At this early stage of development, my project has two related goals. The first is to construct an international collaborative framework for research into questions about artists and networks, specifically questions about what it meant to be an artist and to practise as one in the mid-seventeenth century world. I have supposed that, in practice, this would mean selecting and juxtaposing a set of case studies from a handful of places across the world in (or around) this audit year of 1638, places like Kyoto, Hangzhou, Delhi, Istanbul, London, Amsterdam, Tunis and Mexico City. Part one of the project, supported by an appropriate grant (between 2015-19), would involve a workshop, publications and other research outputs that would also provide a platform for part two: to mount an exhibition in or after 2020, exploring the nature of that interconnectivity between artists across the world at this date. Although dependent on the preparatory research, the exhibition is conceived as an essential part of the project, being a most appropriate way to communicate findings to a wide audience and to revisit paradigms of curatorial thinking.

Although 1638 is chosen as a year of no particular significance in the mid-seventeenth century, it is not a year without significance. I see it as an heuristic means to highlight the contemporary agency of very early modern global practices in art; and to conduct a shakedown of current disciplinary operations -- things like asymmetric models of influence, cultural essentialism and exceptionalism, and the cult of individual (usually male, European) genius. In both its theoretical base and historical focus, this 1638 project is, then, situated well beyond the 'age of exploration' celebrated a quarter of a century ago in the exhibition Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration, at a point in the early-to-mid seventeenth century where an interconnected, early-modern world order was taking shape, and with it a 'world picture' or perhaps world pictures, that did not necessarily have Europe at their centre.¹

The fuzzy specificity of ‘about 1638’ is intended to highlight ways we might approach this interconnected moment. As such, it is not intended that the art of just this one year should be studied, since at the time the process of transmission of images and ideas across cultures could take decades; while we may also imagine a world of multiple art centres, including some not in whole or in part governed by or responsive to the anno Domini dating

and value systems of Christian faiths. So, who might be included? Surely there should be one of the household names of ‘fine art’ active in 1638 – Reubens (1577-1640), Bernini (1598-1680), van Dyck (1599-1641) or Rembrandt (1606-1669), say -- in addition to several ‘others’ as yet less well-known in the discipline outside modern regional specializations, such as Chen Hongshou (1598-1652) in south China and Kano Sansetsu (1589-1651) in Kyoto. These last two are artists whose practices I have researched and I will have slides to show how they worked. The choice of topics to investigate is still wide open: to some extent it will depend on the interests of collaborators as to how many artists to include, and whether media practices beyond ‘fine art’ could be meaningfully included, for instance, as well as court or religious ateliers that might not have been run by had an individual master, such as under Shah Jahan (r. 1627-58) in Mughal India.

In the case of each selected artistic practice, related questions would first need to be posed about the ways artists (and/or their patrons) trained pupils, employed assistants and otherwise managed their studios; and capitalized on old and new technologies and reprographic media (woodblock printing; engraving). These artists’ social networks (of friends and family, assistants and students, peers and guild members, patrons and critics known or unknown), and their production and distribution networks would all be fruitful territory for research, as well as what might be called new identity networks (centred on status- and gender-related issues, cultural and regional paradigms and so on). Much harder to pinpoint, but nonetheless topical and squarely in the sights of this research project, are the inter-regional and inter-cultural networks that had then spread across the globe.

Assuming it is possible to measure factors such as degrees of individual autonomy and the relative agency of artworks, this research should enable a further set of comparative questions as to the in(ter)dependence of these artists, men – we presume – who likely never knew each other or the others’ work, even if they were all necessarily responsive to these less well understood global patterns and transfers of visual knowledge governing ‘art’ and visuality. A premise is that despite localized agencies, some remarkable and provocative parallels will emerge, including broader patterns of artistic identity, and, perhaps, more complex models of transmission in the early-modern ‘world picture’.

Some final questions:

- How this could be mounted as an exhibition? How would a museum or gallery be convinced that a coherent exhibition narrative with public appeal could be realized?
- What impact is the research likely to have on researchers and curators? And the exhibition on a broad public?

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**About the PI**

Shane McCausland is Reader in the History of Art of China in the Department of the History of Art and Archaeology at SOAS, University of London. He was previously, until 2009, Head of Collections and also Curator of the East Asian Collections at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. He has organized exhibitions and published books and articles on aspects of Chinese, Japanese and contemporary art, including *Gu Kaizhi and the Admonitions Scroll* (British Museum Press, 2003; edited), *Chinese Romance from a Japanese Brush: Kano Sansetsu’s Chogonka Scrolls in the Chester Beatty Library* (Scala, 2009; with Matthew McKelway), *Telling Images of China: Narrative and Figure Paintings, 15th-20th Century, from the Shanghai Museum* (exhibition at the Chester Beatty Library, 2010; with Ling Lizhong), *Zhao Mengfu: Calligraphy and Painting for Khubilai’s China* (Hong Kong University Press, 2011) and *On Telling Images of China: Essays in Narrative Painting and Visual Culture* (Hong Kong University Press, 2014; co-edited with Yin Hwang). His monograph, *The Mongol Century: Visual Cultures of Yuan China, 1271-1368*, is currently in press at Reaktion Books, London. As an undergraduate he read Oriental Studies (Chinese) at Cambridge. He received his doctorate in art history and East Asian studies from Princeton University (2000).