Western Bias in Art

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Western Bias in Art

DAI - August 15, 2018

Sally A. Struthers, Ph.D.
My background

- B.A. Art History and Classics, Wright State University
- M.A. and Ph.D. The Ohio State University
- Italian Renaissance Art
- Classical Art
- Baroque Art
- Taught Western Survey of Art since 1983, Ohio State, UD, Sinclair
- 2013 Hired by Wright State University to teach Non-Western Art
“Docents in art museums usually teach people how to look at art, thus inadvertently mirroring the biases of the institutions in which they work. Often they sense that there is a mismatch between the content of their teaching and the interest of their audience, but they don’t know what to do about it. Understanding how our looking and teaching is informed by our ‘hidden Western bias’ may help resolve this tension.”

*The Docent Educator*
What is your favorite type of art?

- People usually collect art that reflects their values
- About 93% (Dr. Jerry Smith’s estimate) of the art in the DAI was donated
- “A report by the Mellon Foundation assessed gender and ethnic diversity among museum staff in the United States: 84 percent of the high-level and leadership positions were occupied by white staffers, while black employees held just 4 percent of them. In fact, a survey of ‘Diversity in the New York City Cultural Community,’ released last week found ‘curators’ to be ‘the whitest’ job category in the arts, with 79 percent identifying as white non-Hispanic”
- [https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/rewriting-art-history/435426/](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/rewriting-art-history/435426/)
“For many marginalized young people interested in art, museums still represent authority, whiteness and power – places where we do not belong.”

Christine Kim, LACMA
“Efforts to diversify the AP reflect a larger push in the art world to integrate artists who were formerly discounted or altogether ignored. Curators and educators told me it’s time to correct the way students—both on school campuses and at museums—learn art history. For decades, women and artists of color have been absent from history books and museum walls, likely giving students of all backgrounds the impression that seminal artwork is produced only by a certain type of artist, by certain accepted cultures.”

https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/rewriting-art-history/435426/
Subliminal Messages
Gainsborough, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, 1748

- What do you see?
- What is the message?
  - Privilege...Imperialism...Dominion
Kehinde Wiley; *The Honourable Augustus Keppel, Admiral of the Blue II*; 2006; oil on canvas

- Based on a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds
“Manifest Destiny”

— a self-supreme notion that any land coveted by Euro-Americans was, by providence, rightfully theirs for the taking
“I would want everybody to be thinking about truth and reconciliation. We have to say what happened, how it happened, why it happened and acknowledging the way that systems of privilege were established and maintained and still maintained, even today, as part of the process to heal those ancient and contemporary wounds and make things better for the next 500 years.”

Anton Treuer, Professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University
Author of Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask

https://www.npr.org/2012/10/08/162392326/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-indians
Globalization

Globalizing art history is “the most urgent task now facing art historians”

- David Carrier, professor at Case Western Reserve University.

“Far and away the most pressing problem facing the discipline is the prospect of world art history”

- James Elkins, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
World Religions

% of world population
- Folk religions 5.7%
- Buddhists 6.9%
- Hindus 15.1%
- Muslims 24.1%
- Unaffiliated 16%
- Christians 31.2%
- Other religions 0.8%
- Jews 0.2%

Number of people in 2015, in billions
- Christians 2.3B
- Muslims 1.8
- Unaffiliated 1.2
- Hindus 1.1
- Buddhists 0.5
- Folk religions 0.4
- Other religions 0.1
- Jews 0.01

Source: Pew Research Center demographic projections. See Methodology for details.
“The Changing Global Religious Landscape”
PEW RESEARCH CENTER
The Field of Art History

- 16th century - Vasari - biographies
- 18th century - Wickelmann - *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*
- Goethe
- Schiller
- Kant
- 20th century - Wolfflin
- 20th century - H.W. Janson
Linda Nochlin

“Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”

ARTnews in January 1971
Greek Art as “classic”

211 APHRODITE PUDICA WITH EROS ASTRIDE A DOLPHIN
Greco-Roman 1968.112
“Primitivism”

- At the end of 19th century term was coined
- Referring to arts of Africa, Pacific & Native America
- “Prime”
- Started as a positive term, then became negative...with undertones of colonialism & racism....
- Even terms “ethnic” and “native” are controversial

The Search for God in Primitive Art
Yoruba, *Head of an Oni*, 11th - 12th century

- “character is beauty”
218 Helmet Mask for the Sande Association
Mende people 1987.216
Coatlicue, Tenochtitlan, Aztec, c. 1487 - 1520, 11’4’’
Coatlicue vs 218 The Immaculate Conception, Bartolomé Estéban Murillo 2003.5, Virgin Mary on Banner of Cortes, 16th century
Orientalism

Orientalism
ˌôrēˈent(ə)lizəm/
noun
noun: orientalism
1. style, artefacts, or traits considered characteristic of the peoples and cultures of Asia.
2. the representation of Asia, especially the Middle East, in a stereotyped way that is regarded as embodying a colonialist attitude
Orientalism 212 DANCE OF THE ALMEH
Jean-Léon Gérôme 1951.15

- Timeless
- Out of step with Western Civilization
- Women as sex objects
- Men as weak, feminine
The Pacific
Paul Gauguin, French, Mahana no atua, 1892
Aboriginals 3.3% of population (2016 Census)
Arrived in Australia 40,000 BCE
Art reflects ancient traditions
Hunting & gathering society
Earliest rock art 40,000 BCE
Polynesia
making of bark cloth a sacred activity for women
Highest ranking women direct
Use woodcarving rubbings
Commodities in Tonga & Samoa
Given & exchanged for
   rites of passage
   political alliances
Each woman has own designs
Gives her power
“Fine Art” vs “Craft”
Coronation of Queen Salote, 1918
Figure 9: Tupoutoʻa Tungī and Tuʻi Pelehake wear *fakalala*, ceremonial clothing associated with the Tuʻi Tonga line; Mataʻaho and Melenaite wear *kie hingoa*. Tuʻuvala ceremony of the double wedding, 1947. Photo after Bain 1955.
Queen Salote ruled 1918-65
Queen Salote of Tonga, 1953
This ngatu launima was associated with two queens. Made in 1953 to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II’s visit to Tonga, it was later placed under Queen Salote’s coffin when her body was flown back from New Zealand in 1965. The tapa was given to the pilot of the plane, Flight Lieutenant McAllister, and he in turn presented it to the Dominion Museum (Te Papa’s predecessor) in 1968.
Figure 13: Princess Pilolevu and Maʻulupekotofa wear *kie hingoa* at the *tuʻuvala* ceremony of their wedding in 1976. Photo Rainbow Studio.
In 2012 NZ artist Dame Robin White worked with Tongan-NZ artist Ruha Fifita to create two huge works on tapa speaking to the trade of goods and ideas between Tonga and New Zealand.
Wogumas People, Papua New Guinea, Melanesian
*Slit Drum*
April River Area, Upper Sepik River
2008.5
Water Spirit Mask, Melanesian, 1975.49

This mask, representing a water spirit, would typically be paraded as part of a pair. Such masks may have been used in an event which is part of a cycle of yam planting ceremonies. They are composed of sheets of bark, each painted with a human face, and a wooden crest in the form of a hornbill’s head. The hornbill is a common animal used in Melanesian art, although its exact meaning here is not certain.
Double-Faced Headdress Mask for Nalawan Ritual, Vanuatuan (Melanesian) 1944.34

This mask comes from one of the Pacific islands that are located more than a thousand miles east of Australia. On these remote islands, people survived both by hunting and by gathering food from trees and plants. Pacific Islanders communicated with the spirit world and its forces in rituals that involved dance, music and costumes. This mask, called a Janus mask, was made for such a ritual. Any mask with two faces is called a Janus mask, after an ancient god who had two faces. It is made from feathers, clay, vegetable fiber, pigments and real teeth. Masks were worn by men during ceremonies where women sang and played rhythms by beating the ground with bamboo. The two faces on the mask suggest opposite forces: good and evil, man and woman, night and day and, ultimately, life and death.
Native Americans

- Spanish Explorers - “Indians”
- “Tribes and bands” should be clan or lineage
- Reservations (were not reserved...)
- Romantic fantasies - “Noble Savages,” “Braves,” “Princesses”
- Romantic or inferior “others”
The Fantasy...Girodet, *The Burial of Atala*, 1808
The Disney View
210 CHIEF MASSASOIT
Cyrus Edwin Dallin 1997.8
“Fraser intended the work as a pointed commentary on the damaging effects of Euro-American settlement on American Indian nations confined on government reservations. Seated upon a windblown horse, Fraser's figure slumps over despondently, embodying the physical exhaustion and suffering of a people forcefully driven to the end of the trail.”
Native American’s thoughts on *End of the Trail*

- **Jeffrey Gibson** (Choctaw-Cherokee): “I remember visiting the Cherokee gift shop as a kid, where there were small novelty versions of the sculpture for sale. At the time, I saw it as an image of a shamed, defeated Indian. It always made me feel badly about myself, and I wondered if this was this really how the rest of the world viewed us, as failures. It seemed to be an image about defeat and despair.”
Jeffrey Gibson: “Over the years, I went to powwows with my family, where I saw *End of the Trail* screen-printed on flags that were used in ceremonies honoring veterans and prisoners of war. There was a comparison being made between the veteran and the warrior, and this brought up conflicting feelings and emotions in me. As I was growing up, I would talk to people about the image, yet no one seemed to know where it originated. It was a symbol that had lost its point of origin, but one that had been completely reinvented in a Native context. This left a strong impression on me, and I found it amazing that this image could embody new meaning under different circumstances.”
Jeffrey Gibson: “Looking at the work now, I can accept why it has become such a popular, iconic sculpture. I have come to see it as a symbol of resilience and strength—characteristics traditionally associated with the warrior. I no longer see this as the end or as defeat. Instead, I see a warrior who is taking a break before getting back up again. There is a degree of lament, but there is also a strong sense of honor and determination.”

Mt. Rushmore

“The area was named Sioux territory by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, and for Native American protesters—particularly active in the 1970s—Mount Rushmore is a painful reminder of broken treaties and a history of mistreatment. This sentiment is only worsened by the men represented on the monument.”
What to do?

- Realize that bias is inherent
- Consider your audience
- Consider different viewpoints
- Do not make assumptions
- Be open to world art
- Do not “judge” art
- Use careful language (avoid words like “primitive,” “oriental,” “fine art”)
- Embrace diversity!
Sources

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