

WHEN ART INTERSECTS HISTORY



A **SPACE** for **DIALOGUE** **99**

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

An artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian. His role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are.

—James Baldwin

When we open a newspaper, we confront headlines that shout boldly and briefly what has happened in the world. But something distinct is evoked when we assess a work of art as a historical document. Consider, for example, if instead of reading the headline “Fighting Rages in Little Rock as Integration Is Attempted,” reporting the ongoing struggle for the desegregation of schools, we view Jacob Lawrence’s colorful, tightly composed watercolor *Soldiers and Students*, which depicts a similar event. The painting juxtaposes black students grasping their schoolbooks against ominous armed guards who loom above them. A mob of furious protestors seep out of an inky black background, jeering at the students as they try to enter the school building. The compressed scene is composed of jagged edges and abrupt swatches of color, communicating the chaos and abrasive intensity of the moment. What is Lawrence’s rendering of school desegregation able to convey that journalism cannot? What perspectives are included that could have been ignored or negated?

When Art Intersects History examines works of American modern art that document the history of equality during the second half of the twentieth century. The politically charged century reached a climax in the 1960s and 70s with the confluence of the civil rights movement, women’s rights campaigns, gay rights movement, and



Vietnam War protests. All of this was propelled by a mounting countercultural cry for equality and social justice. This exhibition considers how American artists have invaluable captured their perspectives on these galvanizing historic moments.

Not bound by the limits and potential misappropriation of words and documents, artists can freely explore the raw emotions unleashed in human struggles for equality. In his essay “On the Social History of Art,” T. J. Clark explains that artists are at liberty to explore the “specific conditions” of their encounters with history. An artist, Clark explains, can experiment with how the “content of an experience becomes form, an event becomes an image, boredom its representation.”¹ Through a creative lens, artists can embrace emotions and personal experience unbound by factual accounting.

This perspective is abundantly clear in the art surrounding the civil rights movement. In *CORE*, for example, Robert Rauschenberg collaged appropriated imagery in order to narrate the contours of racial injustice in the United States. Layering photographs of figures ranging from John F. Kennedy to Native Americans in traditional dress, he juxtaposed competing visions of America in close, shared proximity. The title of the work refers to the acronym of the Congress of Racial Inequality, founded in 1942 to improve race relations through memorable campaigns such as the Freedom Rides of 1961. Yet Rauschenberg’s print also highlights another definition of the word *core*: the central, most essential part of the whole.

Rauschenberg’s chaotic overlapping of a wide range of images perhaps suggests the multiple facets and breadth of American identity. Squeezed just below the screenprint’s center is a small image of the Statue of Liberty, whose strong posture and fixed gaze radiate the unwavering national freedom the statue symbolizes. Yet beneath this image are side-by-side photographs of a Native American and a Civil War soldier, a diptych that interrogates the very freedom Lady Liberty stands for, asking which citizens have access to the American dream of liberty.

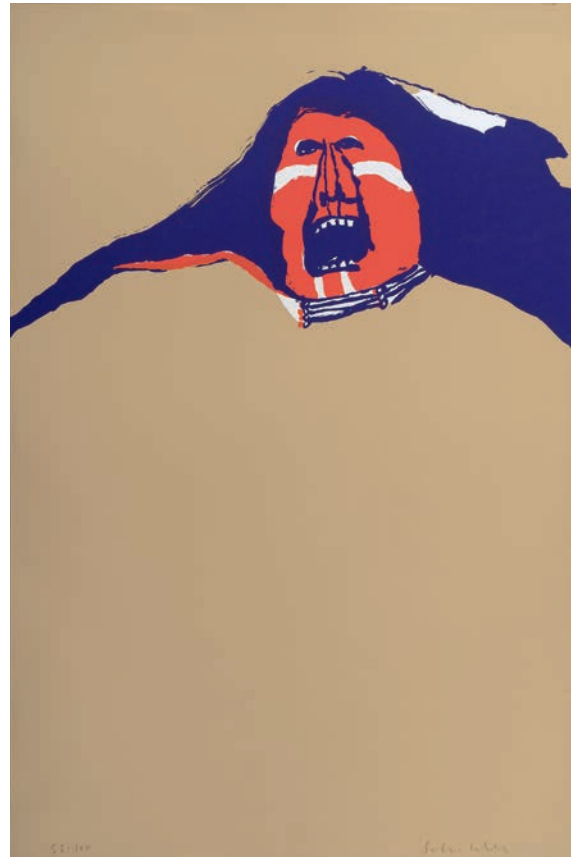
Rauschenberg does not deny the triumphs of the United States: photos of booming commercial industries and even successful

outer space missions claim space within the poster. Yet the transparency of some of the photographs, such as the overlapping images of John F. Kennedy, add an uncertainty to the print's message. Something is askew—part of the whole is perhaps missing. Through this colorful collage, Rauschenberg brings to the fore feelings of both success and defeat, clarity and a general lack of cohesive certainty. These sentimental dichotomies ultimately characterized the climate of the time.

Artists advocating for social equality prompt emotional responses in vastly different ways. Fritz Scholder, for example, uses a solitary figure in *Untitled (Screaming Indian)*, creating a symbolic American Indian—not the stereotyped noble savage of Hollywood, but an anonymous figure responding to a history of oppression. The subject's unfinished form elicits a visceral reaction of discomfort and tension while emphasizing the figure's wide-mouthed expression: Is the man unleashing an agonizing scream? Or does his cry denote power? Does the empty space surrounding his head suggest a cultural erasure of Native peoples? Is it an aesthetic device that alludes to their loss of land? Or does this blank void stand for the negation of authentic Native American experiences through oppressive Indian stereotypes? Scholder effectively prompts his viewers to both observe and reflect upon Native Americans' position in contemporary society.

Artistic engagement in this period extended to issues beyond racial injustice. Fluxus art, for instance, confronted the gendered views that have historically forced men and women into siloed roles within society. Fluxus works are part of a broader experimental art movement that emphasized the production of artwork rather than the product. Through performance pieces, certain Fluxus artists uncovered ways of demonstrating the fallacies of gendered mindsets. Documentation of these performances now serves as a unique form of historical testimony on gender equality movements in the 1960s.

When Art Intersects History contrasts the emotional power of certain works on view with contemporaneous excerpts from *The Dartmouth*, the College newspaper, which rely on text to describe the events and movements that artists depict. Art theorist and writer Erwin Panofsky says that "we study the past because we are



interested in reality."² But human reality is complicated, tempered by vast differences of perspective and place, as this comparison of journalistic and artistic approaches reveals. By augmenting our understanding of history through the lens of an artist, we are able to experience the humanity and emotions of the tumultuous second half of the twentieth century. Ultimately, by closely examining these artistic accounts of historical events, we are better able to make sense of today.

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Class of 1954 Intern

NOTES

Epigraph: James Baldwin, quoted in Jane Howard, "Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are," *LIFE*, May 24, 1963, 89.

1. T. J. Clark, "On the Social History of Art," in *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 13.

2. Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, 1982), 22.

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CHECKLIST

Jacob Lawrence, American, 1917–2000, *Soldiers and Students*, 1962, opaque watercolor over graphite on wove Arches paper. Bequest of Jay R. Wolf, Class of 1951; W.976.187

George Tooker, American, 1920–2011, *Half Dozen Eggs (Carton of Eggs)*, 1963, egg tempera on gessoed panel. Bequest of Louise W. Schmidt; P.996.14.1

Robert Rauschenberg, American, 1925–2008, *CORE*, 1965, color screenprint on paper, edition 180/200. Bequest of Lawrence Richmond, Class of 1930; PR.978.170

Peter Saul, American, born 1934, *Shicago Justus*, from the portfolio *Conspiracy: The Artist as Witness*, published 1971, lithograph on Arches paper, artists' proof, edition of 150. Gift of David R. Godine, Class of 1966; PR.972.224.10

Nancy Spero, American, 1926–2009, and Leon Albert Golub, American, 1922–2004, *They Will Torture You, My Friend*, from the portfolio *Conspiracy: The Artist as Witness*, published 1971, screenprint on Arches paper, artist's proof, edition of 150. Gift of David R. Godine, Class of 1966; PR.972.224.4

Fritz Scholder, Luiseño/American, 1937–2005, *Untitled (Screaming Indian)*, 1973, screenprint on wove paper, edition 52/100. Gift of Varujan Boghosian; PR.993.56.5

Su Friedrich, American, born 1954; and Carolee Schneemann, American, 1939–2019, *Documentation of the Performance "Americana I Ching Apple Pie,"* performance in 1975; photographed in 1977, photographs and typewriting on paper. Gift of Monroe A. Denton Jr., Class of 1968, in honor of Charlet Davenport; 2006.100.2

Hollis Melton, American, born 1944, *Black and White Piece (Photographs Depicting "Black and White," a Performance by George and Billie Maciunas at the Flux Wedding and Cabaret, February 25, 1978)*, February 25, 1978, twelve

gelatin silver prints in an accordion folder. Purchased through the Olivia H. Parker and John O. Parker '58 Acquisition Fund and the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; 2011.52

Guerrilla Girls, American, founded 1985, *How to Enjoy the Battles of the Sexes (Project for the New Yorker)*, from the portfolio *Guerrilla Girls' Most Wanted: 1985–2006*, 1996, offset lithograph on paper, edition 4/50. Purchased through the Anonymous Fund #144; 2006.83.19

The exhibition *When Art Intersects History*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, March 7–April 26, 2020. *A Space for Dialogue: Fresh Perspectives on the Permanent Collection from Dartmouth's Students*, founded with support from the Class of 1948, is made possible with generous endowments from the Class of 1967, Bonnie and Richard Reiss Jr. '66, and Pamela J. Joyner '79.

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Inside left: Jacob Lawrence, *Soldiers and Students*, 1962.
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Inside right: Fritz Scholder, *Untitled (Screaming Indian)*, 1973
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