

Unboxing the Canon—Episode 7—"Musing on Museums"
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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)

If you've been listening to this podcast from the beginning, you might've noticed that I like art museums. Here we are living in strange times, COVID times, when travel isn't possible, and physical distancing makes museum trips difficult even if you happen to live in a city that has one. I miss museums. So, I think I've been reminiscing in these podcasts, and why not? Those grand halls for art are marvellous and magnificent. Take the Louvre, for example: it typically displays around 35,000 objects in more than 60,000 square metres of space. More people visit the Louvre than any museum in the world. Its collection covers the ancient world, Islamic art, and European art. And then there is the building. It was built in the 1200s as a fort and converted to a palace in the 17th century for Henri II. Kings lived there until Louis XIV built Versailles. It began to show the Royal collection of art to the public in 1793 in accordance with one of the decrees of the French Revolution. In the 19th Napoleon enriched the collection with his spoil of war and named the museum after himself. So, you can see, both the building and its collection of art have connections to power.

In this episode of "Unboxing the Canon" called "Musing on Museums," we take a look at the history of the modern museum and consider what stories museums tell and how. We turn towards contemporary artist Fred Wilson and others to understand the hidden histories of collecting and collections.

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

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)

Museums are places to house and display collections. Collecting has its roots in aristocracy and wealth. Wealthy 17th century collectors displayed their objects in *wunderkammern*, specially outfitted cabinets of wonder. Some of the

wealthiest had entire rooms dedicated to their collections. These collections were private and only guests could see them.

We might consider how these kinds of collections are connected to Western imperialism and colonization, for many of the objects came via trade or travel to faraway places. Objects such as shells, pottery, horns, all manner of natural and human-made objects were put on display to teach guests about God's creation. Yet they definitely reflected the power of the collector and functioned symbolically; through these collections, the world was at the feet of Europeans. You might remember that nautilus shell cups were all the rage for wealthy elites during the Dutch Golden Age era. They were rare, wonderful (they were no shells like that on North Sea beaches) and they were a luxury. So, we can make connections here between the consumption of luxury goods and the developing of collecting that would later partially form modern museums.

Modern museums began in the 18th and especially 19th century and they are nationalist institutions. Their aims are to share knowledge, but they are also implicated in constructing national identity. One of the first modern museums and the first public museum, was the British Museum, which opened in the 1750s.

(Playing: a man singing a chorus from "God Save the King")

(Singing fades to an end)

The British Museum's website claims: "It was the first national museum to cover all fields of human knowledge, open to visitors from across the world. Enlightenment ideals and values – critical scrutiny of all assumptions, open debate, scientific research, progress and tolerance – have marked the Museum since its foundation. The Museum is driven by an insatiable curiosity for the world, a deep belief in objects as reliable witnesses and documents of human history, sound research, as well as the desire to expand and share knowledge."

Like the Louvre, we might wonder where the collection originated. Certainly, wealthy patrons donated or bequeathed their collections, and then there were excavations and collections amassed by colonizers. Both the Louvre and the British Museum possess Egyptian antiquities, some of it gathered during British colonial rule, or during Napoleonic invasions. So, when we think of museum collections, we can consider their relationship to power, past and present. It's not just the collections we should think about either, but the manner of organizing those collections, and the ways in which they are displayed. Museum curators tell stories about histories that make those histories seem naturalized - we internalize them. But whose histories are they? Well, often they are the histories of those who first started the collections: those of the dominant class, rulers, those with power, and those who frame the world in their own image.

Art museums standardized art history and divided art into nations, periods, styles, and movements on a timeline indicating progress. This organization is linear and teleological, meaning that it is a narrative formed with an end in mind – the story is one of the progressive succession of styles. This kind of narrative focuses on Western art along a chronology where each movement or style is better than the last. Painting and sculpture are privileged. Arts from continents other than North America and Europe are relegated to the sidelines in art museums, or don't make it into art museums at all. They are found in anthropological and ethnographic museums.

What to do about these powerful institutions? How to change them? Enter the artists!

(Playing: First 10 seconds of leaf wings with no vocals)

(Music fades to an end)

Artists have given us about 50 years of critical analyses of museums. We can call this form of art “institutional critique.” Conceptual artists such as Hans Haacke create projects that unveil the sometimes-nefarious relationships between donors, corporations, fundraising, museum boards, trustees, and museums. In one project, Haacke traced the provenance of a work of art held by a museum in Cologne. He documented Eduard Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus* and revealed its donor as a Nazi. The museum neglected to share his work. Artist interventions in museums are important for they can reveal embedded histories, show us what we assume, deconstruct how museums tell stories, and provide alternatives.

In a ground-breaking exhibition in 1992, called “Mining the Museum” African American artist Fred Wilson created an installation using the collection of the Maryland Historical Society Museum in Baltimore. By “mining” the collection, and by exhibiting parts of it in interesting ways, Wilson showed viewers a different history than the one it usually portrayed. As curator Lisa G. Corrin explains Wilson “...would explore not what objects mean but how meaning is made when they are “framed” by the museum environment and museum practices.”

One of the ways Wilson achieved this was through juxtaposition, a technique used by other artists throughout history including the French Surrealists.

Juxtaposing objects that might not normally be seen together can shock us or provoke us into seeing differently. For instance, in a section called “Metalwork” Wilson juxtaposed iron shackles worn by slaves with Baltimore repoussé silverware, a decorative form of silverware. Baltimore was renowned for having the best silversmiths that created these luxury items for the upper class. By juxtaposing the silver objects with the iron shackles, instead of admiring the work of the silversmiths and marveling at historical patterns, viewers were able

to make the connections between wealth and slavery. Two kinds of metal work, both made in Maryland.

In another segment of the exhibition, Wilson presented an Ernst Fischer painting with alternate titles. The painting depicts a group of white people sitting outdoors in the countryside. The light falls on a white man sitting in his chair with a dog at his feet. In the shadows at the left side of the painting, a Black boy prepares food. Wilson wrote two labels for this painting. One says, "Country Life" and the other titles the painting "Frederick Serving Fruit." The two titles remind us that his painting will have different meanings depending on who we are. The artist identifies with the child serving fruit, the Black boy who, much like the figure in Franz Hals' painting that Titus Kaphar amended and that we covered in a previous episode, is rendered almost invisible. Wilson makes him visible along with the legacy of inequality in the state of Maryland. Wilson added a voiceover to a similar painting.

I'm reading here from a Washington Post review of the exhibition: "But with multimedia techniques, Wilson retrieves these servants from the shadows by literally shifting the spotlight from the central figure -- as in the portrait of the boy Henry Darnall III -- to his unnamed boy-servant, who stands behind him holding a dead fowl the young Darnall presumably has just bagged. Using an audio loop, Wilson then goes a step further in bringing these slave children to life with a series of questions, delivered poignantly in a child's voice: "Where is my mother? Where did I come from? Who combs my hair? Who calms me when I'm afraid?"

Audiences responded favourably to Wilson's installation exclaiming that for once the museum told their story, or that the exhibition made them think about how the truth that is constructed in these institutions is not the only truth. It is a white perspective. Yet even when their work isn't overtly political, artists can help us to see collections in new ways.

About 20 years ago I saw an exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum called "The Final Sleep." It kind of blew my mind. The artist was Spring Hurlbut and she created the exhibition out of 400 objects from the museum's collection of millions of objects. Everything in the exhibition as white, and objects were classified and arranged according to the artist's logic, not scientific logic or museum logic. She took many skeletons and taxidermied animals from the natural history branch of the museum and arranged them in rows. They were not installed in dioramas, which is the usual way we encounter animal bodies in museums. And the objects weren't arranged according to a presupposed hierarchy. They were arranged according to the artist's aesthetic vision.

This is what Hurlbut said in an interview with Bill Clarke in *Canadian Art*: "Museum presentations of natural history in the Americas tend to rely on illusion, trying to animate the departed. The installation moved away from the

idea of the museum as illusion of life towards the idea of the museum as a cultural mausoleum. My interpretation of the ROM collection was to exhibit a monochromatic museum within a museum that constituted a final resting place for specimens and artifacts that had achieved immortality in their conservation and classification. There was no chronology, hierarchy or illusion of life in *The Final Sleep*. All things were equal in repose.”

Like Wilson, Hurlbut disrupted the stories the museum tells. She also revealed the ways in which objects in museums have value. As an artist, she uses the museum collection as her material to create a meditation on death. Rather than use the museum’s collection to reveal how race is constructed through collecting institutions, James Luna, an artist of Payómkawichum, Ipai and Mexican American heritage, put his own body on display. In *The Artifact Piece*, 1987-1990, Luna, wearing only a loincloth, lay in a display case so visitors could view and inspect his body. As Indigenous art historian Richard Hill remarks: “He lay unmoving for hours in a museum display case. Personal artifacts were placed on display in vitrines nearby. These included everything from his Motown record collection to his divorce papers.”

Labels on the display pointed out his scars, described the objects connected to him, mimicking the way Indigenous people and cultures are portrayed in ethnographic or anthropological museums. By asking people to examine his body, Luna reveals the ways that Indigenous cultures and bodies are made subject to European classifying systems. This performance took place in the “Kumeyaay Indians” display room at the San Diego Museum of Man.

Hill notes that: “*Artifact Piece* addressed so many of the key themes that Indigenous artists of Luna’s generation grappled with, including the problems of representation in popular culture and museums and how these systems of representation foreclosed contemporary Indigenous agency. *Artifact Piece* showed all too clearly how what the critic Jean Fisher described as “the necrophilous codes of the museum” makes corpses out of living Indigenous bodies and cultures.” It was a significant piece of performance art.

Contemporary museums are engaging more and more with artists, which perhaps helps to widen the scope of their vision. This is just one way that we might rethink the histories of collections and collecting from other points of view.

That’s it for this episode. Thank you for joining me!

See you next time!

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

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.

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