

The Use of Pictorial Art as a Soft Power Tool in the European Union

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The Use of Pictorial Art as a Soft Power Tool in the European Union

Trabajo final de la materia Seminario de Investigación en relaciones Internacionales II

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Ana González Ibarrodo

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Introduction

Art remains a powerful tool in international relations, serving as a bridge between the past and the present. It not only reflects historical traditions of using visual culture to project power but also adapts to contemporary diplomatic practices. Despite its significant role, art is often overlooked in traditional narratives of International Relations (Sylvester, 2016).

Yet, Singh (2019) argues that art plays an essential role in international relations by shaping and conveying cultural symbols, which are key to understanding political dynamics on a deeper level. One example of this is the expressionist movement that emerged in early 20th-century Europe, particularly in Germany. According to Meyer (2013), Expressionism, as a broad cultural phenomenon, went beyond mere artistic style; it was a response to the profound political, social, and psychological upheavals of the time. Influenced by philosophers like Nietzsche and Freud, expressionist artists sought to convey the emotional and psychological complexities of human existence, using distorted forms and intense colors to communicate the inner turmoil of the era.

The movement's core ideas were shaped by the crisis of societal transformation—marked by industrialization, the rise of militarism, and the loss of traditional values—and were rooted in the desire to create a new, collective vision for the future. This quest for renewal and self-expression through art played a significant role in both reflecting and shaping the cultural identity of nations in Europe, ultimately influencing how the world perceived Germany and its evolving political landscape during a critical period in history.

Art reflects cultural values while influencing how States are perceived and the power they exercise within global institutions. Through artistic expressions, countries can subtly communicate ideologies, build diplomatic relations, and strengthen their presence internationally. Hence, art and culture played an important role in foreign policy construction, acting as strategic instruments to build international relationships and increase global influence, by integrating culture with creativity and innovation, policymakers aim to strengthen their global presence and improve competitiveness in the international landscape (Littoz-Monnet, 2015, p. 28).

In traditional theories of International Relations, the concept of power has been associated with forms of hard power, such as military and economic coercion (Legler, Santa Cruz, & Zamudio González, 2015, p. 8). However, power, according to Michel Foucault (1982) is not a static force exercised from the top down, but as a network of relations that permeates all aspects of social life. According to him, “power produces reality” (Foucault, p. 786). His perspective emphasizes that power is not only repressive but also productive, as

it generates subjects and forms knowledge that serve the interests of power. This understanding of power is reflected in cultural discourses and practices, extending beyond traditional power structures. For instance, art has historically served as an instrument of state propaganda, amplifying political influence and shaping public opinion to align with national interests. Pictorial art, in particular, has been central to conveying political narratives. According to Reid (2001), in Stalinist Russia, art was infused with socialist realism, presenting leaders as noble figures embodying unity and resilience. These images did more than honor the state; they constructed a visual narrative that reinforced the government's authority and depicted an image of societal progress. Through these portrayals, Soviet art helped shape public opinion, aligning collective identity with the ideals of the regime.

This broader view of power sets the stage for understanding how influence can be rooted in cultural and social practices. In a global landscape shaped by Neoliberal Institutionalism—which emerged in the 1970s as a counter to Neorealism by emphasizing cooperation through international institutions over military force—the role of *soft power* gained prominence (Gomichon, 2013). Joseph Nye (1994) introduced *soft power* as the ability to influence the preferences of others and achieve goals through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. As Nye notes, “if a country can shape international rules in ways that are consistent with its interests and values, its actions are more likely to appear legitimate in the eyes of others” (Joseph Nye cited in Gomichon, 2013, p. 2). This perspective underscores the growing significance of ideas, culture, and values in shaping international relations.

The European Union (EU) has become a prime example of using *soft power* effectively. The EU positions itself not just as an economic and political bloc but also as a cultural force capable of shaping global norms. The concept of normative power, defined by Hardwick (2011) as the EU's ability to shape worldwide standards, is deeply rooted in its principles of peace, democracy, and human rights, which are part of its legal framework known as the *acquis communautaire*. In this context, normative power creates mechanisms of *soft power* by embedding values into its foreign and domestic policies that influence other nations. With the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the EU strengthened its identity as a normative power, highlighting the importance of unity and cooperation for its global role. According to the European Parliament (n.d.), this treaty created a stronger foundation for cooperation in foreign and security policy as well as justice, addressing shared European interests.

As the EU continues to develop, culture has become an essential part of its influence. The EU's Global Vision statement emphasizes the need for "positive support for the wider European project" (Higgott, 2017, p. 8), showing that cultural initiatives are vital for both internal unity and an international presence. This raises an important question: How can Europe's rich cultural history and expertise enhance the EU's global influence and strengthen international relationships? The EU believes that cultural diplomacy "can contribute to building European global status" (Higgott & Van Langenhove, 2016, p. 5). The European Commission also focuses on "developing creative partnerships between the cultural sector and other sectors to reinforce the social and economic impact of investments in culture and creativity" (European Commission, 2007a: 10 cited in Littoz-Monnet, 2015, p. 31). This dedication underscores the EU's goal to use cultural diplomacy not only to project a peaceful identity but also to maximize cultural and economic benefits. As Tuomioja notes, "the EU is, after all, arguably the most successful peace project in world history, by eliminating the threat of war among its member states" (2009, p. 3).

European pictorial art, with its long history and variety of styles, is not just a reflection of Europe's evolving cultural identity, but also a strategic tool in the EU's cultural diplomacy. Through its rich artistic heritage, the EU strengthens internal unity while enhancing its image on the global stage. Federica Mogherini, the EU's former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated that "culture has to be at the core of our foreign policy... We should not be afraid to say we are a cultural superpower" (Higgott & Van Langenhove, 2016, p. 2). Art exhibitions and projects, particularly those focused on European pictorial art, serve as a powerful form of *soft power*, allowing the EU to communicate key values like democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity to global audiences.

The EU's use of cultural diplomacy shows that it aims to set itself apart from traditional power models by focusing on dialogue and collaboration rather than coercion. This approach highlights the EU's commitment to promoting shared values through culture, with European pictorial art playing a central role in connecting the EU with other cultures and nations. Art, as a medium of expression, helps the EU influence the world without the use of military force (Hardwick, 2011). By leveraging the power of visual culture, the EU fosters relationships that go beyond politics and economics, emphasizing shared ideals of peace, cooperation, and respect for diversity.

In a time of rising global tensions, understanding how the EU can use European pictorial art in its foreign policy is crucial for creating effective cultural strategies. As Higgott and Lamonica (2021) note, cultural diplomacy uses creative practices to achieve foreign

policy goals, while international cultural relations focus on building dialogue and understanding. This dual approach enables the EU to spread its values, enhance its image, and position itself as a global leader in cultural diplomacy. The use of art by the EU can thus be seen as a strategic tool to shape and communicate its cultural values in a manner that aligns with contemporary contexts and societal aspirations. Furthermore, art and museums “still on the whole, celebrate values worked up by nineteenth-century aesthetics, including ideas of genius, expression, and cultural transcendence” (Sylvester, 2016, p. 46), demonstrating that the traditions and historical roots of European culture continue to influence modern artistic expressions, further reinforcing the EU’s *soft power* in the international sphere.

Considering the above, this research aims to analyze how the EU uses pictorial art as a strategic *soft power* tool to promote its cultural values and exercise normative power on the international stage. Specifically, the main research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does the EU employ pictorial art as a tool of *soft power*?
2. In what ways does the use of art contribute to shaping its international image and influence?

The research will focus on the role of art in EU cultural policies and foreign policy, exploring how it helps to communicate values and navigate global political and social dynamics. The research will provide an understanding of how the EU uses art not only to celebrate its cultural heritage but also to assert its influence in global affairs.

To address these questions, this research will conduct a literature review and a case study analysis. The literature review will analyze Joseph Nye’s framework on *soft power* and Michel Foucault’s ideas on power structures. The case studies will analyze specific EU initiatives to understand how these efforts contribute to the EU’s normative power, and how its values, norms, and policies shape its international standing.

Section 1 will lay the theoretical foundation by discussing soft power, normative power and the role of art in international relations, drawing from historical examples such as the Renaissance and avant-garde movements. Section 2 will analyze how the EU incorporates these concepts into its foreign policy, using art to promote its values and identity globally through programs and initiatives. Section 3 will analyze the effectiveness of these initiatives and discuss the challenges and opportunities the EU faces in using art as a tool for normative power.

1. Theoretical Framework

This section will establish the conceptual foundations for understanding how the EU uses art as a tool of *soft power*, focusing on Joseph Nye's definition, which highlights culture, political values, and diplomacy as key avenues for exerting influence without coercion. Additionally, we will explore the concept of normative power, emphasizing the EU's role in promoting principles and values as part of its global strategy.

The section will also examine how art has historically shaped political landscapes, with examples from movements such as the Renaissance, Expressionism, and Impressionism, which reflect and even drive political ideas and transformations. Particular attention will be given to how the EU leverages cultural diplomacy to advance values like democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity internationally. This framework will lay the groundwork for understanding how the EU strategically incorporates art into its political and diplomatic agenda to enhance its influence on the global stage.

1.1 Conceptualization of soft power

The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a more pluralistic and complex world, where global cooperation and shifting power dynamics became central to international politics. Joseph Nye argues that "the definition of power is losing its emphasis on military force and conquest that marked earlier eras" (Nye, 1990, p. 154). He further highlights that "as the world becomes increasingly interdependent in economics, communications, and human aspirations, other forms of power have gained prominence" (Kissinger, cited in Nye, 1990, p. 156). In this context, Nye introduced the concept of *soft power*, defined as the ability to attract and persuade without resorting to coercion, in contrast to hard power, which relies on military and economic force.

The rise of globalization and a shift in focus toward issues beyond military dominance have highlighted the importance of *soft power*. This form of power is defined by a country's capacity to draw others through culture, political values, and foreign policy—core elements that influence international relationships without using force. Nye's framework of *soft power* emphasizes these three core elements, where culture serves as the most immediate and visible expression, conveying a nation's identity and fostering international influence.

The first core element, political values, reflect a country's ethical standards, shaping both domestic and foreign policies. As Nye points out, institutions can enhance a country's *soft power* by promoting values and policies that align with international norms (Gomichon, 2013, p. 1). When these actions are perceived as legitimate and ethical, they enhance

credibility—an asset crucial for diplomacy. Hardwick, citing Manners (2002), explains that the EU spreads its norms by setting an example rather than using coercion like a traditional military power (Manners, 2008, p. 55, cited in Hardwick, 2011, p. 2). This underscores the EU's role as a normative power, shaping global affairs through principles and values rather than military strength. This conceptual framework is essential to understanding how the EU leverages pictorial art to project influence and shape global perceptions.

Foreign policy is the second core element of *soft power* and is crucial for understanding how states use culture strategically. Milton C. Cummings defines cultural diplomacy as “the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, beliefs, and other aspects of culture, with the intention of fostering mutual understanding” (Tuomioja, 2009, p. 4). When foreign policy is perceived as legitimate, it strengthens *soft power* by building mutual respect and understanding between nations. This principle is evident in the EU's focus on diplomacy and cultural exchange over military force. Mónica Trujillo-López (2019), referencing Barba (2014), notes that culture plays a crucial role in foreign policy, with art being a key instrument of cultural diplomacy. Through these initiatives, the EU projects a positive image, promotes international cooperation, and achieves its diplomatic and economic objectives.

The third core element is culture, and it is the most tangible form of *soft power* as it influences global perceptions and shapes the EU's identity. As Nye (1990) notes, “if its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow” (p. 167). Cultural products, including art, are central to the EU's *soft power* strategy, reinforcing its values and principles on the world stage, ultimately setting global standards based on shared beliefs. Winkler (2020) highlights how the focus on culture has evolved beyond Nye's original model, establishing it as a primary source of influence (p. 227).

While Nye's framework has been influential in international relations, incorporating Michel Foucault's insights on power deepens the analysis. Foucault's idea of power as diffused throughout societal structures complements Nye's view, illustrating how *soft power* operates in subtle ways. He described power as reaching into daily life and shaping behaviors, attitudes, and cultural expressions (Foucault, 1982, p. 178). This perspective reveals how power permeates through art and culture to subtly reinforce norms and influence perceptions.

Foucault's concept of biopower—where power regulates life through cultural practices and social norms—adds another dimension to *soft power*. Through cultural expressions, states do more than attract others; they instill values and reinforce particular

worldviews. Thus, the EU's use of pictorial art in cultural diplomacy extends beyond attraction, actively shaping global norms and values. Foucault's theories, when combined with Nye's, provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how the EU projects its image and influence globally, moving beyond traditional notions of power to impact international relations through a blend of persuasion and norm-setting.

The integration of Foucault's and Nye's ideas provides a more comprehensive understanding of power in international relations by combining two crucial aspects. The first one would be Foucault's concept of power as embedded in societal structures and norms, which complements the second one, Nye's focus on *soft power*, where influence is gained through culture and values rather than coercion. Together, these concepts illustrate how states can shape global dynamics, not only by controlling underlying systems but also by influencing perceptions through cultural and ideological dominance. This is particularly relevant for the European Union, which strategically leverages its cultural identity to enhance its *soft power* on the global stage

1.2 Understanding normative power

Normative power underscores the EU's ability to establish and disseminate values on a global scale. Manners explains that "the notion of a normative power Europe is located in a discussion of the 'power over opinion'... and the desire to move beyond the debate over state-like features through an understanding of the EU's identity" (Manners 2002: 239, cited in Hardwick, p. 1). This suggests that the EU leverages its shared values and distinctive supranational character to shape global opinions and actions, positioning itself as a champion of universal norms and principles. This approach enhances the EU's *soft power* by combining it with ethical influence, thereby promoting its values in a way that resonates globally without resorting to force. Manners and Whitman describe this as the EU striving to be a "power by example" (p. 39), showcasing its principles through consistent actions.

Art emerges as a key instrument in advancing the EU's normative power, integrating cultural initiatives into its foreign and development policies. Through cultural diplomacy, the EU seeks to foster sustainable growth, peacebuilding, and global partnerships while advocating for values such as peace, cooperation, and human rights. This cultural strategy not only bolsters the EU's *soft power* but also reinforces its ethical objectives. Manners observes that "the EU demonstrates its normative power by diffusing it through contagion, informational diffusion, procedural diffusion... The EU therefore diffuses its norms by example, rather than in the coercive manner of a traditional military power" (Manners 2002:

245, cited in Hardwick, 2011, p. 2). Thus, art transcends its role as cultural expression, becoming a potent symbol of the EU's dedication to its ideals.

In conflict zones, art plays a crucial role in fostering peace and reconciliation, aligning seamlessly with the EU's preference for resolving conflicts through dialogue rather than force. As Manners notes, the EU prioritizes non-military means of influence, emphasizing how it conveys its values to the world (Manners 2008, cited in Hardwick, 2011, p. 2). Art that addresses themes such as human rights, peace, and democracy resonates with the EU's core values and serves as a powerful tool for fostering dialogue in conflict-affected regions. By illustrating both the struggles and achievements related to these values, art not only enhances the EU's global image as a defender of justice and peace but also reaffirms its strong commitment to these ideals.

Art also has the power to make complex political ideas more understandable and relatable. According to Tscherny (1983), *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugene Delacroix, connects with the EU's normative power because it symbolizes key European ideals—freedom, unity, and resilience—which match the EU's goals in cultural diplomacy. The painting's strong image of collective heroism and the fight for justice reflects the EU's effort to promote its values worldwide using *soft power* instead of force. By promoting works like *Liberty Leading the People*, the EU can inspire solidarity and support for democratic ideals, using art to connect emotionally and ideologically with global audiences. Just as Delacroix used patriotic visuals like the tricolored flag over Notre Dame to represent European ideals, the EU uses art to visually express values such as peace, justice, and freedom without direct intervention.

However, as Kim Willsher (2015) points out, Delacroix's painting is not just an artwork but a symbol of the French Revolution, with Liberty leading citizens under the tricolor flag, which stands for core Republican ideals. In some contexts, as Willsher notes, this image has been censored, showing the challenge the EU faces in balancing freedom of expression with cultural diplomacy in diverse regions. This shows how the EU's use of *soft power*, through art, seeks to inspire unity and spread democratic values while respecting local norms abroad.

Similarly, Picasso's *Guernica* is a powerful example of how art supports the EU's goals. Painted in response to the bombing of the Basque town during the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica* has gone beyond its historical context to become a global symbol against war and authoritarian violence. García García (2014) notes that “the image of *Guernica* will become a symbol of freedom in all its aspects” (p. 283), especially in its depiction of suffering and

resistance. Under Franco's dictatorship, Guernica gained special meaning for the Basque people, representing their struggle for autonomy and social justice. Over time, it has evolved into a symbol for peace and human dignity worldwide.

Today, Guernica remains central to the EU's efforts in cultural diplomacy and promoting human rights. The painting embodies European values such as peace and justice, which the EU works to spread globally through its foreign policy. By exhibiting Guernica in various regions, like during its 2013 display in Dubai titled *The New Guernica*—which condemned the Syrian war—the EU uses art to influence global norms without military intervention. As García García (2014) explains, this strategic use of Guernica serves as a “symbol of condemnation and rejection of conflict” (p. 282), demonstrating how the EU's cultural diplomacy reinforces European values through art.

Art that addresses human rights further emphasizes the EU's commitment to these values in its trade and diplomatic relations. This connection between art, ethics, and foreign policy strengthens the idea that “the EU places high value in human rights” (Manners 2006: 187 cited in Hardwick, 2011, p. 2). Promoting human rights themes through art solidifies the EU's position as a leader in these areas. In the end, the EU's promotion of art that represents its core values helps establish its role as a global leader. By using art to communicate its principles, the EU helps build an international order based on norms and values that go beyond national interest. As Manners suggests, “the EU will remain and continue to be a normative power for the foreseeable future” (Manners 2008: 45 cited in Hardwick, 2011, p. 2). This indicates that the EU's use of art to influence global values will continue to shape its international role for years to come. The question is: why is art such a central tool for this research?

1.3 The Role of art in International Relations

Art has long been a cornerstone of human expression, reflecting societal needs and historical contexts while serving as a significant instrument in international relations. In an increasingly interconnected world, the interplay between art and diplomacy has become essential, as nations seek to project their identities and values through cultural channels. This section explores how art influences global politics and diplomatic relations in the EU, linking it to the concepts of *soft power* and normative power.

Rafael Velázquez Flores (2021) discusses the crucial role that art plays in international relations by influencing both global politics and artistic expression in a bidirectional manner. He highlights how art and global interactions shape each other, serving

as a medium for communication and understanding between different cultures. According to him, art has become a significant tool for strengthening relations between countries, as it is less affected by ideological differences, thereby promoting effective cultural diplomacy.

Moreover, the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (n.d.), artists have historically served as informal ambassadors or cultural diplomats, using art to foster exchange, and understanding between cultures. As a medium of expression, art has long played a role in cultural communication and diplomacy, contributing to better relations between diverse groups and exemplifying the significant role of visual art in international diplomacy.

To further illustrate the historical significance of cultural diplomacy, the Medici played a pivotal role in Renaissance diplomacy, using art not only as an expression of personal taste but as a strategic tool to consolidate political power and forge alliances. Powerful families such as the Medici used cultural patronage to build a favorable image of themselves and their cities. Through their investments in art and architecture, they gained international recognition and respect, an early form of cultural diplomacy (Farga Mullor & López Varela., 2013). A prime example of this is Lorenzo de' Medici, whose diplomatic brilliance was exemplified in his successful mediating of peace between Naples, Florence, and Milan in 1480, earning him the reputation of a skilled diplomat, famously described by the historian and one of the most important political writers of the Italian Renaissance, Francesco Guicciardini, as the "needle of the balance" (Elam, 1988, p. 817).

Lorenzo embodied the concept of a 'cultural entrepreneur', leveraging artistic patronage to elevate Florence's prestige and extend its political influence across Europe. His approach, however, went beyond mere patronage; he skillfully combined art with diplomacy, which became even more prominent during the Italian Wars (1494-1530), when foreign powers sought Italian art as eagerly as they sought to conquer its territories. (McCall & Roberts, 2017)

Renaissance art played a crucial role in shaping the perception and practice of art into the present day. Its influence spread across Europe, impacting seventeenth-century academic art, and continuing to affect art history today. Rooted in philosophical thought, particularly the Aristotelian idea that knowledge begins with sensory experience, Renaissance art connected artistic creation to intellectual processes. This not only elevated the status of art but also reinforced its capacity to generate knowledge. (Quiviger, 2002)

This shift marked the transformation of art from purely aesthetic value to a powerful symbol of prestige and influence. Lorenzo's skill in using art as *soft power*, acting as a 'cultural intermediary' to manage political tensions, established a foundation for modern

cultural diplomacy. Today, art remains a key tool in shaping international relations (Elam, 1988).

Furthermore, it is essential to note that, "Renaissance diplomacy, like all diplomacy, was a matter of representation. Not only ambassadors, but also a vibrant and diverse material culture represented states and rulers" (McCall & Roberts 2017, p. 217). The authors develop this idea further, emphasizing that "sometimes artists too served as diplomats in their own right" (p. 217). This concept of the 'artist-ambassador' illustrates how the roles of painters, sculptors, and architects extended to diplomatic functions. While not all artists assumed such roles, the fact that some did underscores the importance of visual art in diplomacy. Nonetheless, the role of ambassador, whether held by artists or traditional diplomats, remained fluid, and not always clearly defined (McCall & Roberts, 2017).

Since the Renaissance, the use of pictorial art as a tool of power and influence has undergone significant evolution. This period marked the beginning of art's association with political and social power. The idea of using culture to influence other nations and build positive international relations, as seen in the Renaissance, remains relevant today. Modern cultural diplomacy often follows similar principles, using art, education, and cultural exchanges to strengthen a country's influence and promote its values on the global stage.

To wrap up this historical reflection, it is evident that pictorial art has consistently transcended its aesthetic function to serve as a vital tool in diplomacy, reflecting its unique ability to communicate ideas and values in ways that transcend language and politics, making it a key component in modern *soft power* strategies.

Now it is important to mention that "the concepts of artist and art depend on social and historical context" (Farga Mullor & López Varela, 2013, p. 28). Artistic movements are crucial as they capture the essence of their times, reflecting and influencing societal values and political ideologies. This ongoing significance provides crucial insights into historical narratives and the evolution of international relations. Art can serve as a tool for cultural diplomacy by projecting national identities and values, helping countries shape their image and influence on the global stage. Through art, countries exhibit their cultural heritage and political ideals, providing understanding and dialogue internationally.

The political vocation of the artistic movements led to numerous contradictions but also opened new research lines, where formal issues aimed to provide a new perception of social processes. These movements use artistic creation as a tool for "the reorientation of their creation processes, through the search for new strategies, turning artistic creation into an instrument of action and social penetration" (Pérez Rubio, 2013, p. 197). Thus, according

to the author (2013), art is understood as a reflection of historical and social processes, becoming a means of social intervention to influence the critical consciousness and subjectivity of individuals.

The need to highlight the dialectical relationship between the artistic movements and politics resulted in an expression of manifestos and proclamations. These new genres helped us to get a better understanding of critiques and their capacity for world transformation closely connected to the visual phenomenon itself (Farga Mullor & López Varela, 2013, p. 325). One of these manifestos was André Breton's Surrealist Manifesto, which was crucial in this artistic movement. Surrealism presented a new vision of the world, art, and literature to humanity.

Defined by André Breton 2004 as "psychic automatism in its pure state" (p. 371), surrealism aimed to liberate the imagination and transcend rational limits, marking a departure from the Renaissance's focus on precise and symbolic representation of reality. Rather than adhering to traditional forms, surrealism explored the subconscious, dreams, and the irrational, challenging established boundaries of thought and representation. This shift in artistic expression, exemplified by René Magritte's work, can be seen as an evolution of art as a diplomatic tool in a radically different political and cultural context. Just as surrealism broke away from Renaissance conventions, diplomacy in the 20th and 21st centuries have shifted from reliance on military or economic power toward *soft power*, appealing to emotions and perceptions to influence global opinion.

Surrealism's significance in International Relations lies in its ability to influence cultural diplomacy by challenging traditional boundaries of thought and representation. René Magritte, a leading figure in surrealism, exemplifies this impact through his work, which, like surrealism itself, breaks away from rational representation to explore the subconscious, dreams, and the irrational. This mirrors the diplomatic evolution where states increasingly rely on *soft power* to shape global opinion by appealing to emotions and perceptions rather than solely military or economic power.

René Magritte's art, particularly "The Treachery of Images" (Ceci n'est pas une pipe), provides a unique lens to understand both soft and normative power, particularly in how the EU utilizes cultural diplomacy. Magritte's work challenges established perceptions of reality, which can serve as a metaphor on how *soft power* subtly influences perceptions and values. This aligns with Joseph Nye's definition of *soft power* as the ability to attract and persuade, while also resonating with Michel Foucault's notion of power embedded in societal structures. Foucault's concept of biopower highlights how cultural practices not only attract

attention but also help establish and perpetuate value systems, reinforcing particular power dynamics over time.

By disrupting pictorial and symbolic language, Magritte's art—similar to the EU's normative power—challenges established conventions and encourages viewers to question the reality they take for granted. This mirrors how the EU, through normative power, questions traditional norms and promotes its own values, such as democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity, on the global stage. Magritte's surrealism disturbs the usual way of seeing, prompting reflection, much like how the EU's cultural initiatives, such as surrealist exhibitions abroad, serve as a means to influence global perceptions through both soft and normative power. Michel Foucault's observations that discourse is shaped by historical conditions and societal structures provide a foundation for understanding how art, like Magritte's work, shapes identity and cultural narratives. The EU can use surrealist art to influence global perceptions by framing discussions on European values in ways that resonate internationally, reinforcing its *soft power* strategy.

Thus, Magritte's art becomes a tool for the EU to navigate international relations. Through exhibitions and cultural outreach, the EU uses art to subtly influence how societies view both themselves and Europe, embedding European norms and values into global discourses. Magritte's ability to disrupt conventional understandings of everyday life highlights how art, like discourse, contributes to identity construction and influences how we perceive the world. As Vázquez (2016) suggests, "identities, perceptions, interaction, and language play a determining role, as they shape actors." Magritte's work exemplifies how art can engage in shaping both individual thought and collective identity, aligning with the EU's *soft power* efforts to project a shared cultural heritage and foster a sense of European unity.

Within this framework, organizations like the Alliance Française play a significant role in promoting European art and culture internationally. Ngamsang and Walsh (2013) describe the Alliance Française as a global organization dedicated to promoting French language and culture. Operating more than 1,000 branches worldwide, it serves as a tool of *soft power*, enhancing French influence. While the Alliance Française primarily focuses on French culture, its promotion of avant-garde movements such as surrealism and impressionism align closely with the EU's broader cultural diplomacy efforts.

For example, the Alliance Française in La Paz, Bolivia, will commemorate the centenary of surrealism with the 100 Years of Surrealism exhibition, celebrating the movement's global impact, including its influence on Latin American art (Mendoza, 2024).

Similarly, the French Alliance in Bucaramanga, Colombia, hosted the exhibition *Surrealism and Dualities* by Juan Sebastián Gutiérrez, showcasing the ongoing influence of surrealist ideals (Navarro, 2020). These exhibitions serve as cultural exchanges that strengthen ties between Europe and other regions, aligning with the EU's goal to promote its values globally.

Impressionism, like surrealism, also gained international recognition, often with the support of cultural institutions like the Alliance Française. According to the Alliance Française in Buenos Aires (2024), this year marks the 150th anniversary of Impressionism, celebrating its transformative impact on the arts. Through such exhibitions, the EU and its member states, like France, leverage art to strengthen cultural diplomacy and promote shared European values.

Opanasiuk, Oleksiuk, and Shyp (2021) highlight that Impressionism marked a transition in European culture by breaking from traditional styles, mirroring broader shifts in European thought toward greater artistic freedom and diversity. The Cultural Routes by the Council of Europe (2014) underscores the global appreciation of Impressionism for celebrating everyday life and European diversity, reflecting the values of the Faro Convention. This legacy reinforces the EU's dedication to cultural openness and diversity, key elements of its *soft power* and normative power on the global stage.

By promoting these artistic movements, the EU not only honors its rich cultural history but also reaffirms its commitment to engaging with the world through art and cultural diplomacy. These initiatives strengthen Europe's international image, projecting its values of inclusivity, creativity, and human rights. As seen with Magritte's influence, art becomes a powerful medium for the EU to navigate international relations, shape global perceptions, and promote its identity through both *soft power* and normative power.

Additionally, in the domain of pictorial arts, Belgium has left an indelible mark on the world. Artists like René Magritte have significantly contributed to the global appreciation of Belgian art (Belgian presidency Council of the European Union, n.d.), helping to position the country as a vibrant center of creativity within Europe. This cultural richness not only enhances Belgium's national identity but also supports the broader European narrative of artistic innovation and collaboration, reflecting shared values that unite EU member states.

Brussels uses Magritte's iconic figure as a cultural symbol, reinforcing the concept of the EU as a space where art and culture are not only preserved but also employed for cultural diplomacy (Belgian presidency Council of the European Union, n.d.) by linking Magritte's artistic legacy with its role as a political and cultural center, establishing Brussels

as a meeting point between the local and the global, the artistic and the political, thereby strengthening cohesion and European cultural heritage.

Similarly, The European Capitals of Culture's (ECOC) initiative has become central to Europe's cultural tourism strategy, serving as a catalyst for economic revitalization, urban transformation, and image enhancement (Liu, 2014, p. 499), which are not necessarily EU values, however ECOC seek to "highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures" (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 1999: 2 cited in Aiello & Thurlow, 2006, p. 150), thereby reinforcing cultural cohesion within the EU. This process is not merely a cultural marketing strategy but is also "informed and regulated by an authoritative, historically constituted 'knowledge'" (Aiello & Thurlow, 2006, p. 160) that guides the visual representation of European identity, promoting a shared understanding of what it means to be part of European culture. Since Athens was designated the first European Capital of Culture in 1985, more than 40 cities have participated, fostering a collective vision of European culture and promoting integration (Liu, 2014, p. 499).

This initiative forms part of a broader strategy where cities like Brussels "use their cultural and creative sectors to enhance tourism and stimulate economic growth" (Liu, 2014). In this context, "the silhouette of the stocky man in a suit with a bowler hat is now ubiquitous on posters promoting Brussels as the European capital of the Surrealists" (Kuhn, 2017). This demonstrates how Magritte's iconic figure not only reinforces the idea of the EU being a space where art and culture are preserved and utilized for cultural diplomacy, but also highlights Brussels' ability to connect citizens with their shared cultural history through these artistic symbols. Thus, initiatives that incorporate cultural events and symbols, such as the works of Magritte, align with the EU's cultural diplomacy objectives, as outlined in a 2016 joint communication emphasizing "the EU's ambition to be an important global actor." (Higgott & Van Langenhove, 2016, p. 4).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, as nations and empires expanded, art continued to serve as a medium for showcasing power. Art became a tool for propaganda, projecting national pride and asserting cultural superiority. Today, the role of art in projecting power has shifted from direct political influence on *soft power*. Art is now employed to foster cultural diplomacy and build international relationships by promoting shared values and cultural understanding. Despite this shift, art remains a potent symbol of power, bridging historical contexts and adapting to contemporary geopolitical landscapes.

1.2 Art in the EU's agenda

The EU, as a successor to these historical traditions, continues to utilize pictorial art to advance its values of democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity through the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture. Building on the foundation set by the 2007 European Agenda for Culture. According to the European Commission (2019), the New Agenda, adopted in 2018, aims to adapt to the evolving cultural landscape. It serves as a framework for EU-wide cultural cooperation, emphasizing culture's positive impact on society, the economy, and international relations. This strategy encourages collaboration between EU member states, civil society, and international partners to enhance cultural participation, mobility, and the preservation of shared heritage. By fostering creativity and cultural exchange, the EU aims to strengthen community ties and promote a sense of shared European identity, while also integrating cultural considerations into its global diplomatic efforts.

As noted by Trobbiani (2017), "EU stakeholders should work together to 'advance successful cooperation with partner countries in the three work streams proposed': culture as an engine for sustainable social and economic development; intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations; and reinforced cooperation on cultural heritage" (p. 3). These efforts aim to "promote the EU's image abroad and showcase European cultural production" (Trobbiani, 2017, p. 2), continuing the tradition of using art as a means of cultural and political influence. This illustrates the EU's ongoing reliance on cultural tools to achieve diplomatic policy goals and aligns closely with the New European Agenda for Culture's emphasis on leveraging culture to drive positive change, both within Europe and in its interactions with the global community. Furthermore, it highlights the EU's commitment to foster positive international relations and supporting its broader foreign policy objectives. The continued relevance of art in facilitating dialogue and mutual understanding in today's globalized world is evident. Despite the evolution of its role, art remains a crucial instrument for shaping international narratives and advancing shared values, demonstrating its enduring significance as a tool of power and influence in international relations.

Pictorial art is a vital component of culture to enhance the EU's international image and foster a positive perception of its values and principles. Jorge Valtierra Zamudio (2021) highlights that "showing cultural diversity from one country to another as a political strategy to break negative images" (p. 70), This illustrates how cultural diplomacy is implemented through art and other cultural expressions. This approach underscores the role of cultural

diplomacy in transforming international relations by promoting cultural and artistic practices, thereby fostering international understanding and cooperation.

Cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role in foreign policy by promoting mutual recognition and improving relations between countries, despite sociocultural differences (Valtierra Zamudio, 2021, p. 70). It fosters better understanding between diverse cultures, which can lead to greater harmony and collaboration. In this framework, the EU's strategic use of art within its cultural diplomacy efforts not only enhances its global image but also serves as a potent *soft power* tool. As Valtierra Zamudio (2021) notes, "showing cultural diversity from one country to another as a political strategy to break negative images" (p. 70) exemplifies how cultural diplomacy is realized through art and other cultural expressions. Thus, art becomes an effective vehicle for promoting culture and fostering international understanding and cooperation, reinforcing the EU's values and principles on the global stage.

This relationship is evident in the EU's efforts to "show an image of diversity and richness and to counteract prejudices that have been entrenched for some time" (Valtierra Zamudio, 2021). European art, promoted by the EU, not only attracts other nations to its ideals of democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity but also helps establish cultural norms that may be adopted by other societies, either consciously or unconsciously.

According to Quaggio (2013), since its establishment in 1895, the Venice Biennale, recognized as the longest-running international art exhibition, has played a pivotal role in shaping national identity and promoting unity, first within Italy and later across Europe. Initially conceived as a platform to consolidate national pride, the Biennale evolved into a space celebrating Europe's cultural diversity and intellectual regeneration. It became instrumental in projecting a vision of a united, democratic continent. This evolution is exemplified by its early function as a diplomatic tool, where art and culture fostered international alliances and projected a positive image globally. By the 1950s, the Biennale solidified its place in Italy's diplomatic landscape, emerging as a vital stage for presenting a unified European identity, particularly in the post-World War II era, supporting Europe's intellectual and cultural recovery while emphasizing democracy and diversity.

After World War II and the collapse of fascism, the Venice Biennale embraced democratic and anti-fascist principles, aligning with UNESCO's guidelines. In this context, cultural diplomacy became a key factor in reshaping the image of a new, democratic Italy, contributing to the Peace Treaty negotiations, and facilitating Italy's re-entry into the

international community. As noted by Quaggio (2013), “art constitutes a form of *soft power*, a means to cultivate national prestige and increase a state’s attractiveness” (p. 43).

The Venice Biennale serves as a prime example of how the EU utilizes cultural events to project its values and enhance its global influence. As Quaggio highlights, the Biennale “became a showcase for the values of modernism and abstraction in art and sculpture” (p. 44), demonstrating its role in promoting European unity and diversity. By fostering these artistic expressions, the EU not only reinforces its commitment to these values but also propagates them internationally, “in a language based on the rhetoric of freedom” (p. 44). This interplay between art and diplomacy underscores the importance of cultural initiatives like the Venice Biennale in affirming the EU's broader commitment to human rights and democracy.

The EU’s promotion of European art serves not only as an example of *soft power* but also as a strategy for establishing cultural hegemony. Art exhibitions, cultural exchanges, and the promotion of European heritage on international stages contribute to establishing a cultural standard. This standard functions as a form of biopower, influencing how other societies perceive culture, art, and values by aligning them with European principles.

The intricate interplay between attraction and cultural normativity, as conceptualized by both Nye and Foucault, sets the stage for a deeper exploration into how art functions within the sphere of international relations. As we dive into the role of art, particularly pictorial art, in the EU’s diplomatic and *soft power* strategies, we will uncover how cultural expressions transcend mere aesthetics to become powerful instruments of influence. This exploration will further cement the EU’s position as a cultural and political leader on the global stage.

2. Art in the EU's Foreign Policy

As we explore the interplay between art and *soft power*, it becomes clear that the EU's cultural diplomacy is not just a reflection of its values but a strategic tool in its foreign policy. During the March 23, 2015, conference in Brussels, members of the European Parliament emphasized the need to strengthen the relationship between culture and diplomacy at the EU level to enhance the effectiveness of its external actions. They highlighted the importance of adopting a strategic approach that not only fosters sustainable social and economic development but also promotes intercultural dialogue and the preservation of cultural heritage (Higgott & Van Langenhove, 2016). This recognition underscores the growing role of cultural diplomacy as a core element in the EU's international strategy, aimed at bolstering its global influence. By embedding cultural diplomacy within its foreign policy, the EU seeks not only to project *soft power* but also to position itself as a global advocate for values like human dignity, intercultural dialogue, and shared cultural heritage, elevating its standing as a normative power committed to shaping a more cohesive and inclusive international order.

In this context, the upcoming section will explore how art, particularly pictorial art, functions as a key tool in the EU's foreign policy reviewing how artistic initiatives contribute to constructing a cohesive European identity, and the role of art in evolving EU diplomacy. Additionally, it will analyze how these efforts influence global perceptions of the EU, reinforcing its commitment to core values such as democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity. By utilizing art as a tool of *soft power*, the EU not only enhances its global image but also fosters regional integration and intercultural cooperation, projecting itself as a leader in cultural diplomacy.

2.2 The construction of a European identity through art

Understanding European identity is crucial to analyzing how the EU's normative power fosters a supranational identity through *soft power* mechanisms. Art, as a symbolic expression, can serve as a powerful tool for this purpose. By embedding cultural policy in its framework, the EU can strategically project shared values that transcend national identities and foster a European identity rooted in democratic principles and cultural diversity. The European identity embodies a dual character that merges both national and European values. According to Gómez-López, Ortega-Ruiz, and Viejo (2019), this duality promotes cohesion, diversity, and democracy—core ideals of the European vision. Such an integration of identities is essential to the EU's unity and strengthens its influence on the

global stage. As Nye (1990) explains, *soft power* is the capacity to persuade without coercion, while Gomichon (2013) underscores that actions rooted in credibility and ethics enhance legitimacy.

Through art, the EU not only shapes international perceptions via cultural attraction but also reinforces its values, thereby strengthening both global alliances and diplomatic influence. Art has the capacity to enable communication where ideological boundaries might arise, emotionally and culturally connecting with diverse audiences, transcending linguistic and geographical barriers. This not only builds cultural bridges but also positions the EU as a normative influence, encouraging other actors to adopt or respect these values to maintain favorable relations with the European bloc. In this way, art becomes a means through which the EU communicates its normative values, solidifying its position as a unique kind of global actor that relies on shared ideals rather than traditional forms of power. Thus, the EU's use of art fortifies its identity and *soft power*, solidifying its role as a normative actor on the international stage.

European identity is rooted in the nation-state concept, fostering what Kaelble, Kirsch, and Schmidt-Gernig (2002) describe as an 'abstract solidarity' critical to integration. This solidarity encourages citizens to see the EU as more than a political-economic union but also as a cultural and social project. The Council of Europe has highlighted culture's role in shaping this identity, with initiatives like the European Cultural Convention of 1954, which established a united cultural space in Europe.

A striking example of how art contributes to this vision is the influence of Gustav Klimt, whose distinctive style, showcased at the IX Venice Biennale in 1910, transcended national boundaries and fostered cross-cultural dialogue. His art not only influenced Italian artists but also symbolized how diverse traditions can merge to create a shared European cultural identity. Klimt's legacy continues to resonate in the EU's cultural diplomacy, as his work exemplifies how art can serve as a cultural bridge, uniting different European traditions and reinforcing the EU's commitment to promoting cultural heritage. The continued relevance of Klimt in the EU's cultural agenda, as seen through the recognition of his last studio by the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage / Europa Nostra Awards (Simone, 2014), underscores the ongoing role of art in shaping both the identity and the global image of Europe as a culturally cohesive entity.

Kaelble et al. outline four levels of European identity. The first level, institutional identity, emerges from political agreements like the Maastricht Treaty, which foster a shared sense of EU 'statehood', essential for legitimacy in non-state governance (Börzel, 2013).

The second level, Europe's self-image, reflects centuries of political and intellectual discourse around democracy and human rights (Girault, 1994; Kaelble, 1999), shaping the EU's projection of these values globally through diplomacy and cultural initiatives.

The third level, cultural systems of interpretation, including symbols and practices that embody European identity. A term introduced by the French historian Pierre Nora, 'places of remembrance' (lieux de mémoire), are critical for the EU's *soft power* strategy. Flags, hymns, holidays, and monuments serve as tools for creating a shared narrative, exemplified by the European flag, which symbolizes unity across the continent. These symbols of unity become internationalized representations of the EU's normative power, extending its *soft power* influence by instilling a sense of shared identity that other nations may aspire to or align with diplomatically. Such cultural symbols allow the EU to create a cohesive identity that can be exported internationally, positioning itself as values like democracy and cultural diversity.

Promoting a shared cultural heritage is vital for European identity. Banús, citing Salazar (1998), argues that "collective memory, social environment, and culture" influence how social groups view themselves (2002, p. 167). For the EU, fostering this memory through cultural diplomacy bridges national and European identities, reinforcing a collective European identity based on shared cultural values. This collective memory forms a basis for a supranational identity, presenting the EU as a unified entity in international relations.

As Véronique Charléty (2005) notes, museums have shaped national identities and consolidated borders, playing a significant role in European identity-building. However, the Museum of Europe in Brussels faces the challenge of creating a unified memory across diverse nations, reflecting Europe's complex histories. Historian Marc Bloch notes that the past is understood through the present, which can be applied to European identity, as culture becomes a symbolic tool of EU *soft power*, fostering cohesion and promoting a united European identity internationally. Further evidence of the importance of cultural institutions is seen in the EUNAMUS project, which concluded that national museums act as "cultural glue," fostering shared values for sustainable, inclusive growth (CORDIS - EU Research Results, 2017). These institutions connect local and European identities, illustrating how cultural narratives create a cohesive European identity.

A prime example of this is the Louvre Museum. The Louvre is not merely a museum; it symbolizes France's cultural diplomacy and historical significance in shaping European institutions, policies, and reforms. As noted by the European Union (2023), France has been a driving force behind the development of the EU since the 1950s. The Louvre's role in this

context goes beyond its collection of art—it reflects the relationship between art and politics. For instance, President Emmanuel Macron chose the Louvre as the venue for his election victory on May 7th, 2017, a symbolic choice that underscored the museum's dual role as a cultural and political institution. As Goetz (2024) points out, "the Louvre is a temple of the muses and a center of power", where art serves both aesthetic and political purposes. This highlights the reciprocal relationship between art and the state, where art can enhance state prestige, and the state can use art as a strategic tool. Iconic works like *The Mona Lisa* and *Liberty Leading the People* not only project France's—and by extension, the EU's— influence worldwide but also serve as symbols of national identity, promoting *soft power* aligned with EU values.

At the fourth level, individual and collective identity, previous levels of identity formation are internalized by citizens. Mols and Weber (2013) argue that identities at various levels—regional, national, and European—integrate through broader cultural diplomacy. Art, in this context, serves as a tool for fostering a collective European identity and projecting an image of unity and inclusivity abroad.

Contemporary art often serves as a platform for dialogue and reflection on pressing European challenges, enhancing collective identity through shared artistic experiences. According to Persen (2017), while Banksy's Brexit-inspired mural in Dover highlights deep divisions and questions the notion of a unified European identity due to Brexit, contemporary art can still foster a sense of shared identity by encouraging reflection on these challenges. The mural, depicting a metalworker chipping away at a star from the EU flag, acts as a powerful commentary on the UK's departure from the European Union. Rather than simply celebrating or mourning Brexit, the artwork provokes thoughts on the ideals of unity and solidarity within Europe, which were being tested. By addressing these tensions, the mural encourages collective reflection on the evolving nature of European identity. Even in moments of division, like Brexit, art can act as a medium through which Europeans confront their differences, fostering dialogue and understanding. This dialogue aligns with the EU's broader normative agenda, allowing it to shape a narrative around resilience and unity, even amidst challenges, thereby reinforcing its normative influence both internally and externally.

Understanding the third level of identity formation is crucial for this research, as it highlights how the EU can build internal cohesion and strengthen its external relations through art and culture. Möller (2015) emphasizes that identity is closely linked to memory, acting as the glue that binds together various experiences into a coherent narrative. This belief supports the argument made by Jean Monnet, a pioneer of the European project, who

stated, “If we were beginning the European Community all over again, we should begin with culture” (Monnet, cited in Banús, 2002, p. 158). Such insights underscore the EU's view of culture as a foundational aspect of its identity and a vehicle for fostering supranational commitment, amplifying its normative power through shared cultural values. In the European context, art serves as a significant tool for articulating this collective identity, symbolizing shared history and values that bridge past events with present identities. By rooting European identity in culture, the EU fosters a stronger sense of belonging and creates a cohesive perception both within and beyond its borders, ultimately enhancing its external relations.

2.2 Art in EU politics

This understanding of identity and memory sets the stage for exploring how art functions within the EU's political framework. By leveraging pictorial art as a strategic tool, the EU aims to project unity and promote democratic ideals, aligning with its broader objectives of normative power. This exploration will assess the role of art in EU policy, analyzing its effectiveness in shaping member state cohesion and its influence on international cultural norms. By evaluating these dynamics, we gain insights into art's potential not only as a reflection of shared values but as an active force within EU political discourse.

As Möller (2015) suggests, art possesses a unique ability to influence political discourse in diverse ways, whether by representing, interpreting, or challenging political narratives. Art extends beyond representation; it serves as a medium for insight, change, and engagement. Artists can directly align with political or humanitarian causes or incite societal shifts through work that is subtly political. Visual creators can shape public discourse, promote transparency, and uphold democratic values through widely accessible work that invites public interaction. This dynamic resonates with the EU's normative power, as art's capacity to shape political discourse enhances public engagement. Simoniti highlights this by noting that “we can categorize such works as politically discursive art, in the sense that they are recognizably about a political issue: audiences receive such works as contributions to a debate in the public sphere” (2021, p. 559). This perspective demonstrates how art actively participates in political dialogue, enriching public discourse beyond traditional argument-based debates.

Furthermore, symbolic art in Europe is deeply intertwined with political and cultural narratives. Jacques Rancière observes that “images of art [...] help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought” (acques

Ranci re cited in M ller, 2015, p. 3), emphasizing how art influences perception and cognition by addressing political matters through cultural expression. Artistic symbolism can serve as a powerful communicator of values and ideologies, playing either a reinforcing or challenging role within dominant narratives. As Simoniti states, "Artworks, of course, can create epistemic obstacles as well as offer resources... one may protest that I have unduly privileged the epistemic interests of the hegemonic (white, heteronormative) audience" (2021, p. 571). This suggests that symbolic art can simultaneously support and critique societal norms. Historically, European art has used symbolism to express, and often challenge, the status quo. Young notes, "symbolism has long hovered at the climactic turning point in the narrative unfolding of modern art" (2018, p. 777), underscoring how symbolic movements frequently align with social and political change, transcending aesthetics to engage with political conversations.

The avant-garde movements, for instance, redefined artistic norms, reflecting broader social experimentation and political upheaval. According to Vi ek (1990), the avant-garde movements, particularly the Czech avant-garde, emerged from a rich interplay of local cultural traditions and influences from major European cities. During a transformative period marked by political upheaval and the quest for national identity, these artists conveyed profound social and existential themes by fusing local traditions with styles from cities like Paris and Berlin. Collaborative groups formed, creating a vibrant community that redefined the relationship between art and society, thus laying the groundwork for ongoing cultural dialogue. Although this occurred before the founding of the EU, it remains relevant as it highlights the intertwined roles of art and politics in European history. This blending of influences mirrors the EU's commitment to fostering cultural exchange and supporting diversity among member states, showcasing how historical avant-garde movements continue to inform today's frameworks for European integration and cultural policy. The evolution of symbolism in European art reflects a dynamic relationship with both heritage and contemporary issues.

In the EU's context, pictorial art becomes a strategic tool, fostering unity and reflecting democratic values. M ller (2015) notes that visual content's social and relational aspects go beyond mere historical description, evoking emotions and empathy, providing viewers with a deeper emotional connection. This emotional resonance can reinforce the EU's goals of solidarity and inclusivity. By forging these connections, visual art serves as both historical record and inspiration, fostering a shared sense of purpose.

For example, Andrea Cochius's *Birth of Europe, Political Masterminds and Our Shared Values*, an exhibition held at the European External Action Service (EEAS) headquarters in Brussels in June 2023, featured 20 large portraits of key figures in European history who contributed to the continent's unity. Cochius invested a year researching and painting these portraits, using dynamic backgrounds inspired by European flags to energize the display and evoke reflection on Europe's shared history and aspirations for unity. The exhibition emphasizes the value of democracy and the importance of a unified Europe, especially pertinent amid present conflicts that challenge this vision. Cochius's work invites viewers to connect with Europe's journey through complex emotions and historical themes.

Through art, the EU amplifies narratives that resonate with its core values, enhancing its global image as an advocate for peace, democracy, and cultural integration. By honoring figures who have shaped European unity, this exhibit reinforces the EU's cultural influence—or normative power—in shaping perceptions and promoting shared identity. Art facilitates dialogue, encouraging a sense of belonging and shared ideals among citizens. The emphasis on democracy and unity in times of adversity reflects the EU's mission of solidarity and cooperation among its members.

As Möller (2015) suggests, the EU's commitment to representing its diverse population is essential to counter criticisms of exploitation or subjugation, as "being an agent of their own image is important" (p. 21). The European Commission's PARTIS initiative (2014) exemplifies this commitment. Funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation from 2014 to 2018, PARTIS illustrates the impact of visual arts, especially painting, in fostering social cohesion within the EU. Prioritizing projects involving migrants and refugees, the program leverages art as a bridge between communities, enhancing intercultural dialogue and integration. Initiatives like *Refuge and Art* help young refugees adapt through creative practices, positioning them as cultural contributors rather than passive recipients of aid. By elevating migrant contributions, PARTIS supports the EU's normative power, portraying it as a leader in inclusivity and cultural diplomacy, a vision that promotes internal unity and sets a global example of diversity and solidarity.

In this way, art in the EU not only reflects the union's values but embodies participatory politics. As Simoniti notes, "Artworks... show themselves to be a part of the cognitive enterprise precisely in virtue of inviting objections or re-interpretations" (2021, p. 571). Within EU politics, art acts as both a mirror and a medium for political critique and self-reflection, reshaping perceptions of European integration and diversity. By fostering spaces

where diversity is celebrated and critique welcomed, the EU uses art to promote social cohesion and engage citizens in participatory politics.

Understanding the intersection of art and politics is essential, as foreign policy shapes the narratives of a country—or, in the EU's case, a collective—wishes to project globally. Art's role in EU foreign policy strengthens this narrative, supporting the EU's normative power by promoting democratic principles, human rights, and cultural unity. Through its emotive and symbolic capacities, art reinforces these ideals, offering an accessible means for public engagement and bridging the gap between policy and people. Art underscores the EU's dedication to fostering cohesion and solidarity, both within and beyond its borders.

2.3 Use of art in EU diplomacy

The EU has long recognized the power of culture as a diplomatic tool in its foreign policy. Culture is used not only to promote dialogue and mutual understanding but also to project European values and principles on the global stage. Cultural diplomacy (CD) and international cultural relations (ICR) are the two primary approaches that the EU employs to achieve its objectives of stability, security, and prosperity. While both strategies share similar goals, they differ in their processes. Cultural diplomacy mobilizes culture as *soft power* to serve foreign policy goals, while international cultural relations focus on fostering mutual understanding through dialogue (Higgott & Lamonica, 2021).

Cultural diplomacy is vital to the EU's *soft power* strategy. As Higgott & Lamonica (2021) state, "Cultural diplomacy takes place when a public actor relies on culturally infused power to pursue and enhance specific foreign policy objectives in line with preferred, usually *soft power*, outcomes" (p. 105). This strategy allows the EU to use its rich cultural heritage as a vehicle for advancing its influence and promoting values such as democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity globally. The EU's *soft power* is particularly effective because it combines cultural elements with economic and political initiatives to create a comprehensive approach to diplomacy. The EU has long placed faith in the role of culture in international politics, often seeing it as an instrument for external projection (Higgott & Lamonica, 2021, p. 108).

The European Commission has emphasized the importance of culture in EU diplomacy, recognizing the potential of culture, articulated policy principles that promoted the use of culture as a key element of *soft power* in international relations. According to Isar (2015), "The EU is not just an economic process or a trading power, it is already widely—

and accurately—perceived as an unprecedented and successful social and cultural project” (p. 501).

A significant cultural initiative was the “New Narrative for Europe,” launched by the European Parliament in 2012. This initiative sought to create a new representation of Europe’s identity by involving artists and intellectuals in shaping the discourse. The project aimed to address the gaps in how European integration was perceived, positioning Europe as a global actor through its values, *soft power*, and cultural heritage (Isar, 2015). As MacDonald & Vlaeminck (2020) explain, this initiative, alongside the “Preparatory Action for Culture in External Relations,” helped lay the foundation for cultural diplomacy, promoting cultural exchange and “citizenship in a multipolar world” (p. 50).

Art plays a central role in the EU’s diplomacy, transcending borders and fostering international cooperation. The EU’s cultural diplomacy efforts, through exhibitions, initiatives and artistic exchanges, not only showcase the richness of European culture but also create opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue. This approach reflects the EU’s belief that culture is more than an economic asset—it is a crucial part of building long-term relationships and enhancing the EU’s global standing. As Tsaliki (2007) notes, “The EU recognizes that ‘culture’ has a special status, as its works are both economic goods, creating jobs and producing wealth, and vehicles for the construction of cultural identities” (p. 159). Art is thus seen as a powerful promoter of identity, capable of uniting people across borders, languages, and religions (Tsaliki, 2007).

The EU’s commitment to cultural diplomacy is evident in various programs and policies that support international cultural cooperation. The Creative Europe Programme is one such initiative. This program not only promotes cultural diversity but also strengthens the capacity of cultural organizations to engage in international partnerships. It aims to foster creativity and position Europe as a global cultural leader. As Tadić (2017) explains, “The Creative Europe Programme therefore promotes ideas of importance both for the entire society (not only culture) and in the sense of international relations development, positioning the European continent in the global world, and promoting culture as a powerful means in cultural diplomacy” (p. 266). The program also encourages artistic mobility, the circulation of artistic works, and intercultural dialogue, aligning with the EU’s diplomatic goals of fostering cross-border cooperation and mutual understanding (Kandyla, 2015).

The importance of culture as a diplomatic tool is also highlighted by MacDonald & Vlaeminck (2020), who argue that “Culture is the hidden gem of our foreign policy. It helps to promote dialogue and mutual understanding. Culture is therefore crucial in building long-

term relationships with countries across the whole world” (European Commission 2016a, cited in MacDonald & Vlaeminck, 2020). This approach is part of the EU's overarching priority to make the EU a stronger global actor, placing cultural cooperation at the heart of its diplomatic relations with countries worldwide (MacDonald & Vlaeminck, 2020).

The EU-LAC-MUSEUMS project exemplifies the European Union's international cultural initiatives, aimed at promoting European culture abroad and fostering intercultural dialogue. By focusing on community-based museums, the project not only underscores the EU's commitment to preserving cultural heritage but also serves as a *soft power* tool, highlighting the values of democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity, in line with the EU's normative power goals. Through these efforts, the EU leverages art and culture to enhance its global influence, and the EU-LAC-MUSEUMS project supports this strategy by connecting Europe with Latin America and the Caribbean through shared cultural initiatives.

Although the project centers on museology, its broader goals align with the EU's use of *soft power* in international relations. Funded by the EU and coordinated by the University of St Andrews, the EU-LAC-MUSEUMS project promotes cooperation between Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean by encouraging sustainable development, social inclusiveness, and cultural dialogue through community museums. Its initiatives, including itinerant exhibitions and shared databases, demonstrate how art can act as a catalyst for sustainable development and social cohesion across regions.

One of its key programs, the Bi-Regional Youth Exchange, engages young people with their cultural identity and promotes dialogue between communities in Europe and Latin America. This initiative not only strengthens cultural ties but also supports the EU's broader goal of fostering “inclusive, innovative, and reflective societies” (Brown, 2020, p. 21). As Karen Brown and Jamie Allan Brown point out, the project empowers underrepresented communities and advocates for environmental sustainability and community empowerment, making it a valuable instrument of *soft power* that aligns with the EU's global aspirations (Brown and Brown, 2024, p. 39).

The project's focus on youth and intergenerational knowledge transmission further aligns with the EU's *soft power* strategy. By involving young people in cultural preservation, the EU-LAC-MUSEUMS project supports the EU's normative agenda, promoting sustainability and inclusive development. According to the project's evaluations, the “testimonies of the young people who participated... are evidence that it is possible to share concepts, methods, and experiences in Europe and Latin America” (Brown and Brown, 2024, p. 49). This intercultural exchange not only enhances mutual understanding between

the regions but also helps build sustainable, long-term relationships. By promoting cultural heritage and sustainability in partnership with Latin America and the Caribbean, the project reinforces the EU's image as a global leader in advancing democratic values, human rights, and cultural diversity. Through such projects, the EU amplifies its influence and achieves its normative power objectives on the international stage.

2.3 Art in the perception of the EU abroad

The role of art plays a crucial part in shaping how the EU is perceived globally. As Sonia Lucarelli (2013) notes, external perceptions are key to understanding the EU's effectiveness as an international actor. While the EU is widely recognized for its economic strength and as a model of regional integration that promotes democracy, its broader influence is often less understood. Criticism frequently points to a perceived lack of coherence in its external policies and a paternalistic approach in negotiations. This contrast between its potential and its actual capacity to lead highlights the complexity of the EU's global presence.

However, the EU actively uses culture and art as strategic *soft power* tools to enhance its global image and project its values, as noted by Carmina Crusafon (2015). Cultural cooperation, especially with regions like Latin America and the Mediterranean, is a key aspect of this effort. As the European Commission (2007, p. 3) emphasizes, "The EU is, and must aspire to become even more, an example of a '*soft power*' founded on norms and values such as human dignity, solidarity, tolerance, freedom of expression, respect for diversity and intercultural dialogue" (cited in Isar, 2015, p. 501), underscoring the EU's commitment to using art and culture to communicate these values globally.

The use of art, particularly pictorial art, allows the EU to effectively convey its principles beyond its borders. This cultural engagement enhances the EU's visibility and influence on the global stage. According to Bretherton and Vogler (2008) and Marsh and Mackenstein (2005), "EU external activity is essential for improving the EU's global 'relevance'" (cited in Crusafon, 2015, p. 227). Through cultural diplomacy, the EU not only advances its own interests but also those of its member states. The European Parliament also highlights "the importance of cultural diplomacy and cultural cooperation in advancing and communicating throughout the world the EU's and the member states' interests" (European Parliament, 2011, p. 5, cited in Crusafon, 2015, p. 227).

This cultural cooperation is a prime example of "EU multilevel governance" (Crusafon, 2015, p. 235). By engaging in cultural exchanges with regions like the Global South, the EU strengthens relationships and promotes values such as social and democratic

stability, particularly in areas like Latin America. These partnerships reflect the EU's understanding that cultural exchange fosters not only external alliances but also regional integration and internal cohesion.

As previously discussed, cultural diplomacy has evolved as a fundamental component of the EU's public diplomacy, as observed by Higgott & Lamonica (2021, p. 106). It aims to increase understanding of the EU's perspective, policies, and priorities while promoting its values and improving perceptions abroad. The EU's cultural diplomacy projects an image of Europe as a continent committed to diversity, dialogue, and cooperation on the global stage. Through these initiatives, the EU positions itself as a global actor that not only seeks economic or political influence but also contributes to cultural and social progress worldwide.

3.The EU’s perception abroad

This section provides a critical analysis of the actions of EU cultural diplomacy: It explores how the EU uses pictorial art as a strategic soft power tool, focusing on the impact of its cultural initiatives, the evolving role of art in diplomacy, and the associated challenges and opportunities. Programs like the EU-LAC MUSEUMS project and the Bi-Regional Youth Exchange illustrate the EU's commitment to fostering cultural exchange and social inclusion, positioning it as a global leader in cultural cooperation.

The section will therefore analyze the influence of these initiatives on communities, the EU's shift from a patronizing approach to one of mutual cultural exchange, and the practical challenges and opportunities in sustaining such programs. Through this analysis, the section also analyzes how the EU's cultural diplomacy is being reshaped in response to global shifts in power dynamics and cultural relations. Together, these elements underscore the importance of art in shaping the EU's identity and influence on the global stage.

3.1 Impact of the initiatives

As previously seen before, the EU initiatives such as the EU-LAC MUSEUMS—which ran from 2016 to 2020—and the Bi-Regional Youth Exchange aim not only to be a bridge between two cultures but also to enhance the EU's presence abroad as an important cultural actor. One of the project's standout achievements is its Bi-Regional Youth Exchange, which has empowered over 90 young people from remote rural areas in Costa Rica, Scotland, and Portugal. Through these exchanges, young people are given the tools to become future leaders with a strong sense of heritage and a deep awareness of how their identities intersect with global issues.

At the core of the EULAC MUSEUMS project is a belief in the transformative power of culture. In rural areas, museums serve as vital spaces where communities can explore and celebrate their cultural heritage. Brown & Brown (2024) note that “museums are an invaluable tool in this process due to their capacity to connect the remote/digital with the present/physical understanding of the world, both in terms of its similarities and diversities” (p. 90). This cultural engagement strengthens the EU's image as a positive and influential force beyond its borders. The EULAC MUSEUMS initiative exemplifies the EU's use of soft power, positioning it as a global leader in social inclusion and cultural cooperation. Community-based museums also play a critical role in promoting sustainable development, a key aspect of the EU's foreign policy. According to the European Commission (2019), the EU recognizes culture as a driver of sustainable development, which is reflected in its

commitment to international cultural cooperation. The EU's foreign policy framework emphasizes the protection and promotion of cultural diversity, particularly through the ratification of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Since 2007, culture has been central to the EU's international relations strategy, strengthened by the 2018 New European Agenda for Culture. This agenda highlights the importance of leveraging cultural institutions—such as community-based museums—to advance global sustainable development goals. These museums are instrumental in preserving cultural heritage, fostering social inclusion, and promoting intercultural dialogue. They also stimulate economic growth through tourism and creative industries, creating jobs and enhancing social cohesion. In the context of the EU's external policy, community-based museums contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by supporting economic growth, promoting social inclusion, and strengthening civil society. They serve as platforms for education, raising awareness of environmental issues, promoting democratic values, and encouraging intercultural exchanges that help prevent conflict and promote peace. By fostering local creativity and cultural expression, these museums directly contribute to the EU's global efforts to promote sustainable development. The EU's external strategy also emphasizes collaboration with partner countries, with community-based museums often at the forefront of these partnerships. These collaborations enable museums to play a crucial role in building bridges between societies, contributing to peacebuilding, and promoting mutual understanding across borders.

By fostering local initiatives and cultural exchanges, these museums give communities the visibility and agency to address critical global issues. As Brown (2019, cited in Brown, Claverie, & Weil, 2024) notes, "Community-based museums and heritage initiatives merit more visibility and agency to work through the critical issues affecting human life in different parts of the world" (p. 96) These efforts align with the EU's values of sustainability and social empowerment, demonstrating its commitment to addressing global challenges through inclusive cultural practices. By preserving heritage and fostering local creative industries, these museums contribute not only to global sustainability but also to the EU's strategic cultural diplomacy. Brown & Brown (2024) also highlight that, "Community museums give prominence to 'people,' 'place,' 'territory,' and 'identity,' as well as many definitions reflecting on the intrinsic relationship between the past and the future" (p. 95). The EULAC MUSEUMS project has facilitated collaborations between museums in Europe and Latin America, creating a framework for sustainable museum practices and aligning

these with EU foreign policy. Brown, Claverie, & Weil (2024) emphasize that "the project sought to develop the history and theory of museums, communities, and their territories" (p. 88). This collaborative approach has enhanced the EU's ability to build cultural bridges across regions, bolstering its influence and reputation on the global stage.

Cultural cooperation between the EU and Latin American countries is a crucial aspect of their diplomatic and developmental relationship. One key framework for understanding these interactions is the concept of hybridization, as articulated by García Canclini (2005). Hybridization refers to the sociocultural processes where previously distinct structures or practices are combined to generate new forms, thus reflecting the complex dynamics of cultural exchange. This concept provides a valuable lens through which to analyze how the EU-Latin American collaborations in areas like cultural diplomacy, education, and community-based museum initiatives, give rise to new cultural forms that transcend their origins.

According to García Canclini (2005), hybridization is not merely a fusion without contradiction but is marked by the conflicts and tensions that arise from cross-cultural contact. This insight helps in understanding that cultural exchanges between the EU and Latin America do not always result in seamless integration. Instead, they generate new dynamics and occasionally lead to friction, as existing cultural practices adapt or transform in response to external influences. Such tensions are not necessarily negative but can serve as catalysts for innovation and growth in cultural expression. The EU's initiatives, such as the EU-LAC MUSEUMS project, embody this process of hybridization. By fostering collaboration between museums in Europe and Latin America, the project facilitates the creation of new cultural narratives that blend European and Latin American traditions. García Canclini's idea of hybridization underscores that these exchanges are not just about merging different elements, but also about selecting and reinterpreting historical practices, which contributes to the evolving identities of both regions. These reinterpreted histories play a crucial role in shaping national and regional identities, showing how cultural exchange is a process of both preservation and transformation.

Moreover, cultural hybridization helps to break down rigid national boundaries and encourages cross-cultural interaction. As noted by García Canclini (2005), the previously impermeable borders established by modern states have become porous, allowing for greater fluidity in cultural and political exchanges. EU-Latin American cooperation exemplifies this porosity, as policies aimed at fostering cultural exchanges contribute to the erosion of traditional barriers between these regions. By supporting initiatives that promote

cultural dialogue, the EU helps create spaces where differences are celebrated rather than leading to segregation or conflict.

In this context, hybridization also becomes a tool for promoting democracy and inclusion. García Canclini (2005) suggests that policies of hybridization can help societies manage their differences without reducing history to a series of cultural conflicts. In the EU's cultural strategy, this is reflected in its efforts to use culture as a means of fostering social cohesion, reducing tensions, and promoting peace. Programs like the Bi-Regional Youth Exchange, which connects young people from rural areas in Europe and Latin America, illustrate how cross-cultural encounters can lead to greater understanding and shared leadership for future generations. However, hybridization is not without its challenges. García Canclini (2005) emphasizes that the tensions arising from hybridization do not always resolve themselves easily, pointing to the nature of cultural difference. In the context of EU-Latin American exchanges, it is essential to recognize that some conflicts or resistances may persist, particularly when deeply rooted historical or cultural differences come into play. For this reason, programs must be designed with sensitivity to the complexities of these interactions, ensuring that they do not merely gloss over differences but engage with them in a meaningful way.

Finally, the role of art in the process of hybridization is noteworthy. García Canclini (2005) uses art as a metaphor for hybridization, suggesting that artistic expression can serve as a space where cultural differences are 'translated' and 'reimagined'. Through cultural cooperation programs that promote artistic collaboration between the EU and Latin America, we can observe how new forms of artistic expression emerge from the interaction of these two regions, serving as both a mirror and a vehicle for deeper cultural integration. While these interactions can generate tensions, they also hold the potential for promoting social cohesion, fostering democratic values, and building a more integrated intercultural reality.

In this context, rather than merely being historical artifacts, European paintings serve as dynamic tools for promoting cultural understanding and reinforcing the EU's normative power. Pictorial art, with its rich tradition of depicting themes such as justice, human dignity, and social cohesion, allows the EU to present its values as both timeless and universally relevant. Art transcends linguistic and cultural barriers, enabling the EU to project ideals that encourage ethical discourse around universal human concerns, such as equity and inclusion. By shaping perceptions of shared values and global responsibilities, the EU strengthens its role in global governance, fostering cooperation on societal progress and promoting a vision of Europe as a leader not only in governance but also in ethical and

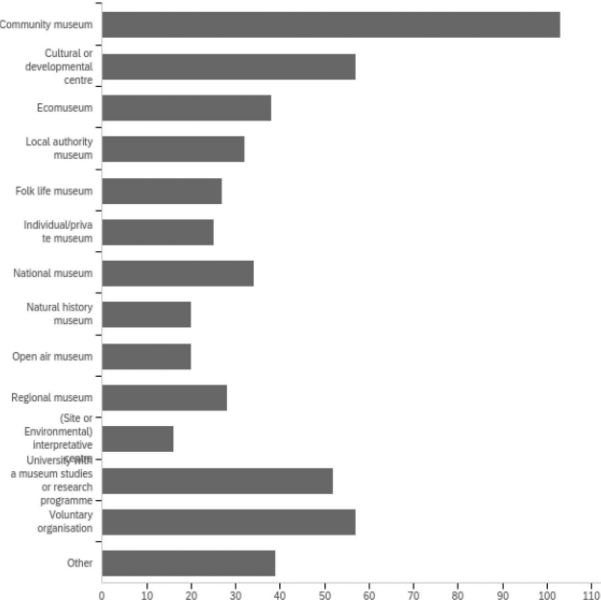
cultural discourse. Through these efforts, the EU effectively uses art as a vehicle for *soft power*, encouraging a global audience to engage with European perspectives and positioning Europe as a moral and cultural guide in an increasingly interconnected world.

3.2 Beyond a patronizing role

The EULAC MUSEUMS project has successfully positioned the EU as a leader in cultural diplomacy by promoting its values of inclusion, cooperation, and sustainability through rural museum initiatives. By empowering young people, fostering cross-cultural exchanges, and supporting community-led projects, the initiative strengthens the EU’s image as a positive, influential force in Latin America and the Caribbean. As a tool of *soft power*, the project reinforces the EU’s commitment to democratic principles, cultural diversity, and global cooperation, thus enhancing its foreign policy objectives and promoting its image worldwide.

Through this graphic (Figure 1), we observe that the EULAC MUSEUMS project, alongside other EU-promoted initiatives supporting community-based museums, plays a crucial role in enhancing the EU’s image as a key actor in cultural preservation and community development. By supporting local heritage and encouraging community participation, the EU reinforces its position as an advocate for inclusive and sustainable cultural values. The graphic further illustrates how these initiatives extend the EU’s cultural influence beyond its borders, portraying it as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue and a connector of diverse cultures.

Figure 1



Note: Figure 1 represents a survey response to the question, “If you are part of an organization/group or individual interested in local or community development, what is its type?” *Communities and Museums in the 21st Century* (Brown, Claverie, & Weil, 2024, p. 100)

These programs serve as platforms for promoting cooperation, inclusion, and cultural preservation, strengthening the EU’s *soft power*. European pictorial art, often displayed in these museums, not only preserves local and European heritage but also projects the EU’s values globally. This fusion of local cultural preservation and European art highlights the EU’s role in fostering global cultural cooperation.

As seen, the EU has long aimed to position itself as a promoter of universal values, advocating democracy, human rights, and sustainable development across the globe. Through initiatives that foster cultural exchange, the EU seeks to project its normative power using *soft power* strategies. However, despite these efforts, the EU often faces criticism for its perceived patronizing attitude, which some argue imposes a homogenized vision of European ‘core values’ in different global contexts.

Still according to Lucarelli, “the images most frequently associated with the EU—mostly by elites and the media—are those of an economic giant, a multilateral actor, an area of economic integration, only rarely that of a norm promoter” (Lucarelli, 2013, p. 7). This indicates that the EU’s normative aspirations are sometimes overshadowed by its economic and multilateral roles. Although “civil society organizations and political elites outside of Europe recognize that the EU is perceived as advancing norms, particularly on human rights, development and environmental standards” (Lucarelli, 2013, p. 10), these initiatives are not always received as intended. In some regions, particularly those with colonial histories, the EU’s advocacy efforts are sometimes perceived as imposing rather than supportive.

Indeed, “some authors have made an interesting observation regarding the EU’s role as a distinctive actor (multilateral, norm promoter, etc.): the fact that the EU is at times recognized to be a promoter of norms (democracy and human rights in primis) does not necessarily imply that it is regarded as a force for the good” (Lucarelli, 2013, p. 10). This critique highlights the EU’s ongoing challenge: its efforts to promote universal norms do not always translate into positive perceptions abroad. Furthermore, “in some cases, the EU’s

democracy dialogue is criticized for its patronizing manner” (Lucarelli, 2013, p. 10). The tendency to promote democratic values in a manner perceived as top-down can create tensions, especially in regions sensitive to perceived foreign interference.

This perception is exacerbated by the EU’s economic practices. As Lucarelli notes, “particularly in countries with a colonial past, the EU’s patronizing style, coupled with its use of protectionist barriers, contributes to reinforcing the perception of it as a neo-colonial power” (Lucarelli, 2013, p.10). When combined with trade barriers, the EU’s efforts can appear less like support for global welfare and more like a unilateral imposition of values, potentially reinforcing stereotypes of European superiority.

The EU, according to Heck and Schlag (2009), has strategically leveraged modern communication methods to shape and manage its global identity. This involves constructing visual and narrative representations that highlight the EU’s role as a humanitarian and civil power. Through photographs depicting high-level diplomatic engagements or EU personnel safeguarding humanitarian sites, the EU emphasizes its commitment to benevolence and ethical leadership. This curated portrayal not only supports the EU’s *soft power* objectives but also reinforces its image as a normative authority. Notably, this selective use of visuals is crucial to the EU’s public diplomacy efforts, which are deeply intertwined with its *soft power* strategy.

Art, much like photographs of diplomatic engagements, aids in constructing a favorable narrative. Paintings that emphasize the EU’s role in fostering peace, unity, and humanitarian efforts resonate emotionally and intellectually with audiences, contributing to the EU’s *soft power*. By focusing on images aligned with a positive narrative, the EU influences public perception and legitimizes its actions on the world stage. For instance, in regions like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), EU visual representations often spotlight peacekeeping and humanitarian missions while downplaying ongoing violence or human rights challenges. In contrast to the limitations of hard power, *soft power* enables the EU to project its values and influence globally, fostering stability and cooperation, and long-term peace initiatives. This narrative construction bolsters the EU’s normative power by shaping what is considered legitimate or admirable in international relations.

As Heck and Schlag (2009) note, public diplomacy not only targets external audiences but also reinforces the EU’s self-image internally. This dual focus reflects a patronizing approach, positioning the EU as a global standard-bearer of values and norms. By projecting itself as a moral leader, the EU risks resembling propaganda and diminishing its *soft power* when perceived as overly one-sided or manipulative. Visual representation

remains a powerful component of the EU's *soft power*. Like language, images do not merely record events but actively shape and frame them. Through strategic visual storytelling, the EU constructs narratives that support its policies and justify its normative influence. The performative nature of these visuals is evident when emotive images are used to foster empathy and rational intervention, reinforcing the EU's image as a humanitarian actor. By carefully managing visual materials, the EU not only conveys its interpretation of events but also shapes global perceptions, reinforcing its normative power and influencing international standards and values through cultural and intellectual means.

The EU's use of visual strategies in public diplomacy highlights its capacity to present itself as a normative actor. However, adopting a less patronizing approach and moving beyond a paternalistic stance could help the EU transition from being perceived as a prescriptive authority to a genuine partner in global cooperation. By emphasizing mutual respect and fostering dialogues that celebrate cultural diversity, the EU can engage more effectively, balancing shared values with respect for local autonomy.

The selective focus on humanitarian imagery, paired with the omission of more challenging realities, allows the EU to craft a narrative that strengthens its *soft power* and solidifies its leadership in promoting global norms. This strategic portrayal affects both external perceptions and the EU's self-image, reinforcing its position as a model of ethical and normative leadership. Art, like visual storytelling, does not merely reflect events but actively shapes perceptions. By curating its artistic output, the EU shapes narratives through which it asserts its interpretation of global events, thereby influencing international perceptions and standards.

For instance, according to Reyes (2023), the EU participated as Guest of Honor at the Guadalajara (Mexico) International Book Fair with the project Artistic Expressions in Contemporary Europe. This project included four exhibitions highlighting the continent's cultural richness. Patricio Jeretic, the curator and general coordinator, explains that these exhibitions "show cultural diversity, different artistic manifestations and disciplines, as well as a series of forms of expression that illustrate the contemporary European reality and the geographical diversity of a continent" (Reyes, 2023). This illustrates how the EU uses art to project its plurality, positioning itself as a model of coexistence and cultural understanding.

During the exhibition, portraits of key thinkers, philosophers, and politicians fundamental to the EU's consolidation, created by artist Andrea Cochius, were presented. These portraits capture the faces of those instrumental in establishing the EU, highlighting the historical and foundational values of the EU as a normative actor promoting peace and

international cooperation. This exhibition, previously shown at the European External Action Service (EEAS) headquarters in Brussels in June 2023, creates cultural bridges between Europe and Mexico, using art to enhance dialogue and mutual understanding in international relations.

Thus, the EU's use of pictorial art serves not only as a medium for cultural expression but also as a strategic tool for consolidating its position as a global and normative actor. By projecting an image of diversity, shared history, and cultural solidarity, the EU strengthens its identity and influence on the international stage, establishing itself as a reference point for values and norms that transcend borders.

3.3 Challenges and opportunities

Despite the EU's efforts to position itself as an important cultural actor, it is still important to mention that the EU still faces numerous challenges in applying *soft power* strategies effectively within diverse international contexts. Key aspects among these are the issues of interdependence and disparity among nations, local resistance to globalization, and the delicate balance between promoting democracy and ensuring stability. Each challenge carries implications for the EU's ability to assert its cultural and normative influence worldwide.

As globalization intensifies, it creates "greater interdependence among actors, while also widening the gap between more developed and less developed countries" (Ibáñez Dobón, 2011, p. 57). This duality poses a significant obstacle for the EU, which aims to influence global partners through *soft power* as it uses art not merely for aesthetic appreciation but as a vehicle for instilling a shared ethical framework. By showcasing values in a way that feels authentic and unifying, the EU subtly guides global audiences toward a vision of governance aligned with its normative ideals. In practice, working within diverse economic and social conditions may hinder the EU's capacity to effectively project its values and cultural standards. The disparities in economic development across nations complicate the EU's efforts to present a unified vision, often necessitating tailored approaches that account for each country's unique context.

The EU's ambition to extend democratic values abroad must "go hand in hand with an understanding of the culture, history, and governance systems of the countries it seeks to influence" (Ibáñez Dobón, 2011, p. 58). This underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity or cultural hybridization in the EU's *soft power* approach; without it, the EU's influence risks appearing intrusive rather than cooperative. Undoubtedly, "the EU brings a

rich history of integration, regional stability, and a unique diplomatic language centered on *soft power*" (Ibáñez Dobón, 2011, p. 59), which can guide the EU's international relationships. However, challenges remain in blending these values with the realities of different regions.

Furthermore, the EU may also face resistance to its globalizing policies, driven by rising nationalist trends, the influence of extremist religious ideologies, and widespread dissatisfaction in socially marginalized populations. According to Ibáñez Dobón (2011), these reactions reflect a perception of European cultural and political values as foreign impositions, which can provoke local opposition and hinder the EU's *soft power* efforts. Particularly in areas where economic inequities are strong, the promotion of European norms might appear to threaten existing identities, thereby fostering resistance. In such cases, the EU's efforts to project its values could inadvertently deepen cultural divides instead of fostering unity.

While it is true that one of the EU's central missions is to promote democratic governance, this goal involves complex counterparts. The EU must decide whether -or not- to "prioritize electoral democracy or to first establish the social, cultural, and economic foundations necessary for a liberal democracy" (Ibáñez Dobón, 2011, p. 58). While art is a powerful tool because it goes beyond language and can connect with people emotionally, and as discussed before, through art exhibits, collaborations, and cultural projects, the EU aims not only to share its democratic ideas but to do so in a way that feels relevant and respectful to different audiences, making its cultural approach art a quiet yet powerful part of the EU's strategy, helping to strengthen its influence while honoring each region's unique identity; this strategy highlights the inherent tension between the EU's cultural and normative objectives and the political stability of the regions it seeks to influence.

While immediate democratization may align with the EU's ideological goals, it could destabilize regions lacking the foundational elements of a democratic society, leading instead to surface-level reforms that merely create a façade of democracy to appeal to the EU. Navigating these challenges requires the EU to balance its values with the complex realities of the international landscape. The interdependence and disparity among nations, localized resistance to external influence, and the risk of a somewhat patronizing approach all highlight the limitations of a purely soft power strategy. As the EU promotes its cultural and political values on the world stage, a flexible, context-sensitive approach becomes essential.

In this effort, the EU's rich and diverse cultural landscape—shaped by centuries of artistic evolution—serves as a powerful asset. This cultural heritage gives the EU a unique foundation to position itself as a global leader in fostering cultural understanding and shared human values. Programs like EU LAC-MUSEUMS, Creative Europe, and the European Capitals of Culture demonstrate that by supporting cultural initiatives, the EU can build its image not only as an economic and political power but also as a cultural leader. These initiatives show how art and culture can effectively convey European values worldwide, complementing the EU's broader objectives.

Art as a form of *soft power* is particularly effective because it embodies the EU's commitment to diversity and mutual respect. Artistic expression can open intercultural dialogues, allowing the EU to connect with different audiences in ways traditional diplomacy might not. Unlike policies or economic deals, art has an emotional and symbolic impact that can shape public opinion and build connections at the community level. However, the effectiveness of this strategy hinges on the EU's ability to align its practices with the values it promotes. A disconnect between ideals and actions can undermine credibility and influence

Of course, using art in this way does come with challenges. Some regions might view European art as imposing European heritage on them, which could raise concerns about cultural imbalance. But this also gives the EU a chance to approach cultural diplomacy with humility and openness. By focusing on collaborative projects and including voices from different backgrounds, the EU can shift how its art is seen—from a one-way influence to a shared space for creation. Art is also flexible and can address current global issues like climate change, social justice, and human rights. Through exhibitions, performances, and cultural exchanges, the EU can promote its leadership on these topics while building solidarity across borders.

In conclusion, while there are challenges, the EU has a promising opportunity to use art as a powerful tool of *soft power*. By promoting art that encourages genuine intercultural exchange and reflects shared human values, the EU can enhance its role as a leader in cultural diplomacy. This approach would not only improve its international image but also affirm its values of unity, cooperation, and cultural diversity on the global stage.

3.4 Understanding the EU Culture Fund and Its Challenges

According to Van der Ploeg (2005), the European Commission's involvement in cultural policy is economically questionable, as much of its funding is directed toward high-profile

initiatives, like the European Capital of Culture, which have limited cross-border influence. Additionally, stringent bureaucratic demands often complicate cultural exchanges. Shore (2013) further observes that the Commission's role is complicated by its dual responsibilities: acting both as a bureaucratic administrator and a driver of political agendas. This mix of administrative and policy-making functions can lead to internal conflicts and operational issues within the institution.

Moreover, inconsistencies among European nations in their approaches to cultural funding open the door to political interference, as no unified standard guarantees the independence of cultural initiatives. While Culture Ministers primarily focus on supporting and preserving the arts and cultural identity, areas like competition and trade—being economic and regulatory by nature—are generally outside their remit. This division of responsibilities is essential, as these economic matters require specialized expertise. Consequently, when European Culture Ministers gather, their agendas are often limited, serving mostly symbolic purposes, as key decisions are made in other ministries. Despite these challenges, most European countries work to shape international cultural policies, often coordinated between their Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs, aiming to project cultural values globally, albeit without a cohesive European framework (Van der Ploeg, 2005).

This fragmented structure complicates efforts to unify cultural objectives across the EU, according to The European Court of Auditors (2020), despite the ambitions embedded within the EU Culture Fund, designed to support cultural identity and economic growth, face operational challenges due to limited budgets, complex regulatory frameworks, and a lack of clear indicators for monitoring success.

While the EU Culture Fund aims to boost cultural development and unity, its lack of coordination and clear evaluation standards across EU funding and member state policies weakens its effectiveness. This inconsistency also limits the EU's ability to use culture as a form of *soft power* by promoting European values through art and heritage projects. The absence of reliable outcome measures, the reliance on public subsidies, and limited long-term maintenance planning for cultural sites create a gap between the EU's cultural goals and their practical impact. When economic priorities overshadow cultural value, it hinders the EU's efforts to build a shared cultural identity and influence.

To make EU cultural policies more impactful, setting clear goals and monitoring progress reliably are essential. Financial independence for cultural sites—through private funding, income-generating activities, and long-term maintenance plans—would help these

projects be more sustainable. This would also strengthen their role in promoting a cohesive European cultural image worldwide. Addressing these issues could enhance the impact of EU cultural investments, building a stronger and more united cultural landscape across Europe.

3.5 Art as a Medium for Cultural Connection and Its Role in EU Soft Power

Art is often celebrated for its ability to transcend borders and cultures, serving as a medium that communicates unique ideas and fosters empathy across differences. However, when the European Union considers using art as a tool for *soft power*, challenges emerge due to the EU's normative power and the culturally specific foundations of art itself.

The claim of universality in art has been largely shaped by a Eurocentric framework, one that “had been largely Eurocentric pretending to be universal” (Sylvester, 2015, p. 27). This Eurocentric perspective assumes a shared cultural understanding that doesn't account for the diversity of art forms and values outside the European context. As such, art that appears universal may still subtly reflect the norms, history, and aesthetic priorities rooted in Europe's past.

Moreover, the meaning and purpose of art are closely tied to specific cultural contexts. As Freeland explains, “what artists make as art depends upon the context of intentions possible for a given era and culture—whatever the culture theorizes as art” (Freeland 2001, 57 cited in Sylvester, 2015, p. 27). Art from Europe, with its unique history and values, may not resonate with the same clarity or impact in non-European settings, complicating the EU's efforts to communicate universally through art.

Art's inherent ties to identity politics also pose a barrier to its universality. According to Sylvester (2015), Art often speaks to particular identities—gender, race, age, nationality, ethnicity, and class—challenging older ideals that “demanded that art hold to universal standards” (2015, pp. 30-31). This emphasis on localized and politicized identities can make it difficult for art to serve as a neutral medium for *soft power*, as its messages may be perceived as reinforcing certain cultural or political values, rather than fostering global unity.

Finally, contemporary art has become intertwined with commercial interests, often valued more for its market worth than for its universal appeal. Kuspit notes that “Art has been subtly poisoned by social appropriation, that is, the emphasis on its commercial value and its treatment as upscale entertainment, turning it into a species of social capital” (Kuspit 2004, 8 cited in Sylvester p.33). The focus on making art commercially appealing has led it to be shaped by what buyers want—quick and easy content, similar to “the news in today's

newspaper" (Sylvester, 2008, p. 33). This shift makes it harder for the EU to use art as a *soft power* tool as its deeper cultural meaning is weakened by market demands.

It is crucial to perform a critical analysis of the actions of EU cultural diplomacy, especially in terms of the use of pictorial art, because art plays a central role in the EU's cultural diplomacy strategy. By analyzing these initiatives, we can better understand how the EU employs art as a tool for *soft power*, aiming to create a global cultural dialogue that reflects its values. The integration of pictorial art into the EU's cultural diplomacy is not only about aesthetic value but also about fostering a deeper connection between the EU and the world, showing its commitment to cultural exchange and collaboration. Through initiatives like the EU-LAC MUSEUMS project and Bi-Regional Youth Exchange, the EU can move away from a one-sided, patronizing approach and toward one of mutual respect and cultural sharing. This shift helps mitigate the Eurocentric biases in art while positioning the EU as a promoter of diversity and inclusion in the global context. Ultimately, pictorial art becomes a vehicle for the EU to shape its identity and influence beyond political and economic power, by weaving its values into cultural engagement on the world stage.

While art may seem a promising means for the EU's *soft power* strategy, its Eurocentric underpinnings, contextual dependencies, and increasing commercialization present significant challenges. Rather than fostering a genuinely universal dialogue, art risks reinforcing specific identities and market-driven values, which could hinder its effectiveness in representing the EU's ideals on a global stage.

4. Conclusions

The EU has a vast cultural history, enriched by centuries of artistic evolution that continues to shape its identity today. This heritage puts the EU in a unique position, enabling it to stand out as more than just an economic and political bloc. By strategically using pictorial art as a *soft power* tool, the EU effectively promotes values such as democracy, diversity, and mutual respect. Initiatives like Creative Europe, EU LAC-MUSEUMS, and the European Capitals of Culture underscore the EU's commitment to cultural diplomacy, fostering international collaboration and projecting a shared European identity.

The concept of a supranational identity, grounded in a shared cultural framework, is essential to understanding the EU's use of *soft power* in global politics. A unified cultural identity, even if not fully realized within the EU, enables the bloc to project a coherent and attractive image to the world. This shared identity, emphasized through cultural diplomacy, serves as a cornerstone of the EU's *soft power strategy*. While internal challenges to cohesion persist, the EU has leveraged its artistic heritage to build a collective European ethos that resonates globally.

Art serves as a lens for understanding society's self-perception and reflects political dynamics. European symbols and artistic movements like surrealism and impressionism have historically been intertwined with political change, highlighting how art can either challenge or reinforce dominant ideologies. The European Union leverages this cultural heritage to foster unity and advance diplomatic goals. Through artistic movements the EU creates cultural connections with other nations, demonstrating how European art can bridge diverse cultural experiences. Exhibitions organized by institutions like the Alliance Française and other EU-driven cultural events create and cultivate emotional bonds and foster empathy, playing a crucial role in strengthening Europe's cultural diplomacy. This strategy solidifies the EU as a normative power, cultivating a cultural identity that promotes integration and influence without relying on traditional force.

Europe's rich artistic history provides a unique advantage in cultural diplomacy, as art transcends national and linguistic boundaries, offering a powerful medium for conveying universal values. Pictorial art, with its emotional and symbolic resonance, fosters deeper connections with global audiences, reinforcing the EU's image as a proponent of human rights and democratic principles. However, this strategy faces certain contradictions. While art can promote intercultural understanding, it may also be perceived as a manifestation of Europe's normative influence, potentially presenting European values as universal.

In international relations, the EU positions itself as a normative power, using cultural and ethical values to shape its influence. Programs like Creative Europe, EU LAC-MUSEUMS, and the European Capitals of Culture highlight the EU's ability to leverage its cultural assets to promote cohesion and reinforce its core principles. Yet, using art as a *soft power* tool is not without its challenges. While these initiatives aim to foster dialogue and cooperation, they risk reinforcing Eurocentrism by positioning European art as a cultural standard, unintentionally sidelining other global perspectives. As a result, these efforts, though well-intentioned, may be perceived as subtle forms of cultural hegemony rather than genuine exchanges of ideas.

Additionally, the EU's cultural diplomacy can sometimes appear politically driven, masked as artistic intent. While promoting peace, dialogue, and human rights are commendable objectives, the EU's art initiatives may unintentionally reinforce perceptions of Europe as a cultural moral authority, potentially generating resistance, particularly in regions with strong cultural identities. For genuine intercultural partnerships, art should serve as a platform for dialogue rather than a tool for asserting dominance.

The EU's cultural initiatives, though intended to build bridges, often fall short of achieving their desired global impact. Programs like EU LAC-MUSEUMS aim to engage regions such as Latin America, but their reach and visibility often remain limited. Expanding this influence globally remains challenging, as low awareness outside Europe suggests a need for a more comprehensive strategy to enhance the EU's cultural presence beyond regional boundaries.

Despite these critiques, art remains a powerful medium for fostering global engagement and addressing pressing issues. Exhibitions and cultural events allow the EU to spotlight global challenges such as climate change, migration, and human rights. These artistic expressions not only enhance the EU's image as a moral leader but also provide platforms for marginalized voices. Addressing these topics demonstrates the EU's commitment to using art as a bridge between cultures and a means to promote inclusive dialogue. Art's role in emphasizing the EU's ethical leadership, independent of traditional political channels, showcases its potential as an entity valuing social and cultural progress alongside economic and political stability. However, this effort must be balanced to avoid reinforcing a Eurocentric view; the EU should continue positioning itself as a partner in global cultural exchange, recognizing and amplifying non-European contributions.

The EU's use of pictorial art as a *soft power* tool illustrates its efforts to shape global perceptions and promote its core values. Supported by Europe's rich artistic heritage, this

strategy must ensure that cultural initiatives are perceived as genuine efforts for shared exchange rather than assertions of superiority. Achieving this balance would allow the EU to use its cultural assets to reinforce its role in international relations, championing collective interests that reflect a diverse and inclusive international landscape.

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