

Episode 6: The Stories We Tell

Zune: Today, we'll be talking about interesting artwork that tells multiple stories. In art, stories can be understood through many lenses, including that of the artist, as well as the viewer.

Noelle: Stories are a form of communication that everyone can connect with. Their way of understanding and remembering the experience of a time and place.

Raquel: I feel like art could teleport you into a moment for a few seconds and make you feel like you were there, you were part of the story. Hi, I'm Raquel and I'm 19 years old.

Zune: And I'm Zune, I'm 17.

Noelle: I'm Noelle and I'm 13 years old. And we are your local museum ambassadors from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Artists express their ideas and opinions through their artwork. And with a little imagination you can too.

Raquel: And the object itself also tells a story.

Zune: What do you see? What do you feel? While you listen to the stories these objects are trying to tell, keep these questions in mind.

Noelle: Close your eyes and see how these artworks transport you into the moment.

Raquel: Hi! It's Raquel. Today, I'll be talking about ***Black Figure Amphora with Lid***. First, let's talk about what an amphora is. They are essentially jars or vases with two handles and a narrow neck, but what makes them unique are the designs put on them by Roman and Greek artisans.

This jar stood out to me because it reminds me of my favorite character from the movie Hercules by Disney, The Muses. They were the narrators of the movie. And would jump off their painting and use other amphoras when referring to some of the gods and their personal stories. The Muses were telling the story by speaking, mostly singing, but stories can be told from a single image. The black and orange face shows figures in combat, which made me think of warriors like Aries or Hercules. I would come to find out that I was wrong, but that's okay. What is important is that this piece made me think and ask, who are they? Where are they going? What are they fighting for?

This amphora has a couple scenes on it. One on each side. One side shows Dionysus with Maenads and the other one has Ajax and Odysseus. We can recognize the characters, Ajax and Odysseus based on the armor and weapons they are carrying, which was probably meant for the fight for Achilles' armor, who died during the Trojan war. Ajax was compared to Achilles for his strength and bravery as a warrior. However, he lost the fight for Achilles' armor and the disappointment led him to go mad and commit suicide. I imagine the passion and loyalty Ajax had for Achilles was so strong that he couldn't go on after losing Achilles' armor.

The other side of the jar shows a scene of Dionysus with the musical possessions of Maenads. Dionysus the god of wine was an offspring of Zeus and a mortal named Semele. Hera Zeus' jealous wife would often harass Zeus' children from other women, including Dionysus. So Zeus had to hide Dionysus away from Hera, which resulted in him being raised by nymphs who were personifications of nature. This scene shows the depth of character in Dionysus. Picking these scenes to be painted on the jar meant that these stories were important. Let's hear from the curators, Louis Chu and Renee Dreyfus and what they have to say about Black Figure Amphora with Lid. Who would use these vases and for what?

Louis Chu: Most Greek vases rather like this one, this amphora, especially if they're painted were generally actually used as burial goods. Because there's a whole tradition with ancients and including the ancient Greeks. In symposium or symposia, which are these, oh, I don't know, parties, drinking parties, gatherings of men that they're used for drinking purposes. They served both as a functional vessel or as well as part of a funeral paraphernalia.

Raquel: Were those who made these vases considered artists?

Louis Chu: We now consider them artists because of those exquisite paintings that you are seeing that you see on some of them, but back in the days of ancient Greece, especially in Athens where the city itself is really famous for these painted vases, both black figure and a red figure. These were really just artisans, as in they actually worked for pottery either owned by the painter or the potter. The master painter, who would sketch the outline on the part. And then, and then it would be painted over where they're behind on top of the black background as in the black figure or on top of a red sort of this whatever color. I mean, this reddish color on the background. So hence a black figure, meaning the figures are black and then the red figure means to figure themselves in red as against the opposite color background. One would assume they're done freehand. And this is why from our point of view, it is really amazing artistry.

Raquel: Can you talk more about the scenes that were picked for these vases?

Louis Chu: Whatever the, what we call now, the artists want to do. And of course, some of these are set themes. Even one of the sides that has the brawling warriors, because that is a very known mythological story. And the one behind with Dionysus scenes that's really all over the place. Started with the background of symposia where it's all drinking and Dionysus is of course the god of wine.

The lid of this amphora is painted with a horse drawn chariot race with three charioteers standing behind a pair of horses. And this is a very common game among the Greeks, where there, especially as a chariot race. It's a common feature in battles where you have a charioteer controlling, directing, steering the horse or the horses. And there's the hero standing next to him fighting, if I may say, killing the opponents. However, on this lid, it certainly looks far more

peaceful because there are only three charioteers with their two horse team racing around the lid as though it's racing around a circular racetrack.

Zune: What do you think is happening in this painting? Why is the lady putting a flower crown on someone's head? Why is everyone watching intently? This painting seems to tell many stories for the lady in green silk, to the two people sitting in the background. When I first saw this artwork, I also had many questions. Well, to start this painting is called ***The Crowning of Mirtillo*** by Ferdinand Bol. This painting is actually based on a scene of a play like a story within a story.

Isabella: The painting depicts a scene from *Il Pastor Fido*, a play written by Giovanni Battista Guarani an Italian in around 1585. The title translates to the faithful shepherd and it documents the protagonist Mirtillo, a shepherd who is crowned with flowers by Amaryllis, a nymph who he is secretly in love with. However, he disguised himself as a woman. And he has just witnessed a kissing war among Amaryllis' female friends. And her mouth having already been judged the fairest, her role is to judge whose kisses are the most pleasing. And this painting focuses on the moment when Mirtillo wins the contest. *Il Pastor Fido* was a pastoral play and it was often performed in Italy.

Zune: That's Isabella, curatorial assistant in European paintings at the Fine Art Museum of San Francisco. Wow. The popular play attracted different artists to make paintings inspired by its scenes.

Isabella: The play was attractive for artists during this time because it was part of the pastoral genre. The pastoral genre is often plays and art set in this pastoral scene that has some semblance to everyday life, but is actually in Arcadia where ideals of social life can be placed.

Zune: Was the pastoral genre a way to escape reality?

Isabella: Completely. The pastoral genre did allow others to escape reality.

Zune: How does this play use gender bending?

Isabella: This play uses gender bending in the way that it has a male dressed up as a female. And when the male Mirtillo is able to be a female, he's able to access female only spaces and to engage in a world that isn't seen as accessible. It's interesting to think that gender bending in a way is allowing a gender to access another gender world that they would not be able to experience. It's a sense of fantasy and imagination that's allowed to be played out.

Zune: Was gender bending looked down upon in the 16th century?

Isabella: I'm not quite sure if it was looked down upon. I am assuming yes. But there are so many instances in literature and European literature produced in the 16th century where gender bending is used. I'm thinking of Shakespeare when a woman is dressed as a man or in this instance where a man is dressed as a woman.

Zune: It makes me think of how gender bending is used in more current entertainment like *Mulan*, *White Chicks* or *Mrs. Doubtfire*. The play's use of gender bending is interesting, especially in today's open conversation about gender, sexuality, and fluidity.

Now that we understand more about the painting source, there's something that caught my eye, the figure in orange positioned in the shadow, peering over the shoulder of Amaryllis, the woman in green, seems to have a darker complexion. As you can see, there are a total of nine people in the painting, but only one person who seemed to be of color. This makes me think of the racial dynamics when Bol created this work in the mid 17th century in the Netherlands. How does this painting reflect the history of that time?

Isabella: This reflects Dutch history at this time in the 17th century. Once it received its independence in 1648, by then it had already been a naval power that dominated economic systems. The Dutch did this by engaging in trade with Asia and also setting up colonial settlements in the Americas and participating in the international slave trade. While slavery was forbidden in the Dutch Republic, people of African descent and people of color did live in the Dutch Republic during this time. And they were most likely brought over to the Dutch Republic as servants by immigrant families. Therefore, there is some question as to who would have been a model for Ferdinand Bol for this scene.

Zune: Ferdinand Bol shows the difference in class through clothes and ornaments people in the painting wore. The rest of the figures have beautiful gowns, wear fancy jewelries while their person of color is covered by two figures in front of them. From what we can see, what class distinctions can be made? And this leaves you with questions, like what role do Amaryllis attendants play? When you look at the facial expression, it's quite interesting. The painting's main focus is on the flower crowning ceremony where most of the figure seems so invested in While the person of color looks confused. I mean, I will look confused too.

Imagine walking into a kissing contest to see who kisses the best. With their expression, skin color and position within the painting, the figure with the darker skin feels excluded. There aren't other figures that look like them, which makes me wonder how they feel. How would you feel if you were in a room full of people that don't look like you? I wonder if the person in the back feels out of place or uncomfortable?

Isabella: During this time, people of color function in paintings often for aesthetic purposes as providing a color contrast between black and white. However, recent art historical scholarship is really trying to understand the social and the political and the economic circumstances of why there are people of color in European paintings. Who exactly was a model for Ferdinand Bol when he made this painting? What was he looking for for inspiration for conceiving this scene? Why even include a person of color? What are the meaning behind that? And I think that rather than having answers for that, it's been a lot of questions because this painting challenges my assumptions about what Dutch painting is, the experiences of people who lived in the Dutch Republic during the 17th century.

Zune: What was surprising to you about the painting?

Isabella: What was most surprising is that this painting hangs in gallery 14 at the Legion, which is dedicated to large paintings that are Dutch and Flemish. It was interesting for me to see that this painting was so large when you compare it to paintings you expect to be in the middle-class homes of Dutch citizens of the 17th century. For me, it was also so interesting to see a person of color there, especially when museums which have European paintings often reflect this very Eurocentric narrative of what life was like. And so it was interesting to think that in our collection, there are different stories that can be told and that there's further investigation that can be done in the social, economic and political situations that these art arise from. What struck me is that if you look close enough in our galleries, and if you look hard enough, there are so many different stories and people that you can see that you might not look at, at first glance.

Zune: So what story do you see when looking at this painting?

Noelle: Imagine this, you're walking to the grocery store, the busy streets of Birmingham, Alabama buzzing with the noise of city life. You turn a corner and you bump into a group of peaceful protesting. Most people in the crowd are kids marching with signs speaking out for equal rights and the end of segregation. The protestors aren't violent, but you can tell that they're driven to make a change. Suddenly police dogs are unleashed into the sea of people. The vicious dogs charge at the protestors, some people getting bitten and trampled.

This is the scene of Jack Levine's painting, ***Birmingham '63***. When I first saw this painting, the dark colors and solemn faces of the figures gave me a distinct chilling feeling. It's one of those paintings where you can just tell there's a rich and deep story behind it. The painting consists of five African Americans whose facial features are mostly blurred out. This makes me think that anyone could have been in their shoes. They're standing together face against ferocious dogs that are barking and lunging at them. The moment portrayed in the art was a part of the Birmingham campaign, which was a segment of the civil rights movement. Starting on April 3rd, 1963, giant meetings, lunch counter sit-ins, marches on city hall, and a boycott of downtown merchants were put into motion.

The purpose of these demonstrations was to put pressure on businesses to desegregate their facilities. On May 3rd, 1963, the momentous scene shown in Birmingham 63 took place at a protest that was mostly attended by students ranging from college, high school to even elementary school, public safety commissioner, Eugene Bull Connor ordered local police and fire departments to use force to control the demonstrations.

Children got blasted by high pressure fire hoses, clubbed by police. And as seen in the art, charged by attack dogs. This horrific scene of extreme violence and racism ignited international outrage. Although a difficult experience, it changed the city of Birmingham for the better. Black citizens of Birmingham and the city's business leadership agreed to desegregate public facilities

such as restrooms, lunch counters and more. Unfortunately, this painting is undeniably similar to photos and news articles today in the media about the Black lives matter movement protests.

De'Yani Dillard: Hi, my name is De'Yani Dillard. I too am a museum ambassador at the San Francisco de Young museum. I have been doing social justice work ever since I could walk. And I am part of a social justice group called the Radical Monarchs. It's a group for girls of color to learn about social justice. And we do things such as marches and we go to protests and we write letters and we learn about social justice and how we can help better our world.

This scene does indeed remind me, it reminds me of the riots that have been happening in 2020. I definitely think that the energy is somewhat the same. You can tell that in Birmingham '63, it was a very dark time in history and there was police brutality and there was just anger and just a lot of emotions going on around them. And then when you compare it to what's going on today, our pictures are more so in color, but it's still the exact same type of energy that was happening back then.

The art resonates with me because I look at it and I can connect it with my experience growing up. Of course I've never seen it first hand, houses being bombed. But I have seen police brutality, whether it's on the news and the newspapers, just speaking with my parents about it and just growing up Black in America is difficult. Even before I joined my social justice work, my mom always sat me down and talked to me about what to do if I ever get stopped by a police officer or what to do when there's a gun around and how to handle those situations at a very young age.

Noelle: This makes me think about how the color of your skin really does affect your experience living in America. As an Asian American, I realized I've never had a talk about how to handle situations with the police. And it never occurred to me that I'd need to know what to do in that situation.

De'Yani Dillard: A lot of people don't know what to do or they haven't received that talk. Luckily for me, my parents, my mom is very active in social justice. She brought me to my first march when I was only four years old. So I've always been aware of what was going on. Of course, I didn't know all of the details because I was still very young. But as I grow older, we have social media now. And so you can see everything. And lots of people aren't ready to see it, but the world is pushing it onto us and expect us just to take it. It's really hard to do so because no one wants to see the things that we see today. And I can say that I've seen plenty of these things.

I've seen first hand a black child being murdered. I've seen it. And I've seen it up close. And it's a horrifying thing that you have to look at. But, that's how the world is working right now. You're never really ready to have that talk. And it's upsetting, especially for Black children in America that you have to sit down and have this conversation with the family members and you have to worry about walking outside the house every day. It's not exactly something that's easy to swallow, you know?

Noelle: It's crucial to remember the struggles African-American families had to go through to ensure and defend civil liberties. And artists have a huge role in getting people to know about current issues. Just by looking at the artwork that is being made right now, whether that be music, dance, or paintings gives you an idea as to the struggles others in the world face.

Jack Levine took it upon himself to make artworks to expose the flaws of American culture. Things like inequality, militarism, racism, and political corruption. In *Birmingham '63*, when he chose to speak about these issues, it was attention grabbing. Not only did he make beautiful art, but he also showed the immorality of racism in events going on at the time.

The way Levine showed his opinion on *Birmingham '63* was by exaggerating his figures for expressive purposes, which was inspired by earlier European artists. Some subjects and elements in the painting may be a bit dramatic, but it draws you in and gets his point across in a powerful way. This makes it impossible to miss the viciousness of the dogs and the resilience of the protestors. When looking into the background and history of this painting, he is giving light to the fight for equality and the end of racism. However, the events which took place in this painting haven't seemed to change.

De'Yani Dillard: Looking back at Birmingham, it's really upsetting because I can still see things that are happening then and now, but it just switched in some ways. But then you see similarities. Like they used batons then, they use it now. It's changed in some, in some way, but then again, it's not, and we're just repeating the same things over and over again. So in some ways I do see progress on how quick we can make change happen. Like whether it's the small things like arresting murderers, but then again, I still don't see a change in our policing. I do not see change in the police department. I do not.

Noelle: Like in this scene, police showed brutality to the protestors, much like they continue to do today. Especially in the circumstances we are in, change will be difficult, but it's possible. What role do young people today have in creating social change?

De'Yani Dillard: We are the future. It takes us to change how we want to live in the future. And of course, there's still going to be older people that determine that. But if we want to make a change that we have a very big role in this because there's so many of us and when we all come together, it's a very powerful thing. And that's exactly why I like to boost and encourage my friends and people in my community to do more.

Noelle: We may be young, but we can't let that limit our voices.

De'Yani Dillard: Using our platforms to speak on issues that we are affected by. And we don't even have to be affected by it. My group and I made a video on how to be an ally and we put it on our social media and just make people aware of when you're not being affected by it, how you can use your privilege to help and do something about it. It takes us to change our futures. And we don't want to be in the same place that we are right now. Right now, we are tired. People of color are tired of fighting. We've been fighting for so long. Our ancestors have been

fighting. It's been years and years and years of oppression and we have to stop it now. So I think that especially our youth right now, we have the power to make a change. So I think we play a very big role in determining our future.

Zune: When we were young, it was very easy to make up stories through our imaginations. But growing up and facing reality our imagination sometimes fades. These aren't words, encourage us to create our own stories while bringing us closer to the role of the artwork.

Raquel: History is formed by the storyteller. Everyone has a different take on the same story, which makes everyone's perspective so unique. My experience when looking at these artworks may be different from yours and that's okay.

Noelle: We hope you've been able to uncover new stories and new perspectives in these objects and found a deeper understanding about them.