

Unboxing the Canon—Episode 8—"Appropriation and Copying"
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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)

I'm thinking about Cree artist Kent Monkman's diptych at the Met Museum again. So many of the poses he uses for his figures were taken from European paintings from the 16th through 19th centuries. Monkman borrows from Titian, Corbet, Leutze and other to compose *Mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)*. In doing that he shows both his connection to the history of European painting – he uses its methodology – and his break from it – he refigures negative Indigenous stereotypes from Delacroix and others to present a different point of view about the story of First Contact.

In this episode I take a look at the ways in which artists refer to the work of their predecessors through copying and appropriation.

Copying works of art is not new. Indeed, it has been a method of art instruction practiced in art schools since they first opened. Students in the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture) began by copying drawings and prints. They also learned from plaster casts of Graeco-Roman sculpture. Even if students went to see Classical sculpture in Rome, they would often be looking at Roman copies of Greek sculpture.

We can think of the history of Western art as a conversation between works of art, past and present. Roman sculptors re-created Greek sculpture. Modern paintings, such as Manet's controversial *Olympia* that showed in the 1865 Paris Salon, have re-purposed Renaissance paintings. In this case, Manet replaced the figures in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, painted in 1534, with the figures of a white sex worker and a recently emancipated Black domestic worker. This is a painting I will cover in a future episode because there is much to say. For our purposes in this episode, let's say Manet's painting refers to Titian's earlier work. It makes a reference that Salon-goers recognized (and didn't like!).

In addition to making clear reference to previous works, artists also use visual tropes - that is to say a visual sign that can be immediately understood, or a conventional representation in a system of representation, such as painting. For, instance, the reclining female nude is one such visual trope. She represents sexual availability, passivity, and refers to odalisque paintings from the early 19th century. Odalisque paintings are based on xenophobic, racialized and inaccurate stereotypes about the so-called exotic orient, i.e., the Ottoman Empire, that imagined harems from the point of view of a white Western male fantasy. All of this is contained in a pose. When artists use such a pose they are interacting with this visual trope.

So, we've thought about copying, reference, visual tropes...what about appropriation? The word appropriation has a few meanings. In general, to appropriate is to take something for one's own use, whether that be property, funds. We can also think of cultural appropriation, where one culture, often the dominant culture, takes an important, often sacred, object or tradition from another culture without respecting those traditions: think party goers wearing First Nations head dresses to Coachella. In this episode I'm thinking specifically about appropriation in art.

Art appropriation certainly incorporates the notion of taking without permission, but it isn't necessarily an ignorant taking as we see in cultural appropriation. It is a taking with a specific end in mind: appropriation art takes a known work of art and uses it in a way that reveals something about the original but also creates a new work of art. Sometimes the differences between the original and the new work of art are theoretical, yet not visible. As a form of cultural critique, appropriation can reveal sublimated meanings in a work of art, political meanings, or socio-cultural meanings. To reiterate, in this episode, appropriation means taking a work of art and re-making it in a way that reveals the original's meaning and simultaneously creates new meanings for the appropriation.

Take Marcel Duchamp's postcard of the Mona Lisa: in 1919 the French artist was working with what he called ready-mades, found objects that could be slightly amended or left as is to become works of art. He was also hanging out with members of the avant-garde art, theatre and literary movement called dada. Dada was irreverent and liked to play with words. Duchamp took one of the ubiquitous postcards of the Mona Lisa - even a hundred years ago, her image was mass produced - and altered it. He drew a moustache on her face, pasted the postcard to a piece of paper, and wrote the letters L H O O Q below her image. The letters mean nothing in English, but spoken quickly in French, they have slightly salacious meaning. LHOOQ. It is a bit of a joke. Because he takes a mass-produced postcard of a famous painting as his starting point, Duchamp's appropriation reveals art as a commodity; it also says something about the distinction between high art and low art, for example.

Appropriation also questions the ownership of cultural products such as art and literature. Who does the Mona Lisa belong to? It is owned by the Louvre, but the artist who painted it has been gone for several hundred years. Who has the right to make images of it? Or of Duchamp's appropriation of it? Where does their value lie?

The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is ahead of the game when it comes to shared cultural objects. They own, store, exhibit and maintain about a million objects, but anyone can have access to the high-resolution photographs of the works of art that are not under copyright. So, you can download one of Vermeer's paintings and do with it what you will. Maintaining a huge inventory of high-quality images is expensive, and the Rijksmuseum has a corporate sponsor to help with costs. The cultural sector in the Netherlands also enjoys significant funding.

But let's return to the notion of art appropriation as comment and critique. I'll turn now to some contemporary works of art that use appropriation to create new works of art.

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

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In *Une moderne Olympia*, from 2018, Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura appropriated Manet's *Olympia* and made it his own. He has recreated the painted scene for a photograph with a few important changes. In this photograph Morimura plays both *Olympia* and her servant, but in this case the servant is dressed as a hybrid figure. A 19th century bourgeois French man with a top hat and period appropriate facial hair wears a swath of pink silk and leans in to deliver a large bouquet of very bright flowers. Morimura's *Olympia* reclines in the same pose with the same direct stare, but instead lies on a red silk kimono, her head dress that of geisha, playing into Western stereotypes about Asian women, connecting fantasies about the figure of the geisha to fantasies about women in a harem. Morimura has re-made self-portraits, such as those by Durer, van Gogh, and Frida Kahlo, as well as many other well-known works of art from the canon, calling his work "wearable Western art." His works investigate cultural assumptions about gender, race, the East-West dichotomy, authorship and originality, and the male gaze.

African-American Kehinde Wiley is most well-known for his portrait paintings, especially the official portrait of Barack Obama that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. He has also investigated the trope of the equestrian portrait through his series entitled *Rumors of War. Officer of the Hussars, 2007*, which is held by the Detroit Institute of the Arts, depicts a young African American man on a rearing horse that appears to be running into the scene. He is dressed in 21st century clothing. Holding the reins in his left hand and a sabre in his

right, the figure twists his body to look down on us. Wiley explains that he finds his models through “street casting.” He walks the streets of New York with a camera crew looking for models. He then inserts them into traditional European paintings.

The Bulletin of the DIA describes the painting and Wiley’s process:

“Kehinde Wiley ...invites the person to his studio, where they page through art history books to select a classic portrait. The “model” recreates the pose, which Wiley photographs for reference. In such paintings as *Officer of the Hussars*, Wiley inserts young African Americans into a tradition that has previously excluded them. Sitting high on a leopard skin saddle and wielding a sabre, Wiley’s model mirrors the subject of Théodore Géricault’s *The Officer of the Hussars* [from] 1812.... His garments—an athletic t-shirt, low-riding jeans, and Timberland shoes—differ from those of the European cavalry officer but serve to project a parallel image of confident masculine power. Bringing visual codes into convergence, Wiley answers what he believes is the most important question in contemporary America: “Why do we continue to undervalue the lives of young black men?”

The pose is similar to Gericault, with one important difference: Gericault’s subject looks down, towards the bottom left corner of the composition. Wiley’s gaze addresses the viewer and challenges us to see him.

I’ll turn now to one last appropriation. American artist Kara Walker’s provocative work critiques the institution of slavery and investigates racial and sexual violence. Her recent ambitious work at the Tate Modern in London called *Fons Americanus* appropriates the Queen Victoria Memorial at Buckingham Palace. The Victoria memorial celebrates the themes of motherhood, justice and truth and is topped by the golden figure of Venus. In appropriating the memorial, Walker reveals the falsehoods implicit these themes and refocuses on the high price Africans have paid for England’s wealth. Walker takes the form of the fountain and creates something very different.

In a video about the work, Walker describes this work as “...a piece about oceans and seas traversed fatally. The *Fons Americanus* is an allegory of the Black Atlantic and really all global waters which disastrously connect Africa to America, Europe and economic prosperity.” Walker replaces the carved marble figures in Thomas Brock’s Victoria monument with caricatures and characters created from sustainable materials. There are multiple layers of appropriation in his work. For instance, Walker’s Venus re-thinks images such as Tom Stothard’s early 19th century *The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, which shows a Black Venus rising from the ocean with Triton, who is white and who holds a British flag. The Tate’s website claims that this “...image was used as a form of propaganda to promote the transatlantic slave

trade.” The author writes that “Walker reclaims the image of Venus. Her version stands majestically at the summit of the fountain and spouts water at the final point of the water’s journey becoming the Daughter of Waters. She is no longer the Venus we see in Stothard’s image, but rather is resurrected as a priestess of Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Caribbean religion who takes her rightful place as the final voice in the story.”

It is not possible to unpack the complexity of Walker’s *Fons Americanus* here, but I hope you are able to investigate it on your own. There is a great video tour and interview on the Tate Modern’s website.

By creating new meanings for existing works of art, appropriation keeps the history of art alive. It reveals new interpretations and shows that art history is dynamic, not static. Similar to the artists’ works in the museum – appropriation art is a way for artists to comment on cultural history and the history of art. It is one way to reckon with some of the issues of the canon of Western art.

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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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