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The Dark Side of the Canon: Art History's Dirty Laundry

May 2026

Fine Art

DOI 10.15132/30000125

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Abstract

The Dark Side of the Canon: Art History's Dirty Laundry investigates the Western art canon's hidden biases, examining how systems of power, this includes racism, sexism, and heteronormativity that have determined which artworks and artists are celebrated. Rather than centring on the individual figures, this dissertation critiques the structures that shaped the canon itself: the moral authority of Christianity, the influence of colonial expansion, and the cultural ideals that elevated white, cisgender, heterosexual male creators as "universal geniuses." By analysing these patterns in history, this study reveals how art history's so-called neutrality was always rooted in some type of exclusion and hierarchy.

Positionality Statement

My position in relation to this research is shaped by a complex intersection of identities that inform both the questions I ask and the way that I perceive the canon I critique. As a mixed Chinese and Scottish person, I sit at a cultural crossroads that has never aligned neatly with the dominant narratives structuring Western art history. My upbringing in two cultural traditions, one historically marginalised in the Western sphere, the other privileged within it, has made me quite aware to the hierarchies, exclusions, and absences embedded in the canon. This duality has cultivated both an insider's understanding of Western academic conventions and an outsider's awareness of the structural silences surrounding artists of colour, diasporic creators, and non-Western artistic lineages.

My queerness also informs my approach to research, not simply as an aspect of identity but as a way of reading and interpreting cultural history. Queerness teaches an alertness to coded narratives, unseen communities, and the forms of erasure that shape public memory. It enables me to recognise where desire, identity, and embodiment have been deliberately obscured in the biographies of artists, and to question the ways art history has policed whose stories are legitimate. My queerness, in this sense, becomes a methodological lens: it encourages me to look towards the margins, to attend to nuance, and to resist the simplifications that canonical writing often imposes.

Layered onto this is my trans experience, specifically, the reality of living in the world as female while identifying and existing as a man. This disjuncture makes visibility and invisibility central concerns in my work. Navigating spaces where I am seen and treated still as female gives me firsthand awareness of how institutional structures can misrecognise, mislabel, or refuse to acknowledge the women in art. My research is therefore not a detached academic pursuit but one born from lived encounters with misrepresentation, absence, and the constant negotiation of belonging.

Together, these identities shape not only my critical stance but also my responsibility within this work. I do not claim neutrality; indeed, neutrality is neither possible nor desirable in a discipline whose canon was constructed through exclusion. Instead, I acknowledge that my personal history sensitises me to the urgency of expanding, re-examining, and rewriting art historical narratives. The voices of marginalised artists resonate deeply with me because I recognise, in their erasure, structures I have had to navigate in my own life. My aim is not to speak for these artists, but to advocate for an art historical framework in which they are no longer biases. My positionality therefore becomes an asset: a guiding force that grounds this dissertation in an ethical commitment to visibility, plurality, and the disruptions necessary for meaningful change.

Introduction

For much of its history, the Western art canon has been upheld as an archive of humanity's most significant cultural achievements, a curated lineage of objects and creators presumed to embody timeless beauty, aesthetic innovation, and intellectual refinement. Yet the authority of the canon rests on a constructed neutrality that obscures the ideological, political, and institutional forces that shaped its formation. The Dark Side of the Canon: Art History's Dirty Laundry interrogates the façade of universality by exposing the systems of exclusion and hierarchy embedded within canonical discourse. This dissertation argues that the canon did not appear organically from a consensus of artistic greatness; rather, it was produced through historical structures of power, including racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and Eurocentric ideals that decided which artworks and artists were encouraged, marginalised, or erased.

The strengthening of the Western canon must be acknowledged within the broader sociopolitical context that enabled its development. Christian moral authority, European colonial expansion, and enlightenment epistemologies collectively shaped the criteria through which artistic value was assessed. Christian doctrine regulated acceptable forms of representation, disciplining both subject matter and bodily depiction. Colonialism constructed hierarchical classifications of cultural production, positioning European aesthetics as the pinnacle of civilisation while relegating non-Western forms to the status of ethnography, craft, or primitive expression. Meanwhile, modern cultural ideals privileged the white, cisgender, heterosexual male artists as the embodiment of universal genius, a construct that continues to influence art historical narratives and institutional practice. Within this framework, the canon appears not as a neutral measure of excellence but as a historically produced narrative aligned with specific ideological interests.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the structural mechanisms that eased exclusion within canonical art history. Rather than treating the absence of women, queer artists, and artists of colour as an unfortunate oversight, this study situates their marginalisation within the disciplinary logic of art history itself. Through critical analysis of museum acquisition policies, pedagogical traditions, and art-historical writing, this section demonstrates how the canon functioned as an apparatus of cultural gatekeeping. The repeated elevation of identities and aesthetics created a feedback loop in which power shaped visibility, and visibility fortified power. The chapter thus exposes the canon as a disciplinary instrument that both reflects and sustains broader social hierarchies.

The second chapter turns toward what might be described as the canon's "dirty laundry" the overlooked, sanitised, or deliberately obscured elements that complicate its presumed moral and aesthetic authority. This includes the persistence of racist caricature presented under the guise of cultural representation, gendered imagery that reinforced patriarchal norms, and institutional double standards that legitimised exploitative collecting practices. Rather than isolating these works as aberrations, this dissertation argues that they were integral to the canon's formation. Their celebration within art institutions illustrates how prejudice became embedded in visual culture, often masked by the rhetoric of beauty, genius, or technical advancement. By foregrounding these uncomfortable histories, this section demonstrates that canonical status has frequently depended on the aesthetics of harm.

The final chapter examines contemporary artistic and intellectual interventions that challenge the authority of the canon and propose alternative models for understanding art's value and function. Feminist, queer, and decolonial practices offer critical frameworks that unsettle the hierarchies previously legitimised by canonical discourse. Through their reimagining of embodiment, identity, and historical memory, these artists and movements resist the homogenising tendencies of traditional art history. Their work demonstrates that artistic excellence has always existed beyond the narrow boundaries defined by Western institutions, and that the future of the discipline depends on recognising the plurality of global creativity. Rather than positioning these interventions as supplementary, this dissertation argues that they constitute necessary correctives that expand the epistemic scope of art history.

In confronting the canon's ideological foundations, this dissertation advocates for a reorientation of the discipline. Acknowledging the canon's complicity in structures of oppression does not negate the significance of canonical artworks; rather, it contextualises them within a more truthful and ethically accountable historical framework. The objective is not to dismantle the canon in its entirety, but to unmask its exclusions and reconsider its authority. Through exposing what has been omitted, suppressed, or misrepresented, this study contends that art history can move toward a more inclusive, rigorous, and intellectually honest understanding of artistic production. Ultimately, recognising the canon's darker histories is essential for constructing a disciplinary future that reflects the full complexity of creativity, power, and human experience.

Chapter One – The Canon

Art history, as we are taught, often presents itself as a neutral record of "the greatest" artists and artworks across time. Yet the very idea of greatness is far from objective. The canon, that invisible list of artists deemed worthy of study, has always reflected systems of human power, preference, and exclusion. Before we can question who is included, who is left out and the power it holds, it's essential to understand where the concept of the canon comes from and what it really means.

The term *canon* originates from the Greek word *kanōn*, meaning "measuring rod" or "standard." In Classical Greece, it referred to the ideal proportions used to define aesthetic perfection in sculpture and architecture. Over time, this notion of a "standard" expanded beyond physical measurement to describe the cultural benchmarks of artistic excellence. By the Renaissance, *the canon* had evolved into a metaphorical collection of a body of artworks, artists, and ideas that were considered authoritative, exemplary, and worth preserving.

In art history, therefore, the canon does not simply list great works; it establishes what greatness is. It determines whose creativity is celebrated, whose voices are silenced, and what kind of art becomes history itself.

The idea of the canon in Western art history began to take shape during the Renaissance period, when writers and scholars sought to define artistic excellence through select examples. One of the most influential figures in this process was Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* (1550) is often considered the foundation of the Western art historical canon. Vasari's book celebrated artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael as geniuses who embodied divine creativity and technical mastery. However, this selection of artists was all Italian, male, and European, immediately established boundaries around who could be recognised as part of this history.

Through Vasari's writing, art history became not just a record of artistic practice, but a narrative of progress led by a specific kind of artist: the white, cisgender, male "master." His work set the precedent for later historians, critics, and institutions to uphold similar hierarchies, reinforcing the notion that art's greatest achievements belonged primarily to Western men. As the canon expanded over the centuries, it continued to prioritise this narrow idea of excellence, often excluding women, queer artists, and artists of colour whose contributions did not fit within these established ideals.

This selective type of storytelling reveals that the canon is not a neutral list of artistic achievements but a constructed version of history, one shaped by those who had the power to define what art should look like, and who should make it.

After Vasari, the idea of artistic greatness began to move beyond individual opinion and into the hands of powerful institutions. What started as one writer's vision of excellence became embedded within the education systems, museums, and cultural hierarchies that shaped art history for centuries. These institutions did not simply preserve art, they defined it.

During the seventeenth century, the ideals of artistic greatness were embodied in the grandeur of Baroque art. Favoured by royal courts and the Church, the Baroque style was dramatic, emotional, and designed to impress. Its theatrical compositions and moral narratives reflected the values of authority, piety, and civilisation, ideals deeply tied to the European elite. Artists such as Caravaggio, Rubens, and Rembrandt were celebrated as paragons of genius and technical mastery. Their work reinforced a visual language of power that aligned perfectly with the emerging art academies, where similar standards of composition, realism, and hierarchy became central to artistic training.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, art academies across Europe began formalising these values into structured systems. The French Académie des Beaux-Arts and the Royal Academy in London taught generations of artists what "good" art should look like. They established hierarchies of genre, placing history painting and mythological subjects at the top while dismissing still life and portraiture as lesser forms. This system rewarded work that aligned with European ideals of beauty, morality, and order, these ideals grounded in whiteness, a specific type of masculinity, and class privilege. Where women, the working-class, and non-European artists were largely excluded from these spaces, both as students and even as subjects.

As Europe's empires expanded, museums became another tool for enforcing the canon. Collections such as the Louvre and the British Museum displayed European art as the pinnacle of civilisation, while artefacts from colonised cultures were classified as anthropology or craft rather than fine art. These institutions transformed subjective taste into objective truth, teaching the public what was worth admiring and what was to be looked at as exotic, primitive, or inferior.

By the nineteenth century, art history had become an academic discipline taught through a Eurocentric lens, with textbooks and lectures reinforcing the same narrow lineage of "masters." Works like E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1950) perpetuated the illusion of a continuous Western progression from Greece to modern Europe, a story that excluded entire continents and identities. The canon had now become a structure of power, shaping both cultural memory and the opportunities available to artists outside its borders.

Today, this institutional legacy remains visible in how art is still collected, exhibited, taught, and sold to the public. A selective narrative that privileges certain voices while silencing others.

Christianity played a formative role in establishing the early Western art canon, shaping not only the subjects' artists depicted but also the standards by which artistic value was defined. Throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods, the Church operated as the dominant patron of the arts, commissioning works that visualised doctrine and reinforced institutional authority. These artworks functioned as both spiritual instruction and political communication,

cultivating obedience, moral discipline, and reverence through carefully constructed visual narratives.

Because the Church held significant religious and political power, its priorities became embedded in the emerging hierarchy of artistic worth. Biblical stories, saints, and idealised divine figures came to symbolise the highest forms of cultural achievement, and artists who mastered these themes were elevated as canonical "masters." In turn, traditions that fell outside Christian frameworks were marginalised or dismissed as culturally secondary. The Church's patronage of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* (1536–1541) exemplifies this dynamic: the fresco operated as a visual assertion of Catholic authority during the Reformation, and its monumental, idealised aesthetic helped solidify the standards later used to measure artistic excellence. Such works did not merely reflect Christian values; they codified them into the foundations of Western art history.

This argument concerns institutional influence rather than the legitimacy of religious belief. Christianity's imagery, symbolism, and moral frameworks shaped the pedagogical and aesthetic structures that continue to inform what is taught, exhibited, and celebrated in the West. Even as art moved into the modern era, these standards did not disappear; they were secularised into new systems of taste and hierarchy. Enlightenment thought, academic training, and early modernist criticism inherited assumptions about beauty, authority, and "universal" significance that originated within Christian and Eurocentric traditions. Although increased global contact introduced diverse forms of artistic production, the canon continued to privilege white, European, male creators whose work aligned with long-entrenched cultural values.

Understanding Christianity's role in shaping early artistic norms is therefore essential for tracing how the canon developed into an exclusionary structure. By revealing the historical mechanisms through which certain narratives and aesthetics were elevated, this section sets the foundation for examining the broader systems of power that have defined, and limited, the scope of Western art history.

This period also exposes what could be described as art history's darker side of the canon: the uncomfortable truths behind celebrated artists and institutions. Many of the figures still idolised today were complicit in, or directly benefited from, systems of exploitation, racism, and colonialism. The myth of artistic genius continued to protect these men, allowing their personal harm and ethical contradictions to be dismissed in the name of beauty or "vision."

Paul Gauguin serves as an early example of this tension. He is often praised as a pioneer of post-impressionism, known for his vivid colours and depictions of Tahitian life. Yet, his presence in Tahiti was not one of innocent observation. Gauguin engaged in exploitative relationships with underage Tahitian girls, exoticised Indigenous culture, and romanticised colonial "otherness" in ways that aligned with broader imperial ideologies. His paintings, still reproduced and displayed in major Western institutions, rarely confront this reality.

In this sense, Gauguin embodies the contradiction at the heart of the canon: artistic innovation built upon moral compromise. The art world's continued reverence for such figures

demonstrates how deeply moral selectivity is embedded in its history a pattern that needs to be questioned to expose how structures of power, privilege, and ideology shape what we call "great art" while artists of those cultures and traditions are ignored.

While artists like Gauguin were celebrated for appropriating non-European cultures, artists of colour were often denied the same recognition or humanity. The art historical canon not only excluded non-Western traditions, but it also frequently misrepresented them. Within Western museums, books, and education, racial caricatures were presented as "artistic study" or "ethnographic record," legitimising colonial stereotypes under a veneer of cultural curiosity.

From the 18th through the early 20th centuries, racist depictions appeared across painting, illustration, and performance, shaping how audiences understood race. Black people, for instance, were commonly portrayed as either servants or symbols of exoticism, decorative presences rather than individuals. Paintings such as Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) use a Black maid as a visual contrast to the white nude, reinforcing racial hierarchies through composition. Similarly, artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme and John Frederick Lewis helped define Orientalist art, turning Middle Eastern and Asian figures into aesthetic objects for the Western gaze.

In other cases, art intersected directly with propaganda. In 19th-century Europe and America, caricature and commercial illustration became tools for spreading racial stereotypes. Minstrel art, blackface imagery exaggerated for entertainment, translated easily into prints, ceramics, and advertisements, embedding racist iconography into everyday visual culture. Likewise, anti-Asian caricatures proliferated in Western newspapers and posters during periods of immigration and labour tension. Works such as The Chinese Must Go lithographs and later Yellow Peril posters reduced East Asian people to grotesque and threatening stereotypes. These images, though often dismissed as "popular culture," reflected the same colonial worldviews celebrated in academic art.

Such imagery reveals how the canon didn't exist in isolation; it was built within a culture already saturated with racialised representation. When white European artists depicted non-white bodies, their work was preserved as innovation or study; when artists of colour portrayed themselves, their work was sidelined as folk, craft, or "ethnic." The difference wasn't in skill or quality but in who was seen as capable of creating "real" art.

This racial bias remains one of art history's most uncomfortable legacies. It shows that the canon's admiration for certain artists depended not only on talent or subject but on privilege, on whose humanity was recognised and whose was not.

The foundations of the Western canon reveal that art history's sense of greatness was never neutral but shaped by power, belief, and exclusion. Religion, empire, and the myth of the genius built a system that defined not only what counted as art but who could create it. Yet the admiration these structures inspired also concealed uncomfortable truths where the moral, racial, and social hierarchies hidden behind the pedestal. As the canon solidified, so too did a culture of selective memory, one that forgave harm in some artists while silencing others

entirely. The following chapter turns to this neglected side of art history, the dirty laundry of the canon, to examine how admiration, morality, and racism became deeply intertwined in the story of art.

Chapter Two – The Dirty Laundry

The canon has long been framed as a collection of the greatest artistic achievements. A celebration of creativity, innovation, and timeless beauty. Yet beneath this idealised surface lies a history of exclusion, distortion, and moral contradiction. The values that shaped the Western canon were never neutral; they emerged from systems of racism, sexism, and heteronormativity that determined who could create, be represented, and be remembered. This chapter examines the uncomfortable truths behind the artworks and institutions that continue to dominate art history. From racist caricatures framed as cultural representation to the erasure of women and queer artists, the canon's foundations reveal not only aesthetic preference but social power. By analysing how prejudice became embedded in visual language and institutional practice, this chapter exposes the biases that turned exclusion into tradition and inequality into taste.

Fig.2.1: *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (1600-10)

In early modern European portraiture, whiteness ran not only as skin colour but as a symbol of virtue, civility, and superiority, a constructed aesthetic ideal that became central to Western visual culture. As the Tate's research essay *The Construction of Whiteness, Gender and Race in Early Modern Portraits* (2023) discusses, painting such as *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (1600-10) idealised pale complexions through layers of white lead makeup, powered skin, and delicate lighting to convey moral purity and social prestige. This manipulation of tone and texture went beyond naturalism; it transformed whiteness into a visual shorthand for power and belonging. Through repetition across religious, royal, and domestic portraiture, artists codified whiteness as beauty, intellect, and cultural refinement, while simultaneously positioning people of colour or non-European descent as oppositional: darker, foreign, or morally suspect. These aesthetic decisions were not neutral, they actively constructed a racial hierarchy within the visual field, reinforcing the belief that white bodies were both artistic and moral ideal. In doing so, portraiture became a quiet but pervasive tool of social conditioning, teaching audiences to

equate whiteness with worth and embedding racial ideology at the foundation of the Western art canon.

The colonial gaze in Western art operated as a framework through which non-European bodies were observed, classified, and visually controlled. Instead of portraying individuals with complexity or cultural specificity, artists often depicted colonised subjects as curiosities, aestheticized objects that existed to affirm European superiority. These figures were positioned in decorative costumes, staged in landscapes coded as "untamed," or rendered with exaggerated features that marked them as fundamentally "other." Descriptively, these works often appear lush, colourful, and sensory, but beneath their surface lies a structural imbalance: the sitter is not portrayed for themselves but for what they represent to the colonial viewer. Critically, such images reveal how artistic representation became an extension of imperial power. By choosing what to emphasise, omit, or distort, artists produced images that naturalised hierarchy, framing non-white cultures as primitive, sensual, or subordinate. The colonial gaze, therefore, functioned as both an aesthetic lens and an ideological weapon, shaping how European audiences imagined the world and reinforcing the belief that whiteness, civilisation, and authority were synonymous. As a result, these artworks did not simply reflect colonial attitudes; they actively participated in constructing them, embedding racialised ways of seeing into the foundations of the Western canon.

Fig.2.2: Paul Gauguin's Tahitian Women on the Beach

Paul Gauguin's Tahitian works exemplify how the colonial gaze reshapes an entire culture into a Western fantasy. Rather than depicting Tahiti as it existed, marked by decades of missionary influence, cultural suppression, and political control, Gauguin constructed an imagined, primitive paradise that suited his artistic and ideological needs. He intentionally ignored the complex reality of a colonised society and instead painted an idyllic, timeless world presented as untouched by modernity. Tahitian customs, objects, and landscapes were selectively borrowed, rearranged, or invented altogether, producing images that bore little resemblance to actual Polynesian life. This act of visual fabrication served to reinforce European myths about Indigenous cultures as simple, childlike, and closer to nature, flattening the island's rich

histories into a decorative backdrop. By erasing colonial violence and replacing cultural specificity with symbolic motifs, Gauguin's paintings became powerful tools of misrepresentation, teaching Western audiences to see Tahiti not as a real place with real people, but as an exotic dreamscape designed for their consumption. In this way, Gauguin's legacy illustrates how the canon often elevates artworks that distort and dominate other cultures, embedding racialised fantasies at the heart of Western art history.

Racist caricature reduces entire groups of people to exaggerated, distorted features, turning identity into a visual stereotype rather than an expression of humanity. These images were often presented as humour, entertainment, or "cultural observation," yet they functioned as powerful tools of dehumanisation. By amplifying traits such as skin colour, facial structure, or cultural dress into grotesque symbols, caricature framed racialised people as inferior, foolish, threatening, or subhuman. Critically, these images did not remain on the surface of popular culture, they helped justify social and political inequalities by making prejudice seem natural and inevitable. In art history, racist caricatures contributed to a visual vocabulary that shaped how white audiences perceived non-white bodies, reinforcing hierarchies of race, beauty, and intelligence. Their harm lies not only in the offensive imagery itself but in the broader cultural impact: they taught viewers to see difference through mockery, shaped policy and public behaviour, and erased the possibility of nuanced, respectful representation. As a result, racist caricature holds a central place within the "dirty laundry" of the canon, an uncomfortable reminder that art has often been used not to enlighten, but to oppress.

Fig.2.3: Jemima character on *Cakewalk sheet music cover* (1899)

Examples of racist caricature can be seen clearly in the widespread depictions of Asian people in early Western comics and advertisements, where exaggerated slanted eyes, yellow skin, and buck-toothed grins formed a visual shorthand for foreignness, danger, or foolishness. These images appeared everywhere, from newspaper strips to wartime propaganda and trained audiences to see Asian identities not as diverse cultures, but as a single cartoon stereotype.

Similarly, the “Mammy” figure in American visual culture, most famously embodied in the Aunt Jemima brand, reduced Black women to a caricature of cheerful servitude. The broad smile, headscarf, and exaggeratedly maternal posture presented Black womanhood as naturally domestic and eternally loyal to white households. Both sets of imagery, though directed at different groups, relied on the same mechanism of distortion: turning real communities into simplified characters that reinforced racial hierarchy. Their harm lies in the way they normalised racism, embedding these visual stereotypes into everyday consumer culture and shaping public perception for generations. By circulating through comics, packaging, posters, and adverts, these caricatures became part of the broader visual vocabulary that upheld white dominance, revealing how deeply racism has been woven into the history of popular and “high” art alike.

While racial caricature and colonial representation expose how the canon has been shaped by white dominance, these hierarchies did not operate in isolation. The same structures that positioned whiteness as the default also upheld strict gender norms that privileged men, particularly white, cisgender men, as the natural creators, subjects, and gatekeepers of “serious” art. As a result, women and gender-diverse artists were marginalised not only by racist frameworks but by a deeply ingrained patriarchal logic that dictated who could be a genius, whose labour mattered, and whose stories were worth preserving. To understand the canon’s exclusions fully, it is necessary to examine how gender and sexism have structured artistic value just as powerfully as race.

Throughout much of Western art history, women were positioned primarily as subjects to be looked at rather than creators with agency and artistic authority. Paintings across the Renaissance, Baroque, and academic traditions often depicted women as passive, sensual, or potential figures, bodies arranged for visual pleasure rather than individuals with interiority or narrative power. This dynamic reflects what feminist scholars identify as the male gaze: a way of seeing that frames women through the desires, fantasies, and expectations of men. Descriptively, artworks might present soft lighting, exposed skin, or carefully staged modesty, yet these aesthetic choices conceal a deeper imbalance. The broader implication is that the male gaze reduces women to objects of beauty, morality, or temptation, while simultaneously excluding them from the role of the “artist-genius” who constructs cultural meaning. As a result, women in art history became symbols to be interpreted rather than voices to be heard, reinforcing patriarchal norms about whose perspectives were valuable. This persistent objectification shaped not only visual conventions, but the canon itself, ensuring that women were far more likely to be depicted than to be remembered for their own creative work.

This objectification was reinforced by the fact that even when women did step behind the canvas as creators, they encountered profound structural barriers that limited how far their talents could be acknowledged. Women artists historically faced structural barriers that limited their access to training, patronage, and institutional support, making recognition far more difficult to achieve than for their male counterparts. Artemisia Gentileschi, for instance, produced powerful, technically accomplished works that rivalled and sometimes surpassed those of male Baroque painters, yet her legacy was overshadowed for centuries by gendered

bias and the exploitation of her personal trauma. Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, one of the most celebrated portraitists of the eighteenth century, was similarly constrained by expectations that framed her success as an anomaly rather than evidence of women's artistic capability. Descriptively, both artists mastered the dominant styles of their periods, but critically, their careers reveal how women's achievements were often dismissed as decorative, emotional, or secondary, even when their male peers with comparable skill entered the canon with ease. Access to academies, life-drawing classes, and elite patronage networks was restricted or outright denied to women, creating a system in which talent alone was insufficient for recognition. These barriers did not simply limit individual careers; they shaped the canon by ensuring that women's contributions remained marginal or forgotten, reinforcing the illusion that artistic genius was inherently male.

The marginalisation of women in art history is closely tied to the masculinisation of the artist genius myth, the belief that true artistic greatness is an innate, almost divine quality possessed naturally by exceptional men. This idea reinforces the artist-hero narrative, framing male artists as solitary visionaries whose work emerges from their own brilliance rather than from training, collaboration, or context. Within this framework, women are rarely permitted the same cultural status; even when they demonstrate equal or greater skill, their achievements are often reframed in relation to men. Lee Krasner's legacy illustrates this dynamic with striking clarity. Although she was a pioneering figure in Abstract Expressionism with a distinct visual language, Krasner is frequently introduced as "Jackson Pollock's wife," her artistic identity overshadowed by the mythic status constructed around Pollock as a tortured male genius. Factually, Krasner's work shows the same innovation, discipline, and emotional depth celebrated in her male contemporaries, yet critically, the canon continually positions her as secondary, a supporting character in Pollock's story rather than a major artist in her own right. This imbalance exposes how the genius myth is less a reflection of artistic merit and more a cultural mechanism that amplifies men while diminishing women, shaping not only public perception but the very structure of the canon itself.

Religion has also played a powerful role in shaping the canon through moral policing, institutional control, and direct funding of the arts, which together dictated what subjects were acceptable and who was allowed to be represented. The Church, as one of the largest patrons in European art history, commissioned works that aligned with its theological and social values, reinforcing a narrow moral vision that excluded identities and narratives seen as improper or sinful. Michelangelo's career reflects this tension between artistic individuality and religious authority. Descriptively, the Sistine Chapel ceiling stands as one of the most celebrated achievements of the canon, yet critically, it exists within a system that demanded strict adherence to Christian doctrine even as Michelangelo's private writings, particularly his poetry addressed to male companions, suggest emotional and possibly romantic attachments that conflicted with Church-imposed norms. The contrast between his interior life and the institution he worked for highlights how the canon was shaped by moral boundaries: artists could express grandeur, divinity, and human emotion, but only within limits set by religious power. This dynamic reveals how moral policing did not merely influence the content of

artworks but shaped the canon itself, privileging works that upheld institutional values while silencing identities and perspectives deemed unacceptable.

Taken together, the racial, gendered, and ideological biases embedded in art history reveal that the canon was never a neutral compilation of "the best" works, but a constructed system shaped by power. From the colonial gaze that distorted non-Western cultures, to the sexist frameworks that positioned women as objects rather than creators, to the religious and moral policing that dictated what forms of expression were permissible, each layer of prejudice reinforced a narrow vision of artistic value centred around white, male, Western perspectives. These forces did not simply influence individual artworks, they shaped the very structure of art historical memory, determining whose stories were celebrated, whose labour was diminished, and whose identities were pushed to the margins. By exposing these uncomfortable truths, this chapter demonstrates that the canon's authority rests on exclusions as much as achievements. Understanding this "dirty laundry" is essential not to dismantle art history, but to re-examine it with honesty, nuance, and a commitment to recognising the artists and cultures that were systematically left out.

Chapter Three – Beyond The Canon

Art history is often framed as a neutral record of greatness, yet the canon is built on deliberate exclusion. Rather than a comprehensive catalogue, it operates as a gatekeeping system that determines which voices and practices are permitted to define the field. As Chapter 2 showed, structures such as colonialism, patriarchy, and cultural nationalism do more than shape taste, they silence those outside dominant narratives. The artists missing from museums and textbooks are not historical accidents but products of selective processes that reinforce power. Understanding the canon therefore requires examining not only who is included, but also the histories and communities that were never allowed to enter.

Fig. 3.1: Hilma af Klint's *Paintings for the Future* (2019)

Hilma af Klint stands as one of the most striking examples of how the canon silences women, not because they lacked innovation, but because recognition required existing within the structures that excluded them. While textbooks often credit Wassily Kandinsky as the pioneer of abstract art around 1910, Hilma af Klint had already begun producing fully developed abstract paintings by 1906. Her work was not just earlier; it was visionary, spiritual, and conceptually ambitious, drawing from Theosophy, science, mysticism and philosophy. Yet her art was dismissed during her lifetime, not because it lacked merit, but because it did not align with the masculine narrative of artistic genius. Rather than being positioned as a founder of abstraction, her role was erased and deferred until recent decades. Her absence reveals how the canon did not simply overlook women, it actively constructed a world in which their achievements could be ignored, postponed, or reframed as anomalies instead of origins.

Hilma af Klint is not an isolated case but an entry point into a wider lineage of women whose artistic contributions fundamentally shaped major movements yet were historically positioned outside of the dominant narrative. Artists such as Sonia Delaunay, whose chromatic and geometric innovations were central to the development of Orphism, and Lee Bontecou, whose sculptural experiments redefined post-war abstraction, demonstrate that women were not operating on the margins of artistic production, but were at the forefront of formal and conceptual innovation. Rather than suggesting an absence within the canon, these artists reveal a history of sustained and impactful creative engagement that has only recently begun to

receive institutional recognition. Their practices resist the conventional framing of women as supplementary figures and instead demand a re-reading of art history that acknowledges the structural importance of their work. What emerges is not a story of belated inclusion, but one of long-standing presence that reframes the evolution of modern and contemporary art itself.

Fig.3.2: Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* (1893)

Henry Ossawa Tanner represents one of the most significant racial omissions in canonical art history. Widely regarded as the first internationally recognised African American painter, Tanner achieved critical success across Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His work, characterised by its technical sophistication, atmospheric realism, and sensitive engagement with spiritual and everyday subject matter, demonstrated a mastery equal to his canonical contemporaries. Yet despite international acclaim during his lifetime, Tanner remains largely absent from standard art historical curricula. His career disrupts the conventional narrative that artistic excellence was solely developed within white European or American frameworks. Instead, Tanner's legacy evidence an early and fully realised Black modernity: one that challenges the assumption that canonical art history is synonymous with white cultural production. By foregrounding Tanner's contributions, it becomes possible to recognise a more complex genealogy of modern painting, one shaped not only by stylistic innovation, but also by the cultural and social forces that determined whose achievements were recorded.

Beyond the Western art historical sphere, numerous artists produced bodies of work that shaped their national visual cultures and modernism more broadly yet were marginalised in Euro-American discourse. Xu Beihong's integration of Western oil painting techniques with traditional Chinese brushwork reconfigured twentieth-century Chinese art and set the foundation for new aesthetic systems outside European modernism. Albert Namatjira transformed Western landscape conventions through an Indigenous Australian perspective, asserting visual sovereignty within a colonial medium. Nasreen Mohamedi's minimalist abstractions, rooted in Islamic geometry and South Asian modernist traditions, demonstrate a conceptual sophistication equal to her Western peers, yet she remains comparatively

underrepresented in global narratives. These artists demonstrate that modernism was not a uniquely European evolution, but an interconnected network of cultures generating parallel forms of innovation. Their work exposes the limitations of a canon that privileges Western development as the universal standard and highlights the need to re-evaluate art history as a global and relational field rather than a single ideological narrative.

Fig.3.3: Romaine Brooks' *The Cross of France* (1914)

Romaine Brooks offers a compelling example of how queer identity and artistic innovation intersected long before queer discourse entered mainstream academic attention. A bisexual woman who entered a "lavender marriage" with John Ellingham Brooks, her life and work resist the heteronormative narratives that have shaped art historical interpretation. Her painting *The Cross of France* (1914) stands as a striking counter-image to the feminine ideals' dominant in early twentieth-century representation. Rendered in her characteristic monochrome palette, the work depicts a figure embodying gender ambiguity and emotional austerity, defying the ornamental femininity expected of women artists of the period. Brooks's aesthetic practice transformed the portrait into a site for queer self-fashioning: she painted gender as performance rather than fixed identity. Yet her name remains peripheral to canonical histories despite her centrality to queer modernism. Her career challenges the notion that avant-garde innovation emerged solely from heterosexual male circles, demonstrating instead that queer artists developed alternative modes of representation, subjectivity and visual language well before such strategies were theorised in academic discourse.

Queer artists and queer culture have played an essential role in shaping the evolution of modern and contemporary art, not as marginal contributors but as catalysts for aesthetic and conceptual change. Across movements, including Surrealism, Neo-Expressionism, performance art and contemporary photography, queer perspectives have expanded the visual vocabulary available for expressing identity, embodiment and intimacy. These artists introduced new forms of subjectivity and experimentation, rejecting stable categories of gender and sexuality and opening art history to expanded ways of seeing. Their work not only enriches the historical

narrative, but it also exposes the limitations of canonical norms that privileged heterosexual masculinity as the default creative position. Rather than treating queer artists as exceptional cases, recognising their contributions reveals how queer aesthetics have been foundational in transforming art into a space of multiplicity, subversion and cultural self-definition. This reframing positions queerness not as an addendum to the "main" art narrative, but as a vital strand within its ongoing development.

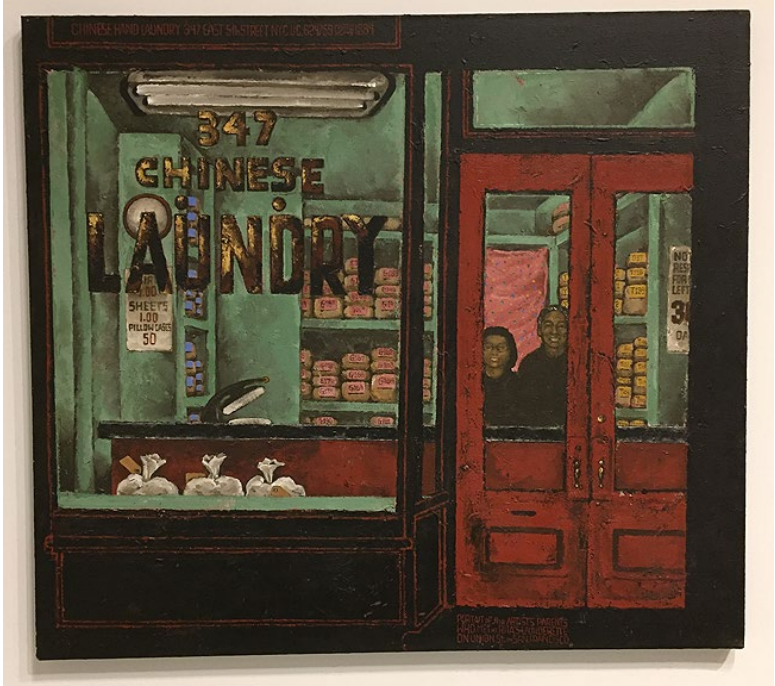

Fig.3.4: Martin Wong's *Chinese Hand Laundry* (1984)

Martin Wong offers a particularly rich example of how queer and diasporic identities intersect in artistic practice. As a Chinese American gay artist working in New York during the late twentieth century, Wong's work foregrounded themes of marginalisation, urban survival and cultural hybridity through a distinctly personal visual language. His piece *Chinese Hand Laundry* (1984) serves as a semi-autobiographical reflection on the immigrant labour experience and the inscribed identities of Chinese diasporic communities. The painted signage, brickwork and storefront façade evoke Chinatown's architectural vernacular while calling attention to the cultural stereotyping embedded within the phrase "hand laundry" itself, a phrase historically used to reduce Chinese immigrant labour to a singular racialised function. Yet Wong transforms this stereotype into a monument, rendering it with careful detail and dignity. The work is both a reclamation and a critique: it exposes how Chinese identity has been confined within narrowly defined narratives while asserting a new visibility for queer Asian American voices within the art world. As a result, *Chinese Hand Laundry* demonstrates how Wong's intersectional identity, racial, queer and working-class, became central to expanding the visual and discursive boundaries of late twentieth-century American art. His work not only challenges the canon's exclusions but offers an alternative framework through which to understand cultural authorship and belonging.

The recovery of these artists is not simply an exercise in adding missing names to an already established canon; rather, it represents a fundamental challenge to the cultural assumptions and ideological frameworks that shaped the canon in the first place. To reconsider their contributions is to question the mechanisms through which artistic value has historically been assigned, and to confront the selective processes that elevated certain voices while marginalising or erasing others. Rewriting art history therefore requires more than a retrospective acknowledgment of overlooked figures. It demands a systematic re-evaluation of the hierarchical structures that positioned Western, white, heterosexual, and male perspectives as the presumed norm, while relegating alternative viewpoints, whether shaped by gender, race, sexuality, geography, or class, to the periphery.

Instead of preserving the canon as a fixed, universal, or authoritative framework, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises it as a historically produced narrative shaped by specific cultural priorities and ideological choices. By interrogating these choices, scholars can reveal the extent to which the canon reflects not an objective record of artistic excellence, but a constructed lineage built to reinforce forms of power. The artists discussed in this chapter illustrate that innovation, influence, and artistic excellence have always been global, varied, and deeply interconnected, even if the structures of art criticism, education, and museum practice worked to obscure this diversity.

The process of rewriting the canon thus becomes an act of repositioning, one that goes beyond simple inclusion to reconfigure the very terms through which art history is organised and understood. It requires acknowledging the plurality of artistic traditions and recognising that multiple centres of creativity have existed simultaneously across cultures and time periods. In doing so, this expanded approach transforms art history from a narrow, selective narrative into a genuinely pluralised field. Such a shift is not merely corrective or additive, but essential to producing a more equitable, nuanced, and accurate understanding of art's development, its cultural significance, and the wide range of human experiences it both emerges from and reflects.

In examining these overlooked artists, it becomes clear that the dominant canon was never a neutral record of artistic achievement, but a product of exclusionary values shaped by race, gender, sexuality and cultural hierarchy. The examples discussed throughout this chapter demonstrate that alternative histories were always present, even when institutional narratives rendered them invisible. Rather than treating these artists as marginal anomalies, their work reveals the breadth of artistic innovation that flourished beyond the canonical frame. Reintroducing these artists into art history therefore does more than rectify past omissions: it challenges the very criteria by which artistic value has been defined. By destabilising the notion of a singular, authoritative canon, this chapter foregrounds a more expansive and inclusive art historical landscape, one that acknowledges diversity not as a contemporary correction but as a long-standing reality of artistic production.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the Western art historical canon as a structure shaped not by neutral evaluation, but by the cultural, political and ideological forces that determined whose stories, bodies and cultural expressions were worthy of preservation. Throughout this research, the canon has emerged not as a passive collection of artistic "greats," but as an active system of power, one that has consistently upheld whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality and European cultural dominance as the core of artistic value. By examining both the celebrated figures within the canon and those omitted from it, this dissertation has argued that the traditional art historical narrative reflects far more about social hierarchies than about genuine artistic merit. In this way, the study revealed the canon not as a fixed lineage, but as a constructed worldview that has shaped how generations understand the origins, progression and purpose of art.

At the heart of this project is the recognition that the exclusions embedded in the canon were never accidental. Racism, sexism, colonialism and queer erasure were foundational in determining which artists became "masters" and which were relegated to anonymity. The canon historically framed white European men as the default artistic subject, positioning their perspectives as universal while casting other identities as peripheral or incompatible with the ideals of "high art." This framing also influenced the types of images that were celebrated portraits reinforcing whiteness as power, colonial fantasies masquerading as cultural curiosity, women reduced to objects rather than agents, and queer expression hidden beneath coded aesthetics. The persistence of these visual and ideological legacies demonstrates how deeply art history is entangled with broader systems of inequality.

But this dissertation has also shown that despite these structural constraints, alternative artistic histories quietly persisted alongside the dominant one. The artists whose stories have resurfaced through this research, women innovators, artists of colour, queer visionaries and global modernists, demonstrate that the richness of art has always extended far beyond the boundaries defined by canonical gatekeepers. Their work exposes the narrowness of the traditional narrative and reveals the plurality of voices, techniques and visions that were always present but rarely acknowledged. The canon's failure to include them is not a reflection of their value or impact, but of the systems that made their contributions invisible.

The act of acknowledging these omissions is not simply an academic exercise. It signals a shift in how art history can be interpreted, taught and valued. Rewriting the canon does not mean discarding everything that came before, nor does it imply that canonical artists lack significance. Instead, it involves recognising the partiality of the existing narrative and expanding our understanding of artistic heritage to include those who were systematically excluded. This process is inherently transformative: it reshapes our perception of the past, challenges the authority of established narratives and opens space for new voices in the future. It encourages us to question why certain forms of art were elevated over others, and who had the power to make those decisions.

Crucially, this dissertation positions itself as a contribution to a broader movement rather than a definitive corrective. The canon cannot be rewritten by a single study, nor can centuries of exclusion be resolved through the addition of a few previously overlooked names. Instead, this work aims to illuminate the mechanisms of exclusion and to highlight artists who deserve recognition, not only as a matter of justice, but because their inclusion offers a more accurate and expansive understanding of art's development. The goal is to spark awareness, to invite

further questioning and to encourage a continuing re-evaluation of art historical narratives. By engaging critically with the canon's construction and acknowledging its biases, this research hopes to support ongoing efforts to make art history more equitable, diverse and representative.

Ultimately, the dissertation argues that change begins with visibility. By bringing these issues to light, the project invites a reconsideration of what the canon could become if freed from the constraints of its exclusionary origins. The hope is that this work contributes to the momentum of that change, encouraging scholars, institutions and future artists to participate in reshaping the narrative, not merely accepting the one inherited. In doing so, the dissertation aspires to help foster an art history that reflects the true breadth of human creativity: complex, multifaceted and shared, rather than owned by the few.

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