Racism in Art History

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For many generations, social scientists, historians, and race studies’ scholars viewed racism to be a modern-day phenomenon, and thus, there is seldom discussion over racism in the historical context. One reason for this was because racism was generally believed to be defined or grounded in biological terms, in which genetic inheritance, physiognomy or the pigmentation of the skin defined race. However, more perceptive later day scholars began to understand race as a cultural classification in practical terms. This understanding is highly significant in informing our understanding of historical conflict and atrocities that were generally believed to have resulted from premodern prejudice instead of racism, despite many obvious signs. For instance, Jews would be asked to wear a visible badge, viewed to have bestial or subhuman characteristics and having a distinct stench; all are hallmarks of modern racism[[1]](#footnote-1). An understanding of how racism could manifest itself in pre-modern periods can guide our understanding of historical art from the racial perspective.

One of the foundations of racism is creating ‘the other’, which essentially is a group of people that are seen to be deficient in some manner compared to the observer group thus justifying a sense of moral responsibility in the latter over the former. The classification of the other would inspire efforts to convert, educate or civilize, not out of genuine concern but establishing authority and domination over them. The same behaviour was characteristic of orientalism that sought to suggest western authority over the Orient and could be observed by its depiction in western art[[2]](#footnote-2). Yet, the ‘othering’ or ‘Orientalizing’ process can be done by any ethnic or racial group over the other based upon a perceived superiority of knowledge or moral authority, possibly to achieve domination or some other political agenda. This is evident by the use of categorical phrases such as they, we, them, us by means of which the other is differentiated by the observer in terms of certain undesirable quality.

An understanding of the other can guide us to investigate the presence of racial overtones in ancient art, something that a substantial portion of academia continues to deny. However, a study of ancient texts and art can lead one to come across many themes based upon ethnicity and race, such as works of Hesiod, Homer, Hippocrates, or Caesar, Plutarch or others[[3]](#footnote-3). Various images from Roman and Greek art reflect their interest with racial diversity and a number of terms they would use in stories and texts carried ethnic and racial overtones, such as phylla, ethnos, natio, genos[[4]](#footnote-4). The presence of such vocabulary in ancient art reflects that ethnicity and race were seen as aspects of group identity by both the Romans and the Greeks. S stories about Spartans and Athenians in ancient Greek stories which talk about why they would never betray one another because of their shared blood, practices and way of life are elements that form the core of racial and ethnic ‘otherness’. Even if ancient concepts were not specifically based on the modern scientific ideas of race, the tendency to form a group identity based on the descent was a concept very close to modern racism. Mythical stories, images, or even genealogies would indicate the importance descent and by extension, selective breeding would carry in ancient Rome and Greece because of the perceived or physical differences they would bring in a people’s inherent character[[5]](#footnote-5). Today such differences are seen in the context of culture, environment or genetics.

Another important consideration when exploring racism in art history is the whitewashing of classical antiquities. In America and Europe, the interpretation of classic art has for long maintained a narrative of white superiority over other races. Even when ancient Greeks and Romans valued heredity, it is not known whether they classified themselves as ‘white', and thus many of the classical antiquities such as sarcophagi, marble sculptures, or stelae developed in the Mediterranean were originally painted in shades of brown, gold, white, and black[[6]](#footnote-6). These pigments had deteriorated or washed off over time leaving its often-white base exposed. This perpetuated the idea that ancients were white who represented an ideal notion of beauty historically. It was a concept that continues to fuel white supremacist notions[[7]](#footnote-7). Thus, the equation of whiteness as beauty led many sculptors in the 18th and 19th century to enhance and emphasize the whiteness of ancient marble sculptures. Although the term ‘white' may not have existed in ancient times, however, Isaac (2004) suggests that racial prejudice did exist among the Romans and Greeks besides cultural and ethnic prejudice, which can be deduced by racial representations in classical antiquity. Isaac (2004) found that the racial overtones in classic art helped provide the intellectual origins of racial prejudice in early modern artists and authors, which in turn fostered social stereotypes, prejudices and racist ideas among them. The art and literature from Ancient Greece all the way to late antiquity are filled with discriminatory stereotypes that possibly indicated or fueled social hatred, which came to play a significant role in early modern and recent history[[8]](#footnote-8).

In the Renaissance and Baroque period, racial overtones started to become visibly present as the presence of black people and the subsequent rise of slavery in Europe began to affect the popular artists of the time. Moving forward to the 18th century, a range of images that represented black people were created reflecting different themes such as the beginning of the abolition movement or the apogee of slavery. Art that showed a black slave adoring his master would lead other artists to depict Africans as victims, at the time when scientific racism was being developed as an intellectual movement. Other modern and early modern art would represent black people in a manner that would contrast between the savagery of the African and the civilization of the European, wherein the natural behaviour of Africans depicted in those works would contrast with European conduct which seemed civilized and inhibited, further perpetuating the idea of scientific racism[[9]](#footnote-9).

The idea that the white-dominated narrative of history is the only truth was perpetuated through interpreting various historical art which supplemented the construction of racist ideas based upon genetics in the late 19th and early 20th century. In the contemporary era, despite a political and social rejection of racism, museum education has largely ignored and failed to acknowledge racist undertones in classical art and has failed to acknowledge that the white interpretation of art has contributed to the construction of a racist and white supremacist interpretation of classical art. Moreover, museum education today has failed to take an anti-oppressive and anti-racist stance, and instead, normalized histories, cultures, bodies, objects, work, and ideas of White people and thus helped reinforced the white supremacist ideology. Consequently, it has erased or diminished the cultures, beliefs, or bodies of people of colour. Moreover, these racist undertones are reflected even in the attitudes of educators who avoid teaching students about many astounding works of art created for or by people of colour. Hence, the influence perpetuated by early modern racist interpretation of classical art has worked its way to contemporary art education wherein the education itself reinforces institutionalized power to the White race[[10]](#footnote-10).

In light of the discussion, it is clear that racism has existed in two primary forms in art history. One has been a result of the perpetuating the idea of ‘otherness’ for cultures and races deemed deficient, along with historical language and text that support the formation of group identity based upon ethnicity and race. The other form of racism in art history has been a tendency to interpret it along the lines of white-supremacism and perpetuating ideas, notions and views that the white race represents the ideal civilizations throughout various stages of history. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to investigate racism in art history in further detail and explore how modern day people of different socio-economic background view racism as a result of that influence.

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7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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