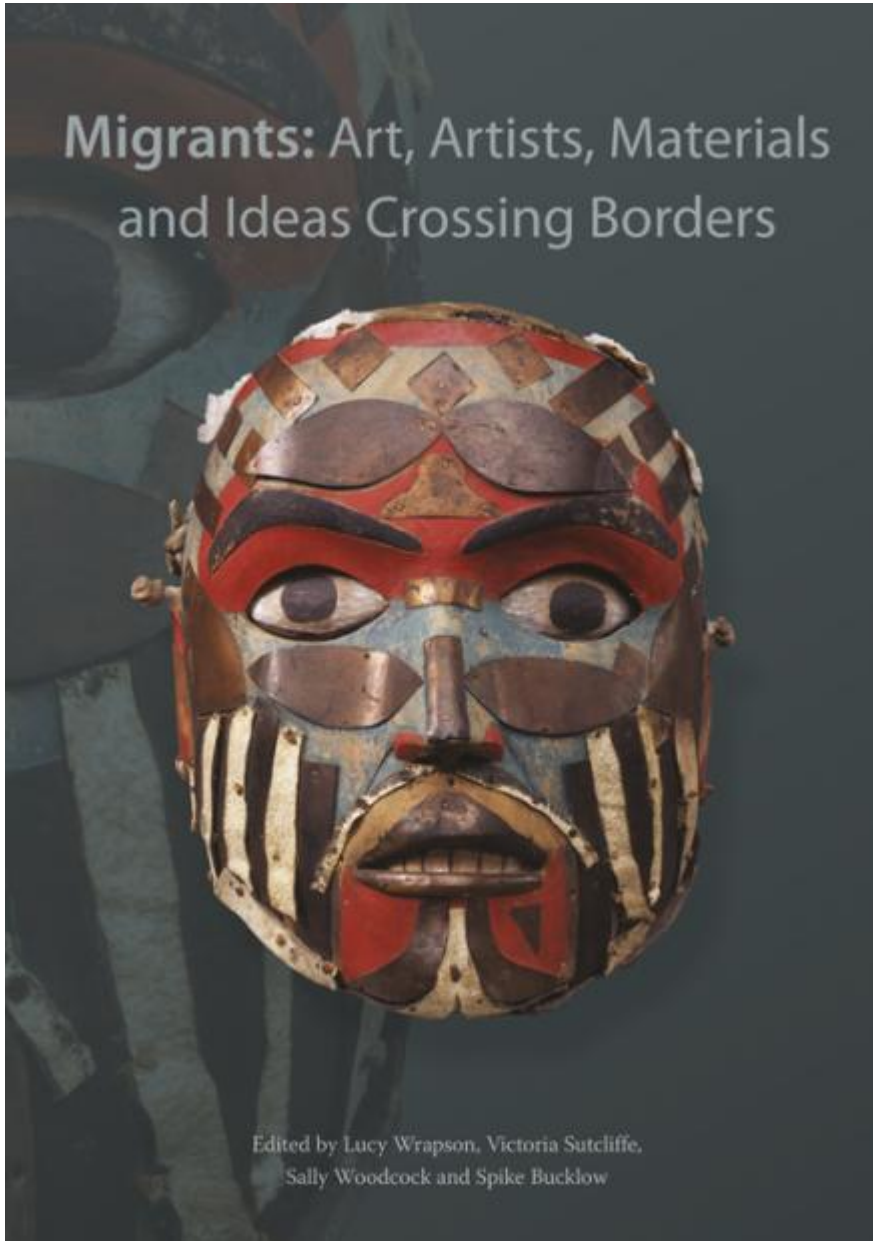


# Book Review: Migrants: Art, Artists, Borders



Reviewed by Joan Francis

Migrants: Art, Artists, Materials and Ideas Crossing Borders  
Edited by Lucy Wrapson, Victoria Sutcliffe, Sally Woodcock and Spike Bucklow  
Archetype Books: London, 2020  
Paperback / 230 pages / 128 illustrations / £45.00  
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Rarely do four authors weave a tapestry of stylistic unison that works so well on multiple levels as was done in *Migrants: Arts, Artists, Materials and Ideas Crossing Borders*. Born out of a 2018 conference of the same title, held at Murray Edwards College, Cambridge, the book depicts the material culture of migration in art around themes such as the availability of resources and the movement of practitioners as well as “evolving conservation theory and practice, within the spheres of fine and applied arts”.

The idea of crossing borders is the most compelling focus of this book. In the past, the art world has mainly concentrated on the outward manifestation of art, artists, and the materials they use. Now, the emphasis is shifting to represent the “loss and the failure of representation” and to purposely convert the visitors’ experience into one of discomfort with the awareness of the under-represented within museums. For example, the displacement of Syrians and the documentation of the atomic attack on Hiroshima are perfectly characterized within this book as “intangible – tangible” traumas, controversial and difficult subjects that artists, like few others, are often able to interpret and convey.

Renowned surrealist Mona Hatoum’s use of loudspeakers as a metaphor for urgency—news reports of the Lebanese Civil War implying the role that journalists have in major conflicts—and the voices of Western politicians as distant subjective interpretations are compatible with Rula Ali and Khaled Barakeh’s “rock-hard” shoes that are used to convey the unaccounted for. The methodology for deliberately making these experiences as painful as possible was outstandingly achieved by the use of everyday materials which all can relate to.

A major theme of the book is art conservation. For example, conservation practice is dynamic in Ukraine and high on the national agenda including continuous recertification of artists culminating in an academic framework of artistic guilds. This history reinforces the importance and role of art amidst migration and border crossings. The actions of the state in determining what to conserve have moved in tandem with ideology: in reaction, religious themes went underground as did their artists, who fled to other countries or were otherwise silenced.

There is likewise correlation between available art materials and the migratory patterns of scientists and industrialists due to conflict in the interwar years. Europe and the UK’s role is featured in the book, with specific reference to 32 Bryanston Square, London (p.102). The Interrogations, ideological threats, and record of escape from Germany of some of these migrants, as well as proof of their resettlement in the UK, can be found in surviving records with the British Intelligence Objectives Sub-Committee (BIOS). The BIOS was widely used to “report on industrial design and applied arts training”. Well-known German refugee and art historian, Nikolaus Pevsner, became involved in the BIOS investigation, reporting on industrial design for the British Council in the late 1930’s. There was, however, skepticism about his authenticity as British sources suspected him of being a spy, as noted in the book.

Observing and reporting on German artists' materials was a major part of their mandate by 1946. Tension existed between British artists' designs and those of their German counterparts with criticisms leveled against the former. During the start of WWI, only a portion of their commercial work, such as the method of recruitment and circulation of reports, was made available in the public domain. However, this changed as the need to hire more employees intensified and inspection reports had to be circulated more widely. The key stakeholders in this process were the trade and technical press and public libraries in industrial cities. However, in time the paradigm shifted from individual firms to industry-wide standards.

## PUTTING THE BOOK IN PERSPECTIVE

This book was published three years ago. In that time the Russia/Ukraine war has ignited. To what extent will Ukraine's attempt to decommunize be reversed with Russia's invasion? Will Russia attempt to topple Ukraine's art and heritage, some of which have successfully attained World Heritage Status? Now that thousands of Ukrainians have had to cross their country's borders, how will artists represent this journey in their future work? And is Syria to be a forgotten war? Syria was furthest from my mind until I read about Rula Ali and Khaled Barakeh's attempt to speak "through an indirect language [which] seemed useful when articulating the collective traumas of displacement, destruction and violence that Syrians share" (p. 134).

In the administration building of the University of Technology in Jamaica there is a framed portion of a wall from Hiroshima, which was presented to the Institution by the Japanese ambassador. It is inscribed as follows: "Atomic Bombed Stone Pledging Peace—Message from Hiroshima—August 6, 1991." I have seen films of WWII, the Japanese destruction of Pearl Harbor, and the response of the United States of America to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, I did not know about Alain Resnais' film *Hiroshima mon amour* and the perspective of its protagonists—a French actress and her Japanese lover (p. 135). The French actress, a visitor to Hiroshima, concluded that she had seen everything. The Japanese actor, having actual ancestral connections, concluded the opposite.

There are many aspects of the past which serve as a recurring theme throughout this book. We see the migrants in a three-dimensional context encompassing output, production, media and vision. *Migrants* explores Afghanistan as well as the issues at the United States' southern border, and it explores what has taken place in Central America and the Caribbean when it comes to migration. It is therefore a vital, highly recommended tool for artists who want to make sense of their migratory experiences, using this well-written text as a guide, adding to the historiography of human migratory patterns and the ebb and flow of the forces that direct them.

One final note. The Interactive World Migration Report 2022, estimated "that there were around 281 million global migrants in 2020, which equates to 3.6% of the global population." Overall, the estimated number of international migrants has increased over the past five decades. It can be assumed that many of these migrants are artists who fall within the category of "loss and the failure of representation" defined by Lucy Wrapson, Victoria Sutcliffe, Sally Woodcock and Spike Bucklow. The artists explored in this text chose to purposely convert the onlooker's experience into feelings of discomfort by bringing awareness to the under-represented within the context of a museum. Perhaps we may never fully understand the entire scope of this, but what we do know is that this book provides a good starting point in delving into these themes.

## REVIEW AUTHOR BIO

Joan Francis is a Jamaican administrator. She has a master's degree in heritage studies from the University of the West Indies, Mona. Currently, she is the museum and heritage preservation officer at the University of Technology, Jamaica, where she also lectures part-time. Joan is published in academic journals and newspapers.

(Read the review in the October-November 2022 "News in Conservation" Issue 92, p. 56-58)