

# Things We Did Not Learn

# APORIA

A Sunday Afternoon in the Times Arts Section  
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I stopped reading the *New York Times* during the Obama years when its formerly-inviting progressive tone became shrill and hectoring. A cross-country flight on a Sunday this Fall afforded an opportunity to revisit the grand old lady. The news and editorials were more interesting and reasonable than I expected. But the arts section has devolved in a way that deserves deeper reflection.

I have kept the two-part section from this October 22 edition on my desk these many months, still not believing what I encountered. Even as I write, I find it hard to believe -- to give credit to the apparent fact -- that what is contained in those pages represents the honestly held views of a significant portion of the arts community and commentariat in our national cultural center. It is, for me, beyond belief, beyond, that is, the baseline of outré that one expects from the arts community.

Many writers on the arts have noted how art has gone from being political and politicized – things it has always been – to being totalitarian, which is the opposite of being political. What I found new in these pages, and perhaps this is no surprise if the totalitarian thesis holds, is that it has also become profoundly ignorant as well.

The lead story enthuses that “The Art World Expands Its Notion of What Art Is and Who Can Make It.” An 80-year old Russian-Jewish artist from Buenos Aires is having a retrospective at the Jewish Museum of New York. Her work includes dropping live chickens and lettuce onto a crowd from a helicopter and dressing up like a mattress (“That’s why mattresses are so important.”) The 30-something curator expresses a “deep frustration” that no one likes the art. “As curators we have an obligation and a commitment to bring unheard, unrecognized, or underrepresented artists into the discussion,” she explains. The museum prefers works “that focus on Black, Jewish, queer and trans experience in the United

States.” It makes a point to display such works “in a German and Nazi context.” All this apparently represents the latest thinking in “the art world.” Mattresses in a Nazi context.

The next salvo informs us that “Museums Move to Integrate the Art of Historically Marginalized Cultures.” We’re still on the front page. “Although the art canon has long been dominated by a white, male, European sensibility, museums are now making a concerted effort to integrate the artistic contributions of historically marginalized cultures,” our correspondent writes. More on the “Black, Jewish, queer and trans” experience, you wonder? No. In this case, three new exhibits on Islamic, Chinese, and Byzantine art. It is difficult to credit the proposition that these traditions are “marginalized.” The Los Angeles County Museum, which hosts the Islamic show, began serious collecting in this area the moment it opened in 1965. By 1980, the *Christian Science Monitor* could attest that “the museum's Asian, Indian, Islamic, and Japanese art...have been nurtured into impressive collections.” The white, male, European sensibility was apparently quite keen on other traditions.

The Met exhibit featured in the story posits an African influence on Byzantine art that “hasn’t been recognized or privileged,” fumes the 30-something curator. The grown-ups apparently conspired to keep our open-minded young guide in ignorance. It is something “we did not learn about when we were learning about art history,” she complains. One suspects that the class on the thousand years of Byzantine art her alma mater, Barnard College, “privileged” the Catholic, Orthodox, and Near Eastern influences, as well as the rich culture of Constantinople itself. In its focus on marginalia, “the art world” seems to have overlooked the manuscript itself.

Have you been “Thinking About How Money Has Infected Society?” Well, No. But Yes, we are still on the front page. The subject here is a Morgan Library and Museum exhibition of medieval money in Europe. If our correspondent had taken an introductory course on this ageless question of money and morality, she would have read a lot of white German males with names like Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. More evidence, seemingly, of the things “we did not learn about” in college. Despite

the pandemic alert of the headline, the show proves how useful money was to the poor, a point famously made in 1989 by Amartya Sen in his study of modern famines in India. Most of the money on display is very low value coins that the medieval poor used to escape from the barter economy. Concerns about “how money has infected society” arose from upper class snobs like Martin Luther, alarmed by all the newly-rich peasants splashing out on indulgences. Nothing has changed today except now it is the Upper East Side subscribers to the *New York Times* bemoaning super-yachts when the peasants should properly be appreciating the dropping of live chickens from a helicopter.

Speaking of super-yachts, at last our ship departs from the moorings of the front page. We set sail across the vast expanse of the inner pages.

Our first port is a story on the yeoman’s work being done by university galleries at Yale, Princeton, Duke and Vassar to atone for their “systemic racism.” These “historically white spaces with pasts that are entangled with slavery” are now hastening to host shows by blacks, the *Times* enthuses. One need not read further to know in advance that the art will be superb, the artists under-appreciated geniuses, the curators ebullient about their newfound virtue, and the didactic purposes beyond overdue. One featured artist glues Post-It notes, bits of her hair, and other items found on the floor onto Ghanaian textiles and calls it a “multiplicity of elements with which to engage.” Another sells photographs of herself nude mocking classical Western paintings (including a Last Supper where she is Christ and only Judas is white). She simultaneously complains to the *Times* reporter about the “dehumanization and commodification of the Black body.” The Duke exhibition is hosted by an institution “whose history is entwined with slavery...segregation, and white supremacy.” But visitors are also warned against “portraying Black people as victims.”

Then a Brazilian artist “of Indigenous descent” who drank himself to death in 1985 but not before producing some colorful street paintings of Amazonian flora and fauna. He may have had an indigenous father, but no one seems to know. The New York gallery wants to be in the vanguard “as the art world begins to widen its eyes to Indigeneity,” the curator explains. With “Indigeneity” agreed, the script is clear:

colonization, exploitation, and the need to decolonize. The colonizer in this case a Swiss art collector who dragged the artist out of obscurity by promoting his “gloriously primitive, divinely illiterate” works, as he called them. The unstated assumption is the artist *should* have been left “uncolonized”, working the boats of the Amazon river to make ends meet, as he did before the “colonial” encounter. In addition to touting anti-colonialism and “Indigeneity,” the exhibit “holds a mirror up to issues of racism and classism,” the curator adds. That’s quite a boatload of mirrors.

Perhaps there was no room for a mirror to sexism. Thankfully, the next article promises “Equality in the Renaissance.” The Boston Museum of Fine Arts has staged an exhibit with the anachronistic title “Strong Women in Renaissance Italy.” I imagine oiled-up female body-builders in steel corsets, pointed bodices, and starched neck ruffs. They mean “influential.” But we get the point. Women 500 years ago “faced barriers to equity and education,” the correspondent complains. There is now a “strong interest in women’s history” among the mostly-female cohorts of curators and journalists whose names dot these pages. The exhibition is “going to overturn the notion that the Italian Renaissance was a cultural phenomenon that only involved men,” promises one critic.

She means “involved only men.” But we get the point. “Only”? If this is another thing that “we did not learn about” in college then we were not paying attention in class. I doubt that one could find any general history of the Renaissance that did not mention Joan of Arc, Isabella d’Este, Catherine de Medici, Lucrezia Borgia, Isabella of Castile, Bloody Mary (Cheers!) and other “strong women.” On the other hand, I also doubt that one could find any general history of the Renaissance that did not mention more men than women. Overturning this notion will take a lot more muscle-flexing by the feminist curators of MOFA.

Can we ever again have art for art’s sake? An opportunity arose at the Museum of Russian Art in Minneapolis when the war in Ukraine erupted. It was a rare moment when a cultural institution could bring people together to celebrate art for art’s sake. Let’s not associate the great Russian art tradition with today’s rulers. On

second thought, let's, according to the enthusiastic report on the museum's decision to go all in for anti-Russia messaging with the headline "Taking Sides."

The museum has taken sides by "focusing on work critical of Russia." It features a newly-commissioned work called "Glory to Ukraine." All the art is now being mobilized for this glorious political project centered on "oppression and resistance." Every item in the museum has been given a "context" label. Those beautiful Russian icons of the 5<sup>th</sup> century are now identified as precursors to the seizure of Crimea. "You don't just say 'Oh, look at this art, how great it is'," instructs the curator. You don't? The Russians used to have a word for this. They called it agit-prop. It is another icon of the diminished artistic imagination evident in the *Times* art section.

Section Two opens with a precis of the story so far: "Artists and Art Institutions Take On Social and Political Issues of the Day." If our knowledge of the contemporary art world had been drawn from Section One, we might wonder what else they could possibly be doing. In this story, a Nigerian artist has "tackled colonialism, the subjugation of peoples that enabled the global slave trade and carved a callous cartography across Africa and other continents." Another thing that "we did not learn about", apparently, was that the global slave trade existed long before European colonialism and was ended because of that colonialism, and that the myth of "artificial borders" forced on hapless black people by devious colonialists has been demolished time and again, though its staying power is impressive.

The artist is not satisfied to scotch the colonialists for their slavery and borders. He insists they stole modernity itself from Africa. The more he looked at Picasso, the more he realized that these abstract ideas were looted from Mother Africa. The "white male artists were lionized by Western art history" while the true geniuses in Africa went unrecognized. "Throughout Black culture," he proposes, "it's always happened." (The injunction back at Duke against "portraying Black people as victims" is now wearing very thin.)

The Nigerian was inspired to his latest work by “the zeitgeist since the George Floyd moment.” He apparently took seriously the assertions on NPR that blacks are now leading “the whole global conversation on culture.” The *Times* seems to agree. Take blacks out of modern music and what are you left with, he chortles to the reporter. “Folk music? Yodeling?” Well, Yes, we might reply. Also Stravinsky, Debussy, and Sibelius, as well as the Beatles, Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, and Kiss. And speaking of looted art, is it time for black jazz artists who appropriated Benny Goodman and the Big Band tradition to pay up? What about black classical and opera performers who have been lionized for their looting of these Western traditions?

We’re still on the front page of Section Two. “Art in a Time of Climate Change.” If you have begun to turn green at this point, it is because you have been aboard the *G.S. Times Arts Section* since mattress woman. This article highlights a “growing group of museums engaging with climate change.” With all these new exhibits on indigeneity, women, blacks, queers, colonialism, classism, poverty, and lettuce, it’s a wonder there is a room to squeeze in climate change. But the climate activists hold trumps among the artists and curators of the *Times* arts section: their cause is not just little fixes for all the oppression but “planetary-scale transformation,” according to the writer. The curator promises “multiple perspectives and approaches,” by which she means multiple perspectives and approaches on how to launch hysterical attacks on Big Oil, capitalism, and Ronald Reagan.

Our final offering from the front page of Section Two tells us “We’re all living in Indian territory.” True enough. My flight to Portland is now over the Great Plains where many an Indian tribe once subjugated, murdered, and enslaved his fellow Indian before U.S. expansion forced a modern state upon the primitive mayhem. The artist claims Cherokee ancestry. Like so many “native” artists these days, she looks wholly European. WalkingStick, or so she is called, was raised in white American society by her white mother and did not identify as Indian until attending art school in her late 30s, according to a 1985 *Times* article. Another thing “we did not learn”, in this case in journalism school, was to consult the back issues of the publication we write for. In 1989, the *Times* noted with arresting candor: “With romanticism still the order of the day, nobody wants to be considered white and

Ms. Walkingstick is fortunate, for her father is a Cherokee.” Or so she says. The label has certainly allowed her to trade in Indian art fetish. When Congress passed a law in 1990 requiring sellers of “Indian art” to prove their native bona fides, WalkingStick complained about the personal intrusion, according to a *Times* article of that year. I’ll reserve judgement until I see a DNA test verified by a third party.

Our weekend read now turns to a “people’s art” exhibit featuring the not-very-typical people of San Francisco. The “democratic” and “inclusionary” jury process opened new vistas of hitherto oppressed art, the curator explains. The result? A trove of “socially or politically loaded” works. The people are apparently very concerned with “immigration, Ukraine, Black Lives Matter, January 6 and election deniers, and people who are unhoused,” enthuses the curator. A life-sized wooden toy soldier of General Robert E. Lee lies on its back “to evoke the way in which racial reckonings have toppled historical figures.”

Both journalist and jurors offer grave assent to these “socially or political loaded” works. Yet another thing that “we did not learn” in college was that brutalist and didactic works were the stock-in-trade of the socialist-realist tradition in communist lands. The response of free societies at the time was to treat them as kitsch, as in Andy Warhol’s Mao series. But the arts savants in the *Times* are so beholden to a totalizing ideology that they can’t bring themselves to invert the meaning of this latest iteration of “people’s art” as the only possible critical response. It is not just the inability to judge good art from bad. It is the inability even to know what art is anymore.

Next up: Annie Leibovitz, at 74, has a new show of photographs in, wait for it, Bentonville, Arkansas. The regulars of the financial page will be savvy to the location. Yes, it is the Walmart fortune, in this case from the founder’s daughter who has funded the exhibition. Leibovitz swoons that it’s the best endowed and freest project she has ever worked on. No underfunded socialist-realist party diktat guiding this show. In gratitude, Leibovitz created new portraits of Milton Friedman, Adam Smith, and John Locke to celebrate the capitalist spirit that created the jobs, consumer welfare, and philanthropy of Walmart. Correction: she took a series of

photos of her liberal friends, including Stacey Abrams, Rachel Maddow, and Ketanji Brown Jackson, all sporting angry faces about the social injustice of late capitalism.

Perhaps Abrams, Maddow, and Jackson were not told that it was the Walmart fortune paying for it all. Or perhaps Leibovitz did not notice the irony. Nor did the reporter. Maddow, a San Francisco lesbian, has been hammering away at Walmart for years. Capitalism, it seems, is OK as long as its fuels the anti-capitalist arts community.

Up to now, half of the stories we have written about have been exclusively about women artists. But here comes an urgent report on the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Like the *Barbie* movie, the arts community cannot seem to stop raging at the 1950s, not seeming to notice the passing of that era, perhaps not wanting to. If your art made it only into a museum with no men allowed, it might be a let-down that no amount of feminist rhetoric could conceal. Imagine your agent saying “Maybe we should give the women’s museum a try.” Some styles are new to me. “Women were really the pioneers in creating sculptures suspended from the ceiling,” a curator informs us. The collection is a mish-mash but for its exclusive focus on what the *Times* calls “female-identifying artists.” Will that soon be the National Museum of Female-Identifying Persons in the Arts? I can’t wait to see the cat fights when a hulking man formerly known as Lance is shown. Even I might attend that gala opening.

I turn the page and the headline reads: “Including the Excluded.” One’s mind is now trained to know the story in advance: repressed black artists, marginalized women, overlooked indigenous, the plight of the LGBTQRST+-, and so on. Here, however, is an unintentional mirror for the oppression narrative that permeates the *Times* art section. The story is about art by people with disabilities who *reject* claims to “exclusion” in favor of claims about the quality of their art. In the past, such works “might have been venerated more because of the demographic of the artist,” the *Times* journalist espouses, apparently not having read the other stories being prepared for the weekend arts section. These disabled artists want nothing to do with the oppression and grievance industry that apparently funds the *Times* art



section. As one curator explains about selling the art: “If disability leads, then it’s a charity case.”

Alas, it’s very hard to escape the gravitational field of “arts as oppression”, even if you try. For one, the disabled artists were funded by “deaccessions” at SFMOMA, a word liberals use when they banish works they find offensive (only conservatives “ban” things). What’s more, the same curator who warns about the charity case also compares the show to past movements for “gay rights, women’s rights, and civil rights for minority groups.” No, No! you can hear the disabled artists plead. Please let us go! Leave us out of your children’s crusade! Too late. “These are artworks and narratives that disrupt our common understanding of the trajectory of art and deserve substantially greater presentation and public engagement,” declares a SFMOMA cadre. Deserve, eh? Ahh, I see. A charity case.

Has it been too many pages without a story about oppression? Not to fear. Last up is another moral reckoning with indigenous peoples (the third this weekend, quite a *potlach*). The subject is a new exhibit on the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 at the History Colorado Center. My plane begins its descent into Portland, now known among the local intelligentsia as stolen land from the Multnomah and other tribes. Here the *Times* celebrates the fact that an exhibition at the History Colorado Center that opened in 2012 providing multiple perspectives on this tragic event that left 150 to 200 Indians dead was shuttered by native activists. They demanded “co-authorship” and only “indigenous perspectives,” on the tragedy. The tribes “nearly didn’t get to tell it themselves,” the *Times* writes with alarm.

The new exhibit that opened in 2022 “drew heavily on tribal members’ views.” History Colorado announced proudly that the entire show had been “vetted and approved by tribal representatives.” The result, according to the *Times*, is a “correct” and “accurate” telling. In this new “indigenous” account, peace-loving Indians who spent their days in family time (omitting, of course, the many white children they kept as hostages) and gazing at the stars suddenly were set upon by malicious whites out to steal natural resources. The body count is inexplicably revised upward to 230, comfortably above the 208 whites killed by Indians over the

preceding spring and summer. Is it any surprise that the hundreds of Colorado schoolchildren perp-walked through the exhibit every day feel only rage?

Bump. The local time is... Have we heard enough from the *Times* arts section? I have reported on 16 articles from that weekend's buffet, leaving out another eight which seemed to me straightforward discussions without political projects piled on top. Even art fans can do that math.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the art establishment of the contemporary United States is staffed by culturally and historically ignorant, mostly-female activists who don't really love art, even if they knew what the term meant. What they were not taught, what our whole civilization is not being taught, is more than just how to think about art. It is how to think at all.

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