



## Unlearning the Whiteness of Academic Art History

In Taipei, my disengagement with the silk scrolls wasn't random. It was learned.

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"Want to take a break?" my partner Serena asked.

We were visiting museums and temples in Japan and Taiwan for her dissertation research in October 2019. We were on day eight of our trip, and I was tired. Back aching and dehydrated, I took a seat on a bench in the middle of the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

We'd spent the day looking at calligraphy, jewelry, pottery, and other valuables moved to Taiwan by Chiang Kai-shek during the Chinese Civil War in 1948. With nearly 700,000 objects, the Palace Museum's collection of ancient Chinese artifacts and artworks is the largest in the world, filled with priceless pieces from Serena's and my Chinese heritage.

Museums can be overwhelming. Constant standing and simply too much visual input can be exhausting. But it's surely worse when you don't understand what you see.

An eighteenth-century scroll showing poets drinking wine felt foreign and unengaging. But why? I can study oil on canvas for hours. I had spent many visits to the Art Institute of Chicago staring at Van Gogh

or Magritte, European masters famous for influencing movements in the art history I learned from museums, books, and popular culture. What was the disconnect here?

I knew the historical and cultural significance of the museum for Taiwan, as well as my own family. They left south China for Indonesia during the war, around the same time these objects were evacuated. But I couldn't understand their beauty on a level deeper than historical acknowledgment. These objects felt like artifacts, not art. Time in museums like the Uffizi in Florence or MoMA in New York felt engaging; time here felt taxing.

"Do you know Vasari?" Serena asked.

I responded "I did not."

She said that, during the height of the Renaissance, Vasari helped craft a dominant narrative in art history that 'art' is sculpture and painting produced by brilliant individuals. Such a narrative rendered historic priorities and practices within Asian visual production—like the Palace Museum's calligraphy, pottery, and scrolls often produced by anonymous artists or groups—outside the purview of 'art.'

The objects all blended together, I said to Serena. I wasn't sure what made them wonderful because I didn't understand them.

Serena suggested that I wasn't trained to appreciate these objects. She said that she, a Beijing-born woman trained in American art history, wasn't either.

"Sometimes when I'm in a room like this," she continued, "I don't even know how to start to look at something either."

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Giorgio Vasari was, by several accounts, a mediocre painter. He produced work for the Medici family, but was nevertheless eclipsed by the production of his friends and contemporaries like Michelangelo. He was more famous for his landmark biographies of artists, collected in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, published in 1550.

Sometimes called the first art historian, Vasari narrates a rise of art—from infancy in the 1300s, to maturity in the 1400s, to "perfection" in the early 1500s. He defines each period by focusing on individuals, eventually landing on Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo in the so-called golden age from 1475 to 1564.

Even at the time of publication, Vasari was criticized for this narrative, for his bias in favor of his home of Florence—he completely ignored the artists of Venice in the first edition—but his work remains influential. He defined the boundaries of art that still divide and judge. By exclusively talking about painting, sculpture, and architecture, he partitioned media like pottery and textiles to the world of 'craft.' These objects were often made for practical purposes and worth less money and attention than the production of brilliant individuals. Art was made by singular geniuses commissioned by powerful people; craft was made by common folk producing for the market.

Placing art above craft also created a geographic center for what could be considered art. Vasari's gaze, however local to Florence, became a global framework for art collecting—and eventually for museums.

Even with the presence of Asian and African objects in modern museums, they are always qualified with their geography, whereas European art is often just ‘art.’

Art historians Barbara Mundy and Aaron Hyman have criticized the use of Vasari and his concept of the singular artist in art history. They argue that Vasari’s society of patrons and commissions limits Vasari’s vision of art, as well as the relevance of his theory for other contexts. Turning their attention to Latin America, they argue that the social conditions were different and therefore the creative production was divergent from Italian painting, sculpture, and architecture. But the difference does not imply less value.

The same can be said for what I saw in the National Palace Museum. Calligraphy and scrolls also fell outside of Vasari’s gaze and, because I learned art history in American and European art museums, my appreciation as well. My disengagement with the silk scrolls wasn’t random, it was learned.

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Serena and I met at an academic conference on Max Weber’s concept of disenchantment in 2017. After a few Instagram DMs, emails, and respective breakups, we began dating a year and a half later. From the beginning, we shared a love for art. Hers is professional as an art historian; mine has largely been a desire to “become cultured.”

Like many immigrant families, mine was just trying to survive after dropping into Cleveland, Ohio, from Indonesia. After surviving, we simply wanted to be as comfortable as possible. I spent my Saturdays with my mom in the discount produce aisle or pouring concrete with my dad at his newest rental property. We didn’t go to concerts or plays and definitely not to art museums. We weren’t poor, but we had different priorities.

Growing up in the suburbs of Cleveland in the ’90s, I struggled to fit in. My conservative private school was split between a white majority and a black minority. As an Asian American, I didn’t belong to either. I didn’t understand the cultures of my black or white friends, so I tried instead to be “cultured.”

I paid attention to the brands people coveted and tried to find them at the thrift stores my family frequented. I memorized the names of classical compositions to appear educated, hoping that knowledge of the music history could patch over the fact that I didn’t listen to music at all.

The desire to educate myself on “classics” grew into an interest in art. My first time in a museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, I told myself to enjoy it because that’s probably what smart people do.

I forced myself to stare at pieces I liked and found I actually enjoyed them. A landscape by the American painter Frederic Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, captivated me. Following the lines of the sunset over the mountains and trees, I found new shapes and absorbed the splashing colors of the sky.

My budding interest in art developed into a routine when I moved to Chicago for college. Though Cleveland was my first art museum, the Art Institute of Chicago was the first museum where I really invested time. During my three years in Chicago, I prided myself on getting to know the breadth of the museum—but I was drawn to twentieth-century art especially.

Van Gogh’s heavy-handed colors in *The Drinkers* and Cézanne’s bent perspectives in a portrait of his wife fascinated me. Paintings like Chagall’s *White Crucifix* wrapped me in their emotion as I studied them. These were the museum’s masterpieces, and I could see why.

I bought a membership and mostly went alone—early on Saturday mornings before the crowds of tourists arrived; or on thirty-minute interludes before an evening class. The quick six-stop trip on the L train down to the museum became a breath of fresh air from the constant productivity of papers and assignments.

As I became an adult in Chicago, shows at the Art Institute were formational. Seeing Archibald Motley Jr.'s *Nightlife* hung to the side of the freestanding center wall which held Edward Hopper's iconic *Nighthawks* taught me about the modern segregation and racism that I saw everywhere in Chicago's West Side. A show on the Belgian surrealist René Magritte gave me visual language for my growing suspicion toward objective truth.

I began learning a basic narrative of art history at the Art Institute in my desire to make myself belong in upper class American culture. I was proud that I knew these names. The knowledge told me that I was smart and refined, breaking away from the grit of my childhood and into sophistication. I could fit in here, I thought to myself.

But I never spent significant time in the Asian art wing of the Art Institute. It was situated below and beside the European and American wings. On my way up to European impressionism, I occasionally dipped into the side hallway of East Asian prints and ceramics. When rushing to the American galleries, I accelerated past the crowds gathered around Southeast Asian shrine objects and statues.

Though I had visited Asia regularly as a child, I traveled to Europe more often in my early twenties. But the more time I spent there, the more I saw my idea of becoming cultured was flimsy, focused too much on European life. And in that focus, it actually excluded my Asian culture, further disconnecting me from my history.

I started to try and see more Asian art first in US museums. I was absorbed by the ceramics featured in the Met's "Asian Art 100" in 2015, commemorating one century of collecting Asian art. The aesthetic of the pottery and sculpture I saw was attractive and minimal with organic tones and materials. It felt familiar in an intriguing way that I wanted to dwell on. Then in February 2019, I went back to Chicago to see an exhibit on Japanese prints, featuring *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Katsushika Hokusai.

Realizing that this was the first Asian "masterpiece" that I had seen led me to write about how the print became one of the most iconic images in modern art because of French buyers who were fascinated with "the East." The taste of Europeans curated the canons that I bought into and honestly loved. Even though European tastemakers had made some Asians into masters, they were few and far between.

Even while knowing this, I still struggled to engage with Asian artwork until I started to engage with its history. During the same visit that I saw Hokusai's *Wave*, I lingered in the Southeast Asian gallery instead of rushing through it. I searched for any Indonesian objects and found six. I found a sculpture of the Hindu deity Ganesha from central Java, a ninth century head of a Buddha, and a twentieth century tapestry depicting the burning of Smara, god of love.

But the religious symbols removed from temples in Indonesia didn't grip me. Instead, they pushed me into anxiety thinking of all the possible ways the objects could have ended up in a museum. How was the head of Buddha decapitated? Did the wealthy white woman who acquired and donated it to the museum know? Did she care? Maybe these objects were looted from temples during Dutch colonialism. Or maybe they were smuggled during the Japanese occupation.

I don't know their history. I'm not sure I want to. The objects reminded me of the violence in my history, not the beauty.

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The next time I went to the Art Institute was July 2019. Serena traveled to Chicago for research and I went with her.

We went to see the four wooden panels, the only remains of Japan's pavilion from the 1893 World Columbian Exposition. The pavilion remained after the end of the expo in Jackson Park—until it was burned down in the Second World War in an act of anti-Japanese arson. The panels that remained were then stored by the city in the bleachers of Soldier Field and forgotten until they were rediscovered in 1973.

As Serena told me this story, we stretched our necks toward the dropped ceilings which held the panels: marvelous looping phoenixes painted in gold, red, and green wrapped around the trees. They were beautiful and a historic treasure.

During my many visits to this museum in college, I had no clue the panels were there, no idea about the history of violence against Asian Americans to which they bore witness. The wing had treasures that told a piece of Asian American history and the complex presentation of Asia in America, and I'd rushed past them countless times.

In a feeling of guilt and grief, I realized that in my pursuit of art as a means of posturing into belonging in American culture, I was ignoring stories that were important to me. The history of Asian America in the Art Institute wasn't obvious. It was hidden away from me and others. And in my interest in traditional art history, I had let it remain buried.

In Taiwan, I found a museum that actually mattered to me. The story of its collection had to do with my kin. My people founded that museum—not some rich, faceless foundation. Yet when I sat down on the bench at Taiwan's National Palace Museum this past October, I was exhausted, disengaged, maybe even bored. But at least I was beginning to understand why.

Serena helped pull back the curtain on the legacy of Vasari, showing me that centuries of art history bend away from our culture. Though my appetite still craves Western art, interrogating that history has opened windows for appreciation. She and I are working to shed the myth that the finest of fine art was made only by Western individuals, and never by people who look like us.

As Serena said, we may not know how to start, but we know that we must begin.