere in the world, people create the same objects or

make the same constructions. On the contrary, the realization of a universal humanity prompted what I call in this book “artifact-based humanism”: the study and theorization of a panoply of handmade artifacts, observed on a global scale, defined the purposeful and singular thinking of their creators, prompted groundbreaking comparisons between the uniqueness of distant artificers’ modes of creation, demonstrated their equality in terms of a nonprescriptive artistic excellence, and ultimately stimulated a new understanding about a heterogeneous, universal humanity at large. This artifact-based humanism differs from the early modern relativism studied by Anthony Pagden as “a far-reaching change in the understanding of human societies” and did not conflate in what Christopher S. Wood perspicaciously identifies as the segregating relativism of modern art history.³⁸

During this process—involving observation, recording, and theorizing human artifacts as intentionally handmade—the very category of “art” was also reconceptualized. Though still anchored to the meaning of “manual work,” artistic activity became the most tangible demonstration of human thought, encompassing the reasoning preceding and active throughout the material realization of a piece and the “artistic” refinement displayed in that piece. A look at Las Casas’s instances of the term *arte* confirms that he uses the word not only to refer to sets of practical know-hows (*arte de marear*, *arte de la agricultura*, *arte militar*, *arte minera*, *arte de adivinar*, and even *arte del demonio*) but also to specifically describe the enjoyment embedded in making extremely elaborate handmade objects “for recreation”—so not out of need—and the aesthetic pleasure felt by those who experienced them as “a delight to look.”³⁹

In this way, the subtlety (both technical and imaginative) of the artifacts coming from outside Europe between 1400 and 1600 played a definitive role in what is considered a distinctively European transformation: the redefinition of the frontier between the “mechanical” and the “liberal” arts and, as we will see in chapter 1, the new conception of the figure of the “painter”—the artist.⁴⁰ Provocatively, one can say that if in the twenty-first century the splendid pre-Columbian pieces displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition *Golden Kingdoms* could be presented as artistic pieces and their authors called “artists,” this is also due to the complex history of the conquest and its unexpected entanglements with the history of artistic theory in the sixteenth century.⁴¹ The dynamic reflections provoked by the masterpieces observed and described in this contradictory historical context are the theme of this book.

Made in the Unknown

The precedents and conditions for the “revolution in thought” that I have presented—the articulation of a universal artistic humanity—began in the previous centuries, when

materials and objects circulated in the Old World through an interlocked world system.⁴² The Mediterranean context provided a particularly fertile space for aesthetic appreciation.⁴³ Written and visual sources testified that the refinement of human-made artifacts could break through distances in time, space, and religious or political orientations. It was precisely their intriguing artistic labor—the outstanding quality of the *lavoro*—that, above all, allowed them this mobility.⁴⁴ Islamic prayer rugs and oriental carpets, for instance, entered Christian spaces of representation in Renaissance painting. Beyond any easy “iconographic” interpretation (reading them as symbols of religious conflict, thriving commerce, bravura consumerism, and so on), one piece of evidence is particularly telling: most often, fifteenth-century artists, such as Carlo Crivelli and, later, Lorenzo Lotto and Sebastiano del Piombo, painted the oriental carpets “above ground, protected from wear and displayed as works of art” (fig. 3).⁴⁵ The immense effort required to render their material characteristics in painting testifies to their aesthetic appeal. In this context, too, contradictory attitudes cohabited. Like the conquistadors lauding and then burning the Inca rope bridges, Renaissance humanists could display in their *studioli* wonderful Mamluk carpets while constructing in their writings the myth of Islam as the enemy and, in particular, the figure of the Turk as the “new barbarian.”⁴⁶ The inverse is also true: a translation (of a translation) of the Qur’an printed in Venice in 1547 could simultaneously sustain an anti-Islamic rhetoric and sketch a most refined biography of Muhammad.⁴⁷

Throughout the medieval period, the Iberian Peninsula, with its moving frontiers of Al-Andalus, had been a unique space of confrontation and reciprocal transformation among artifacts, techniques, and ideas about art making. It is in the fifteenth century, however, that I locate the most important precedent of a novel conceptualization of humanity through artistry, when refined artworks observed in and coming from sub-Saharan, equatorial, and subequatorial African regions physically reached the Iberian Peninsula, particularly Portugal, and were described in detail.⁴⁸ These regions had previously been imagined as existing and yet “unknowable.” According to the theory of the five climatic zones, the equatorial zone was impossible to traverse due to extreme heat. Any potential human presence beyond this central area was, therefore, unknowable as well. Since the conquest of Ceuta (Morocco) in 1415, the Portuguese progressively sailed along the entire west coast of Africa, braving geographical frontiers previously considered insurmountable (Cape Bojador in 1434, the Cape of Good Hope in 1488) and demonstrating that the theory of the five climates had no correspondence in reality. The region previously considered torrid was indeed warm but could be traveled and inhabited. In fact, there were people everywhere.⁴⁹ Christopher Columbus played a crucial role in demonstrating



LIBERTAS

ECCLESIASTICA



FIGURE 4 | Milanese drawing of a Kongolese textile “di pura bellezza” (of pure beauty), 1664. Modena, Settala Museum, Camp. 338=Gamma.H.1.21, fol. 20r, Biblioteca Estense Universitaria—Raccolta Campori. © Proprietà Comune di Modena, in deposito permanente presso la Biblioteca Estense Universitaria di Modena.

this. As Nicolás Wey-Gómez states, “It was partially against the thesis that the torrid zone generally sustained little or no human life that Columbus would carry out his exploration.”⁵⁰ Between 1482 and 1485, before sailing toward the “Indies” and while still working for the Portuguese Crown, he had traded along the west coast of Guinea and visited San Jorge da Mina. Writing about Elmina Castle, he says, “[It] is located beneath the equatorial arc and I am a good witness that it is not uninhabitable.”⁵¹ In his annotations to Pierre d’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi*, Columbus notes that “innumerable peoples” live in sub-Saharan regions. He frequently referred back to his African experience in his later writings.

It is in the 1480s and 1490s that intriguing human-made artifacts coming from equatorial and subequatorial Africa physically or textually arrived in the Iberian Peninsula and beyond. Describing the Portuguese expedition in the Kingdom of Kongo, the royal chronicler Rui de Pina recalls the appearance of “carved ivory items, and many well woven palm cloths of fine colors” brought to Lisbon by the African king, as well as the “very fine embroidered snake” crafted on the cap sported by the ruler of Soyo in 1491, when the Europeans met him.⁵² These artifacts were soon compared to the most refined materials. Duarte Pacheco Pereira writes in his *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* (1506) that palm-leaf cloth is as soft as and more beautiful than Italian velvet: “In the Kingdom of Kongo they produce cloths from palm fibers with velvet-like pile of such beauty that better ones are not made in Italy.”⁵³ Ivory spoons and raffia textiles from Sierra Leone are described as more artistically carved and woven than in any other place.⁵⁴ Comparisons between luxurious European satin and African textiles even sneak into João de Barros’s *Asia* (1552), where the author adds that the fabrics include high and low reliefs.⁵⁵ One century later, a Kongolese textile with geometric decoration and tassels is celebrated in the Settala Museum of Milan as made with “so great an art that [it] surpasses our puckered silk clothes”; a drawing in the illustrated, handwritten catalogue of the museum attempts to represent its silklike softness, and a comment points to its “pura bellezza” (pure beauty) (fig. 4).⁵⁶ In the meantime, the caliber of African artifacts had been considered worth a transatlantic trip. Columbus is said to have reciprocated the beautiful artifacts offered by the Taino chief Guacanagarí in 1492, giving him a tunic “Aphricana arte consutam” (sewn with African artistry).⁵⁷ Most likely, this was a textile that he had himself brought from the west coast of Africa, where it had arrived from western Sudan through the Mande trade networks.⁵⁸

The refined artistry coming from previously unknown lands immediately triggered a meditation on the inhabitants’ faculties. Around 1507, the Lisbon-based Moravian printer Valentim Fernandes writes, “In Sierra Leone people are very fine, very ingenious, they make ivory artifacts that are marvelous to see, and they can do whatever they are asked to—that is, some make spoons, others saltcellars, others dagger handles, and any other fine thing. . . the men of the country are very talented blacks, [experts] in manual



arts . . . they possess infinite ivory teeth from which they make all their gorgeous things [*todas suas obras louçanas*].”⁵⁹ In the Upper Guinea coast, Fernandes asserts, there “are people who are very sophisticated in working with their hands, in sewing, weaving, and many other things.”⁶⁰ Manual dexterity and mental refinement, imitation and invention, could not be separated anymore. The Sapi-Portuguese lidded saltcellar carved in ivory and today displayed at the Metropolitan Museum also tells this story (fig. 5).

Path Crossing Between Antithetical Universalisms

This book proposes that the artifacts observed in and coming from the Americas brought to extreme consequences those previous reflections on the relationship between artistic gesture and the human nature of Earth’s inhabitants. Both anthropology and art history—and even paleontology—are therefore profoundly indebted to the artifacts observed in and traveling through the Mediterranean; sub-Saharan, equatorial, and subequatorial Africa; the Americas; and Asia, as they progressively universalized novel conceptualizations of art and humanity.⁶¹ My use of the term *universalization* and of the adjective and noun *universal* requires definition, as does their distinction from the term *universalism* and the adjective *universalist*.

Universalism can certainly be regarded as a powerful imperial tool of the early modern period. There is no doubt that the hegemonic agenda of conquistadors and missionaries was *universalist* if one understands this term as the impulse “to turn the world into one,” notably through the projection, as Emmanuel Wallerstein demonstrates, of supposedly “universal” categories (civilization, progress, and so on).⁶² Universalism is, in this sense, a synonym of Europeanization.⁶³

It is precisely the antithesis between this sort of European imperial (false) *universalism* and the processes of *universalization* of the concept of art and humanity that I single out in this book. The processes of *universalization* were triggered by the singularity of a myriad of subtle artifacts encountered all over the world. The artistic realities coming from outside Europe prompted a novel conceptualization of the universal: the artifacts coming from, and the artists living in, parts of the world previously thought of as nonexistent or uninhabitable demonstrated how art and humanity are universal, though composed of heterogeneous, singular realities. These objects, in turn, also became *universalizable* in the sense that they could transcend their initial local contexts to enlighten something new about questions that, in principle, were exterior to them. Woodwork observed in

FIGURE 5 | Lidded saltcellar, Sierra Leone, fifteenth to sixteenth century. Ivory, 29.8 × 10.8 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Paul and Ruth W. Tishman, 1991.435a, b.

Hispaniola could expand the locution “artistically made” and even the meaning of the word *architecture*; golden vases arriving from Cajamarca could prompt a redefinition of the concept of *antiquity*; feather mosaics coming from Mexico could redefine the concept of *painting*.

These antithetical universalisms—European (false) universalism and the process of universalization of artistic and human evidence—interacted in a concrete historical context that we need to keep in mind. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Crowns of Portugal and Spain multiplied expeditions of exploration, conquest, colonization, Christianization, forced labor, and enslavement all around the world. We can roughly sketch this period between the Portuguese conquest of Ceuta (1415) and the aftermath of the Peace of Westphalia, signed in 1648: more than two centuries of wars of conquest and territorial occupation, missionary indoctrination, and exploitation on a global scale, in the Americas, Africa, and Asia.⁶⁴ This transcontinental panorama of military aggression and colonization was no less destructive in Europe, where powers continuously confronted one another (often making improbable alliances) through wars, occupation, and destruction. Almost on a yearly basis, treaties (such as Cambrai [1529], Augsburg [1555], Cateau-Cambresis [1559], and Münster [1648]) created periods of relative peace or short truces. But it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that what defined Europe, at least in these centuries, was precisely an internal antagonistic mode, often on the level of civil war, though masked by the fiction of a common identity within Christendom.⁶⁵ That fiction, in turn, provided the ideological unity to overcome internal fights and confront external enemies. One could evoke Aeneas Piccolomini’s *Europa*, where the name of the continent ultimately meant a call for an alliance against the Ottomans, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.⁶⁶

In the middle of this sustained context of confrontation, pillage, and violence, a panoply of novel artistic forms, media, and monuments crossed the paths of not only stormy conquistadors, zealous missionaries, and profit-seeking merchants but also historians, artists, and collectors, who, each from a discrete vantage point, observed and described their most creative aspects. These authors were not only Europeans (Spaniards, Portuguese, Catalans, Basques, Italians, and so on) but also Nahua, Andean, Japanese, and Chinese writers, often urged by Iberian institutions or servants of the Crown of Portugal and Spain to put on paper descriptions of objects and ideas about their creations. This is the reason why, among the richest archival repositories of these artifacts and ideas, there are Inquisitorial processes, missionary inquiries on “idolatries,” and geographical descriptions—endeavors in which the local population actively participated to varying degrees. For instance, within the famous *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, also known as the Florentine Codex, a monumental history of the Mexican world before and after the conquest, directed by the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún from the

mid-1550s, we find hundreds of pages, written in Nahuatl, on various artistic techniques with actual art recipes, described in text and illustrated in painting, as well as fascinating thoughts on the conception of color and brilliance. The images of the Codex Magliabechiano (also from the mid-1550s), painted in Mexico to record the “superstitions of the Indians” (*supersticiones de los indios*), are veritable catalogues of the most inventive textile patterns imaginable. In the *Descripción de Tlaxcala* of 1585, a geographic description of the city that allied with the Spaniards, written by the mestizo Diego Muñoz Camargo in response to a questionnaire sent out by Philip II’s administration, we read extensive descriptions of monuments, “antiquities,” and artistic masteries of the Valley of Mexico.⁶⁷

Asian and African artifacts also entered the realm of ekphrastic practices and visual illustrations, often influenced by the widely circulating descriptions and images of the Americas. The presentation of the architectural splendors of Beijing by the Portuguese Fernão Mendes Pinto in his *Peregrinação* (written before 1583) reminds in many aspects how Cortés had introduced the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan—just before brutally attacking it—to European readership in 1520. When, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit Joao Rodrigues describes how Japanese calligraphy bears a double nature of painting and writing, his thoughts evoke those of the mendicant missionaries trying to grasp how Mesoamerican pictography actually functioned as a form of writing. Celebrating the music of Angola and Kongo in the 1670s, the Italian Capuchin missionary Antonio Cavazzi openly refers to the *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* (1609 and 1617)—the chronicle on the Andean world written and published by the Cuzco-born mestizo Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca. Cavazzi may have even carried the book along during his trip to Africa.

The historical context of confrontation briefly sketched above had a very concrete impact on how these observations and descriptions took place. After the initial encounter, the artifacts, when transportable, were obtained by force or bartered in an unequal exchange. Some became evidence of supposed idolatry and played a fundamental role in Inquisitorial trials. When unmovable, architecture and monuments were often mutilated or destroyed during the wars of conquest or during the construction of new sites. Other works, portable and made with precious metal, were melted in situ or on their arrival in Europe. And yet, between their creation and their fate, many of these art pieces traveled between continents and sometimes all around the world in physical and textual forms: not only sent and offered as proofs of the new territories, lauded as trophies of conquest, desired and collected as “treasures” but also described, compared, and analyzed in letters, histories, and inventories as tangible forms of human thought.

The material realities of specific artifacts and media (sometimes only fragments and ruins, sometimes masterpieces in perfect condition) prompted audacious revisions of historical, art-historical, and geographical narratives. They triggered, for instance, the most

improbable yet vivid conjectures about prior contacts between populations. Pictographic books found in Mexico were interpreted as the missing link between Egypt's vertical hieroglyphic and horizontal alphabetic writing; exquisite bas-reliefs discovered in Cambodia were used as material proofs of a previously unknown Roman conquest; American Indians were believed to have Jewish origins or Muslim ties based on their use of specific artistic media or architectural features. Objects and monuments also encouraged bold comparisons with surprising results: the magnificence, quantity, and monumentality of Andean and Mexican temples eclipsed the fineness of Greek, Roman, Jewish, or Egyptian shrines; gold vases (*aquillas*) used in Peruvian ceremonies surpassed the richness of those described in the Temple of Jerusalem; "paintings" made with feathers in New Spain were celebrated as on a par with and even superior to oil paintings. Monuments like the Elephanta rock caves of Mumbai, the Great Wall of China, the Aztec Great Temple, or the Great Buddha of Kamakura were measured, sketched, and studied in situ and from afar. Their novelty (in plan, size, and so on) was compared to well-known architecture. All around a sphere that could now be mentally embraced, not only carved temples, monumental cities, painted manuscripts, and intricate sculptures but also body painting, gold *byobu*, turquoise masks, feather mosaics, fish-bone necklaces, and ivory spoons deeply challenged conceptual boundaries, such as those between civilized and barbarian, center and periphery, beautiful and frightening, idol and art, classic and modern, ancient and new.

The stunning variety of human creativity visible all around the Earth stimulated a veritable revolution in thought that can be related to the Copernican one. At the same time that the Earth lost its fixed position at the center of the cosmos, the Earth's constitution was completely reassessed. Its inhabitants were, in fact, as diverse as they were kin. A universal feature of this circumnavigated humanity was, precisely, creativity. For several thinkers, artistic evidence even became the most compelling reason to halt the violence of the conquest and to avoid becoming barbarians, in turn.

"Antigo Não é Velho": A New Antiquity

In this specific historical, anthropological, and artistic context, the notion of antiquity underwent a profound transformation. Paradigmatic of this transformation is a statement by the Portuguese painter and art theorist Francisco de Holanda: "Ancient does not mean old" (*antigo não é velho*). Writing in the late 1540s, under the impact of those new artifacts arriving in Europe from all over the world, such as the gold and silver vases looted in Peru, Holanda's brief sentence severed the association between antiquity and the past tense. In the Renaissance, the notion of antiquity already embraced more than

Greek or Roman artworks; Byzantine icons were also considered to be ancient.⁶⁸ But Holanda advanced this conceptual shift to the limit. To him, antiquity now alluded to a subtle and inventive creation that could be found anytime and anywhere. In Holanda's conceptualization, antiquity became a synonym of artistic excellence, one that the Greeks and the Romans had formally achieved but that any great artist could—and should—achieve anywhere and anytime: Apelles in Greece, Michelangelo in Italy, the Peruvians in their *aquillas*, or the Chinese in their pagodas.

This radical temporal and spatial redefinition of what antiquity could mean had art-historical, philosophical, and anthropological implications. People living on the other side of the world could be “ancient” artists—excellent artists; their humanity could be precisely inferred from their ingenious artistry. Conversely, mediocre art made in the past, even if produced at the core of an empire, could merely be thought of as old: incapable of outlasting its immediate time and its narrow locale.

Inspired by Holanda's passage, I call the novel concept that came out of the intensive observation and description of unexpected artistic forms and of the acute reflections about the hands and minds that stood beyond them a “new antiquity,” which gives this book its title. The oxymoron dialogues with and yet deliberately forces the meaning that the term *antiquity* has had in the important scholarship on antiquarianism. In 1950, Arnaldo Momigliano demonstrated that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the term *antiquitates* referred to “the ancient traditions and remains,” which were studied and collected in their inevitably fragmentary condition. Although they were not historians, antiquarians untiringly pieced together and interpreted those fragments, especially epigraphical evidence.⁶⁹ Since Momigliano, the breadth and finesse of scholarship on antiquarianisms, today considered from transhistorical and global perspectives, has continued to unveil a myriad of discrete approaches to the study of “the ancient traditions and remains,” to the multiple antiquities from around the world.⁷⁰ Yet, the term remains associated, in all these studies, with the past tense.

Holanda's crystal-clear statement that “ancient does not mean old” encourages us to think of the term anew—freed from an attachment to the remnants of a bygone time. As we will see in chapter 1, according to Sylvie Deswarte-Rosa, the term *antigo* in Holanda is rather a synonym of *priscum*, a quality of pristine perfection that is embedded and remains active in humanity, albeit silently.⁷¹ In fact, this pristine antiquity, this pristine artistic potential, is revealed rather discontinuously. This is why Holanda clarifies: “antigo não é velho.”⁷² Not each remnant from the past is worth being understood as ancient, and antiquity—as *priscum*—not only can but, by definition, must transcend the past. The theoretical shift is therefore from thinking of antiquity as any fragmentary evidence of particular traditions from the past to considering it an active human potential of artistic perfection, not only freed from time and space but also freed from complying to a stable

canon. The “new antiquity” unveiled during the contact with the artifacts made in unexpected parts of the globe had, in fact, a meaning that transcended local cities, regions, or empires.

Title and subtitle of this book—*A New Antiquity: Art and Humanity as Universal (1400–1600)*—follow in a logical sequence. My proposal is that the concept of “a new antiquity” as a universal artistic potential—a realization that emerged through contact with novel fine artifacts made by people living in parts of the world previously unknown—provided the conceptual basis for a revolution in thought, one that posited that where art is, humans are. Holanda’s motto becomes the conceptual thread of the authors studied in this book. In fact, with him, a myriad of other sources clearly record the highly conceptual impact of those never-before-seen artistries. Driven by them, authors as diverse as chroniclers, artists, collectors, missionaries, and even Inquisitors participated in lively debates about how to redefine aesthetic excellence, often putting aside the supposed falsity of the things represented (myths, fables, gods, and so on). The artifacts ultimately demonstrated that art is a form of thought—one of the greatest forms of thought of which humanity is capable. Novel linguistic and conceptual vocabularies, object illustrations, and collecting and curatorial practices participated in the reflection on this new universal, artistic humanity.

The first three chapters of the book trace how the subtlety of artifacts and monuments not only observed in person but also described or experienced through written and oral accounts became the material proof of humanity’s refined thought for three specific authors. I inquire into the theoretical and historical relationships between Francisco de Holanda, Pietro Martire d’Anghiera, and Bartolomé de las Casas. Chapter 1, “Lights on the Antipodes,” addresses the evidence that people living in parts of the globe previously considered unreachable, uninhabitable, or completely unknown were capable of striking artistry. The chapter moves from cartography to art theory and philosophy through the fascinating work of the Portuguese artist and theorist Holanda. I particularly analyze how the concept of the antipodes, especially the somewhat anachronic concept of American antipodes, was transformed by Holanda’s geography of art into a theoretical turning point to define artistic intelligence as the common potential of a universal humanity. In Holanda’s theorization and in Michelangelo’s words in *Da pittura antica* (On ancient painting; 1548), the previously unknown people of the New World undo any claim of imperial transmission of artistic excellence. The “origins” of art are also redefined: they become potentially universal in space and time. Artistic inception and artistic excellence can be located anytime and anywhere, which does not mean that they happen always and everywhere. In this way, art becomes a potential—and a horizon—of the human.

Chapter 2, “Acuity Through Art,” addresses the linguistic and philosophical precision of the vocabulary employed to describe the artifacts observed in, or arriving from,

the New World. In particular, I study how the concepts of *ars* (art), *acumen* (acuity), *ingenium* (ingenuity), and *industria* (purposeful labor) were theorized in novel ways. The attention given to the intricate making of objects, to their *techne*, is paradoxically what contributes to define their evidentiary role in demonstrating the ethical nature of their makers. The crucial figure here is that of Anghiera, the Italian chronicler at the Spanish court. Between 1493 and 1526, Anghiera played a key role in setting up a specific theoretical lexicon to address the objects coming from the Americas. This lexicon was certainly indebted to a very specific and recognizable rhetorical tradition of ekphrasis. It was also, however, powerfully novel in describing the specificities of never-before-seen objects. Anghiera was also the first to argue that the creative finesse of those human-made things is evidence of the ethical and political qualities of the populations that produced them. What is at stake in this chapter is to position these concepts as originating both within the new fifteenth-century culture of humanism with its classical heritage *and* because of the encounter with new artifacts that impacted and shaped that culture. The intersection between the two generated what I call “artifact-based humanism.”

After exploring the philosophical lexicon of artistic description, chapter 3, “An Indestructible ‘Indian’ Universe of Artists,” focuses on Las Casas’s work and his juridical definition of the human. I propose that the groundbreaking meditations of this author on the artistic activities observed in the Americas (several long chapters of his *Apologética historia sumaria* were completed after confronting Ginés de Sepúlveda in the famous Valladolid Debate) can be regarded as one of the most refined theorizations on human, artistic rationality. Las Casas implies a definition of the American populations not as living in a natural state of innocence, as scholarship had previously proposed, nor as destroyed for good, as his work was promoted since his lifetime, but precisely based on their artistic prowess. This prowess, inscribed in the materiality, is not mechanical—it is, in fact, intellectual. A key argument for this demonstration is the scarcity of tools employed to obtain such marvelous results—hence, their artistic finesse cannot but be the product of elevated mental qualities. Previously relegated to the notion of mechanical and servile, these artistic expressions became a full demonstration of the unbounded (“liberal”) potential of thought. Las Casas redefines humanity through the artistic gesture. The arts and artists from previously unknown territories contributed to the revolutionary transformation of the conception of creativity.

After the first three chapters, the book addresses the unexpected short circuits between the agenda of the project of Christianization and colonization, from one side, and the aesthetic evidence of shapes and media never seen before, from the other. Chapter 4, “The Sublime Art of the Idol,” studies the instabilities of the category of *idol* in the context of the Iberian expansion and its contributions to the modern concept of art. Conquistadors, missionaries, and travelers clearly present the manufacture of idols as an

artistically elevated effort—even though aimed at worshiping the wrong “gods.” In this way, they put the error and the beauty of the idol in productive tension. It is precisely through its human-made nature that the term *idol* becomes a qualifier for artifact and art piece. The transformation of the notion of the idol can be traced through a variety of texts written in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. These texts span from Inquisitorial processes to chronicles and inventories that address the observation of idols as a subjective aesthetic experience. The description of their shape and beauty—and what the sources call, literally, their *sublime* character—becomes a crucial step to theorize the independence of the artistic object from its worshiping purposes. The appreciation of the art of the idol allows the objects to shift from a forensic context (the verdicts in Inquisitorial trials) into the terrain of aesthetic judgment. Along with the term *idol*, many other terms participated in the same delicate disentangling of religion and artistic object. Some of these terms, like the Quechua *huaca* or the supposedly Taino *çemi*, were Indigenous; others, like the Afro-Portuguese *fetisso*, were pidgin terms evolving from European medieval contexts (Lat. *facticium*, Port. *feitiço*). But all helped to portray the people found in the furthest corners of the globe as artifact makers, and all contributed to a reconceptualization of where artistry resides. Among the chapter’s key points of analysis are the Inquisitorial trial of the cacique of Texcoco, Mexico, in 1539, which included the “chasing” of idols, their description, and their display, and the pages that, around 1585, the Portuguese Jesuit Luis Frois devotes to describe the pleasure of walking among the one thousand statues of the temple of Sanjūsangen-dō in Kyoto. The chapter also addresses a fascinating image (dated to the mid-1570s) from the Florentine Codex representing “idol making” in New Spain, where a Mexica idol is represented in contrapposto position. Going beyond the apparent anachronism—pre-Hispanic sculpture was obviously not carved in contrapposto—I propose that this is a theoretical choice made by the *tlacuiloque*, the painters of the Florentine Codex, in order to present pre-Hispanic sculpture as comparable (namely, in a point of potential equality) to Greco-Roman and Renaissance sculpture. The representation of idol making becomes the paradoxical representation of Mexica artistic excellence.

The last chapter of the book addresses the relevance of the artifacts seen or arriving from the Americas, Africa, and Asia, for the history and geography of art—and for the concept of the Renaissance itself. Chapter 5, “Novel Territories of Painting,” reflects on how three treatises on art, written in the mid-sixteenth century, envisioned the “rebirth” of the arts through a subtle interplay between a protonational history of art and the global panorama of human creativity. If in his famous *Lives* (published in 1550 and, in a second edition, in 1568) Giorgio Vasari preferred a biographical model restrained in time and space, the Portuguese Holanda—as seen in chapter 1—and the Spanish Felipe de Guevara broadened their critical lens to novel spaces and times. Grounding reflections on

specific artifacts, such as feather paintings and painted manuscripts from New Spain, Guevara identified unexpected territories of the Renaissance, implying that the rebirth of the arts could come from the outside. The chapter then studies the arrival of feather mosaics in Beijing and Prague: simultaneously at the courts of Wan Li and of Rudolph II, where these novel forms of painting triggered linguistic and painterly reactions that illuminate their profound agency in nonexotic terms.

After synthesizing the proposals of the book and their potential implications for rethinking the history of art history, the conclusion, titled “A New Artistic World,” takes a step further the analysis of the roles played by the antipodean objects in early modern times. Many of the artifacts discussed in this book were eventually displayed in the first museums, like those of the Bolognese Ulisse Aldrovandi and Ferdinando Cospi, during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There, they were presented in courageously close proximity to objects or references from the Old World, from classical antiquities to contemporary local arts. I contend that the displays of these museums may have originated precisely in the previous experiments of the authors studied in this book—not only the European chroniclers, missionaries, and artists, but also Indigenous painters and writers who produced similar “montages” or even proto-Warburgian juxtapositions between discrete art pieces, in their pictorial and textual works. The conclusion ultimately addresses how, between 1400 and 1600, through novel material, visual, and textual displays, the heterogeneity of human creativity found throughout the entire world came to be thought of, represented by, and physically displayed as “comparable,” in the sense of being in a relationship of artistic equality. That comparison was not a juxtaposition—what could be thought of as the dawn of a world art history made of discrete, autonomous regionalisms—nor was it the premise of the world museum in vogue today. It was, on the contrary, a creative intertwining between myriad artworks, always guided by one specific point of comparability between multiple evidences of human creativity: their always unique and yet intelligible artistic excellence. By the late seventeenth century, however, this dynamic vision started regressing into a gradual disconnection. Albeit written from the perspective of supposedly universalist values, modern political philosophy often reinforced—probably even generated—the epistemological divisions that we have inherited.⁷³ Modern disciplines, like art history and ethnography, partitioned further their objects with endless internal divisions: high arts versus minor crafts, people with writing versus those supposedly without it, complex versus simple kinship systems, and so on.

Yet, evidence of a universal artistic humanity did, in early modern times, revolutionize the definition of art itself. In spite of all the conscious and unconscious efforts to stifle that revolution, it happened. It is up to us to reconnect with that groundbreaking process and to invent today original scholarly practices for studying and teaching. In

this regard, the book engages with conversations about how to renew the curriculum of a discipline that often perceives itself as uniquely rooted in Europe. The answer, for me, is not an “inclusive” art history: an art history rewritten with the best intentions of decolonizing the discipline but ultimately made of self-standing parts—chapters and special issues that one may easily skip (or that one could read in isolation, which produces the same results: leaving things unchanged).⁷⁴ The answer is to historically demonstrate, in our daily practice, the generative power of the “artifacts of the antipodes” in the theoretical reflections about art and humanity. Without taking them into account, there cannot be today *any* art history.