

What is a Classic?

On the Role of Endurance in Art History

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The word “classic” in the title of this special issue of *Selva* might seem to some a misnomer. Rather than consistently use any of the rich traditions of the concept from various sub-disciplines of art history—say, Mesoamerican or Chinese—, or address the contested self-identification of the academic field of “Classics” itself, I have thought about the operational role of this word in all the different art histories I have worked with. (I was for a few years responsible for creating and managing a non-Eurocentric introductory art history course with the help of colleagues and collaborators.¹ My level of engagement in various subdisciplines is more or less superficial, but has been broad and undertaken in earnest.)

Operationally, a “classical” work in any given tradition is one that notionally sets a transhistorical standard and/or possesses notionally eternal, if shifting, value within a given community; often, that community will assume that a classical work could potentially set the standard and hold value for all communities. In this framework, how do works become classics? This may go without saying, but to be transhistorical, an object, site, or image must first of all endure. This endurance need not be strictly material. Verbal or ritual traditions may preserve the importance of an object. I like to ask Euro-American academic audiences to think about the Shield of Achilles: this object is surely a cultural classic or functions as one. And yet this Shield endures without ever having existed.

Such endurance is a matter of active maintenance. A community maintains its classics by material, ritual, pedagogical, and/or discursive means.² This process is more likely to be successful if the community is dominant among and amid others, with the resources for

This introduction benefitted from the attention of Jennifer Dorothy Lee and Morgan Ng (who are of course off the hook for any flaws). For the issue in general, I am grateful not only to the authors and for all the double-blind peer reviewers who helped hone the authors’ arguments, but also to my fellow editors Daniel Spaulding and Danny Marcus for their support with the issue.

¹ My thanks go to Sinclair Bell, Maggie Hazard, and Daniel Merkle in particular for our conversations as we developed curricula together.

² Raymond Williams similarly described the pervasiveness of “the transmission of an effective dominant culture”: see his “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), 31–49, here 39.

literal material preservation as well as the infrastructure for regulation of ritual and pedagogy.³ The highest chance of successful maintenance of a classic comes about when a dominating community, facing the difficulties of integrating non-dominating communities under its sway, identifies something in an object, site, performance, or image (produced within the dominating community or otherwise) that justifies its dominance or even powers it: there is then an urgency to promote the transhistoricity of the perceived values of the object, site, performance, or image.

This issue of *Selva* arose from two facts that do not combine with any satisfactory ethical result. First of all, when under threat, non-dominating communities have a lower probability of maintaining their classics on their own terms.⁴ To point this out is also a moderate, perhaps too-polite way of remembering that genocided or nearly-genocided communities in particular may have a zero or significantly decreased probability of maintaining classics without having their classics reframed (sometimes literally) to serve their killers' communities.

Second of all, art history still relies on the classic to proceed. This is something of a tautology: a community will work to preserve what it believes sets an eternal value; what is preserved continues to set that value; and so on until the things that survive—that are available to art history—are indeed those classics of a community's virtues. The various canons of art history can thus be understood as overlapping Venn diagrams of notionally virtuous circles produced largely by overlapping dominating communities. Many an intervention in art history has privileged one dominating community over another, or restored one dominating community's classic to its rightful place alongside the others. And all too often, art history's recourse to materiality, ecocriticism, and the study of trade networks, alongside a so-called ontological turn, has occurred at the expense of meaningful discussion of the values and standards that inhabit objects, sites, performances, and images within non-dominating communities.⁵

Despite the reverberations of this turn, art history still *structurally* relies on the classic. As the avowed bearer of transhistorical and perhaps transcendent value, the classic object, site, performance, or image is a, or perhaps *the*, model for all hermeneutic targets in

³ I am influenced in my following discussion of the power dynamics among and between communities by Edward Said's discussion of "dominant" cultures' role throughout *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978). I use the somewhat awkward participle form to recall that dominance (or, for that matter, non-dominance) is not a permanent or essential quality of any community, but rather a contingent, active property.

⁴ My statements here are indebted to the many discourses developed from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 271-313.

⁵ See Rebecca Zorach, "'Welcome to My Volcano': New Materialism, Art History, and Their Others," in Christopher P. Heuer and Rebecca Zorach, eds., *Ecologies, Agents, Terrains* (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2018), 147-166, esp. 149, developing arguments from Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3 no. 3 (fall 2003), 257-337.

art history. The classic is made to account for a particular community at a particular moment (in some ways precisely through being tested by potential misprision in the history of its reception). However problematically, the classic is the form par excellence of a community's cultural survival. Even a scrap of ephemera from outside established canons, once subjected to art history, participates in the hermeneutic project established by the classic.

I wrote somewhere once that “empire is the only form of preservation,” and, even though that statement is false—even though that statement taken on its own erases powerful and ongoing resistances—it is too close to art history's truth for comfort.⁶ So here is the task I gave this issue of *Selva*: how can scholars uplift histories of non-imperial endurance in object, site, and image? How can one re-think what a classic is in ways that make an ethical art history more sustainable? I asked our seven authors to think about what kinds of objects, images, sites, and performances endure, and about what kinds *should* endure.

Some authors responded obliquely, by reframing the functions of classicism within their own visions of art history. Writing about what is probably the art historical context most saturated by considerations of classicism—that is, the art-making traditions of China—, Li Yuhang has opened a discussion of what classics have to do with class not by invoking Latin etymology, but by reflecting upon classed tiers of knowledge, labor, and values in the later Qing period. The mid-nineteenth-century tomb of Li Tianpei (Li Jingfu, 1830-1875) combines the expected elite-scholarly or “literati” knowledge associated with, say, the canon of Chinese mountain-and-water landscape (shanshui) paintings with a further knowledge, that of artisanal labor in stone. Here the masterful use of stonecarving technique to generate shanshui visual effects can be read as the gentry-merchant Li's surpassing of mere elite scholarly norms. According to Li Yuhang, this commission secures the classic literati forms, but re-classicizes them for literal endurance by means of contemporary master-artisanal labor.

Writing in and about sub-Saharan Africa, an even more vast context that has long been classicized from *without* in art historical scholarship, Babacar Mbaye Diop has provided an introductory overview and sketch of another way to understand classicism in African art. Building on the work of Cheik Anta Diop, Babacar Diop proceeds on the basis of style. Throughout his overview, and especially toward the end, Diop deplores the way that pre-second-world-war objects from sub-Saharan African communities have been used to further narratives of what one might call white supremacy or at least African inferiority. Over and over again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European and Anglo-American scholars used sub-Saharan African objects, especially but not only those evincing high degrees of realism or technical finesse, in order to anchor claims of Mediterranean, Portuguese, Persian, and, most insidiously, “Hamite” impact and guidance. Diop's overview overthrows these narratives of superior cultural influence from the north and offers instead

⁶ See the reflections on George Kubler's 1961 assertions of the extinction of Indigenous art in the Americas in Barbara Mundy, “Dialogues: Kubler's ‘On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Pre-Columbian Art’ Reconsidered,” *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, vol. 2 no. 4 (2020), 55-60.

an alternative introductory heuristic from within traditional art history: style, observed at the level of individual communities' internal difference as well as at the macroscopic level of general form.

Christopher S. Wood's essay also addresses the concept of a classic through the notion of style: that of an "international, global, or universal artistic style," one which "aspires to transcend and outlive local and transitory content, including political and other identities, and so invites the participation of any artist from any place"—a style that in some ways renders local content ancillary to its enduring value. Provocatively, Wood describes a "global contemporary [art] paradigm" that, unlike its predecessor universal styles, is based not on form but on the "relativization and de-privileging" of modernisms, often by means of "appropriation, montage, and recombination," in service (one Wood suggests is near-compulsory) of "progressive" "real-world goals." Form has thus been dematerialized, its freight displaced into thought and affect. With this dematerialization comes a different relationship to survival and endurance. If one accepts Wood's provocation, one can imagine that global contemporary art regards matter, form, and even preservation as incidental and focuses entirely on the community-building function of a potential classic. This art aims directly at the emotional and intellectual engines of communal values on an elite but planetary scale.⁷

In the history of art, the locus classicus (not even a pun) of any universal artistic style is the category of *Idealplastik*, the vast and "heterogeneous body of sculptural copies"—in Patrick R. Crowley's terms—of ancient Greek art made for ancient Roman contexts. *Idealplastik's* presumed elevation of the Classical Greek style (c. 480–323 BCE) in ancient Roman times, and its further elevation by early prominent art historians like Johann Joachim Winckelmann, established it as the core classical set of objects par excellence in art history.⁸ These sculptures endure in many forms, and are still to this day widely imagined, not just in Euro-American contexts, to instill enduring values in potentially all human communities.⁹

At a remove from Wood's global contemporary paradigm, contemporary artist Oliver Laric's sculptural installations—the subject of Crowley's writing in this issue—are the result of numerous and diverse information-oriented "self-referential chains of operations" (like 3D printing) that work not upon modernism, but upon *Idealplastik*, its art history, and its museological history. Setting aside *Kopienkritik*, that is, the scholarly fetish for a core

⁷ Gayatri Spivak first developed the concept of planetarity (as opposed to other, capitalism-oriented terms expressing the interrelation of communities, species, and spaces, etc., on the planet Earth) toward the end of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University, 2003), esp. 72.

⁸ For an overview of this process with extensive bibliography, see Anna Anguissola, "Greek Originals and Roman Copies," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195389661/obo-9780195389661-0213.xml>, last accessed October 2021).

⁹ On this topic in a global context and its many consequences for the study of the Classics as a discipline, see Salvatore Settis, *The Future of the 'Classical'*, trans. Allan Cameron (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006).

classical object, for the original of the copies that proliferate a universal style, Laric's work instead wields extreme "technicity" as a bearer of meaning in itself. The endless "decod[ing] and recod[ing]" that constitute the very existence of Laric's work redefine Idealplastik's constitutive classicism so that variation becomes its own theme. Pushing on Bernhard Siegert and Gilbert Simondon's media archaeologies, Crowley reads Laric's work as an archaeology of the classic that privileges the technics of suspense, and thus reads facture as an unsettling and unseizable fiction.

Other authors in the issue responded to the prompt more directly: they address what the concept of a classic might mean for non-dominating communities. One traditional, more Hegelian way of describing the classic is subverted and perhaps perverted by Damon R. Young's essay on melodrama: the classic as an object, site, performance, or image that "ideal[ly] adequat[es] ... form to content." This Hegelian understanding of a classic is somewhat compatible with the definition I gave above. How else would a classic operate trans-historically? Somehow, if the form were *perfect* for the content, it could potentially be so for all humans everywhere forever. (At some point I hope to write about the ableist assumptions undergirding this basic idea.) With delicious readings that center queer play on race and gender, Young busts this trope, establishing melodrama as the queer form of the classic. Young's vision of melodrama is precisely of a form that preserves an excess of content, a form that spills out into feminine tears, into "stalled repetitions" of a subject, "embark[ing] on ... delirious affective investment" rather than a heroic, living reproduction of a dominating community's values.

Addressing the point of view of both dominating and non-dominating communities, Alejandra Rojas Silva's essay narrates the development of imagery that plays a classic role for both (former) colonizer and (former) colonized into the twenty-first century. The botanical illustrations about which she writes, produced on behalf of the Spanish Royal Botanical Expedition to Nueva Granada (1783-1816), have appeared recently on paper currency for both Spain and Colombia. Here, again, "style" proves vital. Rojas argues for a Creole visual mode that performs highly effectively within the parameters of a typical Spanish knowledge-gathering project. The legibility of these often opposed communities' values in the illustrations endures into the public visual culture of the present without resolving into neat binaries.

Ananda Cohen-Aponte's text conversely takes on a set of works that do not, or only partially, materially endure into the present: works of art that functioned as "critical intercessors in the creation of an anticolonial and radical abolitionist imaginary" during the Tupac Amaru Rebellion in the southern Andes (1780-83), the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), and the Aponte Rebellion in Cuba (1812). One way of reckoning with the disappearance, whole or partial, of works that functioned as touchstones of non-dominating community values is that of "critical fabulation," an "impossible writing" practice that uses the imagination to repair the gaps and structural violence of the archive.¹⁰ But the thinker

¹⁰ Saidiya Hartman most thoroughly developed this term in "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2 (June 2008), 1-14.

who developed this very strategy, Saidiya Hartman, subsequently offered an important corrective to its use. In order to avoid the redoubling of suffering and labor upon historical recipients of physical and archival violence, Hartman asserts in a sensitive but firm book review, scholars must perform “the critical labor to attenuate the violence” of archives through a framework that addresses “the terrors and pleasures” of the present-day onlooker, and such an onlooker’s potential “fascination, if not obsession, with watching, displaying, and reproducing” volatile materials of a violent past.¹¹ This caution in part inspires my dislike, above, for the idea of a classic deployed to serve the purposes of a community that historically committed violence against its makers.

Cohen-Aponte’s approach offers not critical fabulation per se, but a model for critically appreciating the ongoing parallels to critical fabulation in present-day artworks by makers who take on the inheritance of Andean, Haitian, and Cuban rebellions. Rather than imagining the experiences of those who suffered in these rebellions, she acknowledges the importance of undoing archival erasure for a “recuperative vision of the aesthetics of uprisings,” overtly acknowledging the importance of “connecting past and present in imagining alternative futures.” She offers a scholarship rooted in close-looking, contingent uses of archivally sourced knowledge, and critical appreciation of what she—following Joseph Roach and David Lambert—terms “surrogates,” objects that can in some ways stand in for materials that have been lost.

I am grateful to the authors for their provocative, insightful, and often unexpected takes on the simple questions I posed. I am aware that the entire premise is flawed or even perverse. Why should art history be fair or just, including the work of all communities regardless of what has endured? Should we not accept that art history is an elite enterprise, mirroring the tides of dominance and, at best, of dominating communities’ guilt and grief over loss? How many surrogates can there be for all that has been lost? Is it not disingenuous, or even an insult to the concept of art, to give damage and detritus as much weight as a well-preserved masterwork? Are there not better ways to begin to repair historical wounds that do not involve assuming that all communities fall under *art* history’s ambit?

Art historians may accept the discipline’s injustice, or ignore it, or find it irrelevant to their task: something at most to be observed rather than resisted, something perhaps relegated to debates about museums and restitution. Nevertheless, in these last years full of death, both pandemic-related and planetary, I found it helpful to revisit art history’s participation, for better or worse, in what survives. These essays go some way toward clarifying the stakes of that participation for our present moment.

¹¹ I am taking liberties by generalizing Hartman’s specific points in her review of Molly Rogers’ *Delia’s Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), in *The Journal of American History*, vol. 98, no. 2 (Sep. 2011), 520–22. I am grateful to Meredith Gamer for our conversation about this review.