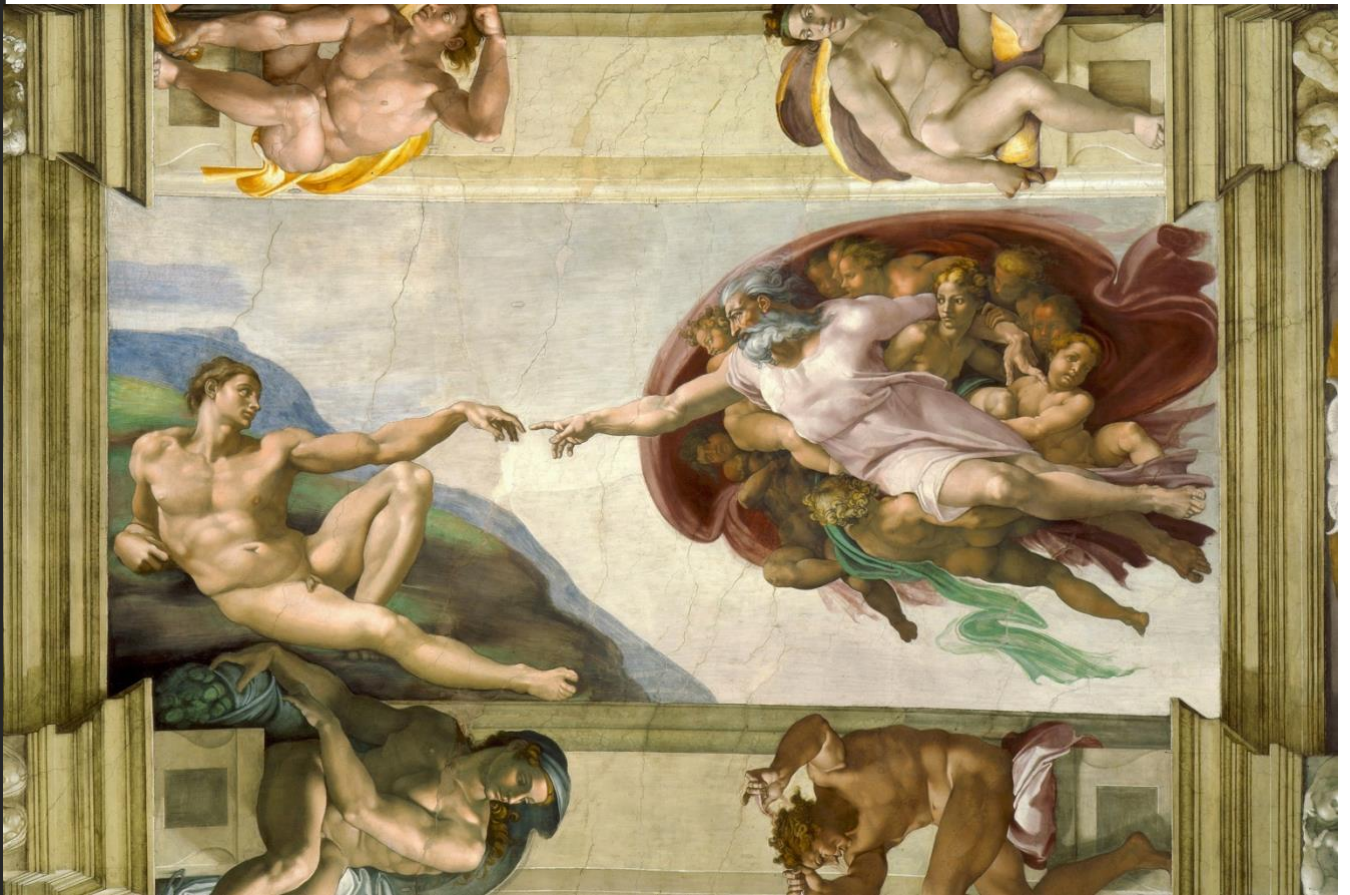


RESEARCH IN PRACTICE, DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

“How has art had an influence on how minority groups are viewed by the public?”

- Fine Art
- Stereotypes
- Discrimination



Student Name: Maisie Tuckett
Student Number: 1802381
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Lecturer: Julia Lockhart & Louise Burston

Introduction

A short context of this writing is to explore the topic of how minority groups are represented in art, and the impact that this representation has had on how society views these communities and ultimately how they view themselves. I will attempt to link three keywords; 'Fine Art', 'Stereotypes' and 'Discrimination', in hopes that they will lead me to a clear and concise question in which to write my eventual Independent Enquiry. These keywords will point me in the right direction in terms of research and what I will look into further in my dissertation.

In this writing I will be primarily exploring racial discrimination and how people of colour are represented in the Western art world. I will stay mindful about how other minority groups, such as disabled people and homosexuals are represented in art and how they are consequently viewed by society, and how this might coincide with similar themes that are discovered throughout this investigation.

I will evaluate how Fine Art throughout history has impacted the laws of society, how the Western world views these communities and how symbolic annihilation has impacted minority groups' perception of themselves.

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Fine Art

The 'canon' or 'canonisation' is a term used to define the classic works belonging to a body of high culture activities, like literature, music and art, and are considered as crucial and of upmost importance to today's society. When various Fine Art pieces are described as belonging to the 'art historical canon' it refers to artwork which is held with the upmost respect and considered the highest standard of its media, worthy of imitation.

The backbone of traditional Western art history is largely religiously motivated, specifically Roman Catholic art that often communicate depictions from the bible. Because of this, Roman art and art belonging to the High Renaissance period are often considered the most prestige and regarded as being of the highest value.

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) 's book 'Lives of the Artists'(1550) led him to be considered the originator of the artistic canon and many of the concepts it embodies. In his book he intended 'to distinguish the better from the good, and the best from the better, the most distinguished from the less prominent qualities'(Vasari, G. 1550). This work supports the belief that artists belonging to the High Renaissance period, like Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael, are creators of the most highly recognised pieces of art in 'modern' history.

Throughout art history there has been many changes in what is 'valued' but the canon always remains prominent, meaning many outdated traditions and beliefs are upheld and embedded in todays society. Vasari's artistic canon runs had-in-hand with Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) 's theory of aesthetics which prioritises form and beauty in a piece of art rather

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than its practical and theoretical content. Kant promotes a stripped-back notion that art is considered beautiful or not purely by its aesthetic value rather than any other contributing factors, like its original political or religious elements. Consequently, there is an aesthetic and ideological standard of beauty that is either recognised as being tasteful or disregarded. The works that follow are pieces that are considered to belong to the artistic canon and are believed to adhere to Kant's aesthetic judgement.



Figure 1: The Mona Lisa – *Leonardo Da Vinci* 1503-1506

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Figure 2 (bottom): Triumph of Venus – *Francois Boucher* 1740

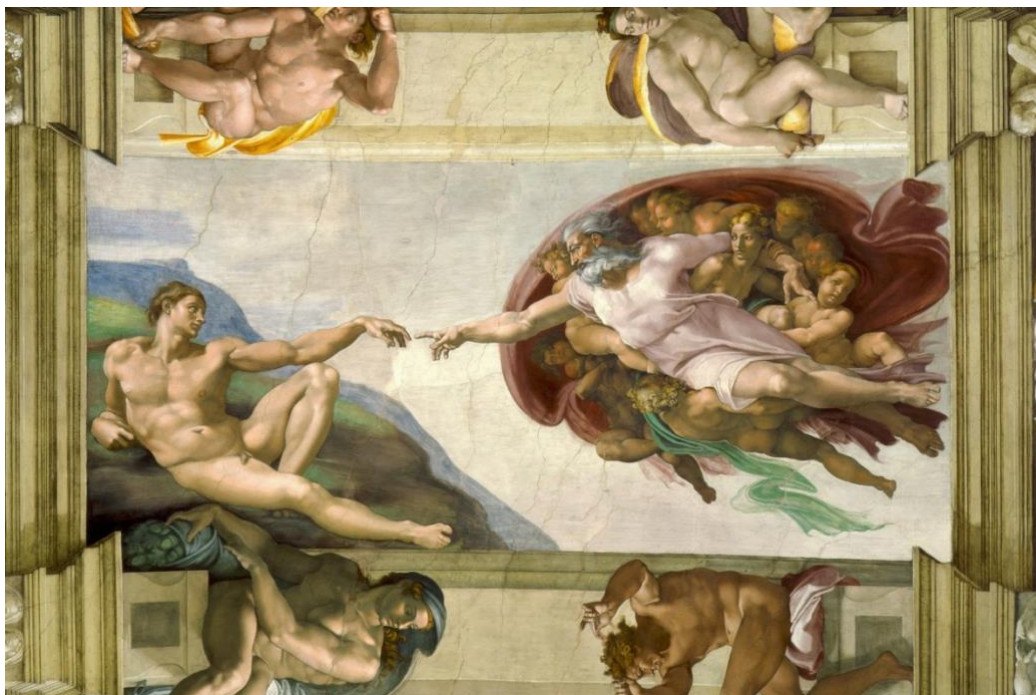


Figure 3: Creation of Adam – *Michelangelo Buonarroti* 1508-1512

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The institutionalised hierarchy of artists and styles is continually fed to society. It is important to remain conscious of the canonisation processes that led and still lead to some artists being included in the canon and entering history and others being excluded."

(Langfeld. G. 2018)

Fine Art is a powerful tool in swaying public opinion and generating social norms. The factors represented in Fine Art that belong to the artistic canon create a universally recognised ideology of what is deemed to be beautiful thus institutionalising a view on what you must look like to be rendered 'beautiful' in society. This dehumanises and invalidates any body type, race, gender or disability that does not appear in these depictions, leading onto the theory of symbolic annihilation "the idea that if people don't see people like them in the media they consume, they must somehow be unimportant." (Martins, N, 2017) in the arts.

"Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation." (Gerbner, G and Gross, L, 1976)

The three examples of canonised art (Figure 1, 2 and 3) communicate a Eurocentric standard of beauty in Western culture that states white bodies are the only form worthy of artistic communication and inclusion. This standard is suggested throughout art history, where the vast majority is only inclusive of white males and females. This is proven in depictions of the New Testament where knowingly middle eastern bodies are illustrated as being of Caucasian ethnicity.

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The lack of representation of minority groups in the early stages of determining the artistic canon means that anybody other than white people are now rarely represented accurately in the art world. This fulfils the prophecy that art is an elitist activity and implies that minority groups are not amongst those able to identify with fine art because of their negative or lack of inclusion. "the message is: You're invisible. The message is: You don't count. And the message is: There's something wrong with you." (Morgan, M, 2017) By being rendered invisible, it creates a false narrative for a large amount of the population which enforces a negative view that moulds the way society sees these groups and the way they see themselves and their own self-worth. Representation in the arts is crucial in engaging minority groups with high culture. Without this representation they are left to "wonder, 'Do I matter? Does society value me as a person?'" (Ramon, A.C, 2017)

Stereotypes

The institutionalised Eurocentric beauty standard set by the artistic canon is what is viewed by society as being the stereotype that sells. Eurocentricity is the look that society is pushed to desire and the only one represented positively across the arts and the media. It is a Westernised perspective of a standard of beauty that is not identifiable with various ethnic groups as well as people with disabilities, promoting a narrative that anything less than this standard is invalid.

Throughout history, people of colour, specifically black African communities have been subject to negative representation in the art world. 'People and continents are colonized or pillaged, black people are enslaved, then you tell them they are beasts or animals, which is

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why you have black people depicted as mammys, or in Sambo-face’(Cunningham, R. 2019).

These representations are still enforced today. Depictions of people of colour having exaggerated features, for example being painted in a darker tone then what they would have been, enlarged heads, noses and mouths. Either this or the vastly contrasting act of whitewashing a historically black character.

An example of this is Princess Andromeda who appears in Greek Mythology. According to an article by a British art historian, Elizabeth McGrath (McGrath, S. 1992), named ‘The Black Andromeda’, the princess was confirmed to have been from Ethiopia and originally drawn as such. However, depictions of Andromeda throughout history have represented her as being white. ‘artists throughout Western art history frequently omitted to depict her blackness because Andromeda was supposed to be beautiful, and blackness and beauty – for many of them – was dichotomous.’(Smith Galer, S. 2019)



Figure 4: Perseus Liberating Andromeda – *Piero de Cosimo 1510-1515*
Andromeda is depicted as being white.

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From the aforementioned Renaissance piece (Figure 4) you can see that Princess Andromeda is among black bodies who are present in the foreground and represented as being very dark-skinned and dressed in exotic costume, however Andromeda herself has been depicted as being a lot lighter in skin colour than anybody else in the piece. In McGrath’s article she references a Spanish artist, Francisco Pacheco (1564-1644) who writes in his book ‘why Andromeda is so often painted as white-skinned when several of the sources say she is black.’ (Pacheco, F. 1649)

Another example of whitewashing black figures in art is the Old Testament’s depictions of the Visitor to King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba. ‘There were once some depictions of the Queen of Sheba as dark-skinned, but the Renaissance saw her whitewashing and sexualisation on a grand scale.’ (Smith Galer, s. 2019) The Queen of Shiba would have come from Saba in Ethiopia and would have been a black queen, however because of how black bodies, specifically black women are dehumanised and hypersexualised if represented in art, ‘by the 18th Century she is no longer a queen meeting a king to have a healthy debate – she is an idolatrous seductress.’ (Smith Galer, S. 2019) which also supports the stereotype of black people being ‘primitive’ and ‘animalistic’, as mentioned before.

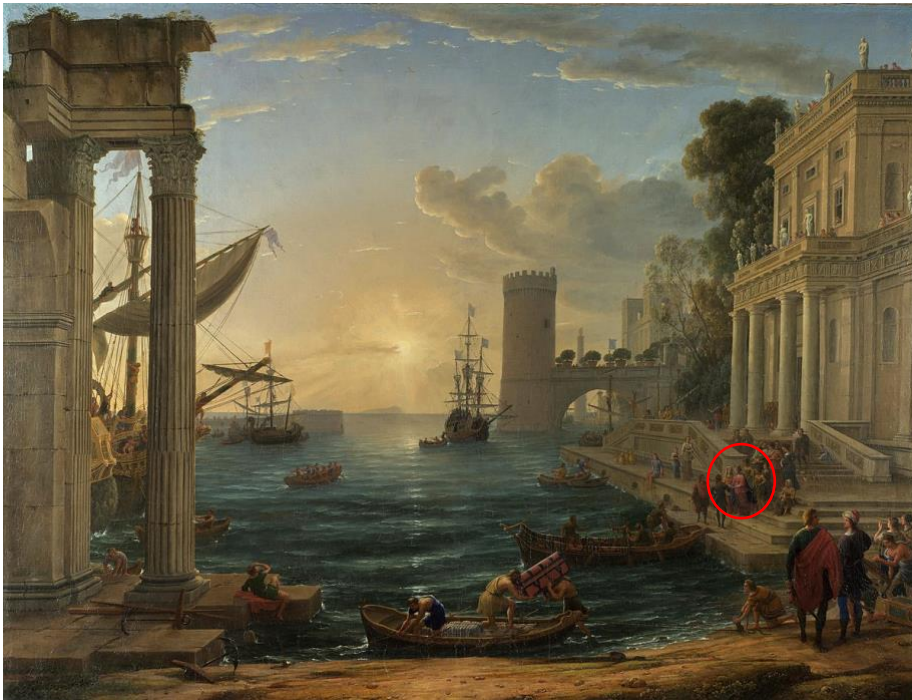


Figure 5: The Embarkation of The Queen of Shiba – *Claud Lorraine 1648*
The Queen of Shiba is depicted as being white.

'Those who are deemed most powerful are often emulated in terms of their physical appearance, their behaviour, their standards and values. Furthermore, those in power project themselves as the ideal physically, mentally, and spiritually and construct reality to support their beliefs.' (Jackson-Lowman, H. 2014)

These examples of whitewashing and exaggerating black bodies enforces the stereotype that anything other than a Westernised Eurocentric beauty standard is worthy of validation and recognition. Black historical figures (goddesses and queens) being depicted as white strips minority groups of their representation and promotes the idea that 'bodily perfection' is only achievable if you are white and able bodied. White, nude goddess figures replacing black history pushes a narrative that white bodies are the only race worthy of godly

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representation, suggesting anyone who does not identify with this Eurocentricity does not belong to the art world and cannot be deemed to be ‘beautiful’.

Discrimination

“If a race has no history, it has no worthwhile traditions, it becomes a negligible factor in thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated” (G Woodson, C and E. Moorland, J.)

The influence that the artistic canon has on society and the examples of black history and culture being erased from the art world, emphasises the belief that any other forms aside from Caucasian males and females are not worthy of recognition.

These factors have meant that racism has been continually perpetuated throughout history and has resulted in institutionalised discrimination across a variety of minority groups.

Because of this, the laws of society are only able to have a distorted knowledge of people of colour’s wide cultures and involvement in society today.

Because of art being a traditionally elitist activity, people of colour would not have had the access to create art that could be appreciated on a large scale like the Western artistic canon has been able to. The art and culture of black communities does exist, but institutionalised racism has erased this from Western knowledge. ‘Black history (and studies including black people at all) starts with slavery and ends with civil rights, sparing not much detail of many events in-between prior and post’(Denteh, B. 2018) ‘The current UK system fails to acknowledge the presence of black people in the country prior to World War One

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and very rarely addresses that African and Caribbean people have contributed to many aspects of our present through philosophy, music, architecture, literature, art, science' (Denteh, B. 2018). The beauty of black history is invalidated, and stories of black communities are not recognised by the Western world unless these stories involve pain and trauma.

This institutionalised discrimination triggered by the artistic canon has lead artists of colour to take it upon themselves to break down these barriers set by society and try to provide accurate representation for these groups. Unfortunately, this often has little to no effect because of how deep-rooted this discrimination is. Contemporary artists like Jean-Michael Basquiat (1960-1988) and Kara Walker (1969) have challenged the way people of colour are viewed by society.



Figure 6: The Keys to the Coop – Kara Walker 1997

"Explores imagery and ideas often associated with slavery and African-American history" (Martin, R. 2015)

"Conforms to stereotypes concerning the wild and uncivilised behaviour of slaves." (Martin, R. 2015)



Figure 7: Riding with Death – *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1988*

"Full of racial undercurrents, social references and sarcasm." (Stockwell, M. 2020)

"Basquiat's style was often described as 'primitive' and 'naïve'" (Stockwell, M. 2020)

"He creates an image of a reversal of power structures, however, by placing this figure on top of a skeleton, an image of death, he seems

Both pieces have been described as 'primitive' (Stockwell, M. 2020) and 'wild' (Martin, R. 2015) which coincides with how black people were often negatively represented in the past proving that this is still relevant today. It suggests that the involvement of slavery and oppression in black art represents black communities as being animalistic and subhuman which feeds into these people being sexualised and criminalised in and by society.

Within these works, there is evidence that a large majority of work by black artists reflect themes of trauma, black oppression and slavery. One can argue that this, on one hand, is

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positive because it brings recognition and highlights these historic experiences of people of colour. But, on the other hand, can also be argued as negative because it is one of the only aspects of black history and identity that is recognised, as everything else before this was eradicated by Western society. -Thus, being one of the only events in black history recognised in the Western world and one of the only well-known topics worthy of expression in black history to improve representation of communities that would otherwise be ignored.

Conclusion

This inquiry has informed me of many major talking-points regarding this research topic as well as providing me with information that I will be able to include in my larger, more in-depth inquiry.

I have discussed and aimed to evaluate the way society has been influenced by the representation of minority communities of colour, or lack thereof. I have discovered that the way society views minority groups is essentially a product of the artistic canon and what it has taught us to be relevant and irrelevant through symbolic annihilation.

My full Independent Inquiry will aim to incorporate ableism and homosexuality communicated by the Western artistic canon, and whether these communications coincide with the representation of racial discrimination in art. This will involve research into hyper sexualisation and the male gaze theory, two common denominators of Fine Art.

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I will also include more examples of contemporary artists who still conform to what the canon promotes today, as well as artists who challenge the ideals of the art canon and strive to make the art world more inclusive.

Proposed Question for Independent Inquiry:

"How has art had an influence on how minority groups are viewed by the public?"

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