

Decolonizing Perspectives on Art History

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about decolonization and the movement to present alternative viewpoints and approaches to art history. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Roots of Art History in Colonization

1a. The Problem With Art History

1b. The Greco-Roman and Renaissance Emphasis

1c. Museums and Colonization

2. Decolonizing Approaches to Art History

2a. Why Decolonization?

2b. The Limits of Decolonization

1. The Roots of Art History in Colonization

Art has been a prominent feature of society for millennia and continues to be a source of artifacts that hint at the human imagination and livelihood across time. There are various perspectives on how to approach art history, and recent perspectives have acknowledged the role **colonization** has played in how historians have access to and perceive art across the globe.



TERM TO KNOW

Colonization

When people of one country take control over the people and society of another.

1a. The Problem With Art History

You may have noticed that this course began with a discussion of four European men whose ideas greatly influenced the development of art history as a field of knowledge. What this should tell you is that art history, as we study it in the United States, has a strong **bias** toward Europe and toward a male point of view. Art historians have been aware of this problem for many decades. At first, they thought that inclusion would provide a solution. Art history departments in universities hired professors specializing in the arts of Africa, Asia, Latin

America, and other regions and groups of people who have been excluded from previous versions of art history. Art history survey courses also included lessons on these excluded histories. However, it is not possible to include every excluded group in a survey course. In addition, inclusion does not help students understand how the very structure of art history reinforces inequalities.



TERM TO KNOW

Bias

Favoring a person or an idea or point of view in a way that is unfair.

1b. The Greco-Roman and Renaissance Emphasis

You may also have noticed that ancient Greece and Rome receive a great deal of attention within **survey courses** of art history like this one, and that the Renaissance also receives a lot of attention. There are many reasons for this. One is that Europeans, especially those who lived during Winckelmann's time, viewed classical Greece and Rome as the foundation of their ideas of civilization. In other words, they thought that the Europe of the 1700s was civilized because of its connections to these cultures. The study of art was a way to reinforce these connections. In the same way, art historians have also looked to the Renaissance for their definitions of art and the artist.



TERM TO KNOW

Survey Course

An introductory course in art history that starts with prehistoric art and ends with contemporary art, offering an overview of the history of art.

1c. Museums and Colonization

Yet another problem related to the decolonization of art history is the fact that the concept of the museum developed during the colonization of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Museums developed out of the *wunderkammer*, or room of wonders. Wealthy men who had traveled around the world would bring back preserved specimens of animals that Europeans had never seen before, as well as objects used in rituals, jewelry, and even sculptures removed from temples and other archeological sites. They kept these for display in rooms that eventually became entire buildings.



Ferrante Imperato (1525 - 1615)

Cabinet of Curiosities in Dell' Historia Naturale

Naples, Italy

1599

Fold-out woodcut print

Many objects contained in major museums ended up there in ways that amount to looting. The British Museum contains the pedimental sculptures of the Parthenon in Greece, as well as the Benin Bronzes, which were taken from present-day Nigeria. The Louvre in Paris contains objects that Napoleon took from Egypt, Iraq, and other countries. Some museums have returned works like these to their rightful owners, but many have not.



Artist unknown

Plaque commemorating rulers of the kingdom of Benin (13-19th century CE)

Benin City, West Africa (modern southern Nigeria)

16th-17th century CE

Cast bronze

The British Museum acquired the Benin Bronzes during a military raid on the Kingdom of Benin that took place in 1897. After this raid, the Kingdom of Benin became a British colony for many decades. British soldiers looted the kingdom and brought the bronzes and other objects of value back with them. The British Museum currently owns 900 Benin Bronzes and has made no attempt to return them to Nigeria. However, the museum website includes the story of how these objects came to be in the collection, which is perhaps a first step in a process that someday might involve returning the bronzes.

2. Decolonizing Approaches to Art History

When thinking about the future of art history, there is growing support to counteract the role of colonization and better acknowledge and spotlight various artworks and artifacts from cultures across the globe. An approach that attempts to undo the negative effects of colonization by presenting the points of view of formerly colonized peoples and by critiquing ideas associated with colonization is called **decolonization**.



TERM TO KNOW

Decolonization

An approach to learning that attempts to undo the negative effects of colonization by presenting the points of view of formerly colonized peoples and by critiquing ideas associated with colonization.

2a. Why Decolonization?

One way that art historians attempt to counteract the inequities of art history is through the inclusion of works of art from parts of the world that had previously been excluded. However, one of the problems with simply including non-European histories of art is that it tends to divide the world up into center and periphery, reinforcing inequalities instead of changing them. You may notice that this course includes lessons on Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu art, as well as the art of the ancient Americas and Africa. However, most of the lessons still focus on Europe. The basic structure that created the inequality has not changed. Decolonization goes further than inclusion by asking questions that reveal the power structures present in art history and other fields of study. These questions might include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Whose point of view/story is being told? Who is telling the story?
- How does this history define the work of art and the artist? To what culture do these concepts belong?
- Who benefits from the telling of these stories?
- Whose values do these stories express?

2b. The Limits of Decolonization

Some scholars argue that a field like art history can never completely be decolonized, and that the dominance of Europe is too strong and will always be present in one form or another. Some universities have decided to get rid of the survey class completely, while others have tried to include as many different points of view as possible. It is important to remember that there is no perfect model.



THINK ABOUT IT

As you move through this course, you might ask yourself:
What aspects of this course could be improved?
Does it successfully incorporate decolonized perspectives?



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that art history as we study it in the United States has a strong bias toward Europe and a male point of view. To fully understand this bias, you began by examining **the roots of art history in colonization**, noting that while art historians have been aware of this **problem with art history** for decades, the inclusion of excluded groups in a survey course does not provide a viable solution, as it is not possible to include them all and does not help students understand how the structure of art history reinforces inequalities. You learned that another source of inequality is **the Greco-Roman and Renaissance emphasis** within survey courses in art history, as Europeans viewed these cultures as the foundation of their concept of civilization.

You examined the link between **museums and colonization**, learning that many objects housed in major museums today were removed from temples and other archeological sites in their countries of origin by wealthy European men who traveled around the world. In order to counteract the negative effects of colonization, art historians have tried multiple **decolonizing approaches to art history**, by presenting the points of view of formerly colonized peoples and critiquing ideas associated with colonization. You explored the reasons **why decolonization** is necessary in addition to inclusion, while acknowledging **the limits of decolonization** and understanding the importance of seeking out decolonized perspectives as you move through this course.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Decolonization

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Survey Course

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