

Unboxing the Canon—Episode 1—Revealing a Portrait  
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Created by Linda Steer

(Playing: Instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod)

“Unboxing the Canon” takes a closer look at the history of Western art. We might be seduced by the pretty packaging, such as soft brush strokes, brilliant colors, grand gestures, expert carving, even traditional iconography. But what happens when we take a deeper look? When we open the packaging and see what might have been invisible, or what is a cultural blind spot? Join Professor Linda Steer and listen in for a take on art history that connects the past to the present, critiques the canon, and reveals what might not be immediately apparent in Western art and its institutions.

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)

Welcome! This is Professor Linda Steer and I am speaking to you from Brock University. In this week’s episode, “Revealing a Portrait,” we think about what the canon of art history is, and we look to a painting by contemporary African American artist Titus Kaphar to consider what it excludes.

Brock University is located in the Niagara Region, on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. I want to begin by reading you a land acknowledgment statement written by the Brock Aboriginal Education Council in 2018:

“We acknowledge the land on which Brock University was built is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples, many of whom continue to live and work here today. This territory is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties and is within the land protected by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum agreement. Today this gathering place is home to many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples and acknowledging reminds us that our great standard of living is directly related to the resources and friendship of Indigenous people.”

What does this statement mean and why is it important for us as we study art history?

First of all, it reminds us that those of us who are not Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people are here because of their generosity. It also reminds us that this land is to be shared and to be treated with respect.

Leela MadhavaRau, the Director of Brock Human Rights and Equity told me a bit more about the Dish with One Spoon agreement. I’m quoting her here:

“The “Dish” or sometimes it is called the “Bowl” represents what is now southern Ontario from the Great Lakes to Quebec and from Lake Simcoe into the U.S. We all eat out of the Dish – all of us that share this territory – with only one spoon. That means we have to share the responsibility of ensuring the dish is never empty; which includes, taking care of the land and the creatures we share it with. Importantly, there are no knives at the table, representing that we must keep the peace.”

These are important ideas, and for those of us studying art history, even more important because the agreement was recorded with a material object – a wampum belt that was made with purple and white shell beads. The belt depicts the dish in purple on a white background. You can see an image of the dish with one spoon wampum on the Museum of Ontario Archaeology website. Check out the podcast links for details.

Now that you know where Brock University is located and the agreements that protect this land, consider researching the history of Indigenous peoples on the land where you live. Does your place of residence fall under the Dish with One Spoon wampum agreement? Or is governed by a treaty? Whose land are you on and what is the history of the land and its people?

In Canada, unless we are Inuit, Métis or First Nations people, we are settlers. Settlers are people who came here to live as a result of colonization.

What’s your family history? How did you arrive here?

My background is composed of early settlers who came to Quebec from France in the 1660s along with more recent arrivals from England and Ireland. Maybe some Scotland too a couple hundred years ago.

In its simplest definition, settler colonialism is a system of colonization whereby the colonizers – in Canada it started with the French and the British – take over the land by populating it with their own people.

What does all of this have to do with art history? Well, it has a lot to do with teaching and learning. Learning is much more than acquiring information. It is a process.

To learn, we have to know who we are, our subject positions, and what our backgrounds bring to the table. What lens are you looking through and how does that lens affect what you see? I see from the perspective of a white cis-gender woman, for example. That means that I might be more in tune with gender in art perhaps, but, like many white folks, I have to work a little harder to see race. That’s ok. Just do the work!

What are our unconscious biases, for example? Where are our blind spots? We all have them. I have them. You have them too. Things to think about...

Okay, are you ready to talk about some art? Let's dive in!

(Playing: Instrumental jazz music-- Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod)

(Instrumental jazz music ends)

This podcast is part of a course I'm teaching called "Introduction to the History of Western Art." It's a survey course that covers thousands of years of art in twelve weeks. And oh, it is an impossible course to teach.

What is typically covered in these courses? Well, the art historical canon that set of works of art that are deemed important or significant – the who's who list of great art and artists. These famous artists are sometimes called the "Old Masters" and their work is referred to as "Old Master painting."

Can you see where I'm going with this?

What does the word "master" mean to you? Think about it for a second or two.

(Playing: Instrumental electronic music—Eternal by Brady Hoffman)

(Instrumental electronic music ends)

It's a word that refers to men. Is the word mistress equivalent? No, it definitely isn't. The connotations of that word are quite different. It's also a title that refers to slave owners, particularly in the American South. If you are a Black person, that word might have negative, even violent, connotations. If you are a woman, you might feel excluded.

This podcast aims to critique the canon of western – mainly European -- art, to try to show its biases, its exclusions, its violence, its effects. This doesn't mean we can't still love art. We just need to be more aware.

Here some question to consider: What is the connection between art and history? Why does art from 2 or 3 or 400 years ago matter? Should we just get rid of it if has all these problems?

Let's think about contemporary American artist Titus Kaphar's work. In a TED talk from 2017, Kaphar expresses his lifelong love of art: going to museums as a kid and then taking art history classes, but at a point during a survey class that covered the history of western art, Kaphar realized that the professor is not going to cover the Black experience – his experience – and that he will have

to teach himself. He notices that there are Black people in European art, but that they aren't addressed, that they are invisible in the history of art.

In his art, Kaphar makes the invisible visible. Watch the talk – it's powerful. He paints copies – excellent copies – of European paintings on a large scale. And then he alters them, or “amends” them to use his word. In this case, he uses a painting by 17<sup>th</sup> c. Dutch painter Franz Hals. This painting depicts a group of 5 people, 2 adults and three children, standing in an outdoor setting – it is a family portrait. Four of the people are visually connected by their resemblance and their clothing, which is mostly black and white, made with fine fabrics, such as velvet and silk, and luxuriously decorated with ribbons, fancy buttons, gold and elaborate lace. The adults hold hands and gaze at one another. Two of the children, who are white like their parents, smile. The boy stands next to his father and the girl stands closest to the frame on the right. Between the girl and her mother stands a smaller child, a black boy, wearing a simple brown jacket and white collar. This child doesn't smile but looks directly at the viewer. Even though he is placed between the mother and the daughter, he doesn't seem part of the group. He stands closer to the background, just behind the others. Who was this boy?

In the TED talk video, Kaphar approaches his copy of Hals painting and, using white paint mixed with linseed oil, he paints over the main figures in it, beginning with the head of the man, the head of the family, moving on to the objects that symbolize wealth.

In covering up these other figures, with a veil of white paint, Kaphar changes the composition and makes the Black child the centre of the painting. He becomes visible.

Kaphar states: “Historically speaking, in research on these kinds of paintings, I can find out more about the lace that the woman is wearing in this painting -- the manufacturer of the lace -- than I can about this character here, about his dreams, about his hopes, about what he wanted out of life.”

That is a potent statement and it is confirmed by the Museum that owns the original of this painting. On the website of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, Mar Borobia describes many aspects of this work of art, including its symbolism and iconography, Hals' technique and skill, its context within 17<sup>th</sup> c Dutch culture, and the painting's provenance – all typical art historical material. The brief article does not mention the small Black boy.

Who was this boy?

Hals painted this outdoor portrait sometime between 1645 and 1648, a few short years after the Dutch became involved in the trans-Atlantic slave

trade. The Dutch Republic enjoyed many human rights, such as religious freedom and freedom of thought, and yet, as scholar Rik van Welie points out in a chapter on the Dutch involvement in the slave trade, those human rights extended to citizens only. But for most Dutch people, slavery happened far away, and they were unaware or unconcerned. There were very few Africans in the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Slavery, we could say, was a blind spot in the Dutch Golden Age, a period of intense wealth and cultural flourishing. Welie states this clearly when he writes: “Arguably no nation at the time so thoroughly symbolized the awkward dichotomy of liberty and humanism at home and brutal conquest and mass enslavement abroad.”

We still don't know who this boy is, but maybe we can take a closer look at the other figures, their clothing, the conspicuous display of wealth. The Dutch Republic, an exemplar of freedom and liberty in Europe, where at the time, most other places were dominated by the absolute rule of monarchies, was the wealthiest place in the world. Its wealth came from trade via the Dutch East India Company and the West India Company, companies who held their own version of absolute power in the colonies and who were ruthless in their domination of local cultures and people. Yet, the true price of the wealth displayed in Hals' painting is not visible.

What should we do with this painting?

A few more words from Titus Kaphar: “What is the impact of these kinds of paintings on some of our most vulnerable in society, seeing these kinds of depictions of themselves all the time? I'm not saying erase it. We can't erase this history. It's real. We have to know it.”

(Playing: instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod)

(Instrumental jazz music ends)

History is alive, changing, evolving: this is what makes it exciting. Whenever possible, University courses should respond to what is happening in the world. For me, this means considering questions of power as we examine the history of Western art. It means analyzing those famous works of art from multiple points of view, not just the institutional point of view, the traditional art historical point of view, or even my point of view. It means challenging the traditional history of art while simultaneously learning what it is.

Next time we will take a close look at a diptych by Kent Monkman, Cree artist who lives in Toronto, also part of Dish with One Spoon territory. Like Kaphar, he takes the paintings and methods of art history and turns them into something new. I'll be using these paintings as a touchstone for framing our investigation of the canon of western art. That episode will drop September 16 at noon. I hope you'll listen to it.

See you next time!

(Playing: instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod)

Credits:

Unboxing the Canon is hosted and produced by Linda Steer for her course “Introduction to the History of Western Art” in the Department of Visual Arts at Brock University. Brock University is located on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples.

Our sound designer and editor is Devin Dempsey, who is also reading these credits. Our logo was created by Cherie Michels. The music for this podcast has been adapted from “Night in Venice” and “Inspired” by Kevin MacLeod. Both are licensed under Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0.

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