



Article

Visual Manifestations of COVID-19 in Global Contemporary Art: Artistic Responses During a Time of Isolation

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Abstract

The article discusses the visual representations of the COVID-19 pandemic in modern art globally, and the ways in which artists around the world responded to the pandemic using symbolic and expressive visual language. While the pandemic was a health crisis, it was culturally, psychologically, and socially oriented. The study applies a descriptive analytical method in examining five pieces of art from various countries that present diverse aesthetic, conceptual, and contextual approaches. The key findings are that artists presented isolation, fear, resilience, and transformation through a diverse range of mediums ranging from digital media, painting, to murals. The article identifies the creation of a new art discourse grounded in common trauma and a necessity to visually represent the social and emotional cost of the pandemic. In this, the article positions the role of contemporary art to document but also make sense of emotionally global crises.

Keywords: COVID-19, visual art, isolation, pandemic, global contemporary art, visual symbolism, emotional expression

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Introduction

The late 2019 COVID-19 outbreak imposed unprecedented challenges on life today. In addition to placing an unquantifiable burden on the world's healthcare systems, the pandemic generated cultural, emotional, and existential crises that reshaped individual and collective lives. World artistic practice was severely affected as museums and exhibitions were cancelled, galleries closed, and artists isolated. However, the pandemic also generated a fresh creative impulse. Visual artists attempted to struggle with, record, and respond to the crisis through images, resulting in a vast body of artworks that convey aspects of fear, constraint, hope, and resolve.

The power of art to reflect and respond to social change has always run deep. In times of crisis, artists have turned inwards and outwards, recording inner angst and invoking transformation within society. COVID-19, with its global sweep and emotional burden, provided rich ground for such artistic engagement. Artists explored not just the direct effects of the virus but also its indirect consequences: isolation, disruption of rhythm, loss of self, and redefining space and time.

This essay examines the way the pandemic visually appeared in contemporary world art between 2019 and 2022, studying how artists from around the world and different traditions responded to a shared human condition. The aim is to understand the art language employed at the time, in terms of both symbolic language and formal quality, as well as emotional power. The study also focuses on the connection between emotional power and visual language, as well as how artists depicted isolation, grief, and collective resilience.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired growing academic interest in the intersection between global crises and cultural production. Numerous studies have explored the psychological impacts of isolation (Brooks et al., 2020), the emergence of digital art platforms (Paul, 2021), and the therapeutic role of art in times of trauma (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Scholars such as González-Martín et al. (2022) argue that art during crises functions as both a document of suffering and a tool for resilience.

Visual studies during pandemics are not new; historical references, such as the Black Death or the Spanish Flu, often appear in art history studies (Cano-Martínez et al., 2021). These comparisons reveal how previous societies visualized loss and rebirth. For example, post-plague art in Europe emphasized divine judgment and mortality, while post-war expressionism visualized psychological trauma through abstraction. However, the COVID-19 crisis is unique due to its simultaneous global digital nature.

The global visibility of suffering and art alike redefined how trauma was processed visually.

Contemporary responses to the pandemic through art demonstrate the adaptability of the visual medium in expressing both personal and collective narratives. Gonzalez-Martín et al. (2022) highlight how surrealism and symbolism offered artists the tools to process existential dread. Digital tools such as AR, interactive graphics, and online exhibitions allowed layered, sometimes nonlinear narratives to emerge. In these artworks, time is often suspended or looped, mirroring the pandemic's disruption of our sense of routine and temporality. The recurrence of visual motifs, such as isolation rooms, severed hands, and floating objects, suggests an attempt to reclaim agency through an imaginative reordering of reality.



Fig. 1: "Mona Lisa Reimagined, 2020"

Notably, exhibitions such as the COVID-19 Art Museum (2020) and The Pandemic is a Portal (McClean et al., 2025) shifted curatorial practice toward inclusivity, urgency, and community participation. These virtual spaces democratized access to art while emphasizing immediacy over academic critique. They served not only as platforms of expression but as visual archives of collective memory. Additionally, such platforms challenged traditional hierarchies in the art world by giving voice to marginalized, emerging, and non-Western artists who were often excluded from institutional narratives.

Moreover, trauma theorists like Caruth (1996) argue that trauma resists linear narration, a principle that helps explain the fragmented and metaphor-rich aesthetic

seen in pandemic art. For example, blurred figures, empty streets, and distorted anatomy often reflect not just literal conditions but inner psychological disruption. Viewers of pandemic-era works were often drawn to metaphoric visuals because they provided emotional distance while maintaining deep expressive power. These works enabled artists to express unspeakable aspects of grief and uncertainty, often in abstract or allegorical forms.

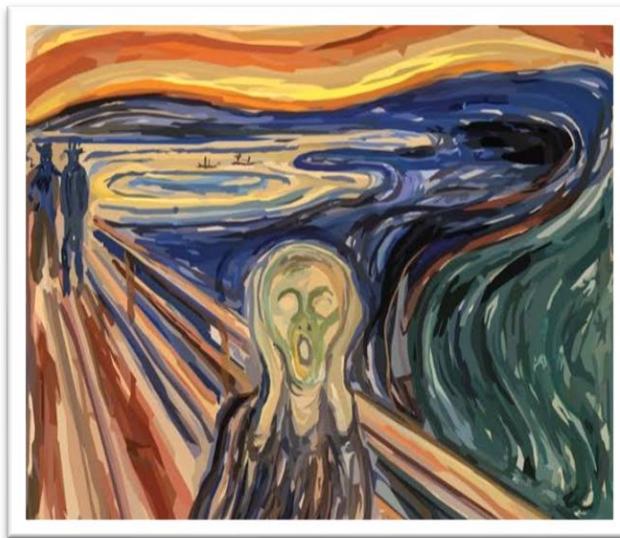


Fig. 2: "Masked Scream"

Some scholars have also emphasized the gender dimension of pandemic art. With women disproportionately burdened by caregiving roles during lockdowns, many female artists explored themes of domesticity, surveillance, and emotional labor in their work. Their visual expressions often challenged dominant narratives and illuminated overlooked experiences, adding complexity to the global visual record of the crisis. Feminist scholars such as Ahmed (2020) have argued that visual culture during the pandemic frequently exposed "affective economies" of fear, care, and exhaustion, particularly within domestic spheres.

Furthermore, scholars in cultural studies have drawn attention to how racial and economic disparities were reflected in pandemic art. Artists from marginalized communities often addressed the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic injustice through visual forms. Works that depicted overburdened hospital wards, street protests, or urban desolation became visual chronicles of inequality. Such pieces contributed not only to aesthetic discourse but also to activist movements that redefined how crises are represented and remembered.

Despite the abundance of content, a gap remains in the critical visual analysis of individual artworks and how their aesthetic strategies address collective emotions

such as anxiety, grief, and resilience. Moreover, most existing literature focuses on Western artistic contexts, leaving cross-cultural perspectives underexplored. This paper addresses these gaps by providing artwork-centered analysis of seven diverse artistic responses to COVID-19, and situating them within broader theoretical frameworks of trauma, digital visuality, emotional geography, and visual activism.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, which facilitates a nuanced understanding of art expression through close visual analysis. This approach is particularly suited for analyzing artwork produced in response to a collective trauma, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where symbolic depth, emotional resonance, and contextual meaning are at the heart of interpretation.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select seven representative pieces of artwork (rather than the initially intended five) from more than 50 visual artworks created between 2020 and 2022. The criteria used in the selection were guided by the need to ensure diversity in geography, visual technique, medium, and thematic concern, as well as showing a balance between emerging and veteran artists.

Data collection was multi-source, with works found and accessed in online exhibitions, academic journals, digital artwork databases, curated pandemic archives, and gallery websites. Where available, artist interviews, public declarations, and artists' personal websites were utilized to note authorial intent. Special attention was paid to the medium used (oil painting, mural, digital artwork, mixed media), the socio-

political context of the artist (urban/rural, cultural heritage, healthcare experience), and the conditions of artwork access (online viewing vs. in situ observation).

Each artwork was analyzed based on the following visual indicators, which formed the foundation of a structured thematic matrix:

- Formal structure: Including composition, color scheme, use of line, and the physical or digital medium involved.
- Symbolism and metaphor: Emphasis was placed on decoding recurring motifs such as masks, windows, empty chairs, hands, and tree roots.
- Representation of psychological/emotional states: Interpreting how artists conveyed fear, anxiety, grief, resilience, and hope through their visual choices.
- Societal and cultural commentary: Evaluation of local/national responses, frontline experiences, or critiques of systemic inequality.
- Use of space, gesture, and visual tension: How artists manipulated space (closed vs. open), scale (individual vs. collective figures), and kinetic flow to evoke emotional impact.

The analytical strategy further integrated semiotic and psychoanalytic frameworks. From a semiotic perspective, artworks were read as systems of signs that communicated meaning through culturally encoded visual language. The psychoanalytic layer addressed issues of displacement, repression, and symbolic substitution, particularly in surreal or abstract works that represented trauma indirectly.

Additionally, the study drew on trauma theory (Caruth, 1996) to understand how the artworks encoded individual and collective wounds, often through fragmented imagery and nonlinear visual narrative. Affect theory (Ahmed, 2020) was employed to assess how emotion was transmitted, blocked, or reconfigured within the aesthetic experience, particularly in works that invoked touch, breath, or isolation.

Lastly, the study acknowledges its methodological constraints. While digital access enabled a more comprehensive survey of global artworks, it limited experiential aspects such as texture, scale, and materiality, which can influence viewer interpretation. Nevertheless, by combining visual analysis with socio-contextual data and artist testimony, the methodology aims to provide a rich and ethically grounded interpretation of pandemic-era artistic production.

Visual Analysis and Findings

To provide an in-depth exploration of pandemic-themed artworks, this section examines five artworks through a critical visual lens. These works were chosen for

their stylistic diversity, global representation, and conceptual resonance with COVID-19-related themes.

Artwork 1: "Quarantine" by Adrian (Bucharest, 2020)

This oil painting juxtaposes confinement and intimacy. Rendered in monochromatic greys, the composition features a dimly lit interior with two central figures: a grandfather playing a violin and a young girl clapping. The window is left ajar, allowing a beam of light to cut through the darkness. The architectural enclosure evokes a sense of claustrophobia, while the figures symbolize intergenerational comfort. The violin, often associated with melancholy and memory, underscores emotional survival. The visual contrast between the static walls and the animated figures suggests the persistence of hope amid stillness.



Fig. 3: "Everything Will Be Alright, 2020"

Artwork 2: Untitled by Alex Albreida (Spain, 2020)

This mixed-media collage uses stark color blocking to express childhood anxiety. The three children, one masked, one screaming, one distant, embody the fragmented psyche of a generation raised in lockdown. The composition features jagged red and black shapes framing the children's bodies. The black void in the background signals the unknown future, while the red overlays suggest danger and

panic. Notably, the screaming child's mouth forms the focal point, serving as a symbolic rupture of innocence.

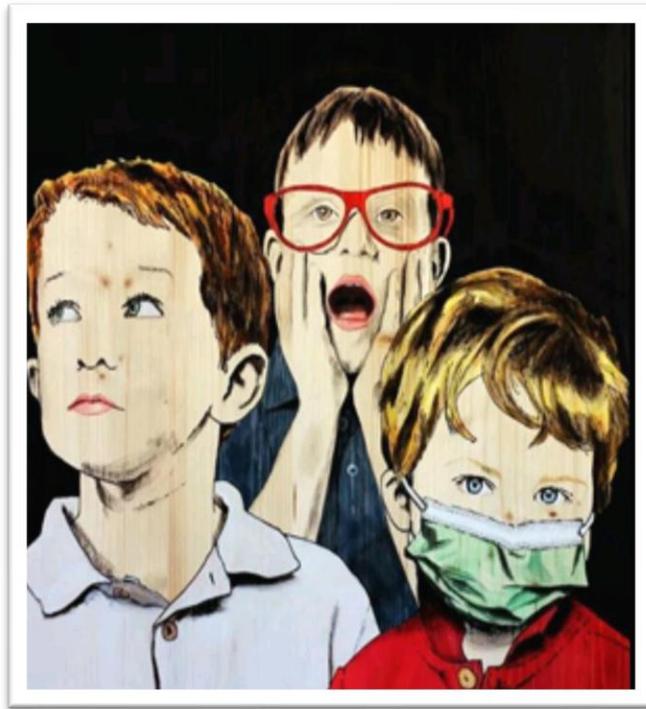


Fig.4: Untitled by Alex Albreida (Spain, 2020)

Artwork 3: "Suspended Reality" by Durfee Acharya (India, 2020)

A surrealist watercolor featuring floating COVID-like orbs, misshapen human limbs, and subdued earthy hues. The artist employs translucent layering to blur the lines between the body, the virus, and the environment. Human figures are partially dissolved, suggesting loss of agency. A masked face emerges from a dense fog, representing the tension between self-preservation and anonymity. The orbs' invasive

spread across the canvas mirrors the spread of viral contagion. The composition's circular motion reinforces themes of entrapment and recurrence.



Fig.5: "Suspended Reality, 2020"

Artwork 4: "Red Tree" by Chen Bushiang (Hong Kong, 2020)

In this symbolist oil painting, a prone male figure lies in a barren landscape. From its chest grows a vibrant red tree whose roots resemble arteries. The canvas is bisected horizontally: the upper half shows a stormy sky, while the lower half glows in muted gold. The tree, a recurring motif in East Asian cosmology, here signifies

regeneration. The red color unifies themes of suffering, passion, and life force. The image can be interpreted as both a memorial and a prophecy.

Discussion

The visual comparison reveals a convergence of symbolic modes across geographically and culturally diverse works of art. Artists employed metaphors of windows (alienation and freedom), masks (protection and loss of self), and red (alarm and life) to project their interior emotional states onto their work. Despite varying visual cultures, a shared vocabulary of distress, resilience, and healing offers itself. These symptomatic returns confirm shared human experience in an age of unparalleled upheaval.

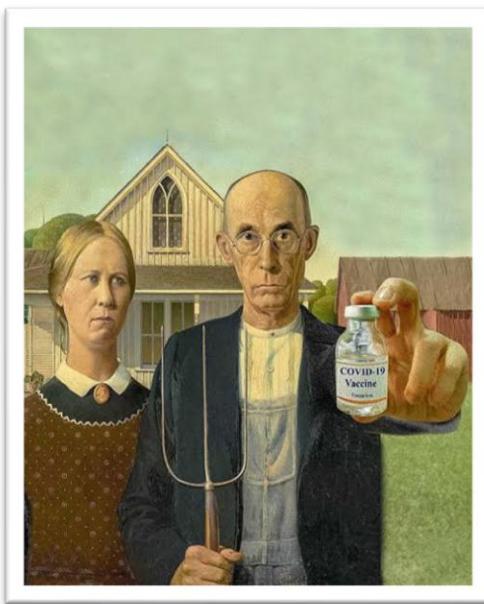


Fig. 6: "American Gothic, COVID Edition, 2020"

This visual synthesis can be situated within trauma theory, wherein art serves as both testimony and healing (Caruth, 1996). Chen's "Red Tree," for instance, transforms suffering bodies into ecological renewal, a visual allegory that gathers mourning and transcendence, employing Catholic visual culture to sacralize medical labor and suggest salvation in common. Leila Hassan's "Room with No Door" laments the psychological burden of media overload and the absence of spiritual refuge, especially in marginalized regions.

The predominance of virtual and hybrid media approaches has been a strength for artists during the pandemic. Bounded by physical movement and financial constraints, most artists had to resort to digital oil painting, video art, and social media

installations. This shift not only reflects technological democratization but also raises concerns about authenticity, access, and the evolving nature of experiencing art (Paul, 2021). The COVID Art Museum, for example, was simultaneously an archive and a gallery, curated in the moment and open to public submissions.

Emotionally, the selected works shift from desperation to salvation. They rise above reportage into narrative effect. Rather than depicting literal suffering, they evoke emotional resonance through abstraction and metaphor. It is consistent with Sontag's (2003) argument that art can "speak to pain" without melodramatizing it. Minimalism in "Hands Apart" by Tomás Rivera, for example, successfully conveys the desire for human contact without requiring unnecessarily intricate detail.

Interestingly, some of the artists integrated local narratives and themes. Adrian's invocation of the violin is a reference to Eastern European folk culture, and Bushiang's red tree is a reference to Confucian and Taoist myths of cyclical rebirth. Rivera's reinterpretation of Michelangelo is a representation of Latin American religious consciousness, and Hassan's Arabic script grounds her work in North African cultural media spaces. Such cultural layers enrich the artwork's meaning, suggesting that while the pandemic itself was global, its artistic negotiation was intensely localized.

The analysis of these artworks also owes a debt to feminist and postcolonial analysis. The figure of the nurse embodies both the ideals of religious martyrdom and the gendered caregiving figures that were elevated during the crisis. Similarly, Hassan's isolated figure is a deconstruction of patriarchal discourse through an unmasking of the ways women's positioning as carriers of information may be a psychological oppression. Intersectional analysis demonstrates how race, gender, and class affected not only who produced the art, but how it was received and distributed.

From the curator's perspective, the pandemic accelerated the transition to decentralized creation and exhibition of art. Museums and galleries welcomed virtual reality and live panels. Although this extended reach, it also introduced new challenges in the form of digital fatigue, ephemeral visibility, and curatorial overloading. Future studies could investigate the sustainability of such models and their impact on long-term pandemic art archiving.

In general, these paintings documented a moment in time as much as they helped shape the emotional and psychological narrative they conveyed. They gave witnesses to the viewer a mirror for their fear, a balm for their grief, and an image vocabulary for their resilience. In the process, they restored the timelessness of art to humanize, critique, and connect across.



Fig. 7: "Human Fragility" by Salvator Rosa (1656)

Conclusion

This article examines the visual articulations of the COVID-19 pandemic in contemporary global art, tracing how painters responded to a global crisis through profoundly individualistic visual languages. From realism in street murals to abstraction in watercolor and digital collage, pandemic painting expressed emotional extremes and social breakdowns, creating a counter-archive of lived experience during this period.

Resonant themes in the works of art covered included vulnerability, isolation, resilience, loss, and transformation. Artists took ordinary symbols, such as red, windows, hands, and masks, and transformed them into powerful pieces that both symbolized universal fears and culturally specific responses. Not only did these pieces function as artworks, but also as testimonies of survival, acts of resistance, and collective memory. By doing so, they developed a shared language of affect that cut across borders and disciplines.

Furthermore, the study can identify how artists utilized local cultural, spiritual, and symbolic references to interpret the pandemic experience. In the symbolic connotation of Bushiang's "Red Tree," artists not only documented their worlds but also offered pathways to survival and rebirth. These works of art transmuted trauma into insight, grief into dialogue, and isolation into mutual recognition.

Through the extension of analysis to several cultures and art traditions, this research broadens the scope of pandemic visual studies. It reaffirms that art is not only responsive but generative, opening new communication modes when conventional language fails. Through metaphor, minimalism, surrealism, and public dialogue, artists reconstructed collective spaces of sorrow and hope. In the process, art expanded the cultural vocabulary of crisis and invoked new modes of looking and knowing.

Subsequent research would be well served by longitudinal studies tracing the effects of COVID-19 on post-pandemic art movements, curatorial practices, and visual literacy. Other comparative studies can also investigate less-represented territories, marginalized points of view, and non-traditional media, such as performance, video installation, or augmented reality art. These areas of investigation will be crucial in shaping a comprehensive understanding of the long-term artistic, emotional, and cultural impact of the pandemic.

Lastly, the artworks described herein reflect the enduring power of visual culture to bear witness to trauma, elicit empathy, and envision healing. During periods of global dislocation, art not only endures but also outlines the trajectory towards meaning-making and collective healing. It is a means by which fragmented narratives are rebuilt and silenced emotions are given voice. The pandemic underscored the necessity of art not so much as representation, but as a means of resistance, memory, and renewal.

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