

The History of the World: Phase 2b

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

School of Art and Design

University of Michigan

Ann Arbor, Michigan

April 25, 2007

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Abstract

History is an artificial construction that reflects actual events but can never fully convey its multiplicity and complexity. The translation of historical texts into pictorial form leaves gaps where the visual details were, thus leaving space for personal interpretation and consciously constructed anachronism. The very act of painting is an exercise in historiography: writers of history perform the act of “filling in” whenever they create a tidy story from real, disjointed events. A painting style that proclaims its subjectivity calls attention to the inherently authored qualities of historical accounts.

Acknowledgements

I, Alison Byrnes, being of sound mind of body, do hereby thank the following people for their respective roles in making my thesis possible:

My committee,

Jim Cogswell and Janie Paul, who are great not because they are painters, but because they really listen; John Klausmeyer who keeps it real, and Sara Forsdyke, who introduced me to the world of Classics in Michigan.

My pals,

Brent Fogt, for listening to me yell “BRENT” a few too many times, for all of the JTB’s, and all of the video and audio recordings I made of the “real Brent;” Toby Millman, for whom I shall forever waive fees for petting Inca for all of the shared cakes and gallery space; Gabriel Harp, for stirring things up; Jim Leija, who knew just when I needed cocktails, crock-pot cookery, and karaoke; Jason Parnell, for consistently distracting me with wine imbibery; Helen Spencer Pantazis, whose cookies always showed up on my doorstep right at the crucial moment; Matthew Binetti, for his optimism and managerial advice.

My family, for not asking too many questions;

Inca, who literally stuck with me through it all, and left her mark by leaving her hair embedded in every painting I ever made and is the best little stink-pie.

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Introduction

I make funny paintings about history: that is the simple way of putting it. Within that statement, three key words deserve much elaboration – “funny,” “paintings,” and “history;” and the word “I” cannot help but be present throughout.

Working within and expanding upon the canon of history painting, I am interested in portraying the problem of historiography itself. History is an artificial construction that reflects actual events but can never fully convey its multiplicity and complexity. I started off with the question, “Why can’t I make up history too, just as do writers and historians?” I began painting eminent historical figures in mid-century modern settings as a comment on how the mind arbitrarily constructs images of history. I portray Roman emperors as a means of combining my two seemingly disparate interests – Classics and Art. By focusing on similarities and patterns in history, I point out that the world leaders making up the traditional iconography of history painting are no different from other people, and, thus, that their position in the social scale is arbitrary. I rely on the recognizability of historical figures through my use of satire, the function of which is to use sarcasm for the purpose of deriding folly. This starting point led me to address complex issues related to perception and memory as they relate to historiography.

I add another layer, wherein I use painting as an investigation into the problem of translating text into a visual representation. By working directly from historical texts I have discovered that I am left to fill in many of the details, as were artists throughout time, thus leaving space for my personal interpretation and consciously constructed anachronism. The very act of painting then becomes an exercise in historiography: writers of history must perform a certain amount of “filling in” as well. I seek to call attention to the inherently authored qualities of historical accounts by using a painting style that proclaims its subjectivity.

The way I paint and what I paint are inextricably linked. The visual representation of my subject matter embodies my concept. I want to find equilibrium between portraying a kitschy, deadpan representation of my subject and portraying my inherently public subjects in a didactic way. I strive to be smart and avoid being overly academic. The specificity of historical subject matter and painting as a color field creates tension that often thwarts the viewers’ expectations about either domain and demonstrates my dual, conflicting role as an artist and scholar.

Kindred Spirits and Influences

Elizabeth Peyton

I used to want to paint just like Elizabeth Peyton. I know that is not only impossible but also undesirable. I still share with her an interest in the celebrity. Celebrities (with historical figures as a subset) function to provide a common ground to people who are otherwise unconnected.

Leonardo diCaprio as Louis XIV (1996) is a piece that most strongly links my work to hers.



Florine Stettheimer

Florine Stettheimer, a wealthy socialite of the early 20th century, was painting nothing like the rest of the art scene (and she had access to the avant-garde art world – she was good friends with Duchamp). I admire her commitment to her artistic vision. I share with her a similar way of framing a composition – slightly elevated, looking down on “the scene” as if it is a stage. I also see a link between our treatment of the figure, in its scale in relation to the overall scene, as well as the semi-flat way they are rendered. I also see similarities in the vibrant use of color we both use. But, I swear, I did not know about her until after I started painting the way I do.

Spring Sale at Bendel's, 1921

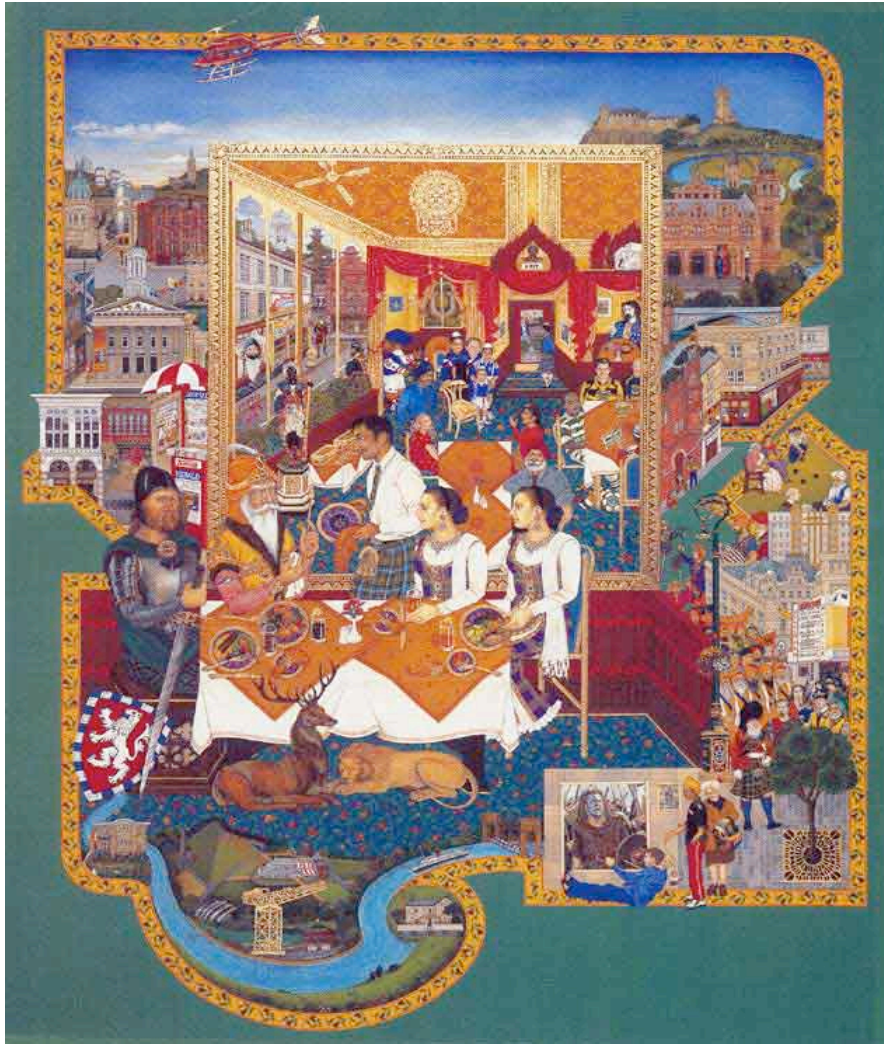
Charlotte Salomon
Charlotte Salomon created a hundreds of autobiographical paintings called *Life? Or Theatre?* during World War II. I admire her creative use of narrative in visual modes – here, she depicts the relationship with her stepmother over time, with the progression of time moving from left to right and back to front. The passing of time thus works within the visual simultaneity of the picture plane.



Horace Pippin

Horace Pippin was a folk artist who often painted historical events. He often uses non-linear, multiple perspectival viewpoints in the same frame. I see our similarities in these factors, as well as the “flattened” appearance of both architectural elements and figures.

John Brown Going to his Hanging.
1942



The Singh Twins

Working as a pair, the Singh Twins create pieces reminiscent of Persian miniatures that combine traditional motifs inspired by their Indian heritage and references to contemporary America. I share their impulse to combine various subjects into an anachronistic whole. They also make use of a myriad of patterns in every piece, as I do. I deeply admire, and hope to attempt some day, their level of detail.

Mr. Singh's India, 1999/2000



Henry Darger

It seems like all of the artists I feel the most artistically connected to were working circa 1920-30. I admire the epic quality of both his individual pieces and the totality of his corpus of works. He uses the grandeur of the battle scene with a children's storybook illustrative style, combining the grand with the everyday. I too seek to marry the grand and the everyday in my works.

from
Realms of the Unreal
mid-twentieth century

Jacob Lawrence.

I admire the visual rhythm apparent in the works of Jacob Lawrence. He repeats representational shapes and lines so that they create a larger pattern.

Firewood
1942





Pieter Bruegel and Hieronymus Bosch

The similarity I see between my work and the paintings of these Netherlandish masters is that many items of fine detail make up an overarching composition removed from the specifics within. Also, both use a viewpoint that is elevated with a high horizon line so that objects on the ground plane have optimal visibility.

The Massacre of the Innocents, 1566

The Garden of Earthly Delights, c. 1500





The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death.

Frances Lee Gestner created a series of painstakingly detailed recreations of actual death scenes that occurred under mysterious circumstances to use as detective training tools. They lovingly combine the precious and the macabre. I am interested in the diorama as art form, and see dioramas as related to my paintings, whose scenes often take place in box-like spaces. The Nutshell Studies also relate the idea of uncertainty surrounding concrete historical events.

Illuminated Manuscripts.

I see a stylistic link between my work and manuscripts. I am also interested in the fact that they are pictures that are part of a text because my work is often an illustration of a particular textual work. This image, from the *Vienna Genesis* (Syria, 6th Century), contains a scene using continuous narrative, wherein the passage of time is depicted by having the same figure appears several times in the same scene.



Creative Work

Painting was presented as a carrot on the end of the stick in the art educational system I was raised in. Permission to paint was granted only after a strict set of prerequisites had been completed. “You cannot enroll in painting until the following courses have been satisfactorily completed: Drawing I, Drawing II, Figure Drawing, Color.” To get into some of these one must have completed 2D as well as 3D design. Painting was only for very seasoned artists who had already been in training for many years – it was not to be attempted by the uninitiated.

After going through all of these more mundane foundations classes twice – I had also experienced the foundations sequence in the School of Human Ecology (known in its former days as Home Economics) in my life as an Interior Design student – I had learned the principles of linear perspective and proportion a few too many times and was thoroughly “over it.” One can spend countless hours completing a drawing in proper perspective, with “correct” proportion and lovely shading to boot, and it still won’t look like much. I recall my Creative Writing teacher in high school, Mrs. Weir-Martell, told us that you can’t write in the vernacular until you prove that you can write in proper English first, using Mark Twain as the exemplar of this theory). Similarly, you have to go through the dry practice of learning how to draw “right” and have at least made a decent stab at it before you can decide to reject it all as arbitrary. This is what I have done.

After all, the rules of art are a form of social control. Like singing, anyone *can* make a picture at any given moment, whether in possession of a master’s degree or a kindergarten degree. Rules, permits, degrees are a way of propagating and elevating of a particular set of standards over others, nearly always in order to protect the interests of the elite. This elevation of particular set of standards over another is the same as the arbitrary value that figures of popular history possess.

After creating several paintings following more-or-less the rules of oil painting (figures in proportion, painting in “layers,” linear and atmospheric perspective, etc.), each taking approximately ten weeks to complete with mediocre results, I decided to “loosen up a bit.” I was not enjoying this painting process. It was fraught with tension – I could really mess it up at any moment, or be working on fatally-flawed drawing from the get-go. I had taken to drawing pictures of my dog on napkins in continuous-line contour at bars with friends. My artist roommate told me that these were often “really good” and captured the little poses of my dog, often the subject matter, more truly than anything made pain-stakingly ever could. I decided to draw my next painting as quickly as I would draw on a napkin, for bad or good, and then deal with the consequences. I also wanted to try different paint. I set out to buy some latex house paint, which the same roommate used on her spontaneous, non-representational works – and she *always* seemed to be having a good time. I set out for the big-box home improvement store and accidentally bought enamel paint instead. I liked the small size of the jars.



Before

Three Members of Poison and One of Moteley Crue, Which One Doesn't Belong?

Oil on canvas, 24" x 48," Fall 2002



After

Modern Living (Twiggy)

Enamel on canvas, 36" x 48," Winter 2003

My new drawing technique involved a process introduced in a drawing class – holding the pencil in my fist and drawing with the entire forearm. I wanted to free myself from the constraints of everything embodied in what I had come to understand made up a “good” drawing. The result was a scene with mixed scales, “off” perspective, and awkward proportion. I then resolved to cover this “bad” drawing with the best painting I could do. The enamel paint offered high-gloss sheen, and a limited palette of saturated colors, which led to well-unified color schemes, excellent coverage, and best of all, ten-minute drying time. Blending and gradating the paint were nearly impossible because of this, and layering options were also limited because the enamel does not adhere well to itself. Flat color combined with flattened perspective, and this prevailing flatness became tempered with new tropes, such as pattern and narrative-advancing compositions. The figures tended to command the same visual weight as did sofas or billboards – or at least not be the only visual focus. I began to establish my own, custom “rules for painting.”

Foremost to my painting practice is the Pleasure Principle. I have to enjoy the process in order to sustain it.

In general, I tend to define myself in terms of negatives. I know what I do NOT like, what I do NOT identify with, who I do NOT want to emulate, more than I can articulate what I DO like. A simple method for putting this tendency into practice in painting is to “do the opposite.” Think of a rule and do the opposite: painters should block in their compositions with dilute color washes and build details through layers – I would draw out every detail in pencil and then fill it in like a paint-by-number. Painters should, according to the guidelines of atmospheric perspective, depict fine detail in the foreground and portray it as becoming hazy with distance – I paint every blade of grass in the foreground as well as in the background. I go to art shows and the pieces that I thought were terrible stick in my mind.

I insist on the “hand of the artist,” me, being present in my paintings. I don’t want there to be any chance that my work could be confused with someone else’s. I prefer to present a mode of depiction that comes naturally from me, rather than fit within the mold of what paintings are “supposed” to be, especially if they’re supposed to be “naturalistic,” attempting to capture the world as the eyes perceive it. My paintings cannot but reflect the visual world of which I am a part, but at the same time filter

through my thoughts and experiences, relying heavily on the connection between my mind and my hand – and a lot can change on that short journey.

[Note: After espousing the wonders of enamel paint above, I must point out that I have returned to oils. Enamel truly is the greatest, but its permanence is uncertain, and my legacy, in the end (see below) is the first priority in all of this. I now use oils in a way that closely emulates the enamel, using fast-drying alkyds and galkyd medium for shininess. I also tried gouache and egg tempera in the interim.]

I have formed my own canon of self-imposed rules and principles that apply more or less consistently across my body of paintings.

1. Arbitrary Perspective



The Year 69
Egg tempera
and oil on
panel,
24" x 24,"
2006

I draw perspective as I focus on each element in a scene, which results in multiple perspective points. This more closely resembles the way we look at the world than the fixed one-eyed viewpoint of Western linear perspective. The eyes can take in a whole scene, but can only focus on a small part of that scene at once. The rest becomes the domain of peripheral vision until focus is placed elsewhere. The many simultaneous points of view relate to the multiple viewpoints that form the historical moment being represented.

2. Point of View



*Alexander the
Great vs. Darius
II*

Enamel on
canvas,
24" x 24,"
2004

The space in my paintings is nearly always set up so that the viewer is elevated and looking down onto the space, as if from the balcony of a theater. The scenes, thus, resemble stage-like spaces. The horizon line is always in the upper half of the picture plane. All elements of the scene are within view because of this set up; figures in the foreground do not block figures or set pieces behind them. The actors play out the historical action for the viewer unimpeded, in full sight. This is analogous to the impulse of the historian to lay everything bare and bring all details of a person's life into the open – things that would have been hidden during the person's actual lifetime.

3. Compartmentalization

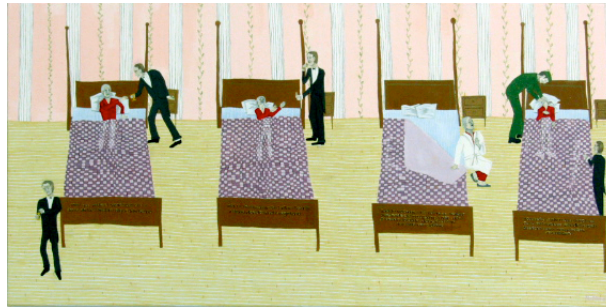


Agrippina

Egg tempera
on panel,
20" x 16,"
2006

The rectilinear plane of the painting is equated to the rear wall of a stage-like interior, creating a compartment in which the scene takes place. Outdoor scenes are divided into smaller sub-scenes through use of architectural elements. The composition then can resemble a dollhouse, or a miniature diorama. This dividing of space is parallel to the compartmentalization of history, wherein one conceives of history in terms of discreet events or “civilizations” that rise and fall one at a time, with no interaction, removed from the complex interaction of real time and space.

4. Repetition



*The Death of
Tiberius According
to Suetonius*

Oil on canvas,
24" x 48,"
2005

Repetition with variation within the composition often serves to advance the narrative point. A viewer can focus on what is different in each case, thus emphasizing the anomalous. Repetition also contributes to visual unity, creating a “meta” pattern in a space that also contains decorative patterning (see below). This reflects the idea that history is cyclic. Repetition can also serve to set up a visual joke. Initial iterations set up expectations, leading to the final punch line. Often the repetition resembles a grid (see immediately below)

5. Grid (frontality)



*Presidents and
Emperors; First
Ladies and
Empresses
Diptych*

Gouache on
paper, each
12" x 9,"
2005

A grid, visible or implied, intended or intuited, is often used in my paintings as a compositional device. The grid is most useful in its ability to provide frontality to all of the elements in a space – when there are several of anything, in order to be able to see them all at once, they must be stacked vertically rather than left in a pile. It’s like hanging a show of paintings “Salon style” rather than placing them in a bin to be flipped through. Everything is visible for the sake of the viewer. The diagrammatic nature of the grid attempts to abstract the past, create (artificial) order, and even predict the future.

6. Shape (Geometric)



*Archduke Franz
Ferdinand as Helen
of Troy*

Oil on panel
16" x 16,"
2006

I use geometric shapes to break up the overall space of my paintings although 90 degree angles are rare (see drawing technique above). Because architectural elements form the basis for composition, rectilinear shapes provide the framework for the organic figures within. Representational shapes combine to form a conflated hybrid shape that defamiliarizes to create unusual relationships. Singular elements within the composition are taken out of categorical isolation.

7. Scale



Livia

Egg tempera
on panel,
20" x 16,"
2006

In many of my paintings, multiple scales exist simultaneously. The figures can be out of scale in relation to their surroundings, or other figures. Figures might be too big or too small for their surroundings, serving to set them apart and draw attention to their position. Hierarchical scale, which has a long tradition in the history of art, is a device used to denote relational importance – a larger figure has higher status than smaller figures. Altering the expectations of scale is a way for me to insert myself into the scene – serving as evidence that I have made a judgment about what or who is important.

8. Symmetry



Nero
Enamel on
canvas,
36" x 48,"
2003

Symmetry, or near symmetry, not only contributes to a balanced composition, it also reflects the tidy form of historical narratives. The world does not exist as a series of well-composed frames, and the events that occur in the world do not exist as a series of short stories with a well-developed story arch.

9. Figuration



Figures appear in every painting. They serve as areas of high detail and focus in an overall composition that contains abstracted elements in large flat or patterned areas. They serve as a contrast to the geometric, architecturally-based compositional structure. In order to convey the individuality of these characters, I rely on stereotyped visages. History is understood as being made by people, or actors. This allows history to be viewed as a simplification of a complex system into single actions. Emphasis on the figures of history is a reflection of a particular, factoid-based, way of seeing history.

10. Color

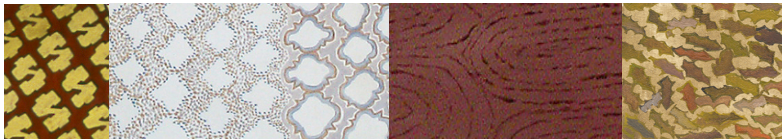


*Ben and
Deborah
Franklin as the
Bundies*

Enamel on
canvas,
30" x 40,"
2005

I use a color palette inspired by decorative arts of the 1960s and 1970s. They are the colors of the “not-too-distant-past.” I extensively referred to issues of *Good Housekeeping* from the 60s until I bought them at an estate sale, until the color combinations became ingrained in my mind. This sort of palette often means combining earthy tones with more saturated hues. The anachronistic color reflects the subjects out of their time as well.

11. Pattern



Each painting features several patterns. These are areas of intense detail, serving also to compete with the figures as a focus of visual attention. The patterns are not perfect with a regular repeat and predictable spacing in the way that the textiles, wallpapers, and floorboards of the real world are – they reflect the “hand of the artist” to a full extent. I paint the patterns spontaneously, without drawing tools, so they tend to wobble and change from one section to another. The usual predictability of a pattern is foiled, stimulating attention from the viewer, even in an “off-putting” way. This signals that “something is not quite right here.”

Pattern also embodies the principle of “High Production Value” (HPV). One of the theories to which I adhere is that evidence of time value increases visual value and intrinsic value. “So what if the drawing is wonky – I make up for it with the love I put back in.” The patterns are the manifestation of my personal work ethic. The work ethic is offered as an objective element in an art world full of subjective judgments and values.

12. Smooth texture, thin, shiny paint

I strive to make my painterly surface as smooth as possible. I add two layers of gesso and then sand it to ensure that no canvas weave remains and have lately worked on panel in order to circumnavigate the weave altogether. I apply smooth, flat paint, which does not mold itself to the shape of the brush. Occasionally lint drifts into the paint and if I catch it in time I scrape it out so that no trace remains, lest it cause a tiny shadow of its presence to appear. Smoothness is a texture, but I see the surface of my paintings as negative texture: I give them texture in that there is none. With my emphasis on pattern and detail, texture would contribute to too much busyness. A smooth surface makes the detail visible. I add a medium to the paint, which not only allows it to flow flatly, but also adds high shine to the final appearance. The sheen adds an element of seediness to subjects that are often portrayed as lofty.

13. Basis in Drawing



*Wrong Exam
Answers:
Leopards – People
with Skin Disease
Healed by Jesus*

Gouache on
paper,
9" x 12,"
2006

My paintings very closely follow the drawing on which they are based. The edge of the paint reflects the line in graphite that preceded it. Every object is cleanly delineated from its surroundings. My painting process resembles that of filling in a paint-by-number. I create my framework and then fill in details that serve the pre-determined story.

14. Narrative

The mind cannot but make connections by its very nature as a complex web. It craves stories and creates them when none exist.

Elements of Literary Narrative (Lye)

Time and ...

change; therefore...

motives for or reasons for change; to be found in...

a conflict, or confrontation, or environmental or contextual alteration

Continuity -- relationship of incidents in some comprehensible fashion, according to time or action or idea

Selection (as one cannot include everything) -- and therefore... exclusions, and also...

connections (bridgings of the 'gaps' of exclusion, selection) -- coincidence, significant repetition, motifs, juxtaposition, contiguity

A beginning and an ending, however indefinite

A narrator (the story must get told), and therefore... a perspective

Some sort of setting or context (an invoked world, with presumably relevant details)

Actors...

and hence relationships.

When I paint a historical narrative, I must condense these elements onto the plane of the picture. "Historical narratives usually describe some kind of change across time" (Maza 5). Lives are not stories, though stories can be found within them, nor are upheavals, political struggles, or agricultural revolutions. The elements of history, whence stories are constructed, do not occur for the benefit of advancing "the plot."

15. History



Napoleon in His Study

Jacques-Louis David, 1812



Napoleon

Enamel on canvas, 24" x 30," 2005

European academics had long considered history painting – with subjects drawn from classical history and literature, the Bible, and mythology – as the highest form of artistic endeavor...” (Stokstad 922). During the post-Renaissance heyday of painting, History painting, like the oil painting techniques employed, was considered at the top of the hierarchy of painting. A painter who chose historical subjects (including, and in fact dominated by, Biblical history) accepted the responsibility of educating the viewer about virtue, heroism, or piety. Next in line came portraiture, whose loftiness was limited to capturing the character of the subject, a mere mortal. Landscape was at the bottom of the ladder, though I would say that this ranking has become inverted today. Somewhere in between then and now, the “purpose” of art became aesthetic reflection, and the art-viewing public was not so much in favor of being “didactic-ed at”).

During the eighteenth century, the time was ripe for historical subjects drawn from ancient Greece and Rome. The excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii commenced in 1738 and 1748 respectively, prompting the material culture of Roman society to enter popular consciousness and well as contribute to exponential growth in knowledge about how Romans lived. Johann Winckelmann, the “father of modern art history,” proclaimed Greek art as the “most perfect to come from human hands” (Gardner 848).

Artists who painted historical scenes did not do so in order to propagate scholarly knowledge about their subjects – historical paintings provide an implied metaphor for the society in which, and for whose benefit, they are produced. I am no different in this respect.

16. Pop culture



Gladiator

Directed by
Ridley Scott,
2000

My paintings rely on a literary history for information regarding facts, events, people, intentions, motives, and interpretations – in short, for the story. A cultural item’s availability to the masses does not preclude its belonging to the realm of “high” culture – after all, every yokel knows what the *Mona Lisa* is, but this fact does not remove it from the canon of fine art toward the magazine rack of pop-culture. Popular visual resources provide the “set” details – how it will look. In painting, these factors are no small consideration. They *are* the painting (they are why one thousand “Madonnas and Child” are each unique, even though the “story” is constant).

17. Anachronism



*The Battle of
Actium*

Enamel on
canvas,
60” x 72,”
2003

I am a current participant in the two-thousand-year-old practice of depicting Romans in pictorial form. I intentionally place the Roman historical figures into

anachronistic settings and costumes, or both, in order to draw direct parallels between the society in which I live and ancient Roman society. I also believe that avoiding anachronism is completely futile, so I choose instead to wholeheartedly embrace it, using it to my advantage, rather than viewing elements out of their time as a “mistake.” The search for historical truth is like a parabola, you can “approach” truth but never actually touch it.

I have identified two kinds of anachronism – anachronism of details and anachronism of values. Anachronism of details is the sort wherein two elements that would have never interacted due to considerations of chronology or spatial distance are able to “be in the same room.” Examples of this are the famous trumpeter wearing a watch in the film *Ben Hur*, and the appearance of Socrates in a high school classroom thanks to the time machine in *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. And, of course, one of these examples was an accident and the other was intentional. Anachronism of values occurs when someone from one point in time projects contemporary modes of thought onto people of the past. Examples of this might be judging the Romans as colonizers (which they were) in light of our own post-colonial intellectual framework, or displaying an epic Roman film via the twentieth-century technology of the motion picture, which demonstrates to an audience of the second millennia its own technological “progress.” My paintings reflect the latter by means of the former.

See Appendix I.

18. Humour



*Parallel Lives:
Emperor Claudius
and President
Zachary Taylor*

Oil on panel,
16” x 20,”
2006

All of my creative work contains an element of humour. Humour takes precedent over any other attribute of medium, subject matter or style. Humour in art seems to be a leveling force, allowing entry into a cultural form that often takes itself far too seriously. This is not to say that the practice of humour is not serious itself, or that practitioners do

take themselves and their work as important. I use humour as a complex form of criticism, often in reaction to the difficult love-hate relationship I have with my subject matter. My paintings are populated with figures of ambivalent accomplishments – forming the canon of history for the contributions they have made to the “advancement of humankind,” while often serving patriarchal, colonial, un-environmental causes.

Humour is foremost, and foremost to humour is recognizability. One cannot get the joke if one does not know what a chicken or a road is. I must choose subjects that have made it into the canon of popular culture so that an art audience, which is not necessarily a history audience, recognizes them and can thus participate in the message I am communicating.

In addition, the type of humour I use is satire, a form of wit devised to attack human vice. People who have been traditionally excluded from the canon of history deserve earnest attention. Those who struggle should not be derided. *That* is not funny. Satire only works on those with power.

Discussion

Since there have been Romans, various individuals separated by time and space have felt connected to them personally. Pope Gregory I in the sixth century felt such a connection to the pagan emperor Trajan that he wept in prayer for him and thus saved his soul (Davis 77). I began my higher education with a degree in Classics, so my passion for Roman history both precedes and parallels my development in painting. History is a discipline dominated by text; thus issues relating to “word and image” arise when considering visual representations of history. I am interested in the reconciliation between the events offered by a historical text and how one visualizes the picture of those events in the imagination. I have attempted various strategies to investigate the gap between the historical word and the visual image: “translating” directly from historical texts into a pictorial form, forging symbolic connections both between persons and surroundings and between persons and other persons, or teasing out how my memory of texts, school, and ubiquitous visual sources (illustrations, art, movies) have shaped my conceptions of history.

I remember feeling terrible the week after I completed my degree requirements in Classics and Classical Humanities. I had no indication that all of my loving devotion to declensions and “future more perfect” conditionals would ever pay off. I had worked so hard for four years, and I facing the reality of work as a barista, thought that maybe I really had earned a “loser” degree. Not for two more years did I justify my exclusive immersion in the study of Classics by using Roman history in painting. I now view my study of Classics as a calculated move that served as a necessary prerequisite to entering the field of studio art.

Originally, I created history paintings in order to question popular stereotypes that Romans were either austere rhetoricians or colonizing soldiers. I wanted to create visual images in alignment with my conceptions of the people about whom I was reading. My favorite source of inspiration was the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius, largely a titillating gossip rag transformed by time into an important historical document. I had to create these images. Ancient Rome was a large, complex society with many of the same issues and social dynamics as contemporary American society. Both have been dominant world powers. Through the devices outlined above, I am able, in a subtle way, to comment on American culture and politics.

While investigating how Romans have been portrayed visually, I discovered that depictions of more or less constant subject matter have changed in different societies at different times. Medieval manuscripts feature illuminations of historical Romans in contemporaneous garb and settings – Antony and Caesar appear in ermine robes upon castle turrets. What do these “inaccuracies” say about medieval values in comparison to those of America, found in film and television? Through this research, I realized that my own portrayal of the people of other cultures was also a reflection of my own values as a reaction to the culture that has been thrust upon me. I sought to find out how cultural associations affect perceptions of historical “truth.”

“Truth” must filter through the totality of one’s experiences. W.J.T. Mitchell, in his influential work, *Iconology*, contends, “Consciousness itself is understood as an activity of pictorial production, reproduction, and representation...” (16). Mitchell seeks to

emphasize the “reciprocity and interdependence” between mental and physical images (17). A physical object (or person) in the real world corresponds with its image in the mind of the observer: in turn, the images in the mind of the observer influence the way the observer perceives the real world. Through painting, I retranslate the images in my mind created through observation, memory, and imagination, into physical form again.

The inherent difference between word and image is that words nearly always follow a linear structure, while images present information in the “complex web,” or network, model. That is, our brains are networks of synapse connections and thus retrieve information via the network model. The network connects information not only chronologically, but also by subject, personal association, or mnemonic. Images present information in a simplified network that also evokes time, subject, and association. Alison Sharrock, in her article “Representing Metamorphosis” states it this way: “The essential difference, it might be held, between visual and literary representations lies in chronicity; that is, visual texts (icons/images) tend to be synchronic, presenting all their material at once, while verbal texts are diachronic, presenting their material in a narrative or quasi-narrative sequence” (106). I see the shift from linear, diachronic text to synchronic image as an action similar to the modifications that writers of history must perform when arranging disparate events into a unified narrative.

Where does a reader of an event find information with which to fill in the gaps? Murray McGillivray, in his article, “Creative Anachronism: Marx’s Problem with Homer, Gadamer’s Discussion of ‘the Classical,’ and Our Understanding of Older Literatures,” addresses the process by which anachronism creeps into our perceptions of history. He relates the experience of teaching literature of the distant past, in his case, *Beowulf*, when he asked his students to describe the picture they had in their minds when they read the first feast scene. This conjured up images of a turreted castle, hung with tapestries, furred and bodiced figures imbibing large steins of beer over a huge roast of meat, and jugglers entertaining the crowd. McGillivray determines that these images of “The Middle Ages” were inspired by popular culture depictions known to Americans of today, such as Dungeons and Dragons, films about King Arthur, and *Conan the Barbarian*. He concludes that the pop-culture derived conception “was so powerful that it caused them to ignore the actual words of the text at several points, and to build an imaginative picture of the world of the poem in spite of the actual details the poem provides, rather than upon those details” (403). McGillivray points out that tradition serves as a point of familiarity that aids understanding, with pop-culture being a part of that tradition. There must be a shared tradition between a source and its recipients; or, when faced with an unknown, “we are likely to make conscious or unconscious analogies to codes with which we are familiar, whether from popular-culture images or from cultural and social presuppositions” (405). The less one knows about a topic, the more one relates it to topics that one does know. As more knowledge is gained, one can make comparisons internally within the topic. For an American, viewing other cultures in terms of American culture is the most accessible strategy for beginning to understand difference. Likewise, I fill in the gaps with my form of commentary – the visual culture which as affected me.

The past can only be interpreted through the lens of the self. As Martyn Thompson puts it, “A historian’s world is always and quite self-evidently a present world since historians can only construct their accounts of the past in the present with and from

materials (sources, documents, and previous accounts) that are all present to them” (261). I am interested in portraying the problems of historiography itself – that history is an artificial construction, reflecting actual events but never fully conveying its multiple realities. The historian is always present, and attempts at objective relating of information through a disembodied author are merely an insidious mask on this fact. Similarly, images of history represent only the subjective point of view of the image-maker.

Texts almost never offer “set” details when recounting history, such as what the figures were wearing or what the cityscape surrounding them looked like; but these details are essential to pictorial production. I have discovered that I am left to fill in many of the details, thus leaving space for my personal interpretation and anachronism informed by pop culture. The very act of painting becomes an exercise in historiography: writers of history must perform the act of “filling in” as well. The issue of subjectivity in history is one that confronts any historical account, written or painted, so I have begun to direct my interest to historical subjects in general.

Simulations of my Thought Process

In which we consider the nature of history: a dialogue

My paintings and other creative work serve as an exploration of the conventions of history – how it is done, how it is taught, and how it is portrayed. Why is history important? Why does history take the form it does? What is the nature of history? By tracing the history of the study of history, I can find out the origins of these conventions and discover what it is I'm up against.

Etymology of the word

Offering the history of a word, and its ancient roots, eases one into a subject that can otherwise be too abrupt. Especially when the topic is something that most everyone thinks she knows a little something about. I have heard intelligent people still very recently try to pull the old “her-story” bit because they think it is a tradition steeped in paternalism. Do they really believe that the possessive pronoun “his” and the noun “history” share the same linguistic root? They do not.

In Homeric Greek, earliest use of ἱστορία is as a judge, arbiter, witness – the sort of person trusted to make judgements (Press 23-24).

This seems to have come full circle to represent the role that historians currently hold. They have done something to give them standing in the community so that we trust them when they tell us about the past. Usually we trust them because they have a Ph.D., or simply because they were able to get a book published.

By the time of Herodotus, ἱστορία means “learning or knowing by inquiry” (Liddell and Scott)(Press 29). For Aristotle, it is a stage in the process of inquiry (Press 33).

A pity this definition has fallen out of use. History is a process, not an absolute truth.

The first instance in Latin “historia” occurs in Trimmicus by Plautus, referring to events in the lives of persons, and first-hand observations (Press 44). Cicero uses the word to refer to factual accounts (Press 47). He considers it a subcategory of “narrative” – the part concerned with things remote from memory of one’s own time. This he contrasts with fibula – things not true and do not resemble truth; and argumentum – accounts that are fictitious, but could have occurred (Press 48).

The ancient concept of history already points to elements in the discipline that still hold true today but are not often acknowledged; that history is determined by the one who decides to set it down – by writing, usually – and that the one who does the setting down does so usually in a narrative form. I seek to call attention to the inherently authored qualities of historical accounts by using a painting style that proclaims its subjectivity.

Forms of history are a cultural organization. Early forms emerged as myths, epics, and chronicles (Susman 8).

Myths are stories about the gods; epics are stories about heroes and have sometimes been found to be based in reality. It's like they say, "write (or transmit orally) what you know." Every idea can be linked to another. Both myths and epics are stories. Stories are easy to remember. Chronicles are more like lists and more dependent on being written because it is hard to remember a list. That's why you write it down. (Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" is a list that became a song, so it is a list that is easy to remember).

History as cyclic.

"History, then, is taken to be circular and repetitive. Therefore, neither history as a whole nor any individual historical event can have any particular meaning or value; since if a thing or an event comes to pass over and over again in just the same way, then no one instance of the type can have any more or less meaning than any other. None of them has any meaning in itself; only the type or form of the thing, which is eternal" (Press 7). The result is pessimism and unmet spiritual needs (Press 8).

History was not always conceived of as a straight line, or a jagged line (or conceived of concretely at all). The ancient Greeks, though they never stated it so explicitly, thought of history in cyclical terms. History was going nowhere. Did they not have to live up to the notion of progress (the "myth" of progress) whereby each generation had to earn more income than it's parents, and "grow" (I hate that term) their businesses, and settle into a safe job so that they might be able to provide health care for their children. Actually, they thought of history as repetitive and degrading. The idea of the Ages of Man held that humankind formerly enjoyed a "Golden Age" followed by a "Silver Age," et cetera down to the "Iron Age" of diminished heroism and corruption experienced by the people who wrote the sources that came down to us that enabled us to know they had ever conceived of the world thusly. The human race was like a T-shirt, purchased and in its most vibrant color, then softened and faded through washing and wear, then one day pit-stained and full of holes with the decal peeling off. It was the kind of entropy that could not be reversed.

Perceptions of history affect views of the afterlife. The Romans, who did not yet have access to the Judeo-Christian view of history (see below), did not have a strong sense of an afterlife. The concept of "religion" is most often associated with human interaction with the gods. Often inextricably linked to this are notions about what happens when the body ceases to live. Even though the religious beliefs of the Romans were disparate and often waning, as John Ferguson puts it in his *Religions of the Roman Empire*, "We find as commonplace the immortality of fame" (132). In the Late Republican era, Cicero points out the propensity of artists, politicians, and philosophers to take care to place their names on their works for posterity, but "himself feels that the terror of death is for those who lose everything with life, not for those whose fame cannot die" (Ferguson 132). Ferguson also points out that, "It will be observed that though a desire to be remembered on earth is not incompatible with a belief in a life of another sort

beyond the grave, it is not likely to be strong in those in whom such a belief is strong” (133). Though the state religion was still in place, Romans of the Late Republic and Early Imperial periods exhibit an agnostic bent when it comes right down to it. Many grave inscriptions start with “if”: for example, “If there be any sensation after death...” (Ferguson 135; *CIL*). Also, Roman grave markers had a tendency to record the exact age, to the day, that the person had reached at death, further illustrating a focus on life on earth. So, being remembered on earth WAS life after death. This is why the deaths of countless gladiators were of no consequence – they wouldn’t be remembered *in perpetuum* anyway. Conversely, Cassius Dio remarks on the absence of Julius Caesar’s *imago* at the funeral procession of Augustus; an omission which everyone present would have noticed and realized that it was due to Caesar’s being immortal among the gods. He didn’t require the immortality of memory provided by an *imago* because he had been granted otherworldly life after death (Dio 56.34.2; Bodel 261).

Indeed the “threat” of immortality via the legacy (good or bad) one leaves behind served as a tangible, immediate sort of motivation, or social control, over each new generation of Romans. As Polybius recounts, the “most important” result of all the funerary pomp is to “inspire” the young men to endure all manner of suffering for the good of the state so that they might also merit the “glory that attends on brave men.” Without the promise of this sort of abstract reward, why should they bother risking their lives in war (or the often equally risky political office)? Cicero discusses the implications of legacy in his *Tusculan Disputations*:

Again, in this commonwealth of ours, with what thought in their minds do we suppose such an army of illustrious men have lost their lives for the commonwealth? Was it that their name should be restricted to the narrow limits of their life? No one would ever have exposed himself to death for his country without good hope of immortality. (*XV*)

Thus, to purely serve the state was not ample motivation to act on its behalf; to serve was a means to a more selfish end of acquiring honor for oneself, while augmenting the family name, and subsequent immortality of memory. Or one could even aspire to a rare immortality among the gods if he were sufficiently accomplished via earthly deeds, as Cicero explains: “Hercules passed away to join the gods: he would never have so passed, unless in the course of his mortal life he had built for himself the road he traveled” (*Tusc. Disp. XIV*). Men were in control of the fate of their own souls through their worldly actions, at least to some extent.

Suicide was not the realm of the angsty teen in ancient Rome. Suicide was what one did in certain situations, and often encouraged. Lucretia killed herself because her virtue was so great, and she was thereafter applauded for the act. Suicide was not stigmatized or subject to prevention hotlines as it is today. When one became embroiled in scandal or lost one’s virtue, it was best to excuse oneself by falling on one’s sword. Cleopatra sought the aid of the notorious asp because she did not want to subject herself to the humiliation of marching in Octavian’s triumph as war booty. Suicide as a legitimate solution to one’s problems suggests a very different way of looking at the value of life (not intrinsic and equally sacred), and time.

A list of famous suicides reveals not only many illustrious Romans but also theoreticians and artists of the twentieth century.

Chart of suicides*

Mark Antony	Walter Benjamin
Brutus	Guy Debord
Cassius	Gilles Deleuze
Cato the Younger	Emily Dickinson
Cleopatra	Sigmund Freud
Hannibal	Arshile Gorky
Lucan	Ernest Hemingway
Petronius	Abbie Hoffman
Seneca the Younger	Sylvia Plath
Nero (assisted)	Mark Rothko
Nerva	Anne Sexton
Otho	Virginia Woolf

*these names represent those whose fame might be known to a general public today, and does not represent the limit of Romans and theorists and artists who committed suicide – the qualifier before each list is “famous_____” which is another shame of much of history.

And here the comparison between ancient Rome and contemporary society comes full circle. Many of the attitudes about life after death and the emphasis placed upon earthly accomplishments through secularism are in vogue again today.

A thorough consideration of a world view other than the one dominant today serves to exemplify the nature of these world views as subject to cultural circumstance, and is a cultural construction thus, as opposed to something objective or natural. The Roman example is provided as a control group against our current assumptions.

History as telic (moving toward an end goal) (Press 4). So, each event is unique, thus meaningful.

Knowing that the conception of history is culturally constructed and not absolute, I cannot escape the view that history is linear because this has been the prevailing view for many hundreds of years. In a way it seems intuitive – a life has a beginning and an end, a day has a beginning and an end, and these are smaller components of the whole of history. When I think of the past I recall events chronologically. At the same time, lives and days are cycles. The unit of the day repeats over and over, and become indistinguishable in their sameness. I like to think that my life is a reflection of the mantra taught to me as a school child: “you are special,” everyone is unique, and, like snowflakes, no two individuals are alike. But snowflakes get all mushed together and form the mass of a snow bank, where no one individual can be distinguished. (Then car exhaust turns the snow muddy black, completing its transformation to corruption). The great mass of people who have lived and are living and will live forms its own snowbank: we, too, are part of a great mass (a realization we sadly come to every once in awhile out of which we have to shake ourselves) that may not allow the individual to be

recognized. In the end, maybe I will only be recognizable during my cycle (which by now must be the Age of Scrap Metal).

Influence of Christianity (possibly why Christianity became such a success).

In the interim between me and the Romans came Christianity. Even though we now live in the post-Enlightenment era of secularism (which many equate with atheism), the legacy of the Judeo-Christian world-view continues to provide frameworks that shape everyone in the “Western World” beyond mere considerations of the relationship between higher beings of the Earth and the divine. Though a plural view is (supposedly) ensured by the separation of Church and State, it is pretty nice that everyone agrees on what year it is at any given moment based on the date of the birth of Christ (though subsequently proven to be off by four years – close enough). Christianity also insists upon a linear structure to the course of the Earth’s (and the humans’ upon it) events. God created the world, and will one day end it – the story has a beginning and an end, with a bit of character development and a few plot twists in between. Implied within this structure is the concept that time *progresses* from one point to the other, encompassing the idea of *progress* in between. The Earth began as would a newborn babe, clean and new. Upon it has been built human civilization, which itself builds upon its own past. The Earth, in this view, is indeed like a person, who grows irreparably more elderly and hurdles toward inevitable death. This death, in the case of Judeo-Christian doctrine, though, provides the promise of eternal paradise; thus dogma serves as defense mechanism against crushing nihilism (which one might find oneself under if the previously discussed prevailing view were all one knew).

At any rate, the Judeo-Christian tradition exerts itself onto believers and non-believers, like it or not, through its persistent propagation of the linear view of history.

Historiographic themes (Maza and Lloyd)

1. “*History has meanings, which can be discovered through systematic study and analysis*” (5).

...assuming that history *does* have meaning, a principle to which the historian must adhere in interest of justifying one’s job...

There are two schools of thought operating within the theory that history has meaning (6:)

1) *Meaning in history lies in recurring patterns or universal truths.*

2) *“Distinctive cultural, social, and political characteristics make each society and historical era unique or different from other cultures.”*

So, it either is fair to compare different historical epochs and cultures, or doing so is unjust to the cultures being compared and is a form of gross oversimplification. As with any dialectic, the real right answer lies in a compromise between the two. If I had to choose, though, I would go with option 1. Pursuing knowledge pertaining to the past is only useful if it can tell us something about ourselves; or maybe I’m wrong, and it’s like the old “art for art’s sake” argument – “history for history’s sake.” I do not go so far as to believe in

“universal truths” however; it’s like they teach you in school about taking tests – beware of the words “always” and “never.”

I have lately become intrigued with the idea of large themes that apply to different societies across time, and am trying to identify these (civil war, love, farming and development, et alia) in order to draw out similarities across societies in my paintings.

The other historiographical themes entail,

2. *“the complex historical connection between the actions of individuals and the social structures in which they live.”*

3. *“the importance of verifiable evidence to support historical claims about what happened in the past.”*

4. *historians should “evaluate documents, events, and historical figures with an objective, balanced method” (Maza and Lloyd 8).*

According to points three and four, history can be a story but not one that is autonomous – it belongs to a greater system of “that which has gone before.” In some ways, this is a tautology (and reminds me of the concept of Aristotle’s “unmoved mover”) – historical writing must be based in other historical writing, so where does the historical writing begin?

I also wonder about the “objective, balanced method.” Objectivity and balance is impossible – it is like train tracks that seem to meet in the distance but never do. One can attempt balanced objectivity, but the horizon line pushes the point of intersection ever further in the distance. If objectivity is indeed a myth, then subjectivity is the only real truth. One should wear one’s subjectivity on one’s sleeve.

History as Ideology (Susman 11).

Erik Erikson defines “ideology” as the “universal psychological need for a system of ideas that provides a convincing world image” (Susman 53).

“Schooling [teaching history] is understood as part of the production and legitimization of social forms and subjectivities as they are organized within relations of power and meaning that either enable or limit human capacities for self- and social empowerment” (Giroux 1).

History, or at least causing others to learn about it, is a form of indoctrination. I don’t even need to mention the Nazis here. Religions also offer historical texts and stories to establish a framework for belief.

History and Identity

History is used to create identities (Maza 7), often through use of “exemplary models” of virtuous behavior.

The events that occurred before us and the people who acted in these events affect who we are. Some are models of quintessential identity. The Revolutionary War and George Washington are so important to American identity that immigrants cannot be considered worthy of living in America, over 200 years later, if they do not know the significance of these. German children today are bound to bear the weight of events carried out by notorious people

nearly 100 years after they came to pass. History is a vehicle for group identity because it gives individuals with nothing else in common something to share.

Justification and sanctification from history (Susman 3). Legitimization through history.

History is useful for its ability to set precedence. Official verdicts in Supreme Court cases determine how all future cases of a similar nature should be handled. Warring factions continue to do so because of historical precedent. People can claim tracts of land because persons with whom they identify lived there once.

History as continuity

“We care [about the past] because we believe that the past and its peculiar problems impinge on us in a special way: we share the same problems or are still trying to solve similar ones. We feel that we are somehow what the past has made us” (Susman 40).

Imagine having no memory from day to day, and each day having to learn everything all over again. History attempts to provide a collective memory, lest George Santaya’s maxim, “Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it,” come true.

History as a means to immortality (Susman 3).

One who “goes down in history” or at least manages to leave behind some trace of having existed is granted worldly immortality. Living on in memory is living on.

In which we examine theories concerning popular culture
Or, the state of history today: a dialogue

[A diversion: perceptions of history
Or, how popular culture colors our notions of history]

Fine art is by definition high culture, though lately it is trying very hard not to be.

All knowledge is equal, because it has to enter the brain in order for one to distinguish that not all knowledge is equal. The senses take in everything indiscriminately, and the brain is then left with the task of sorting it all out. *“All popular culture forms are knowledge forms in and of themselves” (Ellsworth 48).*

Taste cultures (high and popular) consist of values and cultural forms that express these values (Gans 10).

Everything we know arrives in our minds through the filter of culture. Culture is the user-interface of knowledge. The distinction between high and popular (a difficult distinction to make, increasingly) is a distinction based on subjective values rather than on intrinsic worth.

The basic purpose of culture is to “achieve human self-realization and to enhance leisure time” (Gans 131).

If any given cultural form aids someone in these goals, then it has done its job, regardless of quality. *Anna Karenina* may provide access to similar ideas as a viewing of “Desperate Housewives.”

Universality of Popular Culture

“Popular culture is the lingua franca of the world, already, and its universality and acceptability is gaining credibility every day. For better or worse it is the culture, it is the Humanities; it is a language the people who are gaining power everyday understand” (Ambrosetti 3).

The defining characteristic of popular culture is its ability to be understood by a wide audience. It provides a common framework for understanding and communication. Any sort of specific subject matter, at its root, is a shared experience through which people can communicate with each other. Just as people who do not speak the same language cannot speak to one another, people who do not have a common cultural framework have no point of entry for meaningful exchange. Celebrity gossip is really a semiotic system, which serves to connect people beyond the geographically local level.

Debunking the critiques

Critiques of popular culture are all spurious because they pertain to high culture as well, or the distinction between the two is artificial/indistinct/arbitrary. These critiques include the following:

-Popular culture is inferior to high culture because it is for profit.

-Popular culture is inferior to high culture because it provides standardized product for greatest appeal.

-Pop culture borrows from and debases high culture (Gans 19-27).

What is so threatening about popular culture? Why do so many university-affiliated people take pride in proclaiming, “No, I didn’t see it. I got rid of my TV”? In the end, neither popular nor high culture is any better or worse than the other, and each deserves fair consideration (partake in the cultural forms that work for *you*).

The real detractor to social order is a feeling of social uselessness.

An aside, or rant if you like: Art for the betterment of the community

Critics of mass culture “have translated their own private evaluations into a public policy position which not only ignores other people’s private evaluations but seeks to eliminate them altogether” (Gans 121).

All people have the impulse to have art/culture in their lives, and do act on it. It’s not like “the masses” exist without an aesthetic – and constant attempts to “make art more accessible” is like saying that the people artists are trying to reach are artless. Then, because they’re not, a hierarchy is established by these seemingly inclusive intentions.

Any aesthetic act is a means of expressing “cultural significance.” There are a multitude of forms of expression of “symbolic activity” that reflect the same impulse as art, but not recognized as such (decorating a room with posters, choice of clothing, etc.) (Willis 132). All such aesthetic acts meet that basic human need. “The search for new or expanded publics suffers from the implicit assumption that such groups are, in some sense, non-publics, that they have no forms of their own, no culture, except perhaps a very much debased version of elite culture or mass culture passively consumed” (134).

-----end of aside

“Condemning users [of popular culture forms] as passive is an overly Calvinistic judgment which ignores the mental activity of users simply because they are physically passive, or are not producing a visible product” (Gans 141).

Again, one set of standards are upheld over any other, arbitrarily. Again, WASP values are the ones being upheld.

The Media is not as powerful as we think

“Media do not have the simple Pavlovian impact attributed them” (Gans 32).

“People are not receptacles who will accept any facts or ideas poured into them. Rather, people tend to act only on matters that concern them directly and they then select the kind of information they think is relevant to these matters, and to their values” (Gans 143).

The average consumer of popular culture may not be so average. The intelligence of the human mind is often underestimated by those who feel they are qualified to make such estimations. Supposedly hegemonic influences are subject to the same system of personal scrutiny, followed by negotiation and adaptation into an individual's personal worldview.

The Real Power of the Media

"It must be clear to even the most academic of historians that the visual media have become (perhaps) the chief conveyor of public history" (Rosenstone 466).

The power of the mass media is not in its ability to simply brainwash passive observers, but in its capacity to reach observers in the first place. Repetition and continual refreshment is key to reinforcing knowledge (think of how much you remember specifically from your seventh-grade social studies unit about Africa [come to think of it, maybe it's better that we forget most of our schooling]). Once people finish their formal education, the only way to review knowledge is to be exposed to it again through pop culture (scholarly articles have neither the distribution, nor the appeal, to make a significant impact).

Visual nature of motion pictures is particularly effective

"Portraying the world in the present tense, the dramatic feature plunges you into the midst of history, attempting to destroy the distance between you and the past and to obliterate – at least while you are watching – your ability to think about what you are seeing" (Rosenstone 469). "The capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past determinate of experiences in the present" (Lipsitz 5).

Films and television shows are important sources for perceptions of history because they, like a painting, must provide the details of visuality that textual sources lack. It's like when a friend tells stories time and again about another friend whom you've never met. You start to create a picture of that person in your mind. More time passes and you hear of this person on more occasions. The absence of visual information about the person can start to become frustrating. Natural human relationships are highly visual or at least based in present-ness. The person you keep hearing about but never meet is a lot like a historical figure. You keep reading about this person who did something supposedly important, but you can de facto never meet. A visual manifestation of a historical personage, in some form, is a surrogate for the actual present-ness of the figure.

Even Jacques-Louis David made use of popular culture (see page 64 for image).

What's a "Horatii" anyway? While basic knowledge of the literature of the Classical civilizations was more prevalent during the eighteenth century, not everyone was reading Livy every day. The subject of the Horatii was pointed out to David because they were the focus of a popular play (by Pierre Corneille) performed in David's hometown of Paris within a few years of the painting's production (Gardner 849). The play also provided a communicative link between

the painter and his audience, who would have also been privy to the theatrical production. The set design for the play has not come down to us, but the painting resembles a stage in its shallow box-like space. The visual impression of the play appears to have made an impression upon David that greatly influenced the way he perceived that the actual historical event appeared.

Again, texts are lacking

“Works of history cannot literally recreate the past but can only enfold its trace elements into verbal construction” (Rosenstone 477).

Verbal construction is just one kind of construction – the one that happens to be most highly respected in our society (just look at me, right now, a painter, writing a paper! [though I guess the reverse is true too – visual construction are also just one kind of construction out of many, and in the same way cannot be totally privileged]).

Texts are more interpretive than factual (Rosenstone 477).

Just as the act of “creating” a visual scene involves just that – creation; writing a text involves a similar process of editing and making comparisons to one’s own cultural circumstances (even when one is aware of this phenomenon, it is still unescapable).

The only truth is, “There is no truth”

“...historical truth is neither subjective nor objective; rather, it consists of a dialectical interaction between the two” (Lipsitz 31).

Everyone can only be a single being. This inherent singularity necessitates subjectivity because the self is a subject, incapable of experiencing anything outside of the filter of the self (though sympathy and empathy are useful in overcoming the self-centered-ness of this condition). At the same time, one can only take in information presented as objective phenomena, that is, phenomena that actually occur in the world (external to one’s own thoughts). History is *everything* (high and low, popular and scholarly, good and bad) that has come before this moment.

In which we consider theories of humour: a dialogue

Laughter is unique to humans, and to be human is to laugh (Crichley 66).

First of all, this is not true....

Chimpanzees have demonstrated an affinity for and adept use of scatological humour. In addition, various individuals have testified to the effect that their dogs have intentionally played jokes on their more intellectually-advanced humans.

This is not to suggest that laughter is the signal that humour has occurred. Laughter is a social phenomenon. One can be subjected to humour when one is all alone, as when one sees a funny painting when in the company of oneself alone. In these cases, the social component is through the person who created the humorous painting and the viewer, though they may not be in each other's physical presence. The interaction is still social.

There are two kinds of people – those with a sense of humour and those without. Not having a sense of humour does not preclude laughter, but usually finds its distinction in the ability to generate laughter in others – by intention, that is. Anyone can induce laughter by slipping on a banana peel.

Theories of humour (LeGoff; Critchley).

Superiority

The theorists tend to discuss the theory of superiority in terms of jokes with a professor and a yokel, but this is such an insignificant part of humor, that they hardly warrant an entire theory. For that matter, jokes account for a miniscule portion of humor. Jokes are fodder for old men and stand-up comedians. I can't remember the last time someone told me a joke. (I do recall the joke though – something involving Stevie Wonder and a cheese grater [likely source my father]). The telling of jokes must be reserved for a special sort of person who saves a place in one's brain for a stock of jokes and can then recall them without having to resort to some variation of “wait, wait, let me start over – I screwed that up.”

I take humour of superiority to refer to those moments that are funny in the manifestation of social exclusion. It's funny when someone makes a faux pas against group identity (see recent sensation *Borat*). Many people have experienced laughter against them, namely in the teenage years when clique-ish peers establish their own rules for social interaction and mercilessly shriek or guffaw when an outsider does not live up to these, by doing something unacceptable such as wearing fake leather pants when only real leather will do. These situations set up (false, though effective) dynamics of superiority/inferiority, where laughter forms the boundary between inside and outside.

Relief

Relief humour follows two veins – breaking tension and “letting off steam.” Regarding the former, a scene comes to mind: a classroom filled with

eighth-graders, and the teacher states that it has come to his attention that a few members of the class cheated on the last quiz, leading to solemn stares and silence. A savior then emits a long, low belch, causing the students to erupt into laughter. The sound has broken the bubble of tension, although the problem at hand has not been solved.

The “letting off steam” component is often of great interest to historians interested in social history (a very hot topic as of late) because it often points to hegemonic struggle between classes. Historical examples include the Roman *Saturnalia* and the carnivalesque writing of Rabelais in early modern France. The *Saturnalia* was a Roman holiday held in December wherein slaves and masters reverse roles. When high finds itself in the position of the low and vice versa (knowing that the situation is planned and temporary, not the result of revolution) hilarity ensues. Here the situation borders on the incongruous as well. It has been conjectured, though not without challenge, that the carnivale of Rabelais served as a release from the cares of a hard peasant existence. We today are not exempt from such struggles. Disparaging remarks in the workplace about the boss intended to invoke laughter (often concerning his [and I say his because I do have a specific boss in mind] inconsistencies, stupid mistakes, outlandish political theories, or poor quality of work) are funny because they point to the arbitrary nature of his supposed authority (superiority).

Incongruity (Gutwirth 80)

Incongruity is also known as “contradiction humor” – major staple of sitcoms and slapstick comedic films. Some say that the root of all humour is the incongruity of thwarted expectations.

Satire requires all three kinds of humour to some extent. My paintings definitely rely heavily on incongruity (it’s always funny to place a prominent person out of his or her usual context). Debunking the status of powerful people by placing them into equalizing situations serves to temporarily dissolve class/status tensions in much the way that *saturnalia* provided social relief. Nearly all forms of humor rely on cultural insider knowledge and can form boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, but my paintings do not rely on this dynamic as a source of humour (it is more of a by-product of the nature of the subject matter than a cause of laughter).

Laughter and humour are culturally determined/ local (Bremmer 3).

Laughter is universal but the specific causes of laughter are not. Causes of laughter, and the general propensity to laugh, vary at the macro level and then within infinite subcategories thereof, down to the individual. I can make no attempt to generalize cultures now, as such an analysis would inevitably come off as overly simplistic and probably racist. Suffice it to say that a comedy film considered uproariously funny in one place does not have the same power overseas. A sarcastic remark about a colleague is meaningless to anyone who does not share the dynamics of that workplace. Each discreet group of friends has a way of joking within its membership, though inevitably fitting within societal trends.

Humour is a means for determining group identity, sense of inclusion/exclusion (Gutwirth 39). It is a form of cultural insider knowledge (Critchley 66).

Humour depends on semiotics. A group outsider cannot access the signs and symbols (language, images, motifs, themes, persons) of the group until the process of becoming an “insider” has begun. Understanding the semiotic constituents is congruent with taking up the identity of a group, at least to some degree. Humour is an effective way to test or demonstrate that knowledge. Laughing together is a means of establishing human bonds – or realizing a connection has not been made because a quip falls on deaf ears. Humour can be the last phase of assimilating into a group. One can easily imitate clothing and gesture, while a system of humour is much more nuanced and subtle, requiring a lot of specialized knowledge within an intricate web of cultural associations.

Of course, a major reason why humour does not translate across cultures is because it does not translate (namely, those with different languages, although there are also language differences between people who claim, “I speak English.”). Much humour is language-based, and when rendering one language into another, a does not = a . The visual world does embody the principle that $a = a$ although still subject to multiple interpretations.

Humour can be a form of protest, insubordination, or rebellion (Gutwirth 73). There is an “aggressive component to laughter” (65).

Humour is a means to putting people of power in their place (even if for only a moment prior to retaliation) without having to resort to overtly aggressive forms of protest. One can get away with much more when framing displeasure in the form of a joke because when one is confronted about it, the person doing the confronting is further diminished due to his (again, I am thinking of a particular person) inability to take a joke – by his non-membership in “the group.” Joking is rarely criminal.

Even when not used to discredit a particular source of authority or institution in power, even when it’s light-hearted bantering amongst friends, humour is a small act of aggression. It puts people on the spot to have to react appropriately – to “get it.” I am thinking also of certain people who have a loud, piercing laugh, how it makes me uncomfortable, how I cringe but feel badly for doing so because I should not loathe the joy of others. There is something maniacal to it.

“People develop their capacities to be funny in order to cope with problems, to help socialize with each other, to earn a living, and to deal with anxieties and hostility, among other things” (Berger 165).

Yes, people *develop* an ability to be funny (under certain conditions). Every class has *the* clown, not one of several class clowns. The popular kid and the class clown are rarely embodied in the same person. Often the clown develops from another identity that causes insecurity. The fat kid starts to crack wise because he wants to divert attention toward a new, mutually beneficial target. Use of humour is a defense mechanism. Clowns develop out of a certain segment of the

downtrodden population (some of these will grow sullen and withdrawn, some will grow angry, some will try desperately to fit in and possibly succeed, some will form their own communities with their own clowns). Having a successful clown role model is very helpful to the process, because one cannot learn humour in a vacuum.

“There is a metaphysical unease at the heart of humour” (Critchley 52).

Humour is not possible in paradise. Humour is critical; it is an admission that all is not well.

Humour always comes back around to pointing out that “there is something essentially ridiculous about a human being behaving like a human being” (Critchley 59).

Nothing has meaning without a human to make that meaning and relate it to the selfish human self.

“Much as we prize it, justifiably, laughter is not all bounty: it has its dark, its killing side” (Gutwirth 8).

Laughter is not equivalent to happiness – it is a mark of dissatisfaction. Comedy relies on tragedy, but for some reason not vice versa.

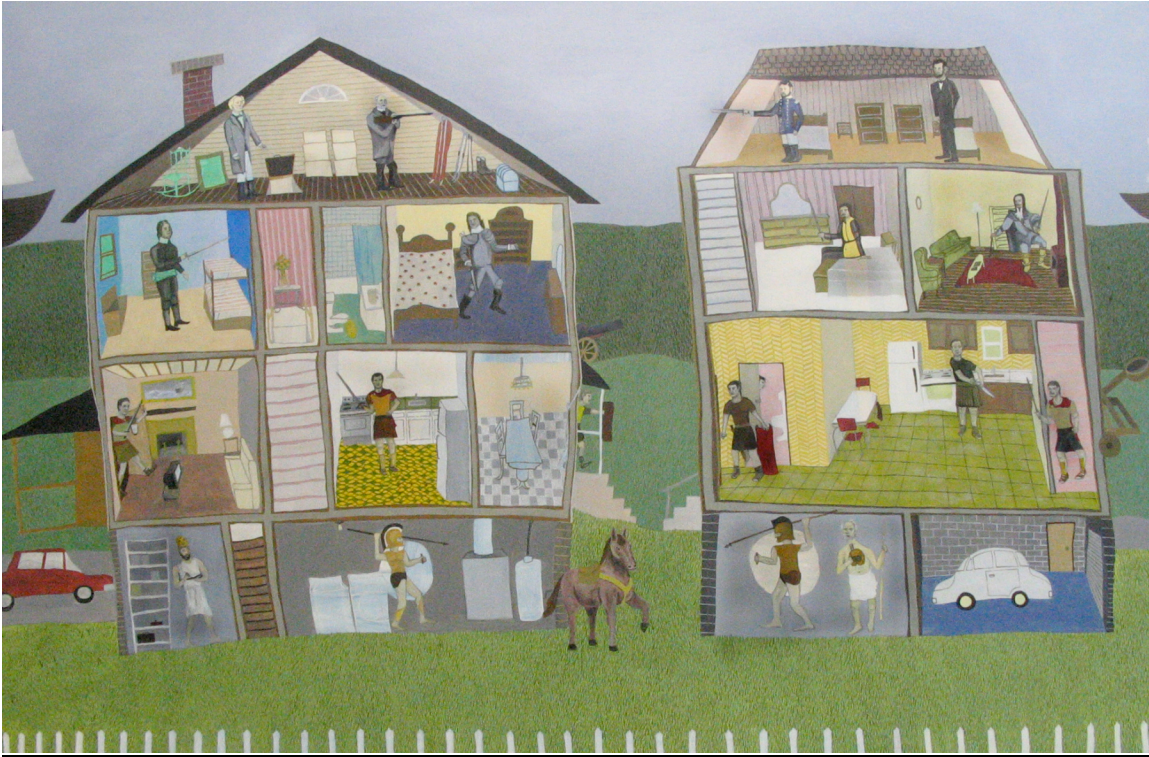
“Humour is delicious, and yet, at the same time, painful” (Berger 1).

Humour relies on displacement, often a fall. Those who watch are just glad it isn't them (this time), but can take the delight all the more knowing that it could very well be them.

“Mortality is the dread visage of our finitude: easier to laugh off our fear of it than the fact of our own coming extinction” (Gutwirth 189).

The mighty are displaced by humour, and all are equal in death. The concept of history completes its circle at death, and so does humour.

Thesis Work



Civil War, 36" x 60," oil on panel, 2007

For my current thesis work, “The History of the World (according to Alison Byrnes): Phase 2b,” a title conveniently broad to allow almost anything to occur within it, I looked for historical themes that peoples and cultures have in common across time and space. I am investigating the dueling notions that history is either cyclic or telic. Similar events occur over and over again throughout human history, such as civil war, which suggests that history is cyclic. At the same time, specific individuals and events compose the larger event. Like a fingerprint, no two civil wars are alike.

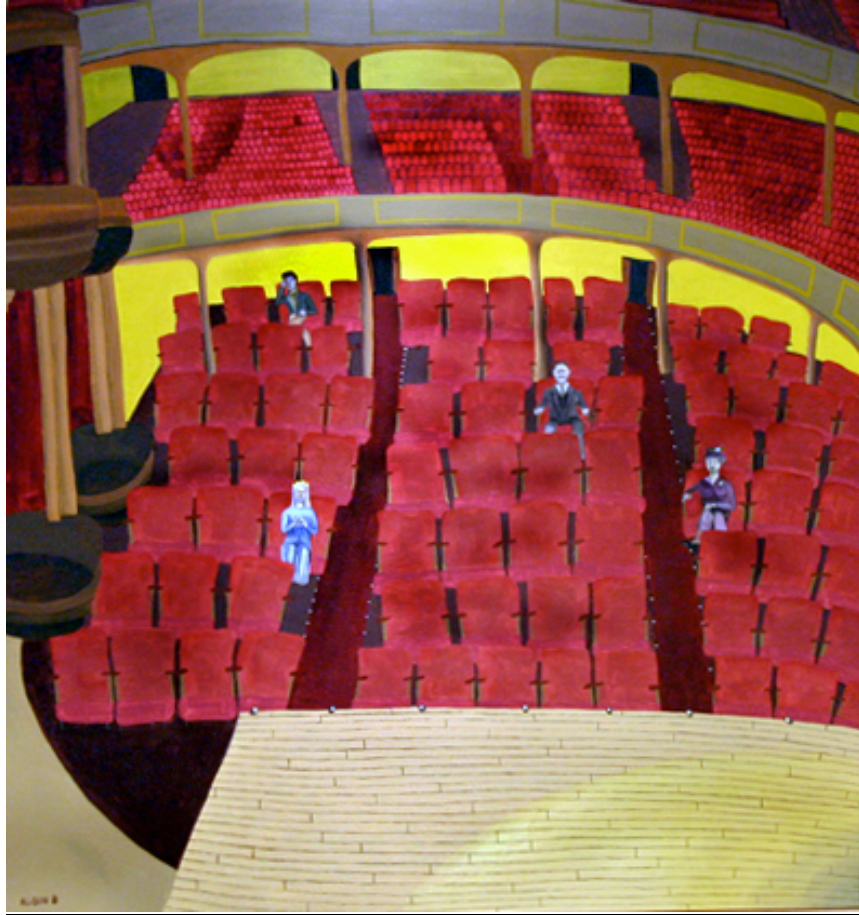
Here, time is represented by the levels within the houses, with the conflict furthest removed by time, the Peloponnesian War, in the basement, and the most recent, the American Civil War, in the attic. In the case of the three Roman civil wars represented, time also moves from edges to center. Thus the wars build upon each other chronologically. Each event occurs within its own compartmentalized space, but, as a unified whole, function as one event through their visual simultaneity. Things like civil wars, that is, political events, form the bulk of the kind of history taught in childhood because these events serve to inculcate the new members of society, children, into the group identity and ideology. These events form the canon of pop-history – history that everyone has an inkling of, has heard of, and may have visual impressions of through textbook photographs and television documentaries. This recognizability forms a new bond between me (with the painting as a surrogate for me), and the viewer.



Couples, 36" x 46," oil on panel, 2007

“Couples,” sometimes known as “Famous Couples,” is another test of whether there is such a thing as a “universal” in history. Is history just repeating itself? Here, again, the answer is both “yes” and “no.” The basic idea of a couple is portrayed across millennia (from the fourteenth century BC to the twentieth century AD), but is complicated by the stories of the individuals within their “hotel rooms.” Not every couple is just two, for instance.

This painting serves both as a narrative and a chronicle. The linear progression of time moves chronologically from left to right, then right to left, from bottom to top. Each compartment has narrative qualities, especially if a viewer knows the characters and can fill in the rest of the story by the single scene serving as its placeholder. At the same time, the structure of the grid as compositional device reflects that the figures within also serve as a simple list of famous couples in history.



Aquitaine Eleanor, Eleanor Roosevelt, Roosevelt Theodore, Theodore Bundy, 36" x 34," oil on panel, 2007

The figures within this painting represent a simple name chain. This mix of characters, brought together because of a surface attribute such as their name, examines whether historical people and events (that is, all people and events) really are connected (by no more than “six degrees of separation”). At the same time, the connection made between these people reflects the artificiality of historical associations and categories. Eleanor of Aquitaine may not want to be categorized as having anything in common with Ted Bundy. Similarly, people today, and historically, are grouped together because of shared surface characteristics, such as race, gender, or nationality.



Factory and Farm, 36" x 70," oil on panel, 2007

“Farm and Factory” is an instance of a serendipitous mistake. I started a painting, to take place on a rolling farmscape, abandoned the project, returned to the same panel and drew another painting on top of it, and then decided to use both as a layered composition. I plan to try this technique again in future works.



The Death of President Warren G. Harding, three dioramas in a cabinet, 2006

I created a set of dioramas because I became interested in the history of museum exhibits through my work at a museum and intense study of them through the Museum Studies Program. The “politics of display” are under heated debate right now, as native people ask that dioramas of them and their ancestors be taken off of display, especially in Natural History museums, where they are the only people exhibited, along with the flora and fauna of the “natural world.” People involved in this debate often ask, “why aren’t Europeans put on display as natural specimens as well?” I created a display of Anglo-Americans in order to explore this issue, as well as learn the dying craft of miniature-diorama building. I also see these dioramas as a search for the “limit” of painting, as they resemble my paintings in their compartmentalization, resemblance to a stage-set, and repetition. I address issues here that I have presented previously in paintings – that historical accounts differ depending on the agenda of the source, and that even seemingly objective events are subjective after all. Here, sources from the United States government, conspiracy theorists, and the Federal Bureau of Zombies and Vampires are flattened and treated as equals, reflecting the origin of each from the Internet.

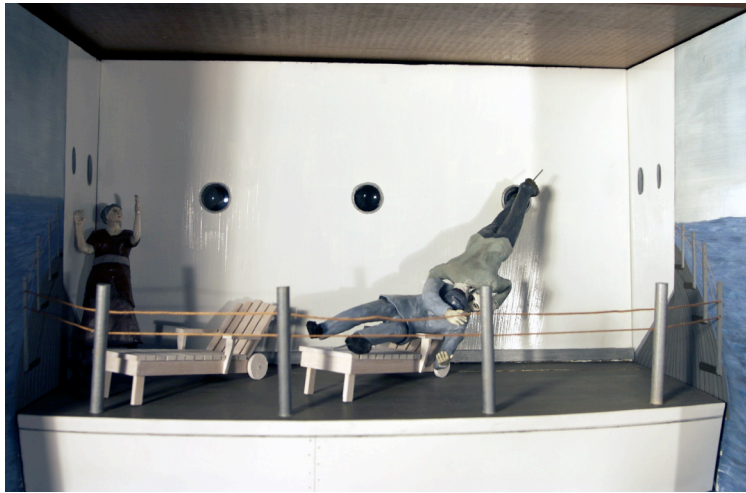
*Theory #1:
Death by
Natural Causes
(Stroke or Heart
Attack)*



*Theory #2:
Murder by Food
Poisoning*



*Theory #3:
Vampire Attack*



Conclusion

Painting as possession

“Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present...” (Benjamin 60).

“For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for a collector – and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be – ownership is the most intimate relationship he can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them” (Benjamin 67).

My paintings, for me, as their creator, are a means of possessing what is contained in them. I collect historical figures and places by painting them.

One of my first series, before I had ever considered myself “an artist” were cut-outs of masterpieces of mid-century furniture. I felt compelled to make these because I was immersed in the study of mid-century design, and had great appreciation for these forms that I could only experience as they were not meant to be experienced, through slides or images in books. I visited the local Herman Miller store and the mid-century interiors resale shop, but I could not even afford a knock-off of a knock-off. My unrequited admiration for George Nelson’s Marshmallow Sofa and Arne Jacobsen’s Swan Chair could only be met by the time I could spend reproducing them pictorially. (I recall also, as a five-year-old child making a Pac-Man game entirely out of paper, which was fully intended to simulate playing the video game [and failed]). I get to know all of these historical figures and yet never really get to know them – they were gone before an inkling of my existence could have ever been perceived. My relationship to the people of history about whom I read, and who I “get to know,” is terribly one-sided. I know them but they can never know me. Making fulfills the impulse to ownership of that which cannot be owned.

Appendix:

How Anachronism Works: Depicting Roman History



In fall 2005, HBO in cooperation with the BBC launched the television series “Rome.” What was to be different about this show was the accuracy of the historical recreation – showing Romans as they really were. An online article says, “Production staff took enormous efforts to be true to the past, even researching the physical gestures of ancient Romans. References for the colors of temples, statues and streets – as well as graffiti and signs – were taken directly from the ruins of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Ostia Antica. More than 4,000 pieces of wardrobe were needed. All of the fabrics used in costume design and set dressing are authentic to the times – wool, silk and cotton (Jam Showbiz). So many resources are going into the details of this show, and yet online chat rooms rebut with discussions of details that are incorrect. The film “Gladiator” has 64 errors of continuity and anachronism, reports slipups.com, ranging from rubber soles on sandals, linguistic impossibilities, and architectural or costume elements that were not in existence until much later. American audiences are obsessed with accuracy, while previous images of Romans obviously do not value accuracy when portraying history. What does this mean about Americans and those other cultures? Can portrayals of Romans ever contain real historical truth, or are they only reflections of the cultures that produce them?

A long and rich tradition of making images of Romans precedes the film examples cited above. The representation of historical Romans, and the problems of anachronism lying therein, is ideal for tracing the issues associated with portraying anything historical through time in Western culture because the Romans have been a consistent source of subject matter for two millennia. Further, we now supposedly have the greatest base of knowledge of all time about the Romans against we might check the historical facts (we likely know more about the Romans than did most Romans).

Each depiction of an ancient Roman made in a time or place other than ancient Rome is embedded within the culture that produced it and is therefore useful for analyzing cultural attitudes toward the past and modes of viewing history. Traditionally, images that were “wrong” were simply dismissed: new models allow all cultural output to be considered for what even historically inaccurate views reveal. I will consider images

made of historical events within the framework of reception theory in order to determine how history itself has been treated through time. The texts and artifacts from which knowledge about the ancients was derived (mostly) did not change, while modes of representing them did. Reception theory, which “refers throughout to a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and reader,” arose in Germany in the 1960s as a literary theory with Hans Robert Jauss as its leading proponent (Holub xii). Concern for the effect upon and response of the audience regarding a work take precedent over searching for the essence of true meaning and author’s intentions (11). After all, “Different readers at the same time, the same reader at different times, and different readers at different times will understand apparently the ‘same’ text differently. The text has simply a potentiality for meaning. Specific meanings arise through the text being read. And these specific meanings will vary according to who does the reading, at what time, where, with what expectations, and for what purposes” (Thompson 251). A text continues to live on even when the author and original audience are long gone. The wider the reach of a text over time and space, the more variable is its interpretations (Thompson 269). Besides, even the most conscientious interpreter cannot separate himself or herself from his or her time and place, so many theorists now agree that meaning is effectively created by the interaction between text and reader (Kallendorf 121).

There is a natural bridge connecting considerations of reception of literature and how they are manifested in art. Craig Kallendorf articulates the adoption across disciplines by stating that “the same sorts of problems that have recently bedeviled interpretations constructed in words also affect how we should be dealing with visual responses to a text” (122). When reactions to texts are not available in words, as is the case for most of the pre-modern era (and later for the non-elite), visual examples can be the only way to gauge conceptions of what people thought of these vestiges of the past and how they related to their own time. In addition, and for the periods succeeding the medieval when more written commentaries were produced, images both provide testament to how the ancients were perceived – and provide those perceptions. To complicate matters a bit, people did not simply react to a text in a vacuum, but were influenced by the aesthetic of surviving artifacts contemporary to classical literature, which was being recovered throughout the periods being discussed. Images inspired by real Roman history are ideal for discovering the difference between word and image as determined culturally because the events contained within really did happen, and various methods for their depiction cannot then be attributed to fantasy or supernaturalism.



Figure 1. The suicides of Antony and Cleopatra, from a 1480 Bruges edition of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*. It is not difficult to recognize historical errors within...

Despite the dominance of representations of Christian subject matter, manuscript illumination of the Middle Ages leaves us many examples of Roman history. A great example is an illustration from a manuscript now kept in the British Library possibly made in Bruges around 1480 of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (On the Fall of Noble Men) first written in the 1360s [Fig. 1]. The picture is identified as the suicides of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. It portrays a man dressed in a long purple robe with gold trim and a crown in his head of shoulder-length hair, holding a large sword whose tip is embedded within the folds of his robe at the chest, directing a sidelong gaze at the woman on the right. This woman can be none other than Cleopatra, holding two long green snakes latched onto both of her breasts, left exposed because her long salmon-colored robe with fur-trimmed collar and cuffs is pulled down around her waist. On her head is a high, pointed headdress with crown, and is made of a material resembling lace, as she returns the stare of her lover Antony. They stand on a patch of gray – a road – with a backdrop of a green hill with trees lining a river, and mountains in the distance. Viewing this illustration today, it does not take a scholar of classics or history to recognize the historical errors within. Antony and Cleopatra wear costumes that do not seem very Roman, with Cleopatra's headdress placing their vestments squarely in the Middle Ages. Her hairstyle gives her a rather high forehead, like that of Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," with is roughly contemporary with the illustration. Mark Antony would have never worn a crown due to a strong aversion to the trappings of royalty in Late Republican Roman society. His sword is much longer than the Roman *gladius* and more like the sort a medieval knight might carry. Also, while the event occurred historically in Egypt, the setting appears rather European, with mountains being non-existent in and therefore not usually associated with Egypt. Roman historians do confirm that Antony died by his own sword and that Cleopatra unleashed the deadly asps upon herself, but the costumes and setting are un-Roman. Two types of anachronism are at work here: details of fashion (costumes, hairstyles, and props), and within the sequence of the events themselves (Cleopatra killed herself after she heard of Antony's death, and they were not together at the time). The non-Egyptian backdrop is not an anachronism – such landscapes did exist at the time so they are not un-chronological, but misplaced.

Traditionally such “mistakes” have been chalked up to the “ignorance” and “loss of knowledge” that made the Dark Ages so dark. The issue is much more complex, however. Scholars now point out that medieval societies viewed the world differently than we do now or than the ancients did - but different does not mean inferior. After all, we today view the Middle Ages with the bias of knowing what was to come after, how the world “advanced.” People living in the Middle Ages could only see themselves as the current pinnacle of time, as “modern.” Naturally, as well, such a long span of time and over many cultures as is encompassed within “The Middle Ages” necessarily encompasses varied attitudes and appreciations for ancient artifacts.

Trends within art and culture are usually expressed in terms of an avant-garde, resulting in a historical synecdoche. A part of a culture, that is, that displays interest in “new” styles and fit into the arch of progress are presented as standing in for the whole. This results in a false representation of unity. Madeline Caviness offers a way of viewing this problem: “Since the theoretical writings on style place emphasis on unity of expression, whether of the individual artist, his school, or his period, the possibility of another system [that of modes within a larger unit of style] to explain a dichotomy often perceived in the actual forms offers some hope, at least, of achieving veracity while accepting the principle of sequential styles” (1). Acknowledgement of the vernacular or of diversity within cultures is a methodological problem for history and art history in general, and often necessitates the treatment of various sub-histories. It must be dealt with in this discussion of the spread of knowledge and reactions to that knowledge through art because such a discussion cannot be more than theoretical because it cannot account for individual realities. Just because medieval artists are anonymous to people living hundreds of years later does not mean they were simply “conduits for the impersonal product of a period mentalite” (Hughes 186).

A full understanding of how each images function requires a study of the modes of production of each particular image, its intended use and audience – the cultural context whence it emerged. In the case of the illuminations, this history closely follows the history of the book; and the history of the book closely parallels the process by which classical knowledge, awareness of the Romans, was transmitted through time. For this twofold reason it is worth discussing here.

An illumination exists as part of a text, so the best place to start an analysis of what historical knowledge the people who created and viewed an illumination had, is with that text. Boccaccio’s work, *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*, was written in the 1360s. The book includes biographies from Adam at the beginning of time to King John of France, who was defeated in 1356 – about the same time the book was begun. Boccaccio does not distinguish between actual historical figures and stories from myth – he includes both Julius Caesar and Hercules. The subjects range widely, from Biblical to Greek history and myth, Roman history and myth, to Western European history. The author groups subjects associatively. Stories often follow a rough chronology, but then often also do not. One section on Roman history follows an order of events not different from that held today. Parallel events in Biblical history are intertwined with tales of Roman emperors, such as the rise of Herod under Augustus, thus synching overall chronology. The themes of the book are the unpredictability of Fortune and the folly of ambition (Hurst). Thus historical Romans are used for their ability of provide a moralizing example. The example is not always completely negative however: he calls Scipio Africanus “chaste” and Cato “prudent” in comparison to the “lecherous” and

“defouled” Tiberius and Caligula. The stories also contain titillating aspect paralleling the didactic function: the reader finds out about the depravity of historical figures under the guise of learning how not to behave. The book was very popular in its day, as attested by the large number of copies surviving in the original Latin, as well as many translations into French and other languages. Some of the illuminations feature a grid containing many episodes originating from various sources [Fig. 2] wherein all figures are presented in the same illustrative style, conflating the different historical periods contained within.



Figure 2. Gridded illumination for a Boccaccio text of West Central France 1460-70. The expulsion of the Latin King Tarquin is top center. He is depicted alongside other scenes throughout history, such as Cambises and Demosthenes, as well as allegorical figures of Poverty and Fortune.

The text to which the illustration of Antony and Cleopatra refers mentions very little information that is reflected in the picture. (The only English version available is *The tragedies, gathered by Ihon Bochas, of all such princes as fell from theyr estates throughe the mutability of fortune since the creacion of Adam, vntil his time* printed in 1554. It is an adaptation of the book by Boccaccio, but follows it for the most part – however, with many references to the translator Ihon Bochas within the text). (This is a portion of the account – for the rest see Appendix II)

Dispaired fled home to his country,
 Knowing no help nor mean to recure
 But to the increase of his aduersity,
 When that he saw his woeful adventure
 Again Octavian he might not endure,
 With a sharp sword his danger to diuert
 Himself he rose unwarily to the heart.

Of whose death the queen Cleopatra
Took a sorrow very importable,
Because there was no recure in the cause
Thought of his woe she would be partable,
Whose fatal end piteous and lamentable
Slew also her self love so did her rave,
After they both were buried in one grave.

What led up to Boccaccio penning his book, and the book's subsequent illuminations? The original body of classical literature was written on scrolls of papyrus. Early Christians used the codex format made with cheap materials when they were still a largely underground sect. The roll became associated eventually with pagan literature, and when Christianity became mainstream in the fourth century a large-scale process of transcribing Christian and classical literature to parchment book from papyrus roll was undertaken (Pacht 14-15). This fortuitous shift in book format ensured survival for those items which made the transfer to parchment, which has a much longer life span than the two hundred odd years for papyrus. As Otto Pacht explains in his *Book Illumination in the Middle Ages*, "Only those things which stood above changes in public taste or the vagaries of public interest, and only those things held to be eternal, would have been passed down from generation to generation. In practice, in post-classical times, this would only have been the Holy Scriptures, the Bible. Victory of the codex over the roll signified the rescue of the classical past for posterity" (15). The common view that of the time intervening their authorship and later discovery is that all of these codices must have then been placed in storage and left to rot until the Renaissance, when a small percentage were found still intact. While we are indeed left with only a small percentage, this loss was not due to simple wholesale disinterest on the part of those living in the medieval era.

In fact, the ninth century Carolingian empire under Charlemagne saw a resurgence in transcription. The monasticism of the scribes and geography with respect to proximity to originals were transcription limits (16-17). Several subsequent "Renaissances," the tenth century Anglo-Saxon, Ottonian, Romanesque, and Gothic were periods characterized by increased receptivity to classical models, which, obviously, were not buried in ruins (176). Madeline H. Caviness points out the possibility of a nostalgia felt for the older buildings of the ancients in the literature, even though the architectural evidence of destruction may point to the opposite view, in her book *Art in the Medieval West and its Audience*. She cites examples of medieval pastiche, such as deliberate archaizing of twelfth century models in the fourteenth century or incorporating salvaged figures into newer stained glass configurations (205). General reconstructions of medieval attitudes toward the past must be hypothesized through physical remains of buildings and decoration, lacking actual literary accounts.

It is indeed remarkable that copyists should have bothered to transcribe classical literature at all, considering the resources and time required to copy books and the seemingly antithetical view of the world held by Christianity opposed to classical paganism. Some of the ideas and language in classical works are shocking even today. The policy of copying what was useful accounts for the survival of treatises on medicine, architecture, law, and grammar, but does not neatly account for poetry, myth or history. The Christian view of Rome was not so much polemical as it was ambivalent, though.

Sympathizers recalled that the rise of Christianity did occur in Rome, after all. Some, such as Dante, viewed the *pax Romana* under Augustus as a necessary precursor to the birth of Christ, enabling a politically unified and stable part of the world in which the new religion could spread (Jenkyns 8). The Holy Roman Empire was conceived of as the continuous line of Roman *imperium*, with the Europe unified under Rome still identifying itself to some extent as the descendant of the Roman legacy (7). Charlemagne was crowned as “Augustus” and his biographer Einhard based the account on the life of Augustus by second century historian Suetonius – who is one of our major sources for imperial history today (Davis 80). In 1143/4 the Roman commune, a rebellion against the pope, was established in Rome and sought to reform the senate and assert its right to create an emperor, using antiquity as a political model (Davis 87). Dante saw Cato, a contemporary of Julius Caesar, as a prefiguration of Christ (Davis 93). Augustine himself saw a parallel between Biblical and Roman events – he saw the slaying of Abel by his brother Cain as parallel to the death of Remus by Romulus (Jacks 12). Philip Jacks in his book *The Antiquarian Myth of Antiquity* says that there was a “long-standing assumption that the heroes of early Rome and the authors of sacred scripture shared a common descent” (128) [Fig. 3]. Scholars and even church leaders identified with historical Romans and felt a very personal connection to them in some cases.

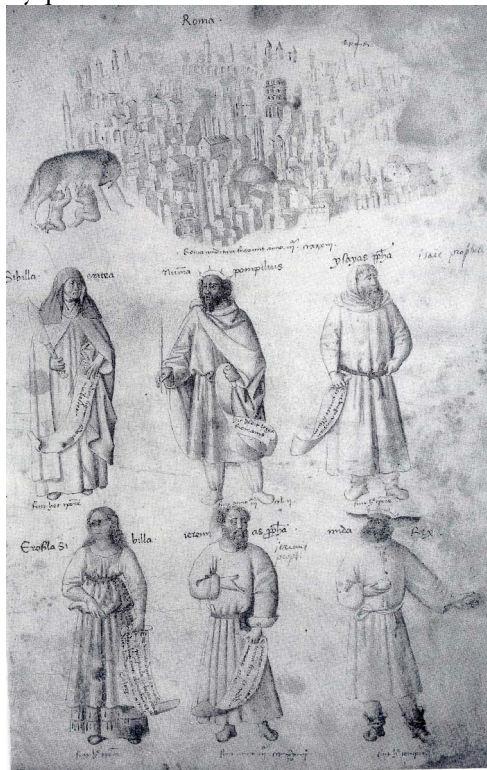


Figure 3. *Uomini famosi* (famous people) from the mid-fifteenth century. The city of Rome, its foundation myth (the suckling by the she-wolf), and early Latin King Numa, are alongside Biblical prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, King Midas, and the Cumaean and Erythrean sibyls (Jacks 128).

Clearly it is false to characterize the Middle Ages by a loss and ignorance of classical history and literature. At least a portion of the literate elite knew of and/or felt a personal conception of Rome. What exactly is the nature of their conception, and what was known about Rome in the medieval era? The concept of historiography was not yet developed, leaving available what we consider today to be an uncritical, popular view of history. Ancient historians and poets were taken at face value, without the later archaeological discoveries that confirmed or debunked textual sources. For most people knowledge about Rome was gained through secondary sources – Augustine’s *City of God*

and Orosius's *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* – whose biases are evident from the titles. A work entitled *Mirabilia Romae Urbis* (Wonders of the City of Rome) of the mid-twelfth century was widely influential guidebook to the city, but confuses historical fact and attributes magical qualities to ancient works of art (Waywell 299). Ancient poets were not viewed as separate from ancient historians, so Virgil was a well-known source of Roman “history” (for which purpose he was undoubtedly valued to most Romans)(Davis 61). Interest in history was largely for purposes of providing moral example. Some did focus on the corruption of Rome, dwelling on the model of Rome as the Great Whore that it is in the Book of Revelations (Davis 66). The medieval residents of Rome did share immediate space with mostly ruined but some intact buildings and a limited number of statues (not melted down or added to the lime furnace). The bronze statue of the she-wolf, the *lupa* of Roman foundation myth, was displayed prominently in public and often referred to in art (Jacks 24). The bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius was spared because it was for many years thought to represent Constantine and hence could be revered as a symbol of Christianity.

R.H. Rouse, in his chapter “The Transmission of the Texts” upholds the notion that what divides medieval thought from the Renaissance, and makes it medieval, is that the concept of progress or change through time was not an aspect of the prevailing intellect (49). Rouse states, “The people of the Middle Ages viewed the Roman past as a world inhabited by giants...” (49). A letter by a Florentine visitor to Rome in 1375, Giovanni Dondi, confirms that at least a few medieval people did think that the artists of their own time were inferior to ancient artists who were “superior in natural genius and more knowing in the application of their art” (Waywell 302). Rouse continues: “But they were unable to distance themselves from that past. That Alexander and Caesar were different from medieval kings was unimportant. Each could be depicted in medieval armor, just as Aristotle and Plato could be depicted in monastic garb. Their ancient legacy did not equip medievals to deal with the concept of historical change over time” (49). Medieval people did not have a concept of time as nuanced as today, but as with the mini-Renaissances which sprang up throughout the Middle Ages, so too did individuals express themselves independent of popular thought. Petrarch, a scholar and poet of the fourteenth century, defined as “ancient” everything before the “celebration and veneration of Christ’s name in Rome” and “modern” everything from that time until his own (Jacks 36). He also tried to conceive of an image of Rome at a particular point in time (37), which is evidence of a recognition of the “other,” thinking of the ancients as different from the culture in which he himself lived. Petrarch’s protégée was Boccaccio – the author of the book from which the illustration of Antony and Cleopatra is derived – who believed that historical truth was underlying the fantastic additions of myth (40). In light of the historical inaccuracies that continue quite purposefully through the modern era when illustrating scenes from history, and considering that medieval people were not impoverished when it came to knowledge of the Romans, the methods of depiction represented by the illumination of Antony and Cleopatra were also intentional. Examples of historical Romans [Fig. 4] made even earlier show the figures in Roman-style clothing.



Figure 4. Illumination from the *Codex Egberti*, Trier 977-993. The Figure on the bottom left is “Pilatus” (Pilate), Roman governor of Judaea who appears significantly in Biblical accounts of the crucifixion of Christ: for this reason he may be the Roman most often portrayed in art. Despite the early Ottonian date of this picture, Pilate appears to be wearing Roman-style dress.

Also, Roman sarcophagus relief sculpture was popular and emulated in the Middle Ages, and triumphal arches in Rome remained intact, so togas were known. Illuminations that are now dubbed “historically inaccurate” were made so to serve a purpose other than recreating the reality of a historical event.

Illumination, or manuscript illustration, did exist in classical times and the practice of supplementing text with pictures continues even to this day. Bouts of iconoclasm within the Christian church occasionally called into question the theological propriety of pictures of the divine. Still, illustration of religious subjects far outnumbers the secular. Books religious in nature developed in layout and style parallel to secular books, suggesting that both types were made in the same workshops (Stones 89), so doctrinal repercussions for one could extend to the other. In the end sentiments such as that of sixth century Pope Gregory the Great, apologizing for images as having a “didactic function” for the illiterate, won out (Pacht 155). This argument is problematized by the fact that many books were created for private use by the wealthy and elite. The capability of pictures to teach the masses justified their production, but once produced, pictures serve a much more complex purpose related to the role of art in general. Art is a non-rational pleasure. Pictures based on text or history create a starting point for the creation of an image in the mind conjured by the text. Pictures aid in forming a personal connection to a distant or abstract subject.

Jonathan J. G. Alexander talks about new ways of interpreting medieval illuminations in his article “Art History, Literary History, and the Study of Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts.” He discusses the usefulness of interpreting meanings in images as being “only intelligible in the social contexts in which they were created, semiotically in other words. And with such shifts in attitude to the work of art as a ‘text’ has gone a postmodern interest in the object, the manuscript and its miniatures, not as a reflection of something else, a copy of the hypothesized lost model, but as a significant object to be studied for itself, in terms of its making and its audience” (3). Under this model, manuscripts are valued in terms of the temporal context in which they themselves were

produced, and not merely as a means for retrieving information stemming from an original author.

An idealized model for the transcription of classical material is just that – straight transcription, from copy to copy, with only the substrate changing as a defense against the ravages of time. In fact, with regard to illumination, Otto Pacht maintains that for classical texts, a picture was never provided when the original supplied none until the Gothic period (33). Certain attributes of illustration in the codex point to a tradition originating from the structure of the scroll, not updated through the Romanesque period (27). For example, classical manuscripts included ornament based on forms from monumental art, such as medallions, which were still used in medieval books. This suggests a continuous lineage of copying from the classical through the medieval era (150). Nothing is ever so simple, though, and many changes occurred both in text and illustration over time.

The very motive for later dividing history into eras, delineating the Medieval as something different from the surrounding classical and Renaissance periods, is a function of the divergent attitudes in cultural ways of seeing for each period. Otto Pacht adds that “the change from roll to codex coincided with a shift in intellectual outlook, in the values attached to experience of the physical world. Criteria based on perception were devalued and this undoubtedly has the most intimate bearing on visual art” (27). Very few artists can generate images without any source material; they cannot simply sit down with paper and pencil and draw complex scenes and figures without looking at a visual reference -- the real world or another image. Illuminators were not free-lance, independent artists in the modern sense. They were workers and did not follow a model for production wherein their illustrations were based on personal interests or artistic inspiration. They could not simply get up and set up a still life with a model from which to work. Theology placed little value on observation of the visible world so copying of previous works was standard practice (Caviness 11). Even examples of illustrations that claim to be “drawn from life” are anatomically mistaken or make use of convention (8)[Fig. 5].



Figure 5. Illumination for *Ovid Moralisee* from 1480s Flanders. The figure is the Roman god Bacchus (Dionysus) who is associated with the panther and was known to ride them. Here he appears atop a griffon, probably because the illustrator did not know what a panther looks like.

M. Alison Stones in her article “Secular Manuscript Illumination in France” states the significant fact that “It is clear that...the content of the illustrations were not invented afresh for each manuscript...[but] artists relied both on visual models and on written instructions. The visual models could be derived either from another manuscript of the same text with the same illustrative cycle, or from a model-book containing representations of stock scenes” (96). The repertoire of stock scenes contained generic representations that could be adapted for specific scenarios (Stones 95). It is easier to make a rote copy of a picture than to innovate, though. Medieval illustrators made changes to their models intentionally and for a purpose. Improvements made the subjects relevant to their own times. Every depiction of the Romans in some way seeks to make the subjects relevant to the artist’s own times.

One characteristic that sets the medieval intellectual outlook apart is the concept of authenticity. Documents that are now called “forgeries” were regularly inserted into official files. This practice may have been viewed at the time as an attempt to legitimately recreate what did at one time exist in the minds of the document “re-creators” (Nagel 408). With regard to illustration, if a copyist innovated, “he doubtless thought he was improving it according to his own interpretation drawing it more exactly. These are intentional ‘improvements;’ they arise from felt needs and conscious intentions, not from ineptitude. They are not signs of inferiority or lack of skill in the copyist” (Pacht 25). In the case of the illuminations related to Boccaccio’s work, all of the historical figures regardless of time or culture are shown in the same medieval-style costumes and architecture. This is because the book was written by a medieval author who was warning his contemporaries that just as the great men and women of history were mere mortals subject to the whims of Fortune, so too were the great leaders of his day not immune to disgrace and death. Medieval people were to take the lessons of history and apply them to their own lives; contemporary costumes and architecture aided in the personal connection to the historical figures not unlike themselves. Indeed, medieval artists perceived history in terms of their own culture (Kallendorf 123), but, as we shall see, such a perception of history is not unique to the Middle Ages.

Medieval people have been dismissed as “ignorant” or “uncritical” based on their error of anachronism. So, what is anachronism? The term came into being in the late sixteenth century in Italian (French and English in the seventeenth) after the rise of Renaissance philology, which required scrutinization of texts to determine internal stylistic inconsistencies in order to reconstruct the originals of ancient works (331) (they had to weed out medieval “improvements”). Linguistically it comes from the Greek *an-*, “not”, and *chronos*, “time.” It is something that is not timely. The exact nature of this untimeliness is open to interpretation however. Beginning the final paragraph of her discussion of Roman ideas of art theory, Helen Morales states, “All too often, wary of anachronism, scholars avoid making moral judgments about Roman art which portrays, or otherwise involves, cruelty and suffering” (209). Here, anachronism is applying the morals of one’s own time and culture to a historical people with its own distinct values. Because the scholars imagined by Morales are “wary,” she suggests that making such a comparison would be unfair, unacademic, or incorrect. In the light of presumed paltry evidence concerning Roman attitudes toward cruelty and suffering, it is best to make no judgment if the only judgment that can otherwise be made is biased by the personal viewpoints of scholars necessarily of another time and place. The past can only be interpreted through the lens of the self. As Martyn Thompson puts it, “A historian’s

world is always and quite self-evidently a present world since historians can only construct their accounts of the past in the present with and from materials (sources, documents, and previous accounts) that are all present to them” (261). Historians of what later became the French Annales School debated the topic of anachronism during the first half of the twentieth century in light of their view that history cannot be practiced as an exact science. Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch reconsidered what has been called the “sin of sins” of the historian as they questioned the ability of anyone ever to objectively view the past (Farago 424).

The very influential art historian Erwin Panofsky distinguishes “good” anachronism as an anachronism that is freely chosen when an artist distinguishes him or herself from the past and uses anachronism as an artistic trope. Conversely then “bad” anachronism is the display of details mismatched chronologically as a symptom of not knowing any better (Nagel 409). Panofsky’s brand of value judgment is futile and nearly impossible to determine. It depends too much on getting into the artist’s head and not enough on how the image may have been useful to the artist and his or her audience. Individuals throughout time have had access to knowledge outside of their typical circumstances, or have remained separate from prevailing thought, so there is no means for determining whether anachronism fits into the “good” or the “bad.” Srinivas Aravamudan claims, “Scale is indeed everything, both for our understanding of event and period and for the functioning of unacceptable anachronism or acceptable historiography” (334). Yes, a medieval artist who sees himself as of the same culture of the Romans might not sense a change in clothing fashion between the Roman era and his own. We are today more aware of hundreds of types of shoes worn by graduate students in 2005, while someone in 3005 might only know about five types of shoes in the entire twentieth century. The lay artist who was assigned the illumination may have had experience painting Biblical scenes and then have observed costumes of his own time. When specific instructions or details in the text were not provided, the unfamiliarity of the Romans was supplemented with the familiarity of the artist’s contemporary world.

Why did the artist choose these particular medieval costumes? When a detail is chronologically out of place, what about it makes it so powerful as to override any other possible variation? In the absence of mechanical means of reproduction (aside from coins and bronze casts) images were not widely disseminated or available, and this leads to the issue of making images of specific people or events standardized so as to be recognizable to anyone, regardless of that person’s having come into actual contact with the subject matter. For instance, a collection of statues and busts of a single Roman leader often resemble each other very little. Conversely, a succession of images emperors appear to share traits even though they were not genetically related because statues were based on “types” – which, for emperors, was commonly the model of Alexander the Great. The practice of rendering people and events according to types makes them recognizable and distinguishable to those who know the particular visual language without having to rely on labels, which can impede on the composition and visual unity of a scene (especially in pictorial work). The Greeks, whose culture the Romans widely appropriated, used types as a sort of visual epithet on their vase painting. Deities and heroes in Greek literature are very often mentioned in conjunction with an epithet, such as “Cow-eyed Hera,” “Far-Darting Apollo,” or “Aegis-bearing Athena” and depictions bore either the standard literary epithet, or, if this was too abstract, some other prop or costume associated with that person related to his or her mythic cycle. Athena was identifiable because she is the

one always wearing the aegis (along with a spear and helmet, her other associative costuming); Hercules has the lion-skin and club. Sometimes these identifiers were so relied upon that they were portrayed anachronistically: Hercules might wear his lion skin in a part of the story that takes place before the slaying of the Nemean lion. The practice of assigning figures identifiers is common over time and place. Saints were subject to this visual language, which would have been well known to medieval people. St. George IS St. George because of his proximity to the dragon, and St. Sebastian to the arrows.

In his article “Marcolf or Aesop? The Question of Identity in Visio-Verbal Contexts,” Michael Curschmann discusses the implications of portraying identifiable figures when they are outside of the recognizable canon. When the relatively limited number of texts exploded in the late Middle Ages upon the introduction of a culturally productive lay society, an potentially infinite number of new figures and scenes had to be portrayed outside of the established system of identifiers (1). The relationship of pictures to text is dynamic, with pictures following their own tradition within visual language. Pictures often have to deal with issues beyond those presented in the text (2). A medieval illustrator works within the visual and oral culture of the day more than with the literary sources themselves. Curschmann explains that the “constant interplay of the verbal and the visual in popular consciousness of these diverse and yet related subjects produces a plethora of visual permutations, to the point where lines and edges may become so blurred that identity is constituted through quite subjective application of the viewer’s prior verbo-visual experience. That experience participates in – and at the same time helps create – collective cultural memory in the form of ‘interpretants’ that in turn become signs through which individual interpreters reconcile their personal memory with that of the surrounding culture” (21). In the case of Antony and Cleopatra, Antony was a contender for taking Julius Caesar’s place, and would have been identified as a sort of prince. Princes wear crowns and lush purple robes, so Antony became identifiable as someone with high rank through princely visual cues. Cleopatra was a queen, and likewise became identifiable by headdress and gown.

A painter must sum up a series of events into one scene of simultaneous action (Marin 297). When it comes to history, an event must follow a path of translations: the original event occurs in time and space, a witness with a single view point tells a historian who writes a composite of witnesses and documents (primary source), another writer in another time and place includes the event in an encyclopedic compendium (secondary source), then an artist reconstrues the visuality of the original event. For the illumination of Antony and Cleopatra, this process might go something like, a soldier in Antony’s army witnesses the suicides or hears about them through rumor and reports the events back at Rome, where they become part of oral tradition until a historian like Plutarch 200 years later collects sources for his biography. Boccaccio reads Plutarch (along with Livy, another Roman historian, and Greek historians, and the Bible) one thousand years later and includes the story, which fits nicely into his moralizing compendium of the fall of great men. An artist in a workshop is given instructions in the margins of the manuscript to paint Antony, an aristocrat and general, committing suicide by his sword, and Cleopatra, a queen, killing herself by applying serpents to her breast. Things get lost and recreated with each translation, intentionally or not.

This ties back into reception theory. Wolfgang Iser discusses the root implications behind reception in his article entitled “Interaction Between Text and Reader.” Assume, again, that the ideas carry over into works of visual art. Iser posits that “dyadic and

dynamic interaction comes about only because we are unable to experience how we experience one another, which in turn proves to be a propellant to interaction. Out of this fact arises the basic need for interpretation, which regulates the whole process of interaction” (108). So, the very fact that we as humans can only experience the world and each other through the filter of the self creates the need to gain information through interaction – speaking, seeing, writing, and creating. Iser continues: “The reader, however, can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it” (109). Any attempt at gaining understanding of a work of art from the creator’s point of view, considering artists’ intentions, is necessarily futile because the creator’s point of view is unattainable by anyone other than the creator. Finally, Iser adds, “[The reader] is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. The structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text” (111). These blanks are where the retranslation provided by the artist’s image leave room for anachronism. Costuming and set details are rarely included in textual historical accounts, but are necessarily an element of pictorial depictions. Peter J. Rabinowitz describes the process by which new interpretations come about: “The multiplicity of audiences arises because all representational art is ‘imitation’ in that it pretends to be something it is not. As a result, the aesthetic experience exists on two levels at once. We can treat the work neither as what it is nor as what it appears to be; we must be simultaneously aware of both aspects” (243). Thus the writing of history becomes a narrative and a piece of vellum or canvas becomes a window to the past.

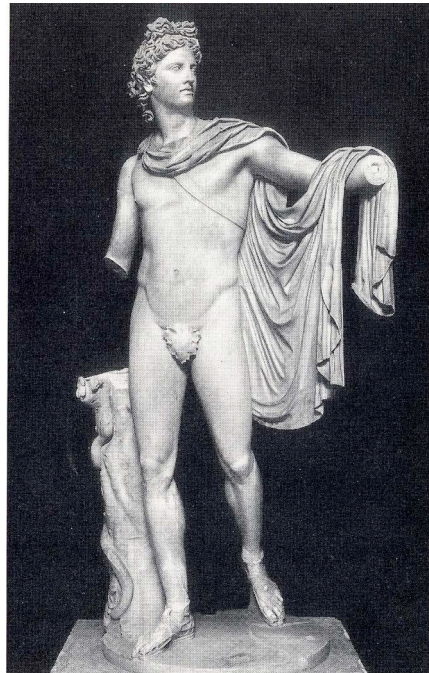


Figure 6. The Belvedere Apollo was discovered in 1503 and prompted a relatively sudden change in visuality and modes of representation across all art subjects and media, even though other classical statues, such as the Dioscuri survived above ground since Antiquity.

Pope Nicholas V declared a universal Jubilee in the city of Rome in 1450. Tens of thousands of the faithful flocked to the city (causing a nasty outbreak of the plague) and became enrapt with its history, and a great deal of money was collected to fund its restoration (Waywell 302). Rome and its classical past became accessible to a more general audience (i.e. not just the scholarly elite) from a wider geographical sphere. A great deal more poking around in the dirt was the result of this new trend. Papal collections of antiquities were started in the second half of the fifteenth century. The

discovery in 1503 of the marble Apollo Belvedere [Fig. 6], which served as the standard of ancient artistic beauty and skill until it was revealed to be a Roman copy of a Greek original a few hundred years later, was momentous and prompted the Vatican to set up the Belvedere sculpture court (Waywell 302). These collections served as the foundations of the concept of the public museum. The time was ripe for knowledge of the past to enter mainstream thought.

The rebirth that characterizes the Renaissance is the rebirth of the classics, so the standard definition says. It is, however, evident as discussed above that classical literature was available and read prior to the quattrocento. The supposed difference, instead, that separates the Renaissance from the Middle Ages is the new critically with which classical literature was read (as we suspend our disbelief that these are not the artificial, later-applied categories that they are). As Charles Martindale explains, the scholars and artists of the Renaissance “envision antiquity in its own terms” in order to “preserve its ‘otherness’”(Kallendorf 123). This new way of approaching the ancient included a more systematic study of their remnants with development of the fields of archaeology, grammar, and philology (Grafton 103). The task of philology was to figure out which parts of classical texts were medieval “improvements” and restore the text to a state more like that written by the original author. This suggests an appreciation for classical literature for its own sake, and a desire to experience it as authentic to its own historical context, rather than as a moral example framed in later Christian terms. New discoveries in the early sixteenth century, like Nero’s *Domus Aurea*, the Capitoline *Fasti* and let’s not forget the *Laocoon*, not only expanded scholars’ scope of actual knowledge, but also sparked overall cultural interest in the Romans (104). The development of the technique of cast making and a furious pace of recreations through drawings and engravings [Fig. 7] allowed forms to be dispersed geographically (Waywell 304).

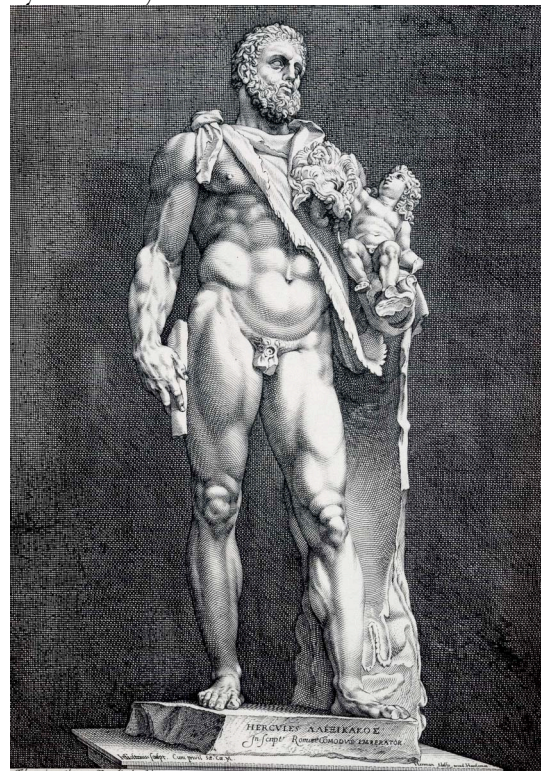


Figure 7. Engraving of a Roman statue, “The Emperor Commodus as Hercules,” by Hendrik Goltzius of Haarlem, engraved 1591-92, printed 1617. Even though the subject is of Roman origin, the fact of it being an engraving places its aesthetic qualities in the Renaissance. Such a visual resource could serve as a model or prop in a painting.

These copied images served as style guides and set the tone for an aesthetic standard that would last, with variation, for hundreds of years. The actual content of the Roman influences in literature and art was secondary to its ability to spur on a new mode of thought: that is, that other modes of thought did exist. Also, as Derrick R. Cartwright puts it, “Serious study of antiquities...provided the educated elite with an obligatory, if not altogether fresh, set of visual references for historical reflection and self-definition. Thus conceived, Rome’s artistic heritage came to be understood as both a lasting measure of high aesthetic standards and an authoritative index of creative accomplishments” (7). Knowledge of the ancients became the rubric for determining whether someone was cultivated or not, and a measure of taste in the arts. Most significantly to the discussion at hand, wide dispersal of copies of Roman artifacts provided the models that were necessary to artistic production. An engraving of Roman architecture could serve as a backdrop in a classicizing painting over which the artist could juxtapose costumed figure models set up in the studio, thereby creating an “accurate” and life-like image. The new historical “awareness” in art was really just a new way of copying [Fig. 8].



Figure 8. “An Audience at Agrippa’s” by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema 1875. The statue of Augustus is copied from another visual source.

Despite all of the newfound knowledge artists of the Renaissance had at their disposal, anachronistic details still appear frequently in paintings of historical subjects. “The School of Athens” by Raphael, (although of a Greek subject) one of the crowning achievements of Renaissance art, portrays not only philosophers together who could not possibly be in the same place at the same time due to the limits of the spans of their lives, which is one form of anachronism, but also sets them amidst classical ruins. One more thing, the likeness of Michelangelo stands in for one of them. Raphael and his contemporaries would have engaged with the classical past in the form of ruins, and the aesthetic of the ruin at that time was revered in its own right. Raphael also placed

Biblical figures into settings of classical ruins [Fig. 9], again not allowing literal constraints of chronology to distance himself from the past to which he felt he was connected.



Figure 9. “Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist,” engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, 1520-25. This picture illustrates the “aesthetic of the ruin,” placing ancient people into a Roman setting contemporary to the artist.

Additions, or “improvements” were still being made to ancient sculpture as well (the suckling twins Romulus and Remus were added to the she-wolf in the 15th century). This suggests a continuation of the view that authenticity is fluid, and that ancient art could be appreciated for its contemporary significance beyond being objects to simply revere (Thurber 66). Adrian W.B. Randolph backs this up with; “This complex interplay of motifs or ‘intervisuality’ between different works of art and different generations of artists produces a complex web of meanings and is absolutely characteristic of Renaissance responses to antiquity. Renaissance artists did not study and record antiquity in its own terms; instead, they interpreted it, giving the bones of antiquity meaningful flesh in creative acts of reconstruction.” *Spolia*, both visual and as actual physical fragments, were integrated into new creations, based on association of motif rather than chronology (Randolph 28). [Fig. 10]



Figure 10. Actual physical *spolia* were integrated into this house in Rome during the Renaissance.

Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood offer a new theory to explain the role of anachronism in their article “Interventions: Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism.” They claim that material objects were understood as having a double historicity, in that people knew that certain objects were not, in fact, old but valued them as if they indeed were. Nagel and Wood call this the principle of substitution, wherein “classes of artifacts were grasped as chains of substitutable replicas stretching out across time and space...The literal circumstances and the historical moment of an artifact’s material execution were not routinely taken as components of its meaning or function; such facts about an artifact were seen as accidental rather than as constitutive features” (405). Objects could reasonably belong to two histories simultaneously (407). This seems like an apology for anachronism, on the same level of “medieval artists painted ancient people in medieval garb because they didn’t know any better.” More simply, artists just did not always have the correct props at their disposal from which to paint. Again, on a purely practical level, artist must have visual guides from life or from another work of art.

Art of the Renaissance, and beyond, renders its subjects naturalistically, so that they appear frozen in time at a single moment, with the viewer just happening to catch a glimpse of the scene. This mode of visibility is indeed shared by much classical art. The artist is removed from the work (Kallendorf 123) – the art objectively presents an image as it would appear in real life, thus operating in the universal style that reflects the real world. At least, this is the goal that cannot but fall short. Louis Marin discusses the implications of the genre of history painting in his article “Toward a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin’s ‘The Arcadian Shepherds,’” and adds to this point: “A historical painting is a set of iconic narrative propositions which displays in its own language the narration of an event...In the case of narrative as opposed to discourse, the specific modality of its enunciation is to erase or conceal the signs of the narrator in the narrative propositions” (295). The “hand of the artist” however is inextricably linked to

the work of art, and is a manifestation of the mind that created it, and the culture that shaped that mind. Anachronism in the representation of history in the Renaissance and beyond is more insidious because the artist is self-aware and attempts to hide it. Today critics tend to “repudiate the historical objectivity of the Renaissance and the succeeding ‘classical’ epoch as a grand lie that needed to be unlearned in the twentieth century” (Nagel 412). For examples of images of Romans made in the Renaissance and beyond, artists were painting in the style of their moment – a Baroque painting cannot be confused for being from Roman times. Romans did not use canvas, for one. Very little Roman painting even survives (except at Pompeii, not largely excavated until the nineteenth century), but painting was the dominant medium for Roman subjects. Sculpture did survive, and was used to model in two-dimensional works, but ends up looking like a sculptural drawing or painting. Artists cannot escape the viscosity of their own time as far as medium and style, and to attempt to do so is forgery. Even when books were supplemented with visual accompaniments based on Roman models, elements like engraving lines place the subject still squarely within the epoch of its creation many hundreds of years later. Any visual treatment of a historical subject is recognized not only for its subject, but also for its own historical moment.



Figure 11. Tiepolo’s “Cleopatra’s Feast” 1743 portrays Antony and Cleopatra in costumes contemporary to the artist, who also painted several Roman subjects in historical dress. Here, anachronism is used as a deliberate trope.

Meaning is created when history (text) and present (reader) interact. Portrayals of Roman history are interpreted as symbols of the culture and times of the artist both by his or her contemporaries and then again by viewers and scholars today. Jacques Louis David’s “Oath of the Horatii” (1784) [Fig.12] is famous for being an allegory of Roman republican virtue as a motivator for the French Revolution because he did indeed turn out to be a revolutionary, but King Louis XVI, later enemy of the revolution, commissioned the painting. King Louis’s court sought to improve public morals through didactic art. The stoicism and loyalty to state that Livy’s Horatii represent, was, at the time of its actual creation, loyalty to the monarchical state.

Figure 12. Jacques-Louis David's painting "The Oath of the Horatii" is interpreted just as much, or more, as a symbol for contemporary French politics and David's opinion of them as it is a portrayal of a historical Roman event. An image is always a function of the culture that produces it.



David himself was inspired by a drama based on the story from the previous century, well before any inkling of revolution had begun. The painting was subsequently adopted as a symbol of the stoicism and loyalty to a specifically republican state eschewed by the French Revolution, which began in 1789 (Stokstad 932). The revolutionary values were projected both onto the painting created just a few years before for an antithetical governmental purpose and onto the original mytho-historical Roman incident itself. Moreover, David's painting, because of its fame, is still a major contribution to perceptions of Romans.

At the same time, the United States was appropriating a Rome-inspired visuality into its own monuments and art. America was essentially "starting from scratch" at every level, and did not have a unique national iconography built over hundreds of years from which to work. American artists did not have a base of visual models left in marble by an ancient civilization to serve as a setting in their paintings. There were not yet repositories of cultural artifacts set up in America; so many artists went to Rome in order to begin that production. Again, when an artist has nothing visual upon which to base a new work, he or she must copy. Americans copied Neoclassicism because it was popular throughout Europe at the time.

The statue of George Washington by Horatio Greenough (1832-40)[Fig. 13] is an example of an anachronism reversed from the kinds discussed here previously. It is George Washington *as* a Roman. The details, this time, are properly classicized but the figure does not belong to them in time. A use of such Roman trappings in association with an important American figure usually draws a viewer to the conclusion that the artist was drawing on parallels between Rome and America ideologically – republicanism (or imperialism), Roman law, etc. Greenough may have had more practical considerations working in this statue as well. The clothing of Washington's own time was already out of style by the time the statue was begun. A toga provided a universal, undated context for Washington.

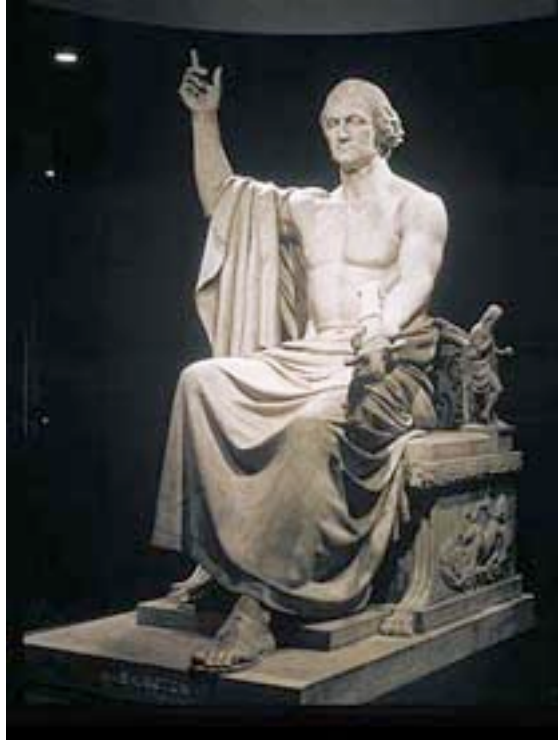


Figure 13. Horatio Greenough's statue of George Washington uses reverse anachronism of costuming details in order to portray him as eternal.

Returning to the cinematic examples that began the paper, the value placed on portraying Romans as accurately as possible in the United States today in the prevalent American art medium of film reflects a new set of American values. Moviegoers and television-viewers demand accuracy because America has the resources to expend millions of dollars to recreate artifacts and costumes, as well as to pay art directors and scholars to devote their studies to such pursuits. For the first time it is practical to do so. This is the standard for the film industry in general, and historical films are at least just as much film as history. These Romans speak English and appear on the modern media of film, so they are inescapably portrayed in American terms.

Murray McGillivray asks, “Is there any *other* way to understand an alien people of the distant past than by the creative use of the codes of our own society, culture, and ideology to bridge the gap between us and the alien culture?” (408). McGillivray asks his question rhetorically, because the answer cannot but be “no.” It is true of us now toward the people of the Renaissance, Middle Ages and ancient Romans, and it was true of people of the Renaissance toward people of the Middle Ages and the Romans, and it is true of medieval people toward the Romans (and Biblical figures, and the Greeks, etc.). A useful model is not to consider works of art as anachronistic but “instead as an affirmation of contemporary culture and its foundation in the cultures of religious and humanistic learning of the past” (Dempsey 418). To acknowledge anachronism is to recognize the inherent subjectivity of history.

I embrace anachronism and “error” in general because the subjectivity made explicit parallels and points to the subjective nature of the historical texts upon which I draw.

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