

The Paintbrush is Mightier than the Sword:

How Kent Monkman is Changing the Art World for the Better

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In recent years, there has been an ever-intensifying movement to consider the histories, and narratives that America was built on and currently perpetuates. This movement often centers on recorded and verbal histories, and how these have ushered in oppressive colonial institutions and ideas. Within the Art world, a similar movement is taking place. Seventy-five percent of all artists displayed in major US encyclopedic Art museums are white men.¹ Beyond its staggering lack of representation, the Art canon and Art museums have contributed many visuals that have been paired with colonialist, and white supremacist histories. Additionally, they've discounted the value of utilitarian, and non-academic art. Luckily, this is slowly changing because of artists like Kent Monkman. Monkman's success in the Art world and his recognition and inclusion in encyclopedic Art museums, like The Metropolitan Museum of Art, indicate this inclusive shift occurring within the Art canon. Monkman's socio-political art style is an important contribution to the reconstruction of the Art canon. Additionally, his ability to work with museums and canonical Artworks that have been linked to the oppression of non-White Americans and indigenous peoples makes his work more accessible and powerful. Due to all of this, it is easy to assert that Monkman is one of the most impactful contemporary Artists contributing to the Art world during the current transitional period.

Kent Monkman is a Canadian Cree artist who creates interdisciplinary sociopolitical visual Art.² Monkman's work often focalizes on, "themes of colonization, sexuality, loss, and resilience,"³ exploring the nuanced realities of "historic and contemporary indigenous

¹ Chalabi, M. (2019, May 21). Museum art collections are very male and very white. Retrieved December 4, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2019/may/21/museum-art-collections-study-very-male-very-white>

² "Biography." Accessed December 4, 2022. <https://www.kentmonkman.com/biography>.

³ "Biography." Accessed December 4, 2022. <https://www.kentmonkman.com/biography>.

experiences.”⁴ Also central to his works is his artistic persona Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. Miss Chief can often be found rocking high heels in many of Monkman’s works. Monkman’s inspiration to incorporate Miss Chief came from George Catlin’s painting, “Dance to the Berdash,”⁵ and his comments on this event.⁶ The image depicts a ceremonial dance meant to celebrate the “Berdash,” or two-spirit person. The concept of the two-spirit is used within a variety of Indigenous communities and is encompassing “cultural, spiritual, sexual and gender identity.”⁷ Catlin’s painting is a part of the American Art history canon and was considered an important image of indigenous people when it was painted in the 19th century. Unfortunately, this painting was paired with many racist and disparaging remarks, about indigenous people and their traditions, from Catlin, and was used to dehumanize the indigenous experience. From this colonial misunderstanding and aggression, Miss Chief was born. She embraces “gender and sexuality, honoring the tradition of the two-spirit in Indigenous societies as a response to Europeans who did not understand sexual fluidity.”⁸ She is further significant to Monkman’s subversion and challenging of the histories that have been depicted in the Art history canon because she “reverses the gaze of colonizers by proposing an equally false history, one full of

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Catlin, George, *Dance to the Berdash*, 1835-1837, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/dance-berdash-4023>

⁶ Madill, Shirley, “Introducing Miss Chief Eagle Testickle” in *Revision and Resistance: mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2020. 20.

⁷ “Two-Spirit.” Provincial Health Services Authority, 2022. <http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/gender-basics-education/terms-concepts/two-spirit>.

⁸ Madill, Shirley, “Introducing Miss Chief Eagle Testickle” in *Revision and Resistance: mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2020. 20.

assumption, mischaracterization, and fetishization.”⁹ Miss Chief infuses a level of humor into Monkman’s works and allows for continuity throughout many of his paintings, and performance Artworks. Through his paintings of Miss Chief and other scenes, Monkman’s artwork forces viewers to question colonial histories and the images that the Art history canon has contributed to these incomplete, oppressive narratives.

Monkman’s works are incredibly entwined with the Art history canon, so to better understand his works, and significance as an Artist, it’s important to know about this canon. Canonization occurs in many different realms of culture, like literature, film, and art, and is the process, “in which specific aspects of culture are established as crucial, of the utmost importance or exemplary.”¹⁰ Art museums and bequests have played a significant role in the creation and upholding of the Art history canon. Merely because a work doesn’t fall into the Art history canon it doesn’t mean it’s bad Art. Many canonical works have been canonized due to happenstance. For example, if you visit the Louvre in Paris, you will likely have to wait in line if you want to get a close-up view of the “Mona Lisa.”¹¹ This painting is arguably one of the most important paintings in the world. The line always in front of it, as well as its \$952 million price tag, making it the most expensive painting in the world,¹² is evidence of its cultural significance. But why does our society value it so much? Interestingly enough, the “Mona Lisa”¹³ wasn’t regarded as a

⁹ Madill, 23.

¹⁰ Langfeld, G.. “The Canon in Art History: Concepts and Approaches.” *The Journal of Art Historiography* 19 (2018): 1.

¹¹ da Vinci, Leonardo. Mona Lisa. 1503-1505. Louvre, Paris. <https://focus.louvre.fr/en/mona-lisa>

¹² Artsapient, Team. “Most Expensive Paintings in the World with Price (2022).” Artsapient, July 3, 2022. <https://artsapient.com/2022/07/most-expensive-paintings-in-the-world/>.

¹³ da Vinci, Leonardo. Mona Lisa. 1503-1505. Louvre, Paris. <https://focus.louvre.fr/en/mona-lisa>

particularly significant painting within the Art world until the 19th century, and amongst the general public until the 20th century when it was stolen.¹⁴ This painting, which is now one of the most important pieces of Art, spent more centuries relatively unimportant to culture than it's spent being a hugely culturally significant work. This is the reality of the Art history canon. It is not an objective seal of quality, but rather a body of works that have been deemed significant for a variety of reasons, some more random than others.

Additionally, it's important to note that like many other fields and aspects of culture, the Art history canon has almost exclusively boosted the creations of White men. Indigenous American artists have been notably left out of the American Art history canon and instead predominantly White, European Artists have been upheld within this area. The Art history canon, like all aspects of culture, was used during the colonization of North America, and indigenous peoples. European Art and Artists were, and still are, upheld within the Art canon as being civilized, “high Art” while indigenous Art was deemed as inferior, primitive, and “low art.”¹⁵ This history and reality are a critical component of why Monkman's Artworks are so important to the reconstruction of the Art history canon.

Monkman's paintings in particular serve as incredibly powerful critiques of the Art history canon. Fine Art paintings typically fall into one of five categories. The first, and most important is the history painting which depicts religious, historical, or allegorical figures or

¹⁴Artsapien, Team. “Most Expensive Paintings in the World with Price (2022).” Artsapien, July 3, 2022. <https://artsapien.com/2022/07/most-expensive-paintings-in-the-world/>.

¹⁵ Plescher, Matt. “High and Low Art: The Rapidian.” The Rapidian | therapidian.org, October 3, 2013. <https://www.therapidian.org/high-and-low-art#:~:text=High%20art%20is%20appreciated%20by,masses%2C%20accessible%20and%20easily%20comprehended.>

events. These paintings are typically made on massive canvases to emphasize the importance of the figure they depict. Other categories include portraiture (which refers to paintings of individuals or groups, and also includes self-portraits), genre painting (which is made up of paintings of everyday people doing everyday things and other everyday scenes), and finally, landscape, or still life paintings.¹⁶ Many of Monkman's paintings are made on the scale of a history painting. This is a very intentional, and very impactful choice. As a fan of Art history and many of the old masters of European Art history, Monkman knows the impact of standing in front of one of the paintings. He uses the "authority that comes through the scale"¹⁷ to insert indigenous experiences through this particular category of painting because "it is such a powerful medium."¹⁸

In addition to scale, Monkman uses a variety of Canonical tools, like format, style, and works, to subvert the Canon. In his paintings specifically, he does so by using traditional academic style compositions, gestures, and mediums. Another reason Monkman's work is paradigm-shifting to the Art history canon is because it is accessible. On every level his work, from theme to form he takes classical Western art history that viewers (regardless of artistic knowledge or interest) are familiar with and communicates "a worldview that is radically

¹⁶ "The 5 Painting Genres Traditional Classification of Paintings." Painting Genres: Classification of Paintings. Accessed December 4, 2022. <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting-genres.htm>.

¹⁷ Kent Monkman, interview by The Art Newspaper, Kent Monkman: the trickster poking fun at the art historical canon, The Art Newspaper, October 7, 2022. Access: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/10/07/kent-monkman-the-trickster-poking-fun-at-the-art-historical-canon>

¹⁸ Kent Monkman, interview by The Art Newspaper, Kent Monkman: the trickster poking fun at the art historical canon, The Art Newspaper, October 7, 2022. Access: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/10/07/kent-monkman-the-trickster-poking-fun-at-the-art-historical-canon>

different to the original that [he's] drawing inspiration from."¹⁹

History paintings within the American Art history canon have embedded false narratives and cultural hierarchies into the settler consciousness. They have been instrumental in the disenfranchising of and violence towards indigenous people. These images have been created by, and/or “reinvented by history painters,”²⁰ and are just as false as the histories they represent. Kent Monkman’s *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)*, a diptych commissioned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, functions to provide an opposition to these stereotypical, idealistic images, and the histories they coincide with.²¹ The two works that make up the exhibit, “Resurgence of the People”²² and “Welcoming the Newcomers”²³ both have extensive references to canonical works from Art history, most notably in “Resurgence of the People.”²⁴

When you think of George Washington what images of him come to mind? If any of these images involve a wintery side-view of Washington standing in a boat on a river staring, intensely ahead while an American flag billows behind him then you have likely seen Emanuel

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Philips, Ruth B. and Mark Salber Phillips, “Welcoming the Newcomers: Decolonizing History Painting, Revising History” in *Revision and Resistance: mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2020. 71.

²¹ Phillips, “Welcoming the Newcomers: Decolonizing History Painting, Revising History,” 69-76.

²² Monkman, Kent, *Resurgence of the People*, 2019, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/830025>

²³ Monkman, Kent, *Welcoming the Newcomers*, 2019, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/830024>

²⁴ Monkman, Kent, *Resurgence of the People*, 2019, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/830025>

Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware."²⁵ This painting is one of the most significant American history paintings, so Monkman's decision to appropriate this image is incredibly important. "Resurgence of the People"²⁶ incorporates many compositional elements of Leutze's classic. Miss Chief holds Washington's place in the image, and the entire painting critiques the superficial patriotism and ideals that "Washington Crossing the Delaware"²⁷ is meant to represent.²⁸ The colonialism that established America has been upheld through many political, economic, and educational systems. These systems have been embedded into culture through false histories and a lack of cultural representation of indigenous peoples. Monkman's Met exhibit is not only a critique, and re-education of these narratives, but also an important piece of transitional Art within the reconstruction of the Art history canon.

Landscape paintings have also been used as a propaganda tool in the colonization of North America. Artists like Albert Bierstadt, "would paint these immense landscapes in the 1860s when the railroad was making westward movement possible".²⁹ These images painted a picture of the West as an empty continent and circulated throughout much of Europe, popularizing this idea, when in reality there were millions of indigenous people who occupied

²⁵ Leutze, Emanuel, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11417>

²⁶ Monkman, Kent, *Resurgence of the People*, 2019, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/830025>

²⁷ Leutze, Emanuel, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11417>

²⁸ Suda, Sasha, "A Practice of Recovery: *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)*" in *Revision and Resistance: mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2020. 96-99.

²⁹ Kent Monkman, interview by Stéphane Aquin, (*At Home*) *On Art and Resilience: Artist Talk with Kent Monkman*, The Smithsonian; Hirshhorn, May 15, 2020. Access: <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/at-home-on-art-and-resilience-artist-talk-with-kent-monkman/>

these lands.³⁰ Bierstadt's paintings, as well as other landscapes by groups like the Hudson River School, are important within the American Art history canon but are often considered less impactful than more overt colonial images. Monkman has explored this idea through his works like "History is Painted by the Victors"³¹ and "Trappers of Men"³² which appropriate landscape paintings by artists like Bierstadt. His works place indigenous peoples back into the land they were erased from in many of the canonical American landscapes. Monkman is an expert at taking canonical paintings that most viewers are familiar with already and re-introducing the visual components of colonialism that often go uncriticized.

Recently, the objective realities of history are being called into question. The biases that have made up shared cultural ideas are being exposed, and with this comes a call for progress in many fields. The Art world is no different. After hundreds of years of exclusion, the Art canon and the encyclopedic Art museums that uphold it are becoming open to a more diverse range of Artists. This is paired with the active reconstruction of the Art history canon. Kent Monkman is an incredibly powerful force within this reconstruction. Colonialism and its impacts on indigenous American populations can't simply be solved by Art, but shifting culture is an important step toward addressing contemporary colonialism. Monkman's works force viewers to consider the untrue images and histories that have led to the genocide and discrimination of Indigenous peoples. Beyond being an incredibly talented Artist, Monkman is an impactful one.

³⁰ Kent Monkman, interview by Stéphane Aquin, *(At Home) On Art and Resilience: Artist Talk with Kent Monkman*, The Smithsonian; Hirshhorn, May 15, 2020. Access: <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/at-home-on-art-and-resilience-artist-talk-with-kent-monkman/>

³¹ Monkman, Kent, *History is Painted by the Victors*, 2013, Denver Art Museum, Colorado, <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/object/2016.288>.

³² Monkman, Kent, *Trappers of Men*, 2006, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/works/43822/>.

As the Art canon and museums continue to address the harm they've caused and move towards a more inclusive future, there will hopefully be more Artists who are able to re-paint history as masterfully as Monkman.

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