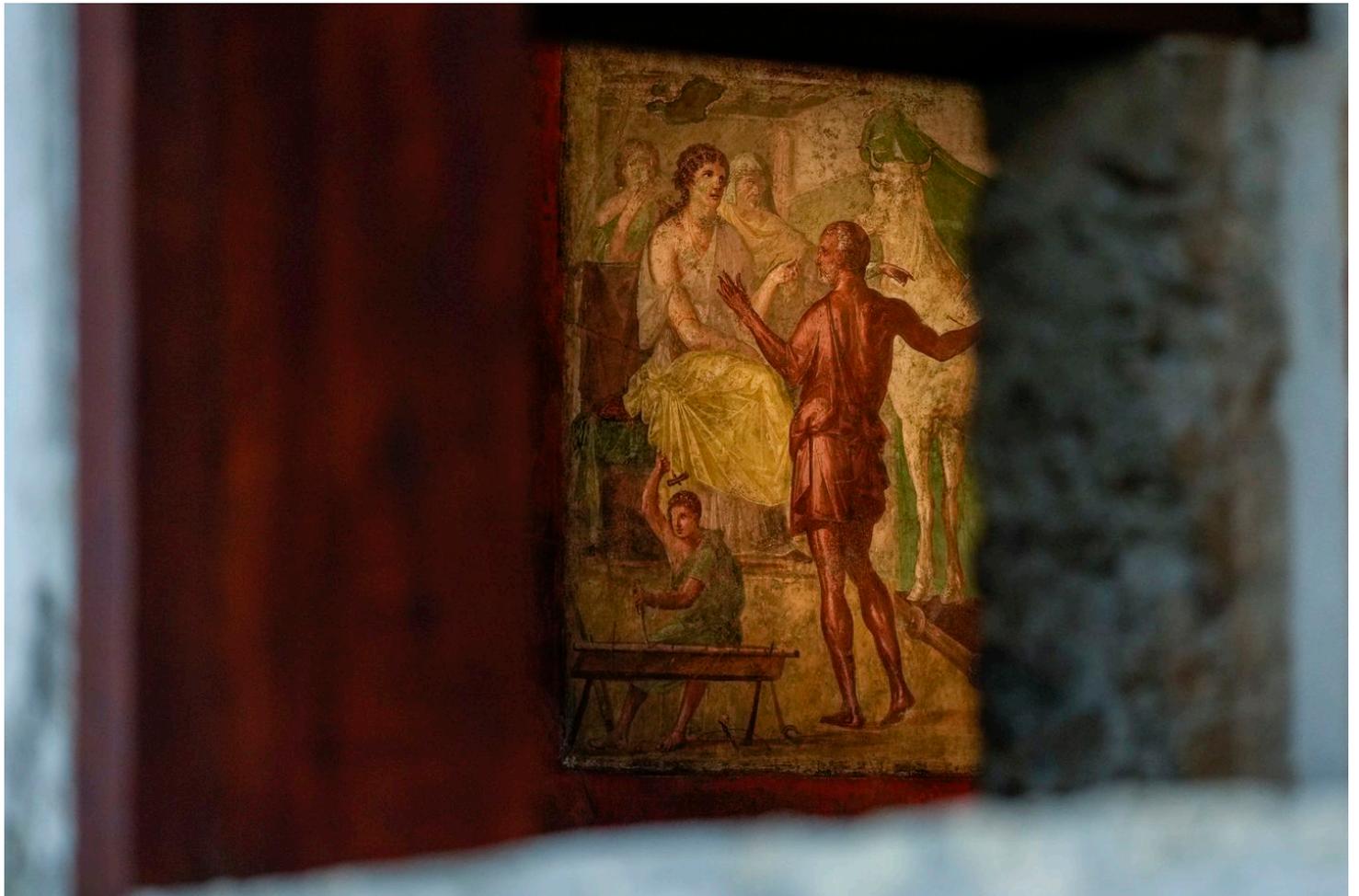


BOOK REVIEW

# In Martin Puchner's 'Culture: the Story of Us,' cultural evolution and cultural appropriation go hand in hand

By **Chris Vognar** Updated February 9, 2023, 6:15 p.m.



A detail of one of the frescoes in the Pompeii Archeological Park, near Naples, in southern Italy. ANDREW MEDICHINI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A Chinese Buddhist pilgrim risks life and limb to bring back sacred scrolls from India. A German artist is inspired by Mesoamerican treasures. A Baghdad caliph receives a nighttime visitation from Aristotle. The cultural cross-pollination at the heart of Martin Puchner's erudite but wonderfully accessible new book "Culture: The Story of Us, From Cave Art to K-Pop" is often the result of war and other turmoil, the kinds of conflict that so often define human history. But Puchner is interested in how art, religion, literature, philosophy, and other categories of what we broadly call "culture" end up leaping — or sailing — from one civilization to another, and often to another after that, evolving and mutating along the way, shaping who we are and what we value and believe.

This is a mighty, polymathic work, equally at home in all four corners of the globe. In the view of Puchner, a professor of English and comparative literature at Harvard, cultural appropriation is part and parcel of culture itself. We exist in a constant state of borrowing, whether the Roman poet Virgil is tapping into the myths of conquered Greece to feed his epic "The Aeneid," or the Ark of the Covenant is allegedly finding its way to a Christian church in Ethiopia. Culture is meant to travel and infuse other culture. The means aren't always pretty, but the ends create a culturally rich, fertile, and diverse world.

Here's an example that has always spoken to me; it's not included in Puchner's book, but it reflects the central premise. A Japanese filmmaker, Akira Kurosawa, grows enamored of American westerns, particularly the movies of John Ford, with their gorgeous tracking shots and wide open visual compositions. He is often criticized at home for being too Western in style, but films like "Seven Samurai," "Yojimbo," and "The Hidden Fortress" become international classics — and non-Japanese directors take notice. John Sturges remakes "Seven Samurai" as "The Magnificent Seven."

Sergio Leone turns “Yojimbo” into the classic spaghetti western “A Fistful of Dollars.” An up-and-coming filmmaker named George Lucas takes key elements of “The Hidden Fortress” and grafts them onto a little movie called “Star Wars.” We’ve got American culture feeding Japanese culture which in turn feeds American culture and Italian culture. This is how the exchange of art and ideas often works. This idea is what drives Puchner’s thinking.

But he’s also a master storyteller. You never really feel that Puchner is throwing ideas at you, or accumulating facts merely to justify the depths of his research (which, it must be said, is quite deep). The tales he weaves here almost have a fable-like quality; they have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and characters with clear motives and ambitions and triumphs and tragedies. Each chapter makes you want to jump into the next. It’s not always easy reading; Puchner’s knowledge pool can be daunting. He seemingly knows something about everything. But he also cares about the clarity and flow of his prose. Academic writing has earned a reputation over the years for being insular and clubby, designed to impress peers more than address a general readership. “Culture” is one of those books that show how great ideas can be expressed lucidly and within a narrative structure.

“Culture” offers the sensation that you’ve suddenly enrolled in the liveliest interdisciplinary humanities course on campus. The guiding principle is the importance of discovery, which often takes place despite the best efforts of others. For instance, when Spain conquered the Aztec empire, Spanish priests and friars, seeking to eradicate the worship of Aztec gods, destroyed most of the Aztec books they found, shipping some off to the Vatican. That was where a Mexican monk, José Lino Fábrega, discovered them in the 18th century and helped make them a subject of avid study. As Puchner writes, “This is the thing about libraries and archives: they can be used to

steal and bury cultural objects, but libraries cannot control how future generations will use their treasures, at least not entirely so.”

Sometimes preservation occurs through means beyond human control. In considering a statue of a South Asian goddess found in the ruins of Pompeii, the Roman city wiped out by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD, Puchner notes the potentially positive cultural repercussions of disaster: “From the point of view of historical preservation, earthquakes, floods, and erupting volcanoes are bad because they destroy, but the one thing that will destroy more thoroughly is continual use by humans ... over time, the ash served like a seal that protected the statue, along with the rest of Pompeii, from the elements — and from humans.” In short, we like to tear things down and start again — except when we can’t.

It all adds up to who we are, or at least a record of who we have been. Puchner has provided us a cultural map that traverses centuries and intercontinental byways and detours, always returning to what makes us human. It is a gift to be savored.

## **CULTURE: The Story of Us, From Cave Art to K-Pop**

By Martin Puchner

WW Norton & Company, 371 pp., \$35

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