

The Hunt for Democracy: The Lion's Perspective

By Meredith Rode

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Until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

--African Proverb

The student was crying quietly, her hands shielding her face, and it was I who had caused her pain. I did not intend to inflict hurt, but hurt was imbedded in the images I displayed and in the words I used to explain.

The topic of the class that session was Greek and Roman art, specifically the representations of African people. The images I shared are not included in the standard texts, and most students graduate believing there were no Black people in the ancient world of Greece

and Rome, except for those in the lands of expanded empire.

As I showed the sculptures, the vase paintings, and the murals that clearly depicted dark people with tightly curled hair, the student who wept cried out, "Why aren't these images in our book? Why have I never seen them until now?"

She knew the answer. She had heard the African proverb about lions and hunters and who writes history, but faced with the reality of what had been missing in her sense of the past, she both raged and suffered.

When I saw the student crying, I said, "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry."

A young man in the back of the room asked, "Are you saying you're sorry that you showed the works?"

"No," I answered. "I'm saying that I'm sorry there is so much pain in history."

For many, perhaps, acknowledging the presence of Black people in ancient Greece and Rome is not important, but I see this as critical information that alters perceptions.

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I am persuaded that a more inclusive vision of our world, both past and present, is crucial for all students.

This is particularly important in my classes at the public University of the District of Columbia, where the student body is largely African-American, with a significant number of international students from Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

I am persuaded that a more inclusive vision of our world, both past and present, is crucial for all students, not just those whose history has been minimized or left out. I believe in a globalized curriculum, and so I cannot present the history of visual expression as I learned it, a history written so clearly from one cultural perspective.

This may not seem the way to democratize the classroom, or to create an atmosphere of tolerance, but I believe it is the only way. If we cannot face the pain of history, and the implications of exclusions and distortions, then we will never really confront the complexities of our common existence.

And I believe that, until we confront those complexities and incorporate them into our world view, we will not feel truly comfortable with each other. Our painful history lurks beneath the surface of even the most simple observations, shadowing our efforts at tolerance and inclusion.

In the terms we currently use, I am a designated white person. Because of how, what, and where I

teach, this is a significant piece of information. I do not share the goal, advocated by many, of a color-blind society. I understand the motive, but I have always felt this approach erases difference.

I prefer recognizing our differences and appreciating them, not denying their existence.

Because of these differences, and because of my own history, my experiences growing up and becoming educated were not the same as the experiences of those who are not white.

While I do not believe in the concept of race as a scientific reality, I do believe in race, gender, ethnicity, and other social categories as created realities that frame our lives.

Examining how these created realities frame our lives—and shape our histories and perceptions—is not easy work. This examination demands a willingness to live with contradictions, acknowledging that cherished beliefs must be relinquished and accepting that often what we've learned represents partial or distorted truth. The lion and the hunter, after all, have very different goals.

I begin classes by emphasizing the importance of recognizing how we know what we know, how much we do not know, and the difficulty of not knowing where our ignorance lies.

I ask students to keep an

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asterisk in their minds that reminds them to ask who is telling a particular story and to mentally footnote data with “as far as we now know.” It’s so easy for all of us to forget that we humans have invented so much of our existence, including the form and content of the college curriculum.

There is a parable I read when I was young. I don’t remember it exactly, but its essence has remained with me and has clearly influenced both how I teach and how I think about what we know. It goes like this.

An elderly rabbi has completed a lecture to the young rabbinical students and asks if there are questions. One of the students in the back of the hall, rises and addresses the teacher respectfully.

“I thank you for the lecture,” he says, “and it was interesting and very clear. I understood it all, and so I have only one question. What if everything is just the opposite?”

This, in my view, is not an arrogant inquiry, but one that is, in a real sense, deeply respectful of learning. It’s a question that is both humble and intellectually stringent. It allows us to question the questions.

There is another story I remember, also from years ago. A noted physicist described how he played a game of Twenty Questions with his

colleagues.

The physicist began with no topic in mind and simply answered the first question, adapting all his succeeding answers to the answer before. Finally, he arrived at an answer that fulfilled the responses to all the twenty questions. He likened this to the process often used in scientific investigation, noting that the answers arrived at are often dependent on the questions that are asked.

As we study in art history classes, and in studio classes as well, it becomes apparent that what we in the modern West assume about art and artists is not applicable to all the world and that universals are elusive.

Most students have absorbed the ideas of the Western tradition and believe that creativity means innovation and that the artist is a rebel. At first, it’s unsettling to realize that these concepts of innovation and nonconformity do not really define the role of the ancient Egyptian tomb painter, the Medieval maker of stained glass windows, or the Aztec sculptor of jaguar deities.

The role of the visual creator and the visual creation, students come to understand, are not the same from time to time and place to place.

To understand the visual creations of the past, and a number of

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traditions of the present, it is vital to understand the very critical ways these traditions differ from the art of the contemporary, industrialized world.

We hold in high regard the tomb paintings of the many Egyptian dynasties, but if we are to consider the painters as artists, we must recognize that the definitions we often use today do not apply.

The tomb painters were seen as craftsmen, artisans whose skill was an important contribution to the culture. They were well-trained and followed a fairly constrained set of rules as to how the images they painted were designed. They were not rebels or non-conformists. They were not “holding the mirror up to society,” nor were they trying to be part of an avant-garde. “Do your own thing” would not have been an acceptable slogan in pursuing their work.

The same holds true for the stained glass maker of Medieval Europe. An artisan, admired for his skill (and as far as we know they were male), he would have been expected to convey aspects of the Christian story for the edification and inspiration of the people.

The content was both prescribed and proscribed, and the style was constrained as well. So, too, the status and condition of the Aztec carver. All of these individual artisans were creating to serve not

self, but the values and beliefs of the community.

The idea of Eurocentrism has been denigrated by its critics, but it is not an inaccurate term. When I ask what the Near East is near to, or what the Far East is far from, the concept of Eurocentrism becomes clear. Europe is the center to which these distance designations relate.

Other terms reveal their origins as well and deserve questioning. The Olmec and the Aztecs did not call themselves Pre-Columbians.

Paleolithic as a time designation does not apply everywhere, and B.C. and A.D. are very specific references to the Christian faith, not concepts shared throughout the world.

When we have confronted these terms and come to understand their meaning, we are perhaps more open to looking at things within their own context. This does not mean no judgments are made, but judgments are made within different frames of reference.

Having these frames of reference, I think, makes it more possible to address images and issues on their own terms. This, in turn, can lead to greater tolerance as a function of understanding how things have come to be.

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another concept that has been subject to ridicule and condemned as compromising stringent content for the sake of promoting self-esteem.

Raising self-esteem is not my purpose, but, in fact, this may be a consequence of learning new information and ways of interpretation that can alter perspectives on both past and present. What is raised by an inclusive curriculum, in my experience, is a greater respect for education and the intricacies of human knowledge.

The presentation of the images of people of African ancestry in a survey of the Greco-Roman era does not undermine that venerable tradition, but expands it and makes the ancient world at once more tangible and more complex.

One student confessed in an essay that when I announced the topic of "Blacks in Antiquity,"² she thought to herself, "How much could there be? There can't be much to show or talk about."

This student expressed surprise at the variety of images in a number of different media and was moved by the fact that the subjects were unmistakably African in appearance: "They didn't look odd or weird or anything." The subjects, she said, looked like "present-day" Black people, and, because the representations were done in classically realistic style, "we get to see how we looked, what type of hair styles

we wore and/or how we dressed."

Through these images, she added, "we have the pleasure . . . of knowing that we, as blacks, were present during such an inspirational time."

This student wrote thoughtfully about the presence of racism at that time and determined that if there was racism, "then the artisans who created these works must have been extremely open minded . . . the type of people who found beauty in everything and were able to put aside their preconceived views to appreciate that beauty."

She ended her essay by asking why, in all her years of school, learning about Greece and Rome, there had been no hint of this reality.

As another young African American female student put it, "I had never considered the presence of Africans in Greece and Rome, and had never been exposed to the idea. It simply was not part of my perception of that time. Seeing the images in class had an extraordinary impact on me. Suddenly, I could think of that part of history as not just theirs but ours."

Is this just building self-esteem, or is it providing a foundation for making important linkages?

What we include and exclude becomes so important because it can deform or enlighten how we

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view the universe and how we behave toward each other.

If our assumptions are wrong, based on incomplete data, then what follows from those assumptions is impaired. We all need structures for interpreting the world. Our brains demand some way of ordering the vast array of stimuli presented, but it becomes too easy to apply our own interpretations or beliefs to other times and other places where they do not fit.

It is terribly important to grasp that looking through one window does not define a vast and varied landscape.

There are many representations in sculptural form of the Aztec deity Xipe Totec. These representations are often strong, but somewhat ambiguous. One may wonder what is covering the figure of the god? What is over his face and why is that glove-like form hanging from his hand? Is that some strange costume? What is going on here?

Initial perceptions often change radically when students learn that Xipe Totec is wearing the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim. Despite the horrific nature of what the statue depicts, what it represents is quite different.

The god is the agent of renewal and regeneration, and the sacrifice is an offering to the higher deities

in gratitude for life. Blood is the ultimate offering, and it has indeed been offered in many parts of the world in ways that those who do not share the same beliefs may find deeply disturbing.

But the ideas of blood sacrifice, even the sacrifice of life, is not really an alien idea. It transcends boundaries of time and belief. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is accepted that while God did not ultimately demand the death of Isaac, Abraham was willing to offer his son's life.

Christians hold in highest reverence the image of the sacrifice of Jesus, and many worship before the image of the crucifixion, often an image depicting, in excruciating detail, the suffering and the bleeding wounds.

Partha Mitter described the initial British response to the visual creations of Hindu India in his book, *Much Maligned Monsters*.³

To the British eye, the many-armed dancing god Shiva and the demon-like goddess Kali were indeed truly monstrous.

Compared to the more familiar and realistic portrayals of the Greek and Roman deities, the Hindu renderings were initially seen as appalling and grotesque. But now the Hindu images are much admired and valued, given prominent display in the prestigious museums of London. The

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images have not changed. How they are seen and understood has.

If we recognize that knowledge can, in fact, affect attitudes, that new information does, in fact, alter how one perceives the world and other human beings, then education as a common—and shared—project of our species takes on profound significance.

The student clientele at my university is largely African American, and much of my energy has gone toward including material that speaks to both African and African American experiences—and the resulting visual expression. Yet I don't neglect other parts of the globe or other traditions.

I've found students from the international community are interested in learning about parts of the world they're unfamiliar with, just as students from the United States are interested in discovering the roots of their personal heritage.

A student from China was amazed by the complex civilizations of Central and South America and the connection to his own traditions. The bronze tripod vases of the Shang dynasty are echoed in the pottery vases of the ancient Americas. The young man marveled, as had his colleagues, at what he hadn't known and how this new knowledge changed his views.

Despite the greater exposure to the multiple realities of the world brought to us through television, the Internet, increased immigration, and world wide travel, we still tend to incorporate these exposures into our pre-existing conceptual frameworks. This reality helps explain the inadequacy and the inappropriateness of efforts to expand curriculum.

In my discipline, the visual arts, there has indeed been an increase of topics covered. But these topics are still offered largely within the Western conceptual frame.

The ancient rock paintings of the Aboriginal people of Australia and their more recently produced bright acrylic canvases are incorporated into surveys that are both on Western terms and in Western terms. The language, the values, the standards, and the interpretations are imposed from an external cultural perspective.

Translation is imperfect at best. Many of the multilingual students in my classes believe that some things are really said best in one language and have no true equivalent in another. In areas other than the hard sciences, I believe this is generally true.

I grew up in the United States, and like others of my time and place, I do not speak fluently anything but English. But my classes are filled with people who

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speak not just two, but perhaps five different languages. Amharic, Xhosa, Urdu, Hindi, Yoruba, Spanish, French, Serbo-Croatian, Tibetan, Vietnamese, Chinese, Italian, Arabic, and Swedish are only some of the languages native to the students in my classes.

We are all here in Washington, D.C., so we usefully communicate in American English. But underneath the words are ideas, experiences, and references that mean many different things.

Students come into an art class, especially one with history and theory attached to it, often with the preconceived notion of art as it has been defined by the Western tradition.

How do we speak of the countless visual images and forms that have been created over many millennia using only the Western vocabulary of art? Terms such as creativity and the aesthetic must be carefully examined for their meaning and analyzed to see how they translate to circumstances quite different from those where the ideas of creativity and aesthetics were developed.

Works from other times, cultures, and traditions have often been force-fit into the Western idea of art, and this sometimes has distorted or deformed the work itself.

This may not bother the perceiver or lessen the experience of

the viewer, but it may do history a disservice, and the work as well. If a creation was not made to be "art" on Western terms, how do we appreciate without violating?

This is not a personal issue. We are always free to respond privately and individually as we will. This is a communal educational issue. How do we teach traditions that were created without reference to the ideas and standards of the dominant Western tradition?

When I say communal here, I mean the global community. The question is as important for classrooms in El Salvador and South Africa as it is for classrooms here in the U.S.A.

At a recent symposium of contemporary Nigerian artists, one presenter said he wanted to be in the center, not marginalized. A fellow Nigerian challenged his position and suggested there was no longer just one center. He pointed out that now there are biennials in Johannesburg as well as Sao Paulo and Venice.

The first artist agreed there were indeed more diversified locations, but argued that they were all part of the same "center," using many of the same curators and attracting the same critics and dealers.

For the most part, this is true of textbooks and curriculum in

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general. The center, the frame of reference, and, quite literally, the point of view are the same and have remained so for a number of years.

Students from other places uncover this cultural bias when they visit Western museums. One student from Africa visited the National Museum of African Art on the mall in Washington, D.C., and responded in a way that reflected her own cultural background.

She did not care for the statues, which she did not consider to be art. She wrote:

As an African, I am quite familiar with objects and statues used for various functions, especially for religious purposes. I do not take lightly these pieces because I know they all carry spiritual forces behind them and so would rather not even look at them.

Another student had a similar response when she saw works from her own tradition. She could not write about these statues and felt burdened by the spiritual presence in the display. But she did feel free to describe and comment on the works of traditions not her own.

A more vehement reaction came from a young man from Cameroon when he saw carvings of the Baoule people of the Ivory Coast.

He knew that these carvings

“were merely duplicating the outer appearance of a deceased person,” and that if the carved figure were placed near the tomb, the spirit of the dead would take up residence in the carving after a few days. The figure would then be kept and commemorated on special occasions.

This student was quite disturbed, then, to walk into the Museum of African Art and see one of the carvings exposed as art. He felt that the spirit inside the carving would not blame him if he were arrested trying to right what he knew was wrong.

He did not carry out his desire to liberate the carving from the glass box where it was incarcerated, but he felt a strong desire to do so.

As other students recognize these intense reactions on the part of their classmates, they are moved to examine their own feelings and to question how the works of one society are to be displayed by another.

These questions are not idle intellectual speculation. Western-style museums are the norm throughout the world, existing in even the smallest towns.

For myself, I am grateful for these museums. I am intrigued and edified by the countless examples of human ingenuity, the extravagance of invention in use of forms and

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materials. Visiting museums is, for me, pleasure of the highest sort. But in recent times, this pleasure is accompanied with the troubled knowledge of the contradictions, and of the disparities of power in both naming and acquisition.

The burial goods and mummy cases of the ancient Egyptians are a marvel and never fail to engage the students regardless of their backgrounds. The students are awed by the skill and inventiveness, amazed at the dedication, engaged in the complexity of such an enduring culture.

They want to know more, and, like me, are grateful to have so many images to appreciate. And yet, there is the question. These creations were not made to be "art," were not carved and painted to be displayed for our eyes.

TTrue, these pieces are now preserved, but not in the way the Egyptians intended. The Egyptians had no word equivalent to art and no concept that can be interpreted as the same. Yet their works have become "art" on terms that were not theirs.

It is the West that established the idea of the aesthetic as something separate and apart from other aspects of life. In *The Hindu View of Art*,⁴ Mulk Raj Anand writes, "The Hindus did not evolve a coherent system of aesthetics.

The plastic arts of sculpture and painting were considered to be purposive arts in the service of the faith."

In considering aesthetics, this author continues, "It is important to understand the differences between the traditions of East and West.

In India, beauty was the aesthetic aspect of the Transcendent spirit." Anand contrasts this perspective with the idea developed in the West of beauty for its own sake as an autonomous emotion.

Rowland Abiodun has written extensively of the aesthetic tradition of the Yoruba of western Africa.⁵ Abiodun uses the term "aesthetic" in discussing the Yoruba approach, but he makes clear that the Western concept it represents is not congruent with Yoruba practice, for to the Yoruba beauty cannot be divorced from the purpose of the visual creation.

Abiodun emphasizes the unity of verbal, visual, and philosophical elements in Yoruba expression and notes that, while these creations are informed by tradition, they are not static. They change.

But, Abiodun points out, innovation "must be appropriate to the meaning and function of the art product, and not be introduced for its own sake."

This contrasts to the modern belief in the original and the

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innovative as desirable in and of themselves.

Visible direct action by the multiple liberation movements in the United States and the end of colonialism in the larger world have brought to the foreground challenges to ways of structuring knowledge. It is clear that we cannot teach in the ways that many of us were taught.

In her book, *Transforming Knowledge*,⁶ Elizabeth Minnich points out that knowledge that is exclusive and claims to be universal and is based on inaccurate or faulty assumptions cannot simply be added onto or undergo "corrections."

"Discoveries indicating the world is round," she notes, "do not merely supplement knowledge shaped by and supportive of the theory that the world is flat."

Minnich offers an example: "Feminist work by and about women is not just missing from the canon: it is incompatible with some of the canon's basic, founding assumptions."

These observations define the challenge we are now forced to confront: how to transform knowledge and the means by which knowledge is transmitted.

This is surely the challenge in my field of the visual arts. I believe that this same challenge applies to most of the disciplines of higher

education. This challenge will intensify as all the issues I have touched on here become more prominent. As our students become aware of the difficulties inherent in a world trying to integrate multiple and often disparate perspectives, they will push us further.

Ultimately, an approach that acknowledges our human complexities and contradictions provides a way for us to honor our diversities with integrity.

Developing the necessary new conceptual frameworks offers the most effective way to create a truly welcoming, inclusive, and democratic environment. When we share the study of many different aspects of human experience, there is less chance of anyone feeling as if they are outside looking in.

New awarenesses create new possibilities, both for individual learning and for societal change. What we have been doing no longer meets the conditions of our time, and what we must create will require a relinquishing of ideas and structures so familiar that they seem inviolable truths. What evolves must come through dialogue, exchange and difficult debate.

The students who engage these issues reflect the diversity that will soon be the norm in many classrooms. These students are not dismayed by the enormity of the task, but welcome what they've

experienced as true intellectual inquiry.

They know that history has not been whole, that learning is partial,

and they understand that we must all work together to ensure that the lion's story is heard. ■

Endnotes

¹ Student quotes are from assigned papers.

² Snowden, 1970.

³ Mitter, 1993 (1977).

⁴ Anand, 1987

⁵ Abiodun, 1987

⁶ Minnich, 1990

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