

# Effects of Cross-Border Cooperation between Artists and Luxury Brands: A Case Study of the Collaboration between Nara Yoshitomo and Stella McCartney

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## ABSTRACT

In modern society, art and design forms are diversified. Art creation is no longer confined to the realm of its traditional self-existence. It has begun to explore cross-border collaborations with other fields so that collaborations between artists and brands are leading the mobilizations of public understanding. This paper takes the historical development of art and consumerism as a starting point and takes the artist Nara Yoshitomo as an entry point to analyze his cross-border case with the light luxury brand Stella McCartney. To explore the meaning and value behind the cross-border collaboration from the perspective of culture and economy, both the photographic and sociological methods are adopted. It is argued that Nara Yoshitomo's success proves that cross-border cooperation for modern art design can benefit from the popular culture and identifiable expression of younger generation consumers.

**Keywords:** cross-border cooperation, Nara Yoshitomo, brand identification, younger generation consumers

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The discussion on the commercialization of fine art has been going on for decades among critics, art historians, and sociologists. It has been not only hard to distinguish the boundary between fine art and its mercantile counterpart but as many scholars have proposed in the past century. It is also antiquated to try to draw such a dividing line [1-3]. In this study, it is proposed that there is a distinction between them and it is justified to use the uniqueness, the art historic value, and the socio-historical significance of work as the criteria. When a sculpture or a large-scale painting transforms into a visual design, the above-mentioned qualities are lost, and the situation would not change for either a tote bag or a pair of silk pants. However, based on the assumption of the boundary, new questions come to light. How does the commodification of art and the industrialization of artistic production--for both the high-end brands and mass manufacturers--influence the artists? On the other hand, this research will investigate the impacts the artists and their ideas have upon modern

consumerism in the process of commercialization: there is a possibility for commercial designs to carry a subversive message. Moreover, although not elaborated here, the possibility for commercial art to "ascend" to the level of fine art is not zero as well. These are the fundamental questions that prompted this study of collaborations between artists and fashion brands. Examining a case study featuring Japanese artist Nara Yoshitomo, this paper would explain the incentives for cross-border productions and argue that the transboundary experience is beneficial for both sides, especially for the artists.

While the process of making art is innately ideological, in which the artist's intentions and thoughts theoretically predominate over everything, the power of the market and the opinions of the consumers play a pivotal role in sifting out "successful" artists from the others. From the patron's point of view, the work of art they purchase is more than a piece of beautiful decoration in their house or an eminent addition to their collections, but a marker of social status and economic power. Art

becomes the means for both the artist and the patron to gain higher recognition in society as the symbol of their taste and intellect. The royal courts, princes, and lords in western history have been responsible for the creation of some of the best art and the best artists in the world. The Spanish court painter for Philip IV Diego Velazquez is a good example, as he made his way from a nameless painter from the country to not only one of the leading masters among his contemporaries but also a pioneer in the world's art history with both his exceptional skills and the favor of the king [4]. His most famous work, *Las Meninas* (1656), portrays himself, who appears contemplating in front of a double-life size panel, alongside the most prominent family in Spain [5].

Although folk arts such as painted ceramics are found in archaeological excavations across the world and populist art forms like wood carved printing for a broader audience became available around the 1400s in Europe and several centuries earlier in Asia, art has been exclusive for the upper class and the bourgeois in general. However, the industrialization of artists, art productions, and collections alongside the massive changes in all industries in the 18th and 19th centuries made it possible for a wider range of perceivers to obtain art on their behalf. The birth of a universal art market where the works are not only judged by their artistic attraction but also their monetary value also stimulates people with the potential to chase their dreams in the art industry. mass production possible across the globe. Pop art arose in response to this rise of consumerism in the artistic field. American-British artist Andy Warhol proposes a direct criticism of it through a variety of media, though ironically some of his paintings turned out to be among the most expensive works in the auction. Another famous American pop artist, Keith Haring, utilizes mercantilism to promote public justice and gather the crowd's attention on social issues; the wider circulation of his works in the market, the more people know about his protests and the revolution of the common masses.

As mentioned above, artist-client relationships like patronage bring reciprocal benefits for both the artist and the owner. A similar modern implication is a collaboration between artists and retailers in other industries such as fashion. In this paper, the ties between the most famous contemporary Japanese artists will be the center of case studies. For example, Murakami Takashi, who is celebrated for his exaggerated comic characters, bright colors, and powerful repeated designs have collaborated with both luxury brands and much more accessible popular brands [6]. He worked with Louis Vuitton for 12 years from 2003 to 2015, bringing his unique color palette into the traditional french fashion house, producing several highly renowned designs that are still fast-selling on the second-hand market. Murakami worked with popular brands as well, for instance, with Vans the sports apparel brand in 2015. His understanding of pop culture and bold designs merged

well with Vans' sporty and adventurous spirit; his skulls and sunflowers appeared on not only the sneakers but also the Vans skateboards. The popularity and influence of the trademarks among the customers and the reputation of the artists in the art world complement each other, opening doors to realms that originally they could not reach. Companies could attract the fans of the artists to become new customers and gain a leading position in competitions with the other brands while at the same time the artists obtain the opportunity to raise their reputation to a higher level through publicizing among people who might not know about art before.

## **2. NARA YOSHITOMO AND STELLA MCCARTNEY**

The cross-border cooperation between Nara Yoshitomo and the various brand had started in the 1990s. The artist collaborated his artworks with various brands to create different products containing the artist's artworks on them. In this section, we're going to look at one of the cooperation of Nara Yoshitomo with British brand, Stella McCartney.

### **2.1. Nara Yoshitomo**

Nara Yoshitomo is one of the pioneering figures in contemporary art [7, 8]. His inspiration mainly came between 1988 to 1993. This period had a pivotal influence on Nara. He began synthesizing Japanese and Western popular culture. His career started in the 1990s which Japan's Pop art movement took place. Because of the synthesized culture, he created a unique style. His work spans many scenarios such as drawing, painting, photography, large-scale installations, and sculpture. Though he had artworks in all these different forms, he is famous for his paintings. His artworks present the result of the synthesize of Japanese and Western culture. However, it was also affected by other factors. Popular music, childhood memories, and current events all influence his creation of artwork. His artwork are showing the rebellion to quietude and contemplation which celebrated the introspective freedom of the imagination and individuals. Loneliness plays an important role in Nara's life too. Because of this, he was able to combine all these cultures and create a unique art style that represent him. He was famous for his drawing of children holding different things. As audience to these artworks, we perceive them as dangerous weapons. However, for Nara, they are toys which the kids are playing with. His artworks have great influences on other artists as being pioneer figures. However, we're focusing on the collaboration of Nara with different brands and what it had created for the consumers and crowds.

## **2.2. Nara Yoshitomo and collaboration with brands**

Nara Yoshitomo's collaboration with other brands first took place in the 1990s. From the 1990s to now, he had already collaborated with various brands to produce different artworks. In 1999, Nara collaborated with CITIZEN Watch Company to create "Nara Lonesome Puppy by Citizen Watch Company 1481010 'NOS'". He cooperated with How2work to design toys that add mobile phone shells. He collaborated with Rimowa to create a limited edition of Doggy Radio and suitcases. He had also collaborated with the SKATEROOM to introduce three-set skateboards with the design of Nara on them to show his identity. His collaborations with other brands were not limited to only objects. He had collaborated with Adidas and H&M.

## **2.3. Nara Yoshitomo and Stella McCartney**

The cooperation between Nara Yoshitomo and Stella McCartney took place in 2020. The collaboration between Nara and Stella McCartney allow Nara to be a fashion designer for the first time. The specific collaboration was set for Stella McCartney's shared Spring/Summer 2021 unisex capsule. "We are punks: Stella Shared SS21 enters the world of Yoshitomo Nara" was written as the slogan to advertise this collaboration. Stella believed that nowadays, youth are naturally opened-minded with gender. Punk's attitude towards the status highly inspired the collaboration. Like Nara, this generation reacts to social change by using self-expression. Collaboration set through and finally established because of the brand's ideas and also the value of artists. As for this condition, the idea of Stella McCartney suits perfectly the conditions. They believe in youth is naturally open and fluid representing the punk attitude that is crucially important for the successful collaboration between the artist and the brand.

The collaboration between Nara Yoshitomo and Stella McCartney created fashion items. The items included knits to tees and totes to trousers. On these items, we could see the work of Nara presented on them. "We are Punks" is the slogan of this whole collaboration. Sentences such as "We are Punks", "Change the History", "Don't waste another day" were presented with the drawing at the same time. The words not only represented an individual attitude towards life, but also the desire of being the unique one in the whole society. When Nara sees young people who have strong opinions toward one thing, they will fight for what they believed. Nara highly respected their spirits of its individuality. From his word, the main themes—individuality, punk, and unisex of this collaboration are presented.

These three main themes are tied to the collaboration of Nara and Stella McCartney in a very crucial way. Punk, being one of the major influences towards his artworks,

played a significantly important role in this collaboration. This was not the first time that the element of punk appears in his artwork. Long before this collaboration, the element of punk had already been rooted deeply in Nara. In 1999, Nara created a series of artwork, naming them In the Floating World. This was the first time that punk appeared in his artwork [9]. "Samurai Punk" is the first drawing that had included the Punk element. This also lay of foundation for the punk element in his future artworks. The classical style of punk is different from the punk that Nara demonstrated. Same as natural punk, the crazy hairstyle, nails, and decoration items were from classical punk. However, there is a cultural diffusion between different art styles. Nara made this artwork into a combination of Japanese culture and punk. These exaggerated and fancy elements represented the punk, classical punk that people all know. The clothing of the samurai was special. It is not the kind of clothes that punk people wear. It is traditional Japanese clothing that they wear for specific occasions. Arguably, this artwork is a combination of cultures that pathed the road for Nara's further creations. However, how does this artwork tied to the collaboration between Stella McCartney triggered further thoughts? Punk elements are not clearly shown in the different clothes. The most direct representation of punk is the iconic slogan of "We are Punk". The figures printed on the clothes are the classic children drawing on Nara's famous artwork. Arguably, this collaboration doesn't consist of lots of punk elements inside. Instead, Nara chooses to put it as a slogan rather than a part of the artwork. Other themes such as individuality and unisex are also expressed. In Nara's words, the theme of individuality was expressed. He respected the spirit of the youth as the same way Stella due. He admires their open-mindedness and adamant towards things they've believed. The drawing of his work also presented individuality in a form of artwork. His understanding of the artworks is different from the crowd which separates him as an individual rather than the crowd. Unisex is demonstrated more directly by just presenting the clothes on both female and male models to represent it [10].

## **2.4. The cultural effect of cross-border cooperation between Nara Yoshitomo and Stella McCartney**

As mentioned above, artworks represent the fusion of culture, and at the same time, there is cultural communication between different artistic styles, from which we can find the spiritual core of the artist. This chapter focuses on the cultural effect of cross-border cooperation between Nara Yoshitomo and Stella McCartney and studies the mechanism of the derived consumer market and changes in aesthetic trends. In addition, it analyzes the inheritance and breakthrough of culture and its adverse effects. Finally, the part explores the relationship between cross-border and innovation.

With the cross-border cooperation between artworks and fashion brands, artworks have gradually formed commercial brands to build brand culture. At the same time, cross-brand cooperation has also strengthened the cultural effects of artists' works and injected new power into mature brands. The cross-border cooperation between Nara Yoshitomo's "Punk Girl" and Stella McCartney promoted the widespread dissemination of "We are Punk", and made Nara Yoshitomo's works both artistic and commercial. Gradually formed the brand cultural effect of artworks, which also promoted the popularity of the artist Nara Yoshitomo while the brand has also added new vitality.

The success of brand cross-border cooperation also represents changes in consumer preferences in the market, and consumers are gradually accepting this cross-border model. This also provides new ideas for the development of other industries, especially how artworks can enhance their cultural and commercial values. The marketing mechanism has also changed accordingly. Cultural inheritance breakthroughs are also the focus of the brand's cross-border research. Yoshitomo Nara cooperated with the brand to inherit his punk culture so that more people can understand this culture and his artistic works, and have a spiritual resonance with it. From the perspective of such cross-border cooperation, the industry needs innovation. No matter what kind of business format, if each industry breaks the original industry boundary and realizes breaking the circle and cross-border, innovation will naturally occur, thus gaining competitiveness. Yoshitomo Nara and fashion brands have gained new vitality and competitiveness.

This article believes that the way to truly improve brand value is to use cross-border thinking to achieve the upgrade of industry business models, to break through industry barriers, leap across related and similar industries, and find new blue oceans and opportunities.

### **3. ECONOMIC EFFECT OF NARA YOSHITOMO AND BRAND CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION**

The cross-border cooperation between brands and art has profound economic effects, which are mutually beneficial to both brands and artists. From the perspective of the brand, cross-border cooperation not only expands the commercial influence and affinity of the brand but also improves its added value. From the perspective of the artist, cross-border cooperation provides an economic basis for their creation. Secondly, it promotes the life and marketization of artistic works, improves artists' popularity and personal styles, and then promotes the prosperity of the market.

#### ***3.1. Influence and significance of cross-border cooperation on brands***

Expanding the influence and affinity of the brand. Brand influence refers to the ability of a brand to explore the market, occupy the market and obtain profits [11]. The brand power and innovation of enterprises are the sources of brand influence. Brand influence has become the key factor for customers to choose goods, and it is particularly important to implement brand strategy. The cross-border cooperation between brands and artists has brought more consumer groups to the brand, consumers have discovered the brand's products because of the artists, and the brand has expanded the market with the influence of the artists and expanded the brand's influence. At the same time, consumers who find their favorite artworks appearing in branded goods will develop an affinity for the good, which might increase their emotional experience and their desire to buy will subsequently increase, thus forming the spending habits of the brand. British luxury brand Stella McCartney has teamed up with Japanese artist Nara to launch the spring and summer Shared collection in 2021, the first time the British luxury brand has worked with the designer Nara, who combined Asian culture and street art with his childlike works and humorously expressed his rebellious punk thinking. His paintings display a rebellious temperament of youth, not only that, the fabric of the clothes adds an element of environmental protection, and this series of clothing has been sold by people around the world in hot pursuit. The critical spirit of punk that clothing conveys echoes the rebellious and headstrong temperament of young people, making consumers more approachable to the brand and expanding its global influence.

Enhance the added value of the brand. The added value of the brand refers to the intangible value of the brand in addition to its basic functions, specifically the intangible value that is added to the tangible value of a product through other forms of spiritual enjoyment for consumers [12]. After the cooperation between artists and brands, the integration of art improves the added value of the brand and adds new elements to the brand. The works of art endow the brand with spiritual and cultural value, which makes consumers obtain not only material enjoyment but also spiritual enjoyment. When products are given artistic and spiritual cultural values, it will dilute the commerciality of the brand, and the aesthetic and emotional nature will invariably enhance the value of the brand, helping to build a good corporate image of the brand and enhance market competitiveness.

#### ***3.2. Influence and significance of cross-border cooperation on Nara Yoshitomo***

The brand provides the artist with an economic basis for artistic creation. The brand has brought capital

support to art and artists' creation, provided the material basis, created a good atmosphere for art creation, and had a positive impact on the commercial value of artists. Secondly, cross-border cooperation has broadened the modes of creation and means of artists, integrated new work carriers into artistic creation, and enriched their ideological connotation.

Promote the living and commercial marketization of artistic works. After the cooperation between the artist and the brand, the art will enter the social life with the help of the brand, making the art alive and market-oriented. Art communication modes are diversified. Whether through brand promotion or the display of cross-border products, works of art are more widely available. Moreover, places for art activities have become diversified, not only museums and art galleries, but also many daily places, such as supermarkets, cafes, and department stores, and infiltrated into people's daily life. The brand has also built a bridge between art and life. Nara Yoshitomo's collaboration with commerce has brought his artworks well into people's daily lives, as he teamed up with top the British clothing designer Stella McCartney to launch the first genderless fashion co-branded collection around the Old Bond Street (OBS) theme, with pieces incorporating Nara Yoshitomo's iconic cartoon child illustrations and unisex minimalist style of clothing, suitable for both men and women. By incorporating classic works into clothing, bags, and accessories, Nara's collection is transformed into a wearable gallery that naturally draws consumers in, not only for their clothing needs but also for their appreciation of art, thus bringing them closer to the artwork.

It is conducive to the branding and symbolization of artists. Consumerism culture is the main manifestation of postmodern society and occupies people's daily life. With the improvement of material life, consumption is not only reflected in material but also cultural meaning. Consumption shows personal identity, which makes consumers imperceptibly add aesthetic factors to their choice of commercial products. Furthermore, this makes the cooperation between art and commercial brands an inevitable trend. People will recognize a brand because of brand symbols and brand culture to meet their material and spiritual needs, convey their life attitude to the outside world, and improve their identity. Art enters people's vision through the brand, and the artist's style will be reflected in the products of the brand. To stand out in the products of the same type, artists need to explore their style of symbol and form unique and attractive personal symbols. These symbols are the externalization of spirit, and the artist's style and characteristics are externalized into products so that the characteristics of the artist become brand and symbolization.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In the context of the consumer era, cross-border collaboration between artists and brands is a win-win situation, as it meets the needs of an innovative society and cultural development, as well as satisfies people's personalized consumption and pursuit of quality life. Cross-border collaborations not only strengthen the cultural effect of artists' works but also inject fresh elements into established brands, which break the confines of traditional modes of thinking, inspire new creations, and enrich artistic expressions. Studying this cross-border phenomenon can therefore explore the multi-functional value of artworks, promote diversified artistic creations, and also reveal the development trend of contemporary art as well as the future aesthetic direction.

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