

[Colonialism. It's in our histories, in our schools, our art and our museums. It's in our speech and our attitudes, in our assumptions and our systems. It is so pervasive that it is accepted as truth. It will not be questioned if it is not noticed. But everywhere colonization has touched, there are stories. Stories of people who have been ignored, stories of histories unwritten, stories told by unoriginal authors that steal narratives and voices. So what happens when we find evidence of those stories in our own communities? When we learn those histories and hear those narratives? Why should we care? And what is there to do about it? My name is Megan Scarborough, and you're listening to Not a Foot of Land.]

[Megan]: It is Episode 3 of Not a Foot of Land, where last episode was basically a crash course in US History, but told in a different way than the one you perhaps were familiar with. I remember when I was starting my research months ago, I couldn't believe how much I had missed in my education about American History. The inspiration for this project actually came from reading some of Dr. Amy Lonetree's work, a professor from the University of California, discussing Native American representation in museums and museum curation. I was so struck by what she had to say about how indigenous culture is represented for a particular audience. I realized that I was that typical white person, who walks into a museum and breezes through the Native American gallery to get to Modern Art, or the Planetarium, or whatever it might be. And when I brought this up to my mom, after my truly mind-blowing introduction to Dr. Lonetree, she said I've been that way since I was a kid. I would be disinterested in American Indian exhibits, not because it was actually disinteresting, but because of the way it was always presented. They were just...boring. Being anthropologically influenced, they were extremely information heavy, and they talked about these people, and these traditions, that in my mind, weren't real. Or at least, not anymore. I've started to be more critical of this within the last several months and have noticed the discrepancies in presentation and the effect that has on the way we comprehend information. Just as a quick example, at the Met, in the Art of the Americas gallery, which is marked by a plaque talking about "Ancestral America" there are several works from the mid-20th century. Now are we supposed to conceptualize the Kwakwaka'wakw people producing art at the same time (and even after!) Van Gogh if one is grouped and categorized as "Ancestral" and the other is "Modern"??? That's a question I don't have the answer to. So, now that our American History knowledge is ripe and decolonized, it's time to focus on my favorite subject: art.

[Megan]: So since representation in art and museums is an issue that affects most, if not all, marginalized groups, our conversation will broaden a bit this episode beyond that of the American Indian, which is what we've talked about the most this series. But we'll start by talking about the relationship between art and museums with this demographic. As I said a minute ago, the way Native Americans are depicted in the museum, whether it be natural history museums or art museums, is pretty consistent. They're all pretty information heavy. There's a lot of text required for people to read, that I think is more than other galleries. Most people visit these galleries to read about the artifact, rather than admire it, the way they might with Western Painting. And I mean, providing information is fine, it's great, people should be encouraged to learn about other cultures and museums are a wonderful way to do that. But when we think about the connotation this presentation comes with, that their culture is something to study rather than something people actively participate in, our perception of it is misguided and our understanding remains shallow. We see them as passive, not active, and archetypal instead of diverse. I mentioned Dr. Lonetree and her book, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, where she discusses three places that exhibit Native American Art and examines their ability to (pause) represent history accurately and honestly (which involves recognizing colonization), communicate culture respectfully, involving contemporary traditions and experiences, and the effect the exhibitions have on shaping public understanding. One of the museums she looks at is the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. In Chapter 2, she documents her changing impression of the museum over the years as they adapted practices in an effort to achieve better public understanding and perception of Native Americans. She talks about several exhibitions and their motives, their successes and failures and how change was achieved. Something she mentions in the book and something I've seen in my own research of the museum is the increasing awareness for Native representation in *decision making*. There's a common slogan among many civil rights movements that says "Nothing about us without us" which, for you history nerds, is the cool kids' intersectional adaptation of "no taxation without representation" basically saying anywhere there are decisions being made that have to do with a particular group's experience, people from that group *must* be involved. So, to accurately represent "The American Indian" as a demographic, The National Museum calls on the help of the people who can best represent that. Their website reads: "the museum's curators, researchers, and scholars engage in dialogues with and solicit the contributions of both respected Native community cultural authorities and

academic specialists.”I also counted that 19/25 Board Members identify as part of a Native American tribe. This is what it looks like to have people controlling their OWN narrative.

[Megan]: So how does this connect? We’re not talking about Native American art in this podcast, we’re not even talking about museums. But, museum studies, that is, how museums organize and present information, has its roots and reasoning in art history. And art history is what?? Well I guess there’s a lot of answers to that but mine is Western. White. Even quote unquote “non western” art is whitewashed when shown or taught, and when people of color are in the canon conversation, they are rarely as the authors but as the characters, the props. Their narratives are controlled. This absolutely permeates art history. We see this in our mural, from 1910, Blossom Farley painting what he refers to as “the character of the Indian” without acknowledging anything we talked about last episode. We see it in Orientalism, 19th century academic art, where white artists were depicting scenes of the East that have since been acknowledged as extremely patronizing and inappropriate. But people in the West at the time believed them, and shaped their judgements around these depictions. We see it as recently as 2017, in the Whitney Biennial, when Dana Schutz painted that portrait of Emmett Till. People were angry. Hurt. Frustrated that a white woman is telling this very real, brutal account of racism, without living through any fear or trauma as a result of racism, which is a legitimate part of the black experience. Some people believe white artists making art like this is wrong because it just IS, and that it’s tasteless and disrespectful to depict a life you don’t know as if you do. Some people don’t think it’s wrong at all and hold the argument of “color-blindness” and believe restrictions in art divide us. Regardless of how you feel about that, we know that paintings like ours, *The Peace Council* tell a story. We know (if you were listening last episode) quite a bit was left out of that story. We also know that Richard Blossom Farley was a white man. He did not get displaced from his home, pushed across the country, murdered, and erased from history. It makes sense why he may have forgotten those parts in his telling of the story. I can’t say that a Lenape artist would have forgotten to include those bits. And I have a feeling that would be a very different painting.

[Megan]: I think now this argument leaves us thinking...so what now? We know context and depiction affects public understanding but what does the alternative look like? And how would THAT shape public understanding? I’m going to talk about some different ways artists are doing

this. Ways they are redefining assumptions established by the canon and taking ownership of their identity.

Our first example is African American artist Fred Wilson and his 1992 exhibition, *Mining the Museum*, in Baltimore, Maryland. Wilson was asked by the Contemporary Museum to look into the collection of the Maryland Historical Society and design an exhibition. When he began looking into the collection, he found the artifacts relating to African American and Native American history weren't part of the public collection, or part of the history that visitors came to see. This is a common theme among institutions and organizations all over America really, but particularly in the South; this neglect to acknowledge racism throughout history. People choose plantations as a wedding venues because of the gardens, or the Georgian architecture. And you can visit the Historical Society to learn about said homes, or duck hunting. But what Fred Wilson found, was a need to talk about slavery, about the black experience, from the mouths of black folks. So, he mined the museum, searched through artifacts and repurposed them in new contexts to tell the SAME history, but from a different perspective. Though I didn't see the exhibition in person (I would've, if I was alive) I'll give some examples of particularly moving pieces I've seen in pictures and read about. There was one I saw that used 18th- and 19th-century paintings from the historical society archives, where slave children were featured peeking from behind doors or curtains. Wilson hung the paintings as they were but shone spotlights on the slave children, rather than the white children. He also added audio to the paintings so as visitors walked through the room, the children would ask things like, "Where did I come from?"; "Where is my mother?"; "Who combs my hair?"; "Who makes me laugh?" In another room was a piece called *Modes of Transport* which was an Edwardian era pram that had a Klan hood in it, laying where the baby would, to demonstrate the future Klan members that were being raised in these homes. All of the rooms looked as any other historical society exhibition would, and everything was made from what was already in the collection. But it was repurposed, recontextualized. He was able to redefine the narrative by using familiar content in a new context. Here's Fred Wilson talking to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art about this:

[Wilson]: When I slow down, I begin to muse on 'What are these things about?' 'What are their particular histories?' And I think things have shifted in the museum world. I don't think museum people were trying not to include us in the conversation, they just didn't realize they weren't including us in the conversation. When I first got to do a project with

a museum, it affected museum professionals really strongly, because I was using their language in a way they never would use. Because I had worked in museums, I understood the didactic, I understood display in a way that they themselves could not. Like newspapers, if you're aware that there are various perspectives, even within the fact that they are giving you their full scholarship, and, you know, their full knowledge, then you don't have to pick apart the institution. You're just aware that they're going to have a different point of view. And you can understand your perspective in relation to that. So I just say don't ignore that. But still enjoy the exhibit.

[Megan]: Our next example is contemporary Black painter, Titus Kaphar. I found out about him through a TedTalk and honestly I want to just put all 15 minutes of that in and let you listen to it but, for the sake of time, I'll summarize it, and maybe put a quote or two in. Kaphar's paintings are described as "wrestling with the struggles of the past while speaking to the diversity and advances of the present." He is intrigued by the representation of African Americans throughout art history and figuring out how they fit in and form conversations and arguments in the present day. Similar to the first example I gave of Fred Wilson in mining the museum, with the 18th and 19 century paintings, Kaphar has also recognized the presence of these figures and thought critically about what they mean. In the TEDx Talk, he has a painting he did, a recreation of a 17th century Frans Hals piece that shows a wealthy family, and a young Black boy. He begins dissecting coded information in the painting, and as he speaks, paints over those parts with a stark white.

[Kaphar]: Above you right here on the slide is a painting by Frans Hals. I want to show you something. *(uncovers something)* I made this. *(audience applauds)* I made some alterations. You'll see some slight differences in the painting. All this art history that I had been exploring, helped me to realize that painting is a language. There is a reason why he is the highest in the composition here. *(sound of paintbrush on canvas)* There is a reason why the painter is showing us this gold necklace here. *(sound of paintbrush on canvas)* He's trying to tell us something about the economic status of these people in these paintings. Painting is a visual language where everything in the painting is meaningful, is important, it's coded. *(sound of paintbrush on canvas)* But sometimes, because of the compositional structure *(more paintbrush)* because of compositional hierarchy, it's hard to see other things. *(sound of paintbrush on canvas)* *(pause)* This silk is supposed to tell us, also, that they have quite a bit of money.

[Kaphar]: There's more written about dogs in art history than there are about this other character here. Historically speaking, in research on these kinds of paintings, I can find out more about the lace that the woman is wearing, the manufacturer of the lace, than I can about this character here. About his dreams, about his hopes, about what he wanted out of life.

[Megan]: In the end, he is left with a historical looking painting, with no visual information to talk about besides a little Black boy. The only part of the painting that isn't talked about. Kaphar takes ownership of a narrative by emphasizing the absence or conversely, the presence of marginalized individuals.

[Kaphar]: I don't want you to think that this is about eradication, it's not. What I'm trying to do, what I'm trying to show you, is how to shift your gaze just slightly, just momentarily, to ask yourself the question 'Why do some have to walk?' What is the impact of these kinds of sculptures at museums, what is the impact of these paintings on our most vulnerable in society? Seeing these kinds of depictions of themselves all the time?

[Megan]: Our last example has raised quite a bit of popularity recently for the recent unveiling of his panels in the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Kent Monkman is a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation, situated in central Canada, and he works with different mediums and subjects, which use symbolism and imagery that kind reference art historical canons and styles but have political concepts that have to do with history, culture, and identity. His work is stunning, the kind that is so loaded with symbolism you could stare at it for hours, making connections and considering importance. The people are depicted so humanely and delicately, you see pain, and their history, their experience. A common figure in a lot of Monkman's work is someone he calls Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, which yes, is meant to be a punny name. Miss Chief embodies ideas of power and expression, dressing provocatively and loudly, without gender and is inspired by spiritual beliefs and traditions of Cree people. Monkman describes Miss Chief as being like a guide of strength, and humor, and compassion to lead and connect people throughout time and history. I love how he talks about The Met paintings in particular, especially with how they fit into the Met.

[Monkman]: Something that I've been looking at in my art practice for many years are the paintings or sculptures that were made by the settler artists who were looking at the

indigenous people. And it's always this romantic view of 'the vanishing race'. In fact, we're very much alive. My work really is refuting those themes of disappearance. Looking at the Emanuel Leutze painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, he's the hero of that painting and I wanted Miss Chief to be the hero of my two paintings. I wanted to make a monumental painting that really reflected on indigenous perspective to give it that same importance. The title of this exhibition is *mistikôsiwak*, Wooden Boat People which is a Cree word to describe when the French arrived, they arrived in wooden boats. The two paintings together really speak about the arrivals and migrations and displacements of people around the world. The Great Hall is this place of people entering and people leaving. The left painting, '*Welcoming the Newcomers*' Miss Chief is literally bending over to assist people arriving to America. That has to do with generosity. In the second painting, '*Resurgence of the People*' Miss Chief is commanding this boat which looks a lot like a migrant vessel. Many people across the world are being displaced from their own land. Miss Chief is leading this resurgence of the people to represent a return to our languages and traditions. I love the capacity for painting to tell a story. I've always been drawn to history painting because so many indigenous experiences were never portrayed. This was an opportunity to engage with this master narrative, to reflect on it and to offer perspectives that come from the outside.

[Megan]: I hope this helps to bring what we're talking about into perspective, even if you're not into art, or have never considered anything about viewership or representation. But this is the kind of stuff that makes *The Peace Council* upsetting. Now, as I said way back at the beginning of this series, problematic murals are an issue that is sweeping the country. We are NOT the only school dealing with this, and we'll talk about some other examples and solutions and all that next episode and you'll see that it may look different from other places. Some are problematic because they're graphic, or overtly and obviously extremely racist and difficult for people to look at. Ours isn't like that. In fact, it's the opposite. It's gorgeous. It's lovely, It makes us feel good to look at and think that's how it really went. But it didn't. That history is not gorgeous, it's not lovely, and it's not okay to pretend that it is. I've said before, colonialism made the museum. It made art history. But that doesn't mean it's right. And it doesn't mean it can't be changed. I don't think a lot of people realize how influential art history is to our daily lives and historical understandings that form social understandings that form beliefs, and prejudices. It's like Titus Kaphar said, if someone lives their whole life being depicted a certain way, it's not long

before that person begins to think they ARE that way, they ARE nothing more than a background character. If we look at *the Peace Council* and get a warm fuzzy feeling that New Jersey was kind to the Indians and think 'well now they don't even exist so it doesn't matter', we're participating. Participating in repercussions of colonialism.

[Megan]: But, as you'll see in just a bit, we are not alone in this. It's time to start talking about some other places and people who are having the same conversations as we are. We'll see what they've been up to and start applying everything we've talked about these past few episodes into action. I hope you'll listen along. This has been Megan Scarborough, and I'll see you next time on Not a Foot of Land.