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Women in Paintings and as Artists

This essay will analyze two Canadian artworks in historical and social contexts, comparing Francois Malepart de Beaucourt's *Portrait of a Negro Slave* and Yvonne McKague Housser's *Silver Mining*. Each painting belongs to a different movement in Canadian art history, namely colonialism and modernism of the 18th and 20th centuries. Additionally, it will explore female slavery expressed by European male artists during colonialism and how female artists later contribute to Canadian art history during modernism.

Throughout history, Canada was colonized by both France and Britain until it gained independence in the 19th century. When colonized, Canada did not have an artistic style that represented and reflected itself. Almost all artworks were produced by either French or English settlers and very few by indigenous people. The artworks created by the settlers are referred to as colonial paintings because they were made from a settler's perspective and used European art techniques. There was also a period of slavery not widely covered in Canadian history. Initially, the French sought to extract Canada's resources for their purposes when they came to Canada ("Slavery, Portraiture" 24). They began to label indigenous people as Others, removed them from their homes, and enslaved them (Skinner 132). With time, colonizers became settlers and needed more labour, prompting them to import and enslave African people (Skinner 135).

One of the most well-known paintings of the 18th century is *Portrait of a Negro Slave* by Francois Malepart de Beaucourt. The subject is a smiling Black female dressed in a white blouse

adorned with accessories (Gibson & Silverman 29). She has one breast exposed while seated

with a tray of tropical fruits placed next to her on the table (Gibson & Silverman 29). The

context of the painting and the identity of the woman in the portrait is not specified. Art

historians intensely analyzed this artwork due to its difficulty determining its historical context.

However, they assume that the woman in the portrait was an enslaved person that belonged to

Beaucourt's wife ("Slavery, Portraiture" 24). Charmaine Nelson explains that artists omitted

including African peoples' names in their painting titles because they were merely properties,

suggesting that the woman in the portrait was also an enslaved woman ("Slavery, Portraiture"

27).

The painting is significant for several reasons. It represents slavery's history when

Africans were enslaved and had no rights. It is the only painting representing an enslaved

African in Canada. Lastly, it demonstrates the exploitation of African women and their body in

paintings (*Slavery, Geography* 92). The painting also provides information about enslaved

people's cultural and social lives and how they were exploited by European artists (*Slavery,

Geography* 111). At that time, portraiture was expensive, and only wealthy people paid artists to

paint them. Enslaved Africans had no means of income to pay the artists for their portraits,

signifying that it was their masters that paid and used their portraits as luxurious, exotic paintings

("Slavery, Portraiture" 26-27). This proposes that the woman in Beaucourt's painting had no

control over her body ("Slavery, Portraiture" 27). Although Dennis Reid, the author of *A Concise

History of Canadian Painting* insinuates that the artwork was created when Beaucourt and his

wife were on vacation outside Canada, meaning it may not have been an enslaved woman, and

she gave him her permission. ("Slavery, Portraiture" 24).

In 2011, the artwork's name was changed to *Portrait of a Haitian Woman* when exhibited at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (*Slavery, Geography* 114). Nelson considers the name changing problematic because it eliminates the historical context of slavery in Canada and depicts the woman as the one who willingly exposed her breast (*Slavery, Geography* 126). It also does not inform that a European perhaps owned her (*Slavery, Geography* 126). Nelson further explains that Beaucourt likely owned the portrait to show off his class status and used it as an advertisement to attract Canadian clients (*Slavery, Geography* 126). Portraits of enslaved Africans were considered a sign of luxury and power among wealthy Europeans ("Slavery, Portraiture" 26). Representing enslaved Africans, especially women, as exotic and visual pleasure dehumanizes and portrays them as mere valuables and sexual objects ("Slavery, Portraiture" 27). The African female body was highly desirable for painting. African women imported into Canada were significantly less than African men, making them rare and exotic gems or trophies used as fashionable properties ("Slavery, Portraiture" 26). Historically, all paintings of indigenous and African people were created by colonizers, indicating that the artists had more power and authority over the colonized (*Slavery, Geography* 111).

By the 19th century, slavery ended, and Canada gained its independence. However, Canada was still adopting European styles and wanted to develop its artistic style that shaped and represented the nation ("Envisioning Nation" 36). Colonial paintings did not represent Canadian Art. Modernism became popular in Europe and other parts of the world in the twentieth century. However, Canada did not want to adopt the same approach and style as Europeans. It wanted to develop its Canadian identity. Therefore, wilderness and landscape became the Canadian identity's primary theme (Burns 90). Painting Canada's landscapes provided deeper insights into Canada's beauty as a nation and identity. The landscape theme provided a brighter and more

intimate aura to paintings, unlike the previous artworks created by the French and British, which were sombre and dark in colour. The Group of Seven were widely known for contributing to the Canadian identity through landscape art, and their works were much appreciated during the modernism period. Modern Canadian paintings consisted of bright hues of colours and elevated, simple forms. The artists also explored monochrome colours in their artworks, using different shades and hues of one colour to create monochromatic paintings that were also modern.

The female role had also changed from being the subject of gaze in paintings to working artists in the art field. Unfortunately, their presence in the art field was limited, and often their artworks were excluded from records and exhibition displays ("A Tale of Three Women" 104). They were not recognized as creative artists, paid less and received less funding than male artists ("A Tale of Three Women" 109). Although, female artists have achieved recognition for their work later on. An example of a female artist is Yvonne McKague Housser. Similar to the Group of Seven, she created landscape paintings. However, her artworks reflected her surroundings' political and social contexts, which she mostly displayed in dark hues. Analyzing her artworks, she followed the same theme and techniques as the Group of Seven but did not receive the same recognition she deserved, perhaps due to her gender. McKague was also perhaps not as famous as the Group of Seven due to her political use in her artworks. As a nation new at developing its own art, it was perhaps looking for a Canadian identity that did not reflect its political or social circumstances but represented Canada's beauty and culture. ("Envisioning Nation" 35).

However, she had more opportunities than most female artists. She received recognition for "conforming to the male values" and having "masculine strength and intellectuality, who could handle big materials in a big way" ("A Tale of Three Women" 105). She was the only one with two artworks presented in a wartime series by A. Y. Jackson. McKague also taught at the

Ontario College of Art ("A Tale of Three Women" 105). She wanted to educate people about Canadian Art and encourage young artists to produce specifically Canadian art by creating a wartime series to exhibit in the National Gallery Museum ("Envisioning Nation" 35). Regardless, McKague represented the reality of the social and gender gap problems that help understand the history of female presence and struggle in the art field.

Finally, the transformation of women in art history is interesting, from using women as subjects through a male gaze to women being artists, shifting away attention from the female body and changing attitudes towards it. Francois Beaucourt's portrait exploited the woman for her body to present sexuality and exoticism. Meanwhile, McKague's artwork portrays the shift from women as objects to being recognized as artists that express their views using diverse genres.

Francois Malepart de Beaucourt, *Portrait of a Negro Slave*, 1786

Yvonne McKague Housser, *Silver Mining, Evening*, 1932

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