

Unboxing the Canon—Episode 2—Reversing the Gaze
September 16, 2020
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 back! You might remember that in the last episode we thought about *Shifting the Gaze*, a painting that contemporary African American artist Titus Kaphar created live during a TED talk in 2017. Kaphar based his provocative work on *Family in a Landscape*, painted by Dutch artist Franz Hals around 1645. In this episode of Unboxing the Canon, called “Reversing the Gaze,” we turn towards 2 paintings by contemporary Cree artist Kent Monkman. Like *Shifting the Gaze*, these paintings also refer to earlier paintings from the Western art historical canon and they also aim to shift the gaze. Here Monkman aims to “reverse the gaze” from white settlers looking at Indigenous people to Indigenous people looking at settlers.

Are you ready to talk about art? Let’s dive in!

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

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)

Let’s think about the diptych *mistikôsiwak*, translated to English as *Wooden Boat People*.

First some details:

These two paintings by Monkman were commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. One is titled “Welcoming the Newcomers” and the other is “Resurgence of the People.” Both are acrylic paintings, completed in 2019. Each is 132 x 264 in. (335.28 x 670.6 cm), which is 11 x 22 feet or about 3.5 x 6.5 meters. These are monumental paintings.

Ok, so imagine yourself standing in front of these monumental paintings in the Great Hall in the Met Museum, which is the large entrance space in this neoclassical building for art that opened in 1902.

(Playing: The sound of people walking and talking in a museum)

You are standing on a mosaic floor and overhead there are 3 domes. Perhaps you feel a bit small here. The voices of others bounce off the limestone and echo throughout the space.

(Sound stops)

Welcoming the Newcomers is on your left. There are many figures in this painting that is both a landscape and a seascape. Some are on the land that juts out diagonally from the left of the painting. Others are in the water in the foreground, hanging on to the rock. Most of the figures on the land are Indigenous. Some of these figures interact with those in the water; others do not. Many are engaged in mini-narratives that do not connect to other figures. Most of the figures in the water are white, except for a couple of people of color, including a Black man in chains. On the right side of the painting, a group of soaking wet men cling to an overturned wooden boat as a shark circles. One of them has been pierced by an arrow. It is a chaotic scene.

The water is rough and threatening. The sky is dramatic: black clouds hang overhead, and the horizon is fiery orange. We catch a glimpse of blue here and there, but the sky is mostly dark. Rays of light emanate from below the clouds, highlighting a few of the figures in the scene. The light illuminates the back of a figure who bends forward and extends her hands towards two figures in the water, grasping the hand of the man in chains and reaching towards another who Ruth B. Phillips and Mark Salber Phillips have identified as an Ottoman mercenary in their essay entitled "Decolonizing History Painting." This Indigenous figure, the one set apart from the others and highlighted by sun light, is wrapped in red silk, wears beaded rainbow earrings, and Louboutin heels, her long hair blowing in the wind. The light signifies this figure's importance. This is a self-portrait of the artist as an archetypal figure, that is Monkman's alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testicle. If you say the name quickly it becomes mischief egotistical, a play on words that makes me think of French artist Marcel Duchamp. Miss Chief is a gender fluid two spirit figure who appears in many of Monkman's paintings. As writer Shirley Madill points out, the figure of Miss Chief, " ...embodies the mythological trickster... who exhibits a great degree of intellect and knowledge when she is present in a work of art. Monkman uses her to help guide viewers to see new truths". Miss Chief looks directly at the viewer, at me, at us, at anyone seeing this painting. What do you think she wants? Her expression is serious, almost resigned. What is she trying to say? What truths does Miss Chief show us?

(Playing: Instrumental electronic music—Bleeding by Adana Twins feat. Human Life)

(Instrumental electronic music ends)

In an artist's video about the work, Monkman describes his love for the visual language of painting, but when looking at paintings of Indigenous people made by settlers, he says that, " ...it's always this Romantic view of the 'vanishing race.' In fact, we're very much alive. My work really is refuting those themes of disappearance." Miss Chief's look is a way to "reverse the gaze." An attempt to take over the institutional space that holds many of the works of art that depict Indigenous people as disappearing. Monkman's painting is intended as revised version of history. Rather than showing conquest, it highlights the generosity of Indigenous people towards settlers. That nuanced history challenges some of the false or overemphasized narratives written and painted by Europeans and settlers.

Some of the figures in this painting are portraits, and many poses are taken from paintings that reside in the Met Museum. For example, as Phillips and Phillips note, the group of figures in the center of the rock—the new parents with the baby—are based on French painter Eugène Delacroix's, *The Natchez*, created in the early 19th century. Met curator Randall Griffey writes that the appropriation of Delacroix's painting is an example of Monkman's "subversion of multiple artistic representations of the European conceit of the so-called "vanishing race"." Perhaps Miss Chief looks at us to challenge our stereotypes.

Instead of the downtrodden, sickly family in the Delacroix's European painting, Monkman presents us with parents who are healthy and happy.

Numerous figures in both paintings are drawn from the history of Western painting that pictures Indigenous people as a relic of the past. These representations are directly connected to colonization. To see indigenous people as a dying or vanishing group opened up the land for takeover. It legitimized genocide against Indigenous people. Monkman's painting is complex but one of the messages is: we are still here. We did not vanish.

Monkman not only depicts Indigenous life on Turtle Island, or North America, as outsiders arrived, but also shows us some of the settlers. This is a history painting and it depicts historical figures, both individuals and groups. One of those is related to my family history. In the centre foreground, there is a thin, unclothed, red-headed white woman in the water, leaning up against the rock with her arms over her head. This figure, as Phillips and Phillips identify her, is a *fille du rois*, a "daughter" of King Louis XIV, one of the hundreds of young women sent by France in the 1660s and 1670s to populate the New World. Many of the *filles du rois* were orphans or impoverished young women with nowhere to go.

This figure is complex. On the one hand, she likely had little agency. Her role was to bear children. On the other hand, populating the land with white people was one of the ways that France and other countries sought to occupy the land. We can see tension in the way Monkman painted this figure. She's naked – she's vulnerable and her value is in her body. She is being pulled out of the water by a male figure, another Monkman self-portrait, who interacts with an Indigenous woman on the rock. He lifts the woman out of the water with the pinky finger of his left hand by pulling on the rosary that is wrapped around her wrist. Is she bound by Catholicism or saved by it? And while the male figure looks away, religion creeps onto the land. We know the devastating history of Christianity in Canada and the damage that religion has done to First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples.

This figure is personal for me because my earliest Canadian ancestor on my mother's side was a *fille du roi* from Paris. Her name was Mathurine Gouard. In relation to the painting, this leads me to think about the colonialist legacy of my family, my place in Canada, and the land as an image of safety, refuge and welcome in Monkman's painting.

What would this place be like had settler colonialists behaved differently? I'm reminded of the land acknowledgment I discussed in episode 1: that the standard of life we all enjoy in the Niagara region comes from the generosity of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people.

Welcoming the Newcomers provides us with an alternate view of first contact and the settling of Turtle Island. Instead of depicting Indigenous people as defeated by war, famine, forced migration, and disease, we see happy strong healthy vibrantly alive people helping others who arrived on the shores and saving them from certain death. This act of welcome is presided over by Miss Chief the central figure who graciously reaches towards the exhausted and desperate people in the water. She looks at us, the viewers, directly and asks us to pay attention. We see the story of the founding of North America from Miss Chief's point of view. And her direct gaze asks us to think about our roles, our positions, our point of view, and our histories.

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

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)

Monkman's second painting hangs to the right of the entrance. *The Resurgence of the People*, is based on Emanuel Leutze's well-known history painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* from 1851. The painting depicts an important moment in the American Revolutionary war. Monkman takes this image that immortalizes a moment in the life of America's first president and indigenizes it. This is another kind of reversal where an indigenous artist

appropriates American mythology for his own means. And here, Miss Chief takes the position of Washington in the boat. Wearing her trademark heels and silk drapery, rather than an American flag, she holds up an eagle feather to guide the boat that is overflowing with refugees, reminiscent of the boats of migrants turning up on European shores in recent years. In the background, we see the soldiers and police that have caused the people in the boat to flee. Four Indigenous paddlers steer the boat towards safety. This is a different history.

As Mohawk artist Alan Mickelson notes, in Leutze's painting, a Native American man is pictured at the back of the boat, the stern, amongst the troops, reminding us of those early alliances between Indigenous people and settlers. He also notes that treaties created between with people such as the Lenape, also known as Delaware, and the Americans were not honored by the Americans, and that the Americans later murdered many of their Indigenous allies. Leutze doesn't show that.

As I outlined in the previous episode of "Unboxing the Canon", I've redesigned my first-year art history course to both introduce and critique the history of Western Art. I'll be using Monkman's paintings as a touchstone, so we'll look at them again. We need to be careful, though, of simply accepting the messages Monkman communicates. As Regan de Loggans points out, Monkman's diptych depicts a shared history, one that emphasizes co-operation between settlers and Indigenous people. They ask an important question: who is the intended spectator? As an Indigenous person, de Loggans does not see their history, or their trauma, as they write, as shared with white settlers. This is not the only critique that has been levelled against these two paintings and others from Monkman's *oeuvre*. We'll come back to this in future episodes, such as when we consider intersectional feminism. The relentless representation of racialized trauma in our culture and what that does is also something we ought to think about.

Some describe Monkman's gesture of reframing Western art as "decolonizing" - there are articles and reviews that use the word "decolonize" in reference to this work. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write in their article, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," decolonization is not the same as decentering settlers, or anti-racism, or critical discourse about a subject.

While I am attempting to take a critical approach in my teaching, that approach is not decolonizing. Instead I investigate how the institution of Western art has participated in colonization, racism, and the suppression of difference in a myriad of ways. This means that we will consider race, class, gender, ability and other issues as we look to acknowledge and de-construct the systems of power that created and maintain the field of art history, the museum and gallery systems, art criticism, art education, and the higher education myself and my students are participating in right now. Will this course be perfect? Definitely not. But it is important to try.

We tend to think of history as a series of indisputable facts. And there are indeed some facts in this example. Kent Monkman painted *Welcoming the Newcomers* in 2019; it is on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as I record this podcast. But these are the simple facts. When we look at *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, for example, we can interpret it in many ways and that interpretation changes over time. Art history is an interpretation of facts, events and information. The paintings themselves are interpretations of history. Leutze didn't even paint *Washington Crossing the Delaware* in America. He painted it in his native Germany, and he took a lot of artistic license in telling the story. For instance, the crossing happened at night, not during the day as it is painted. Anyone who has been in a small boat knows that standing up in it is not a great idea unless you want to end up in the icy water. The flag is historically inaccurate as well, but the painting was meant to glorify Washington and America. In that sense, it gets the job done. In fact, it's become such an iconic painting that many artists have referred to it in their own work, often to critique America, past and present.

Stay tuned for the next episode where we will look at sculpture and monuments. Now there is a topic of some importance in the present moment! Just this week Prime Minister Trudeau chastised those who toppled a statue of John A. MacDonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, in Montreal. But what should we do with these monuments to historical figures who caused suffering for others, who created atrocities like the residential school system in Canada? We'll take a look at some of the answers offered by art historians.

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.

We are grateful to Alison Innes from the Faculty of Humanities for her sharing her podcasting wisdom and offering support.

This podcast is funded by the Humanities Research Institute at Brock University.

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)