Decolonizing the Art Room: How to Incorporate Artists from Various Backgrounds

Fritz Scholder (Luiseño American, 1937–2005)
Galloping Indian, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
78 × 70 3/4 in. (198.12 × 179.71 cm)
Gift of Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley M1975.160

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Colonialism in a museum context refers to how western public institutions were built on imperialist expansion, white centered worldviews, and the acquisition of artifacts through theft, looting, or coercive trade *

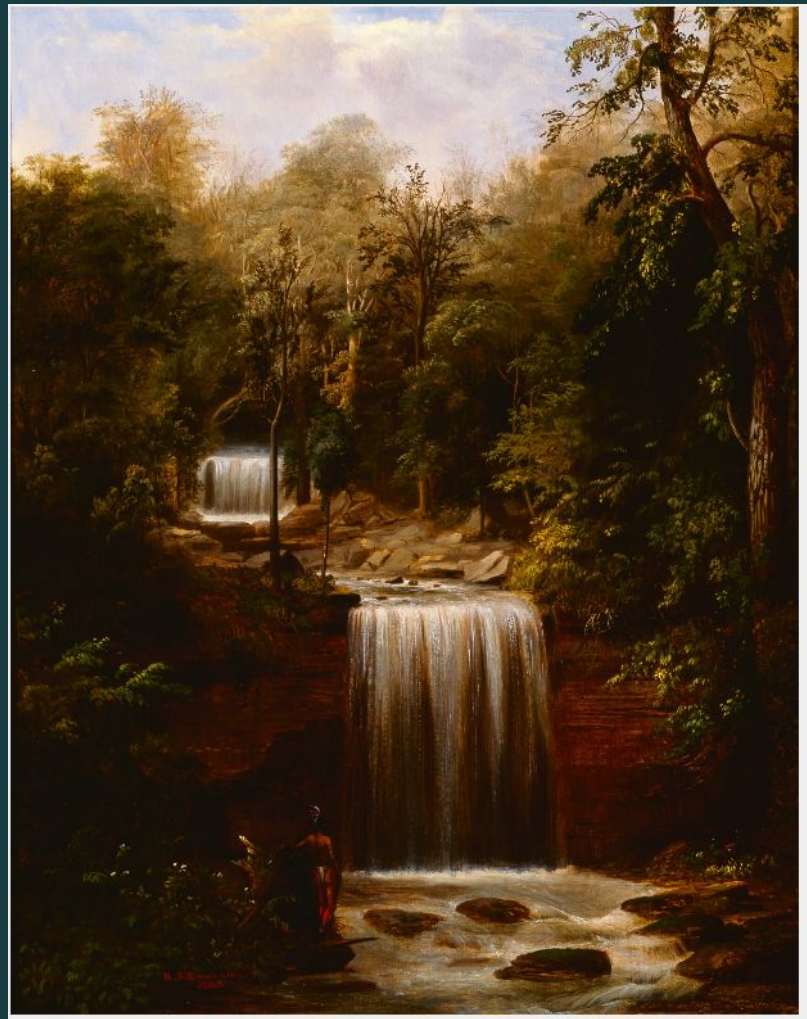
-Enlightenment origins/origins of major public institutions like the British Museum, when European countries, used of private and public collections to classify and display world cultures without context or permission (Al Jazeera, 2023; Lambert, 2024)

-Objectification, decontextualization, and hierarchy: Non-European items were/are often shown as curiosities and primitive objects thatcher than fine art, reinforcing hierarchies (Lambert, 2024).

*(Al Jazeera, 2023; Goldman, 2022; Lambert, 2024; MIA, 2018)

In 2021, the Milwaukee Art Museum established a Native Initiatives project to address how the Museum could honor the foundational history, traditions, and ongoing presence of Wisconsin's Indigenous communities. As part of this work, the Native Initiatives Advisory Group (NIAG) was formed. Comprised of Indigenous scholars, artists, and members of Native communities from across the state, the group actively counsels the Museum to ensure Indigenous cultures, resilience, and art are respectfully represented and celebrated.

Together, the Museum and the NIAG determined that this gallery, previously organized around the traditional themes of the "American West," presented inaccurate and incomplete historical accounts. It also featured works depicting harm toward Native people. This new installation includes work created by Indigenous artists, historically excluded from Anglo-American museums, providing a more comprehensive portrayal of what we consider American art. Native people have always inhabited the lands known as the United States, and their arts and cultures continue to thrive today.
https://mam.org/exhibitions/homelands/



Robert S. Duncanson

American, 1821–1872

Minneopa Falls, 1862

Oil on canvas

Purchase, Andrew A. Ziegler Fund M2007.37

VIEWPOINT ► CURATOR

African American painter Robert S. Duncanson was one of the most skilled landscape artists of his time. A trip to Minnesota in 1862 inspired him to create *Minneopa Falls*, which suggests little about the violence taking place nearby. Only an Indigenous figure contemplating the scenery seems to evoke the war waged by the United States against Dakota people at the time Duncanson visited the region.

Thomas Busciglio-Ritter, PhD
Abert Family Associate Curator of American Art

VIEWPOINT ► COMMUNITY MEMBER

Is he a Dakóta wičašta who stands at the base of mni-hiŋhe-nuŋpa? Duncanson painted him in a position that mirrors the viewer. Asking us to witness alongside, to watch the water rush down, with the surrounding foliage in summer fullness. Was the scene painted a month or mere moments before the war—when Dakota people attempted to reclaim their home after broken treaties left them starving in August 1862? Troops were later called away to ready for a different front. Duncanson turns our gaze away from ongoing and impending cataclysms and toward the twin falls of the river in the presence of its lone viewer—a nostalgic view. Yet, like the river, we remain.

David Drake (American), *Jar*, 1855. Alkaline-glazed stoneware, 13 in. (33.02 cm). Milwaukee Art Museum, Purchase, ethically acquired from and for the benefit of the artist's descendants, with funding provided by a Museum donor, M2026.51.

Attributed to David Drake (American), *Jar*, 1840–1850. Alkaline-glazed stoneware, 25 in. (63.5 cm). Milwaukee Art Museum, ethically borrowed from the artist's descendants, to whom the work was returned by the Museum, L6.2026.1.

Milwaukee Art Museum Announces Transfer of Ownership of Two David DrakeVessels to Artist's Descendants

Context/Why?

In an art classroom, we can practice decolonizing by explaining and teaching students about the history of conquest and stealing that happens in many traditional museum context. We can also show art made by diverse groups of people, with the correct context, and include the histories of colonialism within it.

Shared Teaching Philosophy

- **Big Idea/Enduring Ideas**

  Focus on key principles and connections between different topics to help students understand deeper contexts and develop critical thinking

  Examples: Identity, community, conflict, beauty, etc.

- **Student Centered**

  Include students in planning, implementation, and assessments

- **Culturally Responsive**

  Incorporate and center unique student experiences and identities

- **Anti-Racist/Anti-Bias**

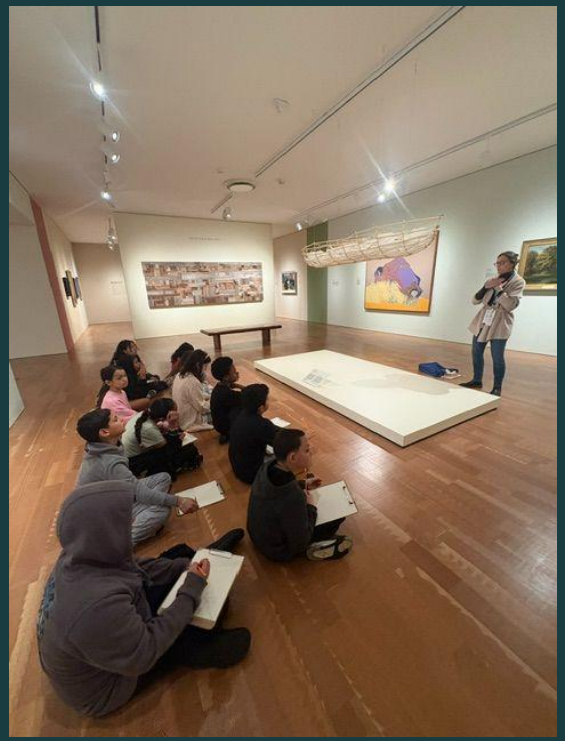
  Help students understand racism's origins and guises, past and present, so they can act to disrupt White supremacy.

Saifer, S., Edwards, K., Ellis, D. & Stuczynski (2010). Classroom to community and back.
(Adapted by Melissa Bollow Tempel)

Culturally Responsive Teaching

- Connected & Integrated
- Fosters Critical **(& Creative)** Thinking
- Power to Transform
- Relationships and Community
- Assessment & Reflection

Strategies for Culturally Responsive Teaching through Art



- Present artworks that represent diverse cultures, including their "entanglements"
- Mimicry of cultural artifacts does not equal learning about another culture
- Engage students in understandings of accurate context
- Use contemporary artworks
- Use of primary sources & artists' voices whenever possible

Exploration cards are sponsored by Four-Four Foundation and an anonymous donor.

Haitian, *Vodun Flag (Danbala)*, 20th century. Sequins and beads on cloth. 29 × 24 1/2 in. (73.66 × 62.23 cm). Gift of Richard and Ilma Flagg, M1991.177. Photo by Efrain Lev-er

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

Religion + Vodou

Exploration Card ★ Haitian Gallery ★ Exploration Card ★ Haitian Gallery ★ Exploration Card

Find and Look

Vodun Flag (Danbala)

In the Vodou religion, ritual ***drapo*** **[DRAH-poh]** (flags) are danced in ceremonies to honor the spirits who protect the spiritual community. Historically, different colored cloths were sewn together to make the flags. Devotees began decorating them with sequins and seed beads in the mid-20th century.

This ritual drapo honors the divine couple Danbala (the green serpent) and Ayida Wèdo (the rainbow serpent, in purple here). The staffs before them recall canes used by the elder spirits. They appear to stand on a ***pe*** **[peh]** (a small pedestal altar).

In the top left and bottom right corners are two 8-pointed stars. These represent ***pwen*** **[puhWENH]**, mystic points of power. They are ***vèvè*** **[veh-veh]** (sacred symbols) used during ceremonies to call spirits. In the top right and bottom left corners are two sets of intersecting *v*'s. These represent the ***lwa*** **[LUHwah]** (Vodou spirit) Ayizan, mistress of initiation. This flag was likely made for the ritual rites of becoming a Vodou devotee.

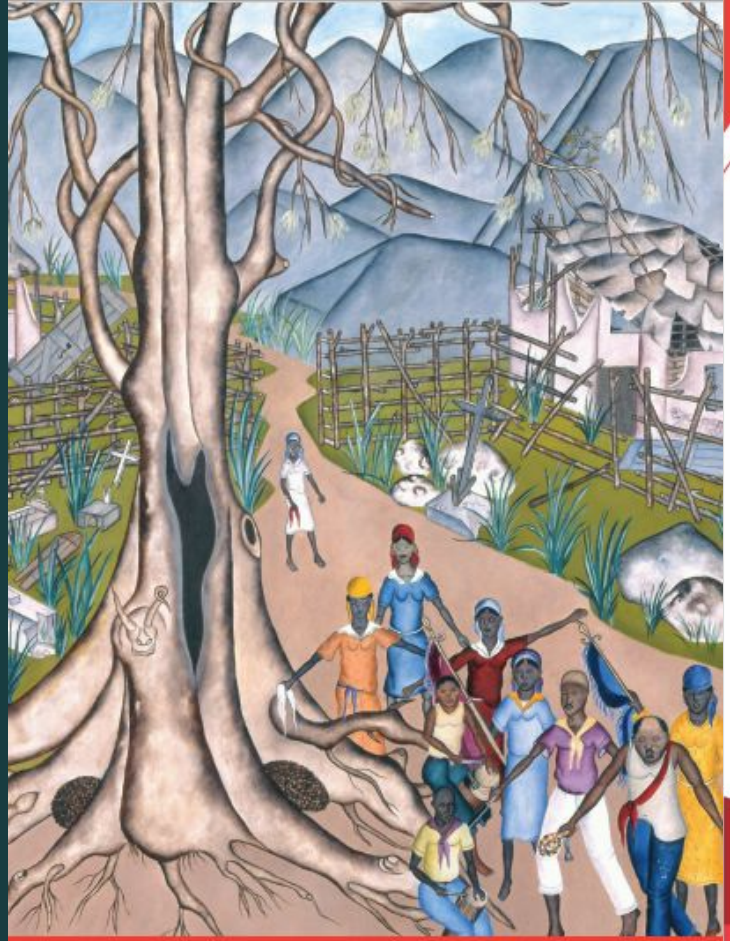
The gold sequins and white and purple striped border add more colorful flare to the eye-catching drapo. Some scholars call this flare "the flash of the spirit."

Symbol search

Haitian artists used recognizable symbols so viewers would understand their artwork's meaning. Can you find other artworks in this gallery with the symbols you see in this flag?

Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know

Ayida Wèdo [Ah-YEE-dah Weh-DOH] *Ayizan* [Ah-YEE-zunh] *Danbala* [Dunh-BAH-lah]



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Rigaud Benoit (Haitian, 1911–1986), *Recall of the Dead*, 1973. Oil on Masonite. 30 1/2 × 24 in. (77.47 × 60.96 cm). Gift of Richard and Erma Flagg, M1991.114. Photo by Efraim Lev-er

Religion + Vodou

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Find and Look

Recall of the Dead
Rigaud Benoit

Saying goodbye to people we love when they leave this life is never easy. In the Vodou religion, the ritual ***wete mò nan dlo*** **[WAY-tay moh nan dalow]** (recall of the dead) helps families reconnect with a loved one who has passed away. The ritual is performed one year and one day after the person's death.

Rigaud Benoit's painting portrays this ritual in a small cemetery near the river. A group of religious devotees and two drummers have gathered around a sacred tree. An ***houngan*** **[OON-gunh]** (priest) leads the ceremony with a ritual ***ason*** **[AH-sown]** (rattle). He stands before several mystic ***govi*** **[GOH-vee]** (pots). In the river, we see five shadowy figures. They are spirits of the deceased residing in Afrik-Ginen, a reimagined Africa as both homeland and ancestral world under the water.

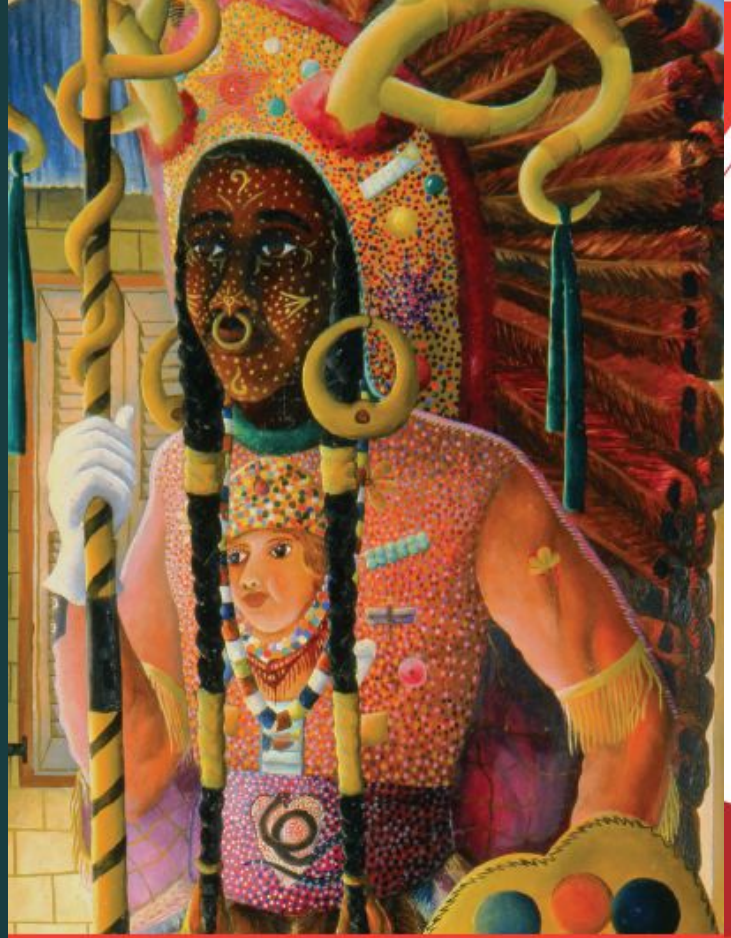
During the ceremony, the spirits of the dead are recalled, spiritually nourished, and newly housed inside the mystic pots. Like urns that hold the ashes of loved ones, the pots will reside on family altars. In this way, Vodou devotees honor ancestral legacies and welcome their loved ones' spirits back into the family home.

Discuss together

How do you stay connected to people important to you who have passed away?

Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know

Vodou **[VOH-doo]**
A religion that believes in one god and that every person and thing is sacred.



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Wilson Bigaud (Haitian, 1931–2010), *Self-Portrait in Carnival Costume*, 1958. Oil on Masonite. 47 7/8 × 16 in. (121.6 × 40.64 cm). Gift of Richard and Ema Flagg, M1978.122. Photo by Efraim Lev-er

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

Religion + Vodou

Exploration Card ★ Haitian Gallery ★ Exploration Card ★ Haitian Gallery ★ Exploration Card

Find and Look

Self-Portrait in Carnival Costume
Wilson Bigaud

Haitian ***kanaval*** **(carnival)** is a season of joyous festivities, religious symbolism, and political activism. Carnival masqueraders wear fanciful clothing to express their cultural identity or become someone else entirely.

In this self-portrait, Wilson Bigaud wears a brightly colored outfit of face paint, gold jewelry, a feather headdress, a shield, and a tomahawk staff. The Taíno people are celebrated in Haitian kanaval as the original inhabitants of **Ayiti (Haiti)**. But Bigaud's clothing seems imagined and inspired by Plains Native American garb from the midwestern United States.

Suits like these are also found in New Orleans, Louisiana, during the carnival festival known as Mardi Gras. Since the 1880s, the Mardi Gras Indians have celebrated the solidarity of Indigenous and Black communities. Like Haiti, New Orleans is home to many people whose ancestors were forcibly displaced from Africa and arrived on lands of displaced Indigenous peoples.

Although we do not know what inspired Bigaud to make his suit look as it does, it reflects the influence of the global world around him: Indigenous, African, and American.

Can you find these details in the clothing?

- ★ Two snakes
- ★ A dragonfly
- ★ Two stars
- ★ Peacock feathers
- ★ A face

Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know ★ Words to Know

diaspora **[dy-ASP-or-ah]**
A group of people who no longer live in their original homeland but continue to maintain their community and culture.

https://youtu.be/KmMrSYP8b58?si=4Yld755N_zRBNy2t

Fritz Scholder (Luiseño American, 1937–2005)
Falling Buffalo, 1973
Acrylic on canvas
68 × 80 in. (172.72 × 203.2 cm)
Gift of Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley M1975.159

Junior Docent School Program Artwork Examples

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Further watching/reading

https://mam.org/exhibitions/homelands/

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https://www.edutopia.org/blog/student-centered-learning-starts-with-teacher-john-mccarthy

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUf6CobelVc

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