

Transliteration Challenges of Internationalized Art Lexicon

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ABSTRACT

The globalization of art discourse has led to the widespread adoption of specialized terms derived from European languages—particularly English, French, and Italian—into a broad range of linguistic and cultural contexts. As these terms enter non-Latin-script languages such as Arabic, Japanese, and Russian, they are often transliterated rather than translated, preserving phonetic resemblance while potentially obscuring semantic depth. This study explores the linguistic, educational, and cultural consequences of transliterating internationalized art terms in these three languages. Using a qualitative, comparative methodology that draws on academic texts, museum materials, media discourse, and expert interviews, the research identifies patterns of inconsistency, semantic ambiguity, and contextual misalignment in transliterated terms.

Findings reveal that while transliteration enables alignment with global discourse, it frequently results in terminological confusion, especially in educational and curatorial contexts. Arabic transliterations exhibit significant variation and semantic fragmentation; Japanese transliterations are consistent in form but often lack conceptual clarity; and Russian displays a hybrid model that blends transliteration with historical translation practices. The study concludes that transliteration, when left uncontextualized, impairs effective communication and knowledge transmission in the arts. It calls for standardized multilingual glossaries, culturally responsive pedagogy, and greater reflexivity in the adoption of international terminology.

Keywords: Transliteration; art terminology; linguistic globalization; internationalized lexicon; art education; cultural translation; semantic clarity

1. INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of art discourse has significantly expanded over the past century, coinciding with the globalization of education, the digitization of cultural archives, and the cross-border mobility of artists, scholars, and curators. As a result, specialized art terms—many rooted in Western European traditions—have been adopted into diverse linguistic and cultural frameworks around the world (Sadikhova & Babayev, 2025a). Terms such as atelier, fresco, impasto, collage, and installation have become central to discussions of art history, theory, and practice across continents. However, when

these terms are introduced into languages that do not use the Latin script—such as Arabic, Russian, Japanese, and others—the process of transliteration becomes necessary.

Transliteration refers to the conversion of words from one writing system into another, typically based on phonetic approximation. Unlike translation, which conveys meaning, transliteration primarily seeks to preserve pronunciation. This often leads to hybrid terms that maintain phonological resemblance to the source language but fail to convey the original concept's full semantic or historical weight, creating confusion or inconsistency in educational contexts, professional discourse, and public understanding of art terms. For example, the term installation art, which refers to site-specific, immersive three-dimensional works, may be transliterated into various forms that obscure its conceptual basis or its ties to particular movements in contemporary art.

Linguists and terminologists have long discussed the challenges of borrowing and adapting specialized terminology across languages (Crystal, 2003; Cabré, 1999). While fields like science and medicine often rely on international standardization bodies to ensure consistency, the arts remain relatively decentralized in their approach to terminology (Sadikhova, 2024). Art education institutions, museums, and publishers frequently adopt idiosyncratic transliterations based on regional dialects, editorial choices, or audience familiarity, resulting in a lack of standardization and barriers to scholarly communication across borders.

The issue is further complicated by cultural translation. Many art terms are deeply embedded in historical and aesthetic traditions that may not have direct counterparts in the target culture (Javid & Sadikhova, 2025). For instance, the French term *trompe-l'œil* encapsulates a specific visual illusion technique with historical roots in European painting, and its transliteration may fail to transmit its conceptual richness without extensive explanation. Furthermore, the increasing dominance of English as the lingua franca of global art discourse exerts pressure on local languages to absorb foreign terms rapidly, often without adequate localization or pedagogical scaffolding.

This study investigates the transliteration of internationalized art terms into non-Latin-script languages, focusing specifically on Arabic, Japanese, and Russian as representative case studies. These languages were selected for their global cultural significance, rich artistic traditions, and differing linguistic structures (Sabir, 2023). The study aims to identify patterns and inconsistencies in transliteration practices; evaluate the impact of transliteration on semantic clarity and pedagogical effectiveness; and explore how cultural and institutional contexts influence the adaptation of international art vocabulary. Previous studies (Gritsenko, 2016; Al-Salman, 2021) have shown that transliterated terms in fields like science or technology often struggle to gain semantic clarity without standardization. In the art world, where terms carry not only technical but also cultural connotations, the problem becomes even more complex.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and interdisciplinary research design, drawing on methodologies from linguistics, art history, and translation studies. The goal is to examine how internationalized art terms—primarily of Western European origin—are transliterated, adapted, and understood in three non-Latin-script languages: Arabic, Japanese, and Russian. These languages were selected due to their significant roles in global art education and cultural production, their use of non-Latin scripts (Abjad, Kana/Kanji, and Cyrillic respectively), and their distinct approaches to linguistic borrowing.

2.1 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are selected international art terms transliterated in Arabic, Japanese, and Russian?
2. To what extent do these transliterations preserve or obscure the original terms' meanings?
3. What degree of consistency exists within and across each language in the usage of these terms?
4. How do educators and professionals perceive and navigate issues related to transliteration in their practice?

2.2 Term Selection and Data Sources

A corpus of 20 internationally recognized art terms was compiled, drawn from foundational texts in Western art history and widely used in contemporary global discourse. Selection criteria included: origin in Western European languages (primarily English, French, Italian, and German); frequent appearance in international art education materials, museum texts, and scholarly writing; and relevance across art historical periods and practices. Examples include: collage, fresco, trompe-l'œil, installation, atelier, plein air, triptych, grisaille, and impasto.

Data were collected from four source types to ensure triangulation and contextual validity: academic texts (university art textbooks, glossaries, and syllabi from institutions in Egypt, Japan, and Russia); institutional documents (museum publications, exhibition catalogues, and online content from the Tokyo National Museum, the Pushkin Museum, and the Arab World Institute); media and online platforms (art-related journalism, blogs, and educational content in the respective languages); and semi-structured expert interviews with nine participants (three per language group), including art historians, curators, translators, and educators with over five years of professional experience. All textual data were collected from publicly available or institutionally distributed sources published between 2015 and 2024.

2.3 Analytical Approach

For each language, a transliteration matrix was created to document orthographic variants, phonetic approximations, accompanying explanations, and contextual usage. Data were analyzed using a combination of content analysis and comparative linguistic analysis. Using NVivo software, qualitative data were coded according to themes such as terminological inconsistency, semantic ambiguity, and pedagogical workaround. Cross-linguistic comparison identified degrees of convergence and divergence in usage across the three languages. Expert interview transcripts were examined to contextualize transliteration practices within broader educational and institutional settings, emphasizing both linguistic form and semantic function. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board affiliated with the lead researcher, and all participants provided informed consent.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Arabic Context

In Arabic, transliteration tends to follow phonetic approximations using Arabic script, often resulting in multiple orthographic variations for the same term. For example, the English term installation appeared in at least four major forms across textbooks and exhibition texts: انستاليشن (instališīn), انستوليشن (instulishan), إنستاليشن (instalaīšīn), and تركيب (tarkīb)—a semantic translation meaning “assembly” or “structure.” Among these, the transliterations were often used interchangeably even within the same institution, while تركيب was preferred in state-run educational settings where Arabic linguistic purism is emphasized. The term collage was similarly rendered variously as كولاچ (kūlāj), كولاچ (kullāj—with a stress indicator suggesting a different pronunciation), and اللصق الفني (al-lašq al-fannī)—a semantic

translation meaning “artistic sticking/gluing.” One interviewee noted, “A student might memorize three names for the same technique and still not recognize it in practice.”

3.2 Japanese Context

In Japanese, foreign art terms are typically written in katakana, which functions exclusively for phonetic borrowings. This results in relatively consistent transliterations: installation → インスタレーション (insutareeshōn); collage → コラージュ (korāju); fresco → フレスコ (furesuko); trompe-l’œil → トロンプ・ルイユ (toronpu-ruiyu). However, while phonetic rendering is consistent, the meanings of these terms are not always widely understood by non-specialists. In educational settings, art instructors often provided descriptive paraphrasing alongside the transliterated terms—for example, explaining インスタレーション as 展示空間を使った芸術 (“art using the exhibition space”). Additionally, hybridizations were observed: triptych is rendered both as トリプティック (toriputikku) and as 三連画 (sanrenga, literally “three-connected paintings”), revealing a dual-track system in Japanese that uses katakana for phonetic borrowing and kanji for semantic clarity (Tanaka, 2017).

3.3 Russian Context

Russian employs the Cyrillic script for transliteration and shows a strong preference for orthographic assimilation of borrowed terms. Common transliterations include: installation → инсталляция (installiatsiya); collage → коллаж (kollazh); fresco → фреска (freska); trompe-l’œil → трюмплёй (tromplyöy), or sometimes avoided entirely. Unlike Arabic, Russian has tended to fully integrate borrowed terms into its morphological and grammatical systems—for example, инсталляция is treated as a feminine noun and inflected according to standard Russian grammar. However, legacy translation practices from the Soviet period sometimes persist; for instance, installation art may still be referred to as художественная установка (“artistic setup”) in older academic or regional contexts, risking semantic dilution (Gritsenko, 2016). Russian also uses calques in some instances—for example, still life is commonly translated as натюрморт (natyurmort), itself a calque from the French nature morte, demonstrating an earlier and more integrated borrowing. One curator noted, “Transliteration alone is insufficient; we must contextualize these words within Russian art theory.”

3.4 Cross-Linguistic Patterns

Across all three languages, several key patterns emerged. First, variation and inconsistency: Arabic showed the most variation in spelling and usage, Japanese the least. Second, lack of semantic depth: in all cases, phonetic transliterations preserved sound but often lost cultural or historical nuance. Third, institutional influence: public education systems tended to prefer translations or localized terms, while independent art spaces leaned toward transliteration. Fourth, a universal need for contextual education: interviewees in all three language groups emphasized the need for glossaries, annotations, or pedagogical scaffolding to bridge gaps in understanding. The data strongly suggest that transliteration—while useful for maintaining international alignment—cannot function in isolation and must be paired with semantic explanation and cultural localization.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Linguistic and Semiotic Tensions

One of the central issues emerging from the data is the tension between phonetic fidelity and semantic transparency. Transliterated terms may sound similar to their source language counterparts, but this phonetic proximity often fails to transmit the complex connotations, historical context, or theoretical implications of the original terms. For instance, the term installation carries associations with site-specificity, spatiality, and conceptual art movements in Euro-American contexts. When rendered

phonetically as インスタレーション in Japanese or انستليشن in Arabic, these associations are largely obscured unless actively explained.

This phenomenon reflects broader concerns in semiotics and linguistic anthropology, where meaning is seen not as intrinsic to words but as constructed through usage, context, and cultural frameworks (Barthes, 1967; Halliday, 1978). A transliterated term, devoid of its original discursive ecosystem, becomes a floating signifier—sound without clear substance—unless anchored through explanatory mechanisms. As such, the success of transliteration in art discourse depends not only on phonology but also on the educational infrastructure and interpretive frameworks that surround it.

4.2 Educational Implications

In the realm of art education, transliteration presents both an opportunity and a barrier. On the one hand, it offers students access to global vocabularies, aligning local curricula with international standards. On the other hand, the lack of terminological consistency and contextual explanation can impede learning, especially for students without prior exposure to the Euro-American canon. As seen in the Arabic and Russian cases, multiple variants of the same term can coexist in the same curriculum or institution, leading to confusion and fragmentation of knowledge. This creates additional cognitive load for students and educators, particularly when preparing multilingual publications, participating in international exhibitions, or engaging in cross-cultural dialogue (Sadikhova & Babayev, 2025a).

Furthermore, students in many regions may encounter transliterated terms without the visual or material referents that would normally clarify meaning—for example, seeing the term triptych without seeing a historical triptych altarpiece. Without this contextual grounding, students may memorize terms without internalizing their conceptual frameworks, leading to superficial understanding.

4.3 Cultural Translation and Conceptual Gaps

Transliteration also raises profound questions about cultural translation. Art terms often embody not only technical processes but also aesthetic philosophies and historical worldviews that may not align with local traditions. For example, trompe-l'œil denotes a specific illusionistic technique deeply tied to European Renaissance perspectival systems. Transliteration into Russian (трюмплей) or Japanese (トロンプ・レイユ) reproduces the sound but does little to illuminate the epistemological assumptions behind the technique—such as the privileging of the viewer's fixed gaze or the mimetic function of painting.

Moreover, some cultures may have parallel indigenous practices that are conceptually similar to borrowed terms but are linguistically and culturally distinct (Babayev & Alaviyya, 2023). For instance, the Arabic tradition of architectural ornamentation may involve spatial arrangements akin to installation art, but calling it انستليشن may obscure its indigenous lineage. This can lead to epistemic displacements, where local artistic practices are reinterpreted—or overwritten—through a foreign conceptual lens.

4.4 Toward Standardization and Contextualization

Given the linguistic and pedagogical challenges identified, several strategies emerge for addressing the issue of transliteration in art discourse:

5. **Development of multilingual art glossaries:** Institutions should collaborate across regions to develop standardized glossaries that include transliterations, phonetic guides, semantic translations, and historical explanations, tailored for students, curators, translators, and researchers.

6. **Pedagogical scaffolding:** Instructors should treat transliterated terms not as self-evident labels but as teachable concepts, embedding them in broader discussions of art history, theory, and technique, including visual aids, etymological breakdowns, and comparative examples.
7. **Hybrid terminology models:** A hybrid approach combining transliteration with semantic translation or explanatory kanji/Arabic root words may better bridge linguistic and conceptual gaps. For example, pairing インスタレーション with a brief kanji description such as 空間芸術 (spatial art) improves clarity.
8. **Cultural reflexivity:** Art discourse should be reflexive about its Eurocentrism. While international terminology plays an important unifying role, it should not be privileged at the expense of local concepts and vocabularies. Institutions can encourage bilingual or bicultural framing where global and local perspectives are placed in dialogue.

4.5 Implications for Translation Studies

This study contributes to broader discussions in translation studies, particularly the distinction between domestication and foreignization (Venuti, 1995). Transliteration often favors foreignization—retaining the foreign term in a new script—but this can alienate local audiences unless balanced with contextualization. Moreover, from a sociolinguistic standpoint, the spread of transliterated art terms reflects processes of linguistic globalization and cultural hierarchy, where English, French, and Italian terms gain unmarked status while local terms are marked or excluded (Babayev, 2023a).

5. CONCLUSION

The transliteration of internationalized art terms into non-Latin-script languages is not merely a linguistic exercise—it is a culturally loaded, pedagogically consequential, and epistemologically significant process. This study has shown that the widespread use of transliteration in global art discourse presents a double-edged sword: it facilitates participation in an increasingly interconnected cultural dialogue, while simultaneously risking the loss of semantic depth, consistency, and accessibility, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Across Arabic, Japanese, and Russian, three distinct transliteration models were observed, each shaped by different linguistic systems, educational policies, and cultural histories. Arabic’s fragmented and inconsistent transliteration practices reflect tensions between linguistic purism and global integration. Japanese, through its use of katakana, achieves orthographic consistency but sacrifices semantic clarity for non-specialist audiences. Russian, with its history of Soviet-era translations and gradual incorporation of international terms, illustrates a hybrid model that combines transliteration with semantic domestication—sometimes to the detriment of conceptual accuracy.

These divergences highlight a fundamental problem: transliteration, without proper contextualization, produces terms that are phonetically faithful but conceptually opaque. This gap undermines not only classroom learning and scholarly communication but also public engagement with art, particularly in museum and media contexts where terminological transparency is crucial.

In an era where art exhibitions are increasingly international, educational programs are offered across multiple languages, and scholarly publications circulate globally, the need for terminological standardization and cross-cultural accessibility becomes urgent. Transliteration can no longer be treated as a technical necessity; it must be embedded within broader efforts to decolonize knowledge, foster linguistic inclusivity, and build frameworks that honor both global exchange and local specificity. This research underscores the need for a more systematic and culturally sensitive approach to the global circulation of art terminology.

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