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Jacoba Urist, "Rewriting Art History," *The Atlantic*, February 3, 2016

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Rewriting Art History

The College Board is changing the AP course to reverse the cultural and racial bias found in the art world—a prejudice that museums are struggling to overcome, too.



Rebellious Silence, 1994

Shirin Neshat / Cynthia Preston / Gladstone Gallery

Imagine having to select just 250 works of art and architecture, spanning all humankind, Paleolithic man to Maya Lin. Such was the Herculean task the College Board—the organization that oversees Advanced Placement classes—shouldered when it relaunched AP art history this fall. The course had been lacking on two fronts: one pedagogical, the other cultural. So, several years ago, the College Board convened a group of professors and teachers to condense its

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curriculum, for the first time, into a set of several hundred exemplary works, across as many artistically significant cultures as possible.

Diversifying a syllabus, however, isn't the same as diversifying a classroom. White juniors and seniors still take AP exams at disproportionately higher rates than their Hispanic, Native American, or black peers, according to College Board data. In 2015, only 2,072 of the country's schools offered AP art history. So while the new AP-history curriculum requires students to make cross-cultural connections, there's still a fundamental racial divide in AP art-history classes and exposure to art history that a redesigned course doesn't address.

And unfortunately, this divide persists on a larger scale. A report by the Mellon Foundation assessed gender and ethnic diversity among museum staff in the United States: 84 percent of the high-level and leadership positions were occupied by white staffers, while black employees held just 4 percent of them. In fact, a survey of "Diversity in the New York City Cultural Community," released last week found "curators" to be "the whitest" job category in the arts, with 79 percent identifying as white non-Hispanic.

For many students—including myself in the 1990s—the AP course was a blitzkrieg through centuries of art history. The College Board's previous materials never specified that instructors acquaint students with a particular list of works. Because the entire textbook was up for grabs, teachers often drilled students on vast amounts of information and showed their classes over 1,000 works—hoping enough of them would look familiar to test takers on the year's given AP exam. This scattershot approach left teachers little time to discuss the definition of art, how it changes, and why particular works acquire meaning—the kind of fluency demanded by upper-level college courses. The new emphasis on a defined set of work does give teachers considerably less leeway over which art to teach, but the redesigned framework is more focused and less didactic. It's a finite universe meant to encourage better analysis, leaving room to teach art history, as opposed to spending so much energy on pattern recognition.

The course's second problem, however, proved to be much more complex: It mirrored the broad cultural bias found in the art world—and rewriting history is a painstaking process. As with most art-history classes, the old test was largely Eurocentric, according to John Williamson, the vice president of AP curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the College Board. Roughly 65 percent of the course content is still art considered within the Western tradition. Now, 35 percent—around 87 artworks—come from "other artistic traditions."

Efforts to diversify the AP reflect a larger push in the art world to integrate artists who were formerly discounted or altogether ignored. Curators and educators told me it's time to correct the way students—both on school campuses and at museums—learn art history. For decades, women and artists of color have been absent from history books and museum walls, likely giving students of all backgrounds the impression that seminal artwork is produced only by a certain type of artist, by certain accepted cultures. Campaigns have sought to change the status quo, including the anonymous group known as Guerilla Girls, which has been creating posters and flyers since the 1980s that critique art-world sexism and racism, documenting the low number

GLADSTONE GALLERY

of women and minorities represented by galleries and shown in major museums. Members wear gorilla masks and assume the aliases of dead female artists. I corresponded with an artist who uses the pseudonym of a German painter and sculptor, “Käthe Kollwitz,” who died in 1945.



Guerilla Girls

“If you were to believe what many of us were taught in school and museums, you would think a clear line of achievement links one genius innovator to the next,” the Guerillas wrote in their 1998 book on the history of Western art. The very acceptance of a “mainstream,” they explained, reduces centuries of artistic output to “a bunch of white male masterpieces and movements” because art by women and people of color often don’t meet historians’ criteria for “quality.”

But mindsets are evolving, subtly and not so. The Denver Art Museum (DAM), for example, has a major upcoming exhibition in June of female abstract expressionists—a movement usually linked to iconic men like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. According to an official statement by Gwen Chanzit, DAM’s modern-art curator, Women of Abstract Expressionism “contribute(s) to a more complete understanding of this important mid-20th-century movement by presenting artists beyond the handful of painters who have previously defined the whole in textbook accounts.” But once the art world adjust the inequities, Chanzit said in an email, the categories will become meaningless and unnecessary. In the same vein, Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts last week announced the acquisition of its first Frida Kahlo painting, releasing a statement that her work “enable[s] the museum to tell the story of modernism in the Americas more broadly and inclusively.” A group of leading museums are also in the process of adding

GLADSTONE GALLERY

more black artists to their collections—in the words of the *New York Times* art writer, Randy Kennedy, “playing historical catch-up at full tilt.”



En la barbería no se llora, 1994 (Pepón Osorio)

Indeed, the redesigned art-history course reflects a similar shift, explained Wendy Free, the director of AP arts programs, by broadening the scope of art and artists students encounter. The revised AP course now includes works like the Puerto Rican-born artist Pepón Osorio’s large-scale, mixed-media installation *No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop*, which incorporates barbershop chairs, potted plants, and a life-sized statue of Jesus. Osorio explores notions of “machismo,” and the distinct emotions—both cultural pride and marginality—that come with the Puerto Rican American identity.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



En la barbería no se llora, 1994 (Pepón Osorio)

The thinking behind including art such as Osorio's is, of course, that students should be exposed to artists who look, think, and create in contrasting ways. The new curriculum is, in turn, designed to reward those who are able to discuss a piece of artwork created by artists from wide-ranging artistic traditions. Equally important, the College Board plans to periodically revise its image selection, aligning them with the art studied in college courses to ensure they are synched up as education evolves. Up to 10 percent of the works will be changed every five to seven years, according to Williamson.

(The revised AP course is also urging students to make personal connections to works of art, rewarding those who can discuss pieces in relation to their own experiences and cultural

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background. With that in mind, *The Atlantic* and College Board's writing prize—a contest for all students, whether or not they take art history—is currently looking for exceptional high-school essays “that insightfully analyze and interpret a meaningful work of art.” The winner will be published in the magazine's September issue.)

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Art-history education has long had a diversity problem. According to researchers at Sacramento State who reviewed gender representation in three of the most popular AP art-history textbooks used in schools, if asked to identify a famous artist, most people will probably name a white male. “From a young age, I remember seeing the perspective of textbooks, that Eurocentric artists, scientists, and scholars created the world and the standard of beauty,” said Allison Davis, the associate artistic director of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn. This is problematic not just for “black and brown children, but for all of us,” she continued, “inherently creating an imbalanced perspective from a young age” and “perpetuating a society of dominance.” The online art resource Artsy recently likened the art world to a school cafeteria: a battlefield of social dynamics.

“We certainly are seeing more visible changes now,” said Ronda Kasl, who became the Metropolitan Museum's first curator of Colonial Latin American art in 2013. “But the movement to include artists from different cultures and countries has been gaining momentum for 25 years or so.”

In many ways, the Met and the AP-art curriculum face a similar, daunting challenge: Both are tasked with developing comprehensive presentations of world cultures. Kasl, for example, curated a small gallery of 20 objects of Mexican art, culled from six departments—and the reaction she described from visitors is: This is nice, but why just one room? According to Kasl, it's generally recognized now that an encyclopedic museum like the Met can't leave out whole regions and periods, not to mention major artists. “It's just isn't acceptable anymore,” said Kasl. “But it takes a while to remedy.”

On the other hand, art-history classes may be able to redress omissions more rapidly than museums; compared to physical collections, textbooks have far more flexibility. For example, as Kasl pointed to the Met's collection of Mexican art, which is mostly from the period between the 1890s and 1910, when it was fairly common for wealthy Northeasterners to travel to Mexico City by train. Then came the Mexican revolution; wealthier patrons stopped visiting the country, an interruption that led to a significant hole in the Met's holdings. In that sense, art-history teachers may be the ones who lead the charge of gender and racial parity in the art world, deviating from standardized textbooks and revising the art canon.

Consider *Rebellious Silence*, a piece by the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, now No. 235 on the AP's list of required works. In the photograph, Neshat uses classic calligraphic imagery of Islamic art to examine the complex personal landscape for modern-day Muslim women in the Middle East. According to the artist's statement, the Farsi text on the artist's body is poetry by contemporary

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Iranian women who have “written on the subject of martyrdom and the role of women in the [Iranian] Revolution.” Mounting a solo Neshat exhibition—or acquiring her art as the Met has done—would involve considerable more red tape and political maneuvering than, say, presenting it to a high-school or college class.

Still, the fact remains that students who enroll in AP courses—including art history—are overwhelmingly white. For a set of complicated social reasons, thousands of prepared minority students in this country, Williamson said, either didn’t take a course in an available AP subject for which they had the ability to succeed, or attended a school that doesn’t offer a course in that subject. In the class of 2015, 19,492 black students who took the PSAT showed “AP potential in the arts”—art history or music theory—yet only 520 took either exam. And correcting that imbalance—teaching more students of color about art—is the next crucial hurdle for schools and the College Board.

Luckily, College Board data shows that the number of black students taking all AP exams (including art history) has grown significantly over the last decade: Nearly 68,000 black students sat for AP tests in 2005, while over 190,000 did last May. Citing the Met’s director, Thomas Campbell, *The New Yorker* writes that the museum may have a “unique ability” to present contemporary art within a 5,000-year historical context. The revised AP art-history course may hold the opportunity to present art across all time periods, teaching students about diverse aesthetic traditions from prehistory to the present—and placing women and artists of color along a new continuum.