

Unboxing the Canon—Episode 5—“Taken from the Headlines”
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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 back!

It’s been awhile since I’ve been to an art museum. I guess that’s the case for many of us right now.

(Playing: Busy noise from people walking inside the Louvre)

I’m remembering walking through the Louvre, thorough the long gallery of 18th and 19th century French painting, heels clicking on the parquet floor, the sounds of voices echoing through the space. It’s pretty crowded because this gallery also holds the Mona Lisa. – in my memory, not in the current moment. I avoid the lineup for the Mona Lisa and instead I’m looking at the HUGE history paintings all around me. Delacroix’s triumphant *Liberty Leading the People*, Gericault’s terrifying *The Raft of the Medusa*, David’s heroic *Oath of the Horatii*...

(Background noise fades to an end)

What is it about these paintings that is so...interesting or appealing? Part of it is the size and the setting, for sure. *The Raft of the Medusa*, for example, is 16 x23 feet or 4,91 x 7,16 m and it is in a long rectangular room with many other similar-sized French paintings on both walls.

But it’s also that they are dramatic narratives. They tell stories that focus on pivotal moments. They are what we call “history paintings.” We see many of these kinds of dramatic scenes in the 19th century in European countries and North America. But the notion of history painting goes back a little further.

What exactly are history paintings? And why are they significant in the canon of Western art? In this episode of “Unboxing the Canon” we will consider these questions along with some historical examples before we turn to the present moment and consider how artists might use this genre today.

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

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)

The notion of history painting has changed over time, but we can make some generalizations. The term “history” can be a bit confusing because, although many of the paintings deal with historical subjects, a history painting needn’t be about history. The term comes from the Latin word “*istoria*.” Leon Battista Alberti used that word in his treatise *On Painting*, which he published in 1436. While *On Painting* is most well-known for outlining the rules of perspective, which was a new and highly illusionistic mathematical method for creating three-dimensional images on a two-dimensional plane, Alberti also addressed the subject matter of painting. The subject matter of painting was to be intellectual, significant, not frivolous but weighty. In other words, great painters should deal with serious and important subject matter. This intellectual dimension of painting was important at a time when painters were attempting to have their work recognized as more than craft, but as a liberal art. The 7 liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music) were the foundation of medieval education, and during Alberti’s time, education shifted to include poetry, history, kind of what we now think of as the humanities.

While the word *istoria* can be loosely translated as “story,” there is no modern equivalent for the term and its meaning had changed by the time we see painters such as Gericault and Delacroix working in France. For Alberti, great painters had to be educated and able to interpret Classical and biblical texts, and create scenes which, by using composition, gesture, colour and drawing were able to express emotional complexity. Painting was not to be mere imitation, but “The *istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul. It happens in nature that nothing more than herself is found capable of things like herself; we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing, and grieve with the grieving”.

By the time Raphael painted his *School of Athens* almost a century later, in 1509-10, humanism was the prevalent mode of thinking and learning, and philosophy (or human knowledge, the subject of this painting) was on par with theology (the subject of a painting on an opposite wall). Raphael depicts the classical roots of human knowledge using order, harmony, colour and gesture to express its importance. Plato and Aristotle are located at the centre of the fresco in this amazingly illusionistic architectural space of receding barrel vaults, stairs, arches and a dome.

Nearby, also in Vatican City, and painted right at the same time (1508-12), is Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, a complex, elegant, monumental and dramatic fresco cycle that depicts stories from the Old Testament. We are all familiar with that image of God floating in from the heavens to touch Adam's finger and create the first human, a story that is told in Genesis.

These paintings contribute to the highest form of Western art at the time, the late Renaissance in Italy. Most art historical textbooks will list these two paintings as examples of the pinnacle of Western art, really of all art. They are considered true "masterpieces." Remember that word from episode one when we thought about Titus Kaphar's re-making of Franz Hal's group portrait? If these are the best of the best, what do they show? Michelangelo shows that the first human is a man, a white man. Raphael shows that all of Western culture rests on the shoulders of ancient white men. Well, one human woman is pictured, and she has been identified as Hypatia, a philosopher and mathematician who lived in Alexandria, Egypt in the 4th and 5th centuries. A pagan, she was "torn to pieces by a mob of Christians at the instigation of their bishop Cyril" according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Remember that it is important to make note of who is represented in art and who is left out.

Let's jump ahead to the 17th century. There was a distinction between the so-called high arts (history painting) and the "minor-arts," such as decorative arts and paintings that are not history paintings. This distinction was formalized by André Félibien.

Félibien's hierarchy of painting genres, from 1667, reflected ideas about the distinction between invention and imitation. The highest-level paintings, history paintings relied on invention and imagination, which were seen as the skills of educated people. While the imaginary scenes of history painting were based on stories the artist had to create the scene in their head. This was believed to be much more difficult to do than copy from nature. This relates to the Baroque notion of the ideal. The ideal cannot be found in nature (nature is imperfect -- beauty is perfect). In invented scenes, the artist selected what was best and perfect in nature and left out the ugly, or less ideal.

The lower forms of art relied on imitation: portraits, landscapes, the very popular flower paintings, still life, etc. were copies of what was visible in nature. No imagination was needed. An artist only needed to copy nature. This relates to the Baroque notion of the real. In the real world there is ugliness, death, imperfection of all kinds.

These ideas about hierarchy prevail even when we see a shift in the subject matter in paintings in the late 18th and early 19th century France, when history painting takes on political overtones. Jacques Louis David's Oath of the Horatii, exhibited in the salon just before the revolution, in 1786. The painting shows a dramatic and emotional moment in a Roman legend, retold by

16th century French playwright Corneille, where two groups of young men, the Horatii from Rome and the Curatii from Alba choose to fight one another as representatives of either side, thus sparing the lives of many that would be lost in a full out war. The painting shows the Horatii triplets taking an oath swearing allegiance to Rome.

This new style of painting, known as neoclassicism, uses clear composition and linear forms. It is economical (only the elements to tell the story are shown), huge (the figures are life-sized) and symbolic in its visual elements. David uses thirds to tell the story: there are 3 men, 3 swords, 3 arches, 3 women off to the side, and the canvas is divided into 3 areas: the men on the left, the father and the swords in the centre and the women at the right, in shadows. The painting's themes are honour, self-sacrifice for the greater good of the republic; patriotism and morality. It is also a heroic celebration of masculinity. Originally painted for the King, by 1790s it had become a symbol of the revolution. This is significant for it shows us that the meaning of a painting can change despite an artist's or patron's intent.

David's painting still refers to the Classical past even though it expresses the politics of the moment. In the 19th c, we see history painting engaging with current stories, some even taken from the headlines such as in Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, painted in 1819. This painting is based on a real contemporary event that happened in 1816.

(Playing: Waves from the ocean crashing)

(Waves from the ocean fades to an end)

A French ship, called the Medusa, loaded with settlers and soldiers heading for Senegal was involved in a shipwreck. The captain of the ship was incompetent, poorly trained but had been given the job because of his class status and wealthy, influential family. In addition, the ship was not adequately outfitted with lifeboats and the captain and his officers took them, leaving 152 people to fend for themselves. They built a raft. Ninety percent of the people abandoned by the captain perished and only 15 were rescued from the raft 2 weeks later. Survivors told horrifying tales of what they had endured with no food and hardly any water. You can imagine what happened. This event caused a huge political scandal. Gericault shows us a dramatic tangle of writhing bodies in dark seascape. There is no order or clarity as in David's painting. There is only chaos, which gets to the emotional impact of the event. A tiny ship is visible on the horizon and the men at the front of the raft stand on one another's shoulders in an attempt to attract its attention. All of the energy in the painting moves towards the pieces of cloth the men at the front wave at that faraway ship, contrasting hope with utter despair. This is a decidedly political painting. As Harris and Zucker claim on Smarthistory, it is an anti-monarchy painting.

Contemporary painters like Kent Monkman, have taken up the form of history painting as political and cultural critique. It is an effective method of critique because it is well-established in the history of art as the best or strongest form of art, as art whose purpose is to say something important, whether it be the foundations of western culture or humanity itself, or heroism, or the tragic loss of life due to inequality and class structures. By employing the genre of history painting, artists instantly elevate their subject matter. The story becomes important. In *The Scream* of 2016, Monkman dramatically depicts horrors of the residential school system, a practice whereby for over 100 years, Indigenous children were systematically taken from their parents and put into schools to be assimilated. Like Gericault, Monkman presents us with a chaotic scene in this painting, which heightens the terror of the scene, but his composition focuses on one dramatic moment of high tension: in the foreground, two Mounties in red uniforms grab the hair, the dress and the arm of a young woman who lunges forward her arms out, her mouth open in a scream, towards her child who is being carried away by a priest. Similar struggles take place behind her. As in Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, the bodies in this painting are in various states of life and death and we are viewing trauma. Some critics felt that Gericault's painting went too far, not just in its critique of the recently reinstated monarchy and the king, but in also in the way it dramatized a real event and depicted it in all its traumatic detail. I think we need to pause for a moment here and ask: who is this painting for? Who is Monkman's audience? The painting seems instructive, made to show and convince a white audience of something First nations, Inuit and Métis people know from experience: that residential schools were a form of terror.

Writing in *C-Magazine*, David Garneau tells the story of a Cree artist and a Métis curator standing before Monkman's painting. The artist asks the curator what he think and the curator says, "Kent Monkman is the Norman Rockwell of Native trauma!" Garneau unpacks that statement through his article. I can't do the article justice here. You should read it. But I'll read a few sentences:

"The jarring juxtaposition of Rockwell and Monkman offers intuitive shape to what our Métis curator perceives is a shared (Indigenous) discomfort with some Shame and Prejudice paintings (the series of which *The Scream* is part). The comparison is, initially, uneven. Rockwell is criticized for sentimentality, for icing over his turbulent times with utopic confections of small-town life. While Rockwell sought refuge in an expurgated America, Monkman, hijacks this aesthetic to recover and display some of what that conservative imaginary edited out. The curator's intuition, however, is that the style itself undermines the content, rendering Native trauma a spectacle for white consumption." And, later in the articles Garneau states: "The Scream's wholeness, brightness and staginess feel awkward, intrusive and superficial. Our Métis curator wonders who and what the painting is meant to satisfy".

These are very provocative ideas and well worth considering.

One thing I always tell my students is that when we look at images that depict trauma, we have to be aware of the implications of looking, of our potential voyeurism, and, again, we need to be aware of our subject positions, of who we are, and where we look from. As a white woman, when I look at *The Scream*, I might be detached whether I know it or not, because I don't have the embodied experience of this trauma. Whoever we are, whatever our cultural, racial, gendered background, we can think critically about what we see and what we might not fully understand.

Garneau's suggests that we compare Monkman's *The Scream* to the work of Robert Houle or Alex Janvier, other Indigenous artists whose work addresses the experience of the residential schools in Canada. In his series of drawings, *The Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, completed in 2009, Salteaux artist Robert Houle shows us what happened to him in an oblique manner. The small-scale drawings are moving, yet not dramatic. We don't see what happened to him; events are suggested. The drawings have an unfinished quality. One, entitled *Drive-in Predator*, is a wash of blue with a white screen in the distance. *Night Predator* depicts the black outline of a bed in the foreground with a red door in the background. A black circle, a head, peeks up from behind the bed. It is difficult to know whether this is the predator or the child. The language of these paintings is fragmented, cryptic and unclear. Houle's experience is not representable. In interview with writer and curator Shirley Madill, Houle states that "My residential school drawings are about what happened to me without the language of judgement and forgiveness." The artist's experience is not fully accessible to us. Unlike genre of history painting, a narrative genre that tells a clear story, a fully visible dramatic story, Houle creates something that is more personal and less spectacle, something more nuanced and less didactic. Its motives aren't overtly political, but instead are more artistic in the sense that art is an expression of an artist's experience.

That's it for this episode. I hope I've given you something to think about. Next week is reading week at Brock University and I will be... well...reading! There will be no episode on October 14, but you will hear from me again on the 21st. 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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(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end).