

# Coloring the Western Canon



A **SPACE** for **DIALOGUE** 107

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



What goes through your mind when you see something colorful? From the natural hues of our environment to the synthetic dyes on our clothes, color is an integral part of our lives, and every day we make choices that reflect the meanings and values we ascribe to colors. But our preferences do not exist in a vacuum. Our attitudes toward color speak to who we are as a broader society. What forces have shaped our preferences and associations around color?

*Coloring the Western Canon* examines our attitudes, not toward individual colors, but to the presence of *color itself*, particularly within the context of an art historical tradition shaped by Eurocentric concepts of art and beauty. Our ideas about what constitutes “good art” are influenced by the Western canon—a body of literature, music, philosophy, and art emblematic of “high culture and civilization” known as “the classics.” From the ideas of Plato to the paintings of Leonardo and the writings of Shakespeare, they are the best products of Greco-Roman antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. But who gets to decide what belongs in the canon and what does not? Who chooses the great masters?

Rooted in upholding Western standards, the field of art history has long centered the opinions and experiences of white male artists and historians while excluding those who do not fit the mold. In major US art museums today, 85% of featured artists are white and 87% men.<sup>1</sup> Founded on these principles, institutions maintain the illusion of a Western artistic tradition that is exclusively white.

How does the Western canon govern how we think about color? “To color” something means, literally, to change its physical color. But “to color” also means “to influence, especially in a negative way.” Color, then, is synonymous with distortion, misrepresentation, and exaggeration. Color is deceitful. In *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor notes how the word *color* evolved from the Latin and Middle English words for “conceal” and “disguise.”<sup>2</sup> In “Why We Don’t Trust Colour in Art,” Anna Souter explains that our distrust of color is linked to its association with “the Other.”<sup>3</sup> Color is a dangerous illusion that contradicts reality and rationality.

Early art historians advanced the idea that color is antithetical to intelligence. Johann



Wolfgang von Goethe, a prominent literary figure, wrote that “savage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colors; and that people of refinement avoid vivid colors in their dress.”<sup>4</sup> Goethe’s sentiments are especially unsettling in the context of European colonialism and the atrocities committed in the name of “progress.” Similarly, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, considered the father of art history, wrote, “Color contributes to beauty, but it is not beauty itself.” Celebrating classical sculpture, he wrote, “The whiter the body is, the more beautiful it is.”<sup>5</sup>

But the Greek and Roman sculptures that shaped their sensibility were not, in fact, pristinely white. They were originally painted with vibrant colors that faded over time, giving rise to the myth of classical whiteness. This white fantasy persisted for centuries and was used to justify not only the taste for white sculpture but the superiority of whiteness as a whole. The construction and idealization of whiteness is tied to the rejection of color. White is not appreciated as a color on its own; rather, it is admired as the *absence* of color.

Echoing white-supremacist ideals, our attitudes toward color continue to have racial implications today. Whereas whiteness is often associated with purity, cleanliness, beauty, rationality, and refinement, color is often a marker of the primitive, exotic, dirty, sexual, and unrefined. Perhaps it is time to rethink our canon, to rethink what makes something a

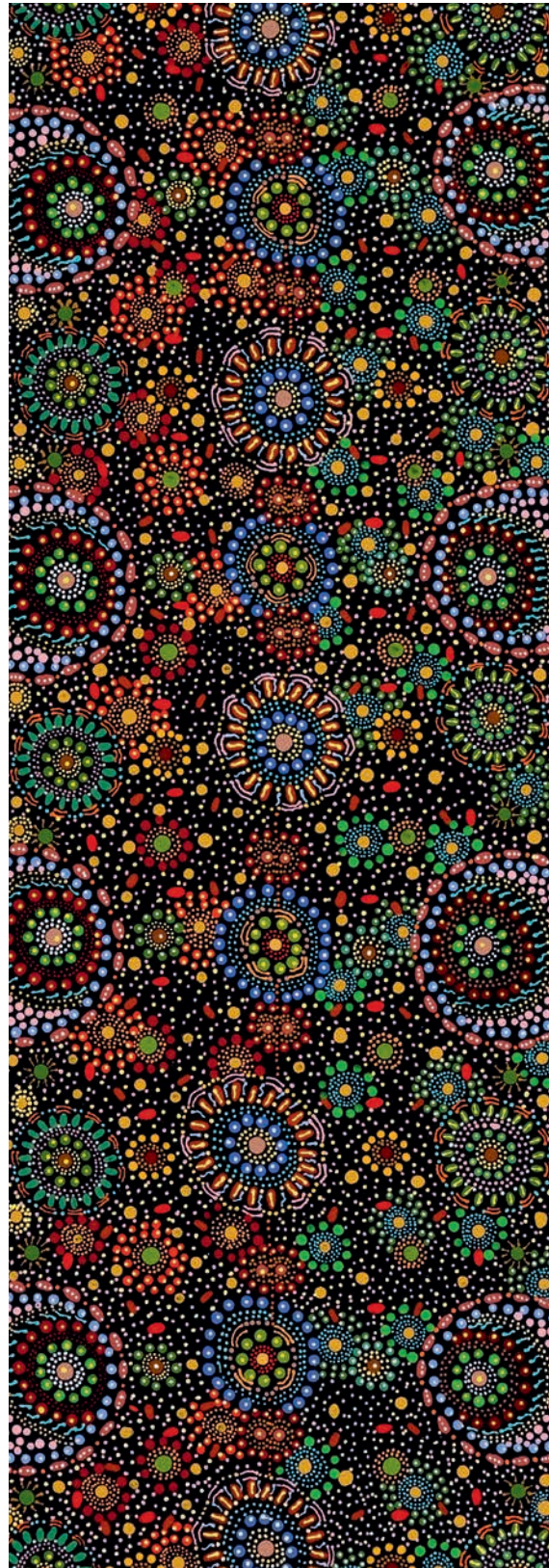
“masterpiece.” Reworking our perception of color is just one avenue for that.

Using color as a visual and conceptual focal point, *Coloring the Western Canon* challenges the arbitrary boundaries of our whitewashed canon. The exhibition uplifts marginalized voices by shifting our focus toward stories that have been systemically excluded. The featured works are united by their vibrant colors, with each relating in some way to its artist’s cultural heritage and identity. Works like these are not what you might expect to find in the canon, or even in a museum until recently. Our interest lies not so much in what colors are used but in *how* they are used.

Harry Fonseca’s modern and playful approach to color subverts stereotypes of Native American people as vestiges of the past. Julien Sinzogan’s more historical and spiritual approach to color grapples with the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Both Jacob Hashimoto and Carlos Mérida use color in more abstract ways: the former creates a sculptural landscape painting, while the latter narrates an ancient story. Muriel Williams Kngwarreye and Tanya Smith Angale employ color to express connection to cultural traditions and knowledge while simultaneously using it as a vehicle for self-expression, showing us that tradition and modernity can coexist.

Their use of color is adaptive, powerful, transformative, and beautiful. By decentering whiteness and expanding our appreciation for color, we can open more space for racial minorities in the art world. As you explore *Coloring the Western Canon*, you are invited to rethink what color means to you. And in the process, may you find ways to incorporate a little more color into your life.

Chloe Jung '23  
Class of 1954 Intern





## NOTES

1. Chad M. Topaz, Bernhard Klingenberg, Daniel Turek, Brianna Heggeseth, Pamela E. Harris, Julie C. Blackwood, C. Ondine Chavoya, Steven Nelson, and Kevin M. Murphy, "Diversity of Artists in Major US Museums," *PloS one* 14, no. 3 (2019): e0212852–e0212852.
2. David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 52.
3. Anna Souter, "Why We Don't Trust Colour in Art," *Roman Road Journal*, May 12, 2017.
4. Quoted in Margaret Talbot, "The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture," *New Yorker*, October 22, 2018, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture>.
5. Quoted in Talbot, "Myth of Whiteness."

## CHECKLIST

Carlos Mérida, Guatemalan, 1891–1985. *Untitled*, numbers 1–5 and 7–10 of 10, from the portfolio *Stamps of Popol-Vuh* (*Estampas del Popol-Vuh*), 1943, color lithograph on wove paper. Gift of Eric Richards; PR.2004.72.1.1–5, PR.2004.72.1.7–10

Harry Fonseca, Maidu (California culture) / American, 1946–2006. *Coyote Woman in the City*, 1979, acrylic, glitter, sequins, and foil on canvas. Gift of the Class of 1962; P.989.10

Tanya Smith Angale, Eastern Arrernte, Ltyentye Apurte Community (Santa Teresa), Northern Territory / Australian,

born 1978. *Untitled*, 2003, acrylic on linen. Gift of Will Owen and Harvey Wagner; 2009.92.297

Muriel Williams Kngwarreye, Eastern Arrernte, Ltyentye Apurte Community (Santa Teresa), Northern Territory / Australian, born 1980. *Untitled*, 2004, acrylic on linen. Gift of Will Owen and Harvey Wagner; 2016.1.99

Jacob Hashimoto, American, born 1973. *Broken Yellow Circuit*, 2006, acrylic, paper, and bamboo on nylon. Anonymous Gift; 2018.37.141

Julien Sinzogan, Beninese, born 1957. *Désenchaînement II*, 2013, colored inks and acrylic on paper. Purchased through the Phyllis and Bertram Geller 1937 Memorial Fund and the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; 2015.68.1

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The exhibition *Coloring the Western Canon*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, June 25–August 20, 2022.

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Cover image: Harry Fonseca, *Coyote Woman in the City*, 1979.  
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Inside left: Julien Sinzogan, *Désenchaînement II*, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel

Inside right: Muriel Williams Kngwarreye, *Untitled*, 2004. © Emily Kame Kngwarreye / Copyright Agency. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2022

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