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TITLE

FOR HISTORIANS AND ARTISTS, DO CONVENTIONS LIMIT
OR EXPAND THEIR ABILITY TO PRODUCE KNOWLEDGE?

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TOPIC: For historians and artists, do conventions limit or expand their ability to produce knowledge? Discuss with reference to history and the arts.

Think how dull the world would be if every artist were obliged to employ the same tints, or every historian to narrate a single story of events. Life can be easier, but would it teach us anything more? This question prompts us to consider how rules and traditions, commonly referred to as conventions, either assist or harm individuals who seek to enlighten others with knowledge, as they do in their roles as artists and historians. In history and the arts, conventions are used by people to make their work intelligible and clear. However, there are occasions when such rules may constrain creativity or silence those who seek to be heard.

In history, there are specific rules concerning the use of written records or the organization of events by chronological sequence, which make stories easier to believe and follow. However, they are also able to overlook oral history or history transmitted by a weaker section of society. Learning how to write or draw within established rules in art may provide people with helpful lessons, but it can also prevent them from exploring new ways of creating and viewing the world.

This essay will demonstrate that conventions can sometimes be restraining, but they usually assist people by providing a pretext of uniformity to begin with. Having this common foundation, individuals can construct new concepts and push the limits. It is usually when working against these conventions, to say something new or important, that the most powerful works in the history of art and the history of ideas come about.

History:

In history, conventions such as the use of written records, chronology, and the sourcing of primary data are employed to expand knowledge, as historical accounts are supported with verifiable information. The practices are core to the methodology of history, advancing the reliability of knowledge and enabling evidence to be used as a means of knowing.

Consider the work of historian David Olusoga, e.g. By tracing archival documentation of his book and the television series *Black and British: A Forgotten History*¹, he maintains similarities with historical scholarship as he relies on shipping records, censuses, and personal correspondence to demonstrate how Black people in Britain have existed there since pre-modern times. By following this systematic process, Olusoga is capable of overturning mainstream historical accounts and putting marginalized voices to the forefront, which could not be easily achieved without adhering to the conventions that allow their voices to be heard. His critical selection of sources is used to countercheck the records and trace the trends that develop a more inclusive history of Britain. In this case, the norms of history do not restrict the production of knowledge; they provide a model that assists in rewriting and enable historians to cast light on muted voices.

However, the same conventions may also restrict the domain of historical knowledge by emphasizing written materials and chronological sequences. This threatens to exclude other cultures that exist through oral tradition or non-linear perceptions of time, ultimately limiting our understanding of the past. Take an example of Aboriginal history². Much of the knowledge of this community is orally transmitted through Dreamtime stories, narratives that, unlike Western customs, do not follow a chronological order or require documentation. Oral histories tend to be less visible in conventional historical narratives because they cannot easily be used to support the claims that academic historians usually want to make, as the evidence is often oral rather than physical. Although some historians have made efforts to integrate oral traditions using perspective as a key concept, conventional standards of evidence can still make it difficult for such knowledge to gain the same level of recognition or authority. In this case, conventions are

¹ *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (2016) TV mini-series, directed by Naomi Austin, presented and written by David Olusoga. United Kingdom: BBC Two. Available at: IMDb (accessed 18 June 2025)

² Aboriginal Heritage Office (n.d.) History. Available at: <https://www.aboriginalheritage.org/history/history/> (Accessed: 18 June 2025).

less inclusive, favoring empirical data over cultural knowledge systems and risking a partial or biased understanding of the past.

Although historical conventions provide a practical framework for generating truthful and consistent history, they may inadvertently favor some forms of knowledge over others. This is particularly evident in the historical knowledge process, where the scope and procedures dictate what constitutes legitimate knowledge. The tension between being more rigorous and inclusive is itself a persistent one.

Art:

Conventions have become fundamental instruments in the arts due to the expansion of the ability to produce knowledge, providing artists with a shared visual, structural, or stylistic language of expression. These primary constructs, whether a sense of historical tradition, cultural aesthetics, or formally technical processes, empower artists to achieve further significance and share it through time and space. Under constraints of conventions, artists employ language, emotion, and imagination as vital ways of knowing in an attempt to generate knowledge that is not only effective but also accessible.

For example, the Italian Renaissance³, as exemplified in the works of Leonardo da Vinci, demonstrates how the conventions of proportion, perspective, and symmetry contributed to the heightened expression of art. The Last Supper by him is a painting that adheres to linear perspective and anatomy. These rules of style helped him direct the viewer's gaze towards Christ and the psychological tension between the disciples. This painting conveys religious, emotional, and philosophical knowledge that has remained relevant to this date. Conventions do not limit meaning in this case, but rather increase it, providing clarity and depth that relate to general human experiences. Such mutual artistry techniques also aided in distinguishing

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.) Renaissance. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance> (Accessed: 18 June 2025).

between masterpiece effects and the sloppy approach to art, providing the organization of the creation and reception of works of art. Through conventions, the knowledge structure of the arts can be shaped, the scope of the arts can be clarified, methods can be shaped, and the knowledge of the arts can be rooted in techniques that can be learned, taught, and expanded.

Yet, conventions may also restrict knowledge production, as they create order and intimidate deviance. This is very rigid and can kill perspective and intuition, equally essential modes of knowing in the arts. If artistic expression has to adapt to existing aesthetics, it becomes unwillingly a threat to voices, styles, and subjects that raise social unease.

One of the most awe-inspiring is the initial view of the Impressionist movement in France, during the 19th century. The Académie des Beaux-Arts⁴ would have rejected Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and other artists of their time due to its strict policies regarding subject matter, brushwork, and composition. Paris, the Academy supported large historical paintings and slick methods. In contrast, the Impressionists painted in short, expressive strokes, capturing everyday life, and worked outside in the open air to capture natural light. Critics ridiculed his painting when Monet showed Impression, Sunrise, as they saw the artwork as incomplete and childish, mainly because it did not follow conventional standards. The Academy had conservative rules that delayed recognition of these artists in the broader community, limiting access to their new visual expression to fewer people. In this instance, conventions failed to aid knowledge creation; instead, they have formed a gate that is too narrow, pushing out new ways of knowledge production.

A dialogue between knowledge and conventions in the arts is changeable and situational. In the knowledge partition of the TOK, arts are distinctive in that they permit the subjectivity and emotional response to occupy centre stage. Although conventions enable art forms to be more

⁴ Académie des Beaux-Arts (2025) Accueil. Académie des Beaux-Arts. Available at: <https://www.academiedesbeauxarts.fr/> (Accessed: 18 June 2025)

perfected and knowledge to be more communicable, they must remain dynamic and not become overly restrictive. Not just the conventions and the formative practices they create, but also the most influential artists have critically used conventions by adapting them, subverting their uses, and repudiating them to seize new lines of meaning.

A good example is that of Pakistani artist Shazia Sikander, who learned miniature painting, a highly traditional and rule-based art form⁵. Instead of leaving this convention, she imagined it differently, fusing it with other modern topics, including gender, migration, and identity. The work challenges the spectator to reevaluate cultural boundaries, combining overlaid classical technique with contemporary allusion. The art of Sikander demonstrates how conventions can be utilised creatively to become a source of innovation. She creates culturally specific knowledge that has universal import by invoking the visual vocabulary of an ancient artistic tradition.

Conclusion:

Conventions in history and art are complex yet crucial to knowledge creation, communication, and understanding. Instead of being mere rules to guide by, they are structures which provide thinkers and creators with the means of organizing their thoughts, sharing them clearly, and reaching a broader audience. In history, certain conventions govern how we collect and interpret evidence, providing objectivity and coherence to past reflections. So it is with the arts, where conventional forms may furnish the framework within which the imagination shall work, yet leave to that imagination plenty of freedom to explore novelty and to compass feeling. Produced by convention as calculated by Leonardo da Vinci, as analysed to the nines by David Olusoga, conventions can therefore be considered the launching pad of knowledge that can outlive its time.

⁵ SmartHistory (n.d.) Shahzia Sikander: Pleasure Pillars. Available at: <https://smarthistory.org/shahzia-sikander-pleasure-pillars/> (Accessed: 18 June 2025)

Nevertheless, the dangers of conventions are well known when they become too inflexible, thus blocking other existing viewpoints, which could include aboriginal oral culture or even a radical art style, such as Impressionism. These restrictions lead us to believe that conventions should be re-examined to avoid being exclusive and out of touch.

After all, conventions are not rigid limits, but they are dynamic devices. When applied appropriately, they strike the right balance between order and freedom, as well as credibility and creativity. Whether used in the study of the past or the creation of art, conventions can expand knowledge, providing a system as well as a critic, since understanding is not a given but a construction that we constantly develop, challenge, and reinvent. With such interactivity, knowledge is not only factual, but revolutionary.

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