

Art of the Mundane: Cultural Markers in Everyday Life

DIGITAL CURATION PROJECT
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In Western studies, documentation of history has often been developed by educational material, distributed media, and state declarations. We often consider history to be about sweeping victories in war, political changes, and monumental dates to remember. However, I find the everyday person's point of view to be a more widely encompassing look at the cultural moments that surround us. Storytelling and visual art are productive forms of historical documentation that work to create a holistic view of experiencing archival information as it unfolds. To do this, I investigate the [OSU Museum of Art's Collection](#), as well as supporting pieces from contemporary art historical archives that include people going about their mundane moments of everyday life, but are in fact visual documentations of broader historical narratives. While it is important to note that no singular artist can speak for the entirety of every dual cultural community, the eventual compilation of numerous microhistorical narratives should form a diverse, yet relatable, web of historical accounts that is holistically interpersonal, intrapersonal, and collective, and highlights the story of multicultural individuals through the ones that have experienced it or been impacted by it.

For example, this screenprint of my own (see fig. 1) utilizes food and the dining room setting as cultural markers of biculturalism. The medium of a layered print communicates the idea of multiple parts contributing to a whole identity. When my grandmother set the table, she would always lay out a napkin, fork, and chopsticks, as if to let me decide which to use. In front of my Vietnamese grandmother, I always chose the chopsticks, which I now see as powerfully symbolic of me allowing myself to embrace an identity that I previously did not. A common meal she made was spaghetti, but being Vietnamese, we would season it with nước mắm (fish sauce) rather than salt. These moments of accidental fusion cuisine are common place in the lives of many dual cultural individuals, but they tell the complex histories of war, migration, and acculturation.



Figure 1: Paige Nguyen, *Mời Ông Bà Nội, ăn Spaghetti (Welcome Grandma and Grandpa, Come Eat Spaghetti)*, 2023, screenprint on paper, 14 in x 18 in

Similarly, [T.C. Cannon](#)'s *Waiting for the Bus* (see fig. 2) allows for the ordinary act of sitting at a bus stop to become a revelation of Native life at the periphery of American history. [The artist](#)—native to Oklahoma and son of Caddo and Kiowa parents—grew up



[FIGURE 2: T.C. CANNON, WAITING FOR THE BUS, 1977, LITHOGRAPH ON PAPER, OSU MUSEUM OF ART COLLECTION, GIFT OF DICK AND MARILYN HEATH](#)

when Native art in museums often focused on painted academic portraiture and landscapes. This [limited collecting of Native art](#) depicted Native American communities as something of the past. However, Cannon's image shows a Native woman existing in a contemporary American setting as she awaits the bus with her umbrella in tow, painted in a background of modern American art style, boasting bold outlines, areas of flat color, and textural markmaking reminiscent of American [color field painting](#). All the while, she dons cultural [accessories and dress](#). In this way, Cannon visually argues that Native cultures not only still exist and thrive in American society today, but also that they are also inseparable from the art historical cannon of Oklahoma.

Another Native artist that culturally centers their work in the mundane is [Beverly Blacksheep](#). The artist identifies as Navajo and attributes her creativity and work ethic to the weaving women in her family. Blacksheep draws influence from the early [Bacone style](#) of the 1930s that utilizes sharp linework and flat planes of vibrant color. She infuses this historic Native art movement with modern Navajo and American hobbies that many people today may have. American viewers may be able to identify with creating fiber arts for a hobby and the care that may go into creating a piece, and enjoying this activity alongside a beloved pet. However, the artist does not forget to imbue the cultural significance of [weaving](#) into the piece; Navajo weaving continues today to uphold tradition, but \has also adapted to market towards a Western audience of buyers. The figure wears [turquoise jewelry](#) and her hair is in a traditional style of [bun](#). In doing so, Blacksheep also carries tradition to the next generation, shares it with outsiders, and ensures a space for Navajo artists and individuals in today's American culture.



[FIGURE 3: BEVERLY BLACKSHEEP \(B. 1963\), KITTENS AND YARN, N.D., WATERCOLOR ON BOARD, OSU MUSEUM OF ART COLLECTION, GIFT OF CHARLES LITTLE](#)

George Grosz's lithograph depicts a group of men going to work at a factory. This is also representative of everyday life for many during both world wars through art. Following World War I, Germany had taken on many war debts, many were killed in battle, and the national government was unstable. As a German, eventually Grosz had to migrate to the United States preceding the Second World War. Though this piece was created within the context of World War I, both wars left noticeable scars on the general public of all nations involved. The men carry shovels and appear in scuffed work uniforms. Everyday people worked hard to support war efforts. Buildings in the background appear dilapidated and hazy, possibly reflecting the bleak state of the world during the wars. He tells a complex history of movement and the damage conflict inflicts on the civilians.



FIGURE 4: GEORGE GROSZ (B. 1893), ANTS, FROM IN THE SHADOWS, 1920. LITHOGRAPH ON PAPER, OSU MUSEUM OF ART COLLECTION, GARDINER ART COLLECTION

Roger Shimomura's Kansas Samurai (see fig. 5) is a piece that holistically combines the artist's love of American pop culture that surrounded his youth in the 1950s with his pride in his Japanese heritage, along with the indelible scars left on the Japanese American community during the Second World War. Roger Shimomura was born in



FIGURE 5: ROGER SHIMOMURA (B. 1939), KANSAS SAMURAI, 2004, LITHOGRAPH ON PAPER, OSU MUSEUM OF ART COLLECTION, GIFT OF ROGER SHIMOMURA

Seattle in 1939, and later held in an internment camp with his family after President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in 1942, stating that federal troops could forcibly remove anyone that was living in a "military zone" and relocate them to internment camps. Anyone of Japanese descent, whether American citizen or not, was removed. Kansas Samurai documents Shimomura's feelings of isolation as a minority in America after moving from his childhood town of Seattle on the ethnically diverse west coast to a more homogeneous area of the Midwest, in Kansas. The background of the piece is composed of iconic comic book characters and American pop culture references, such as Goofy and Dick Tracy. Along with these popular American figures, Shimomura also incorporates familiar elements of Japanese imagery and artmaking.

I employ Gina Lombardi's *Washing Clothes* as a point of contention and possible institutional critique. [Lombardi's artist statement](#) lists that "the world of primitive societies is the artist's focal point of inspiration," and that "she finds herself mysteriously bound to ancient lifestyles as searching for meaning and identity." These works perpetuate the narrative of Native and Eastern cultures being seen as exotic, mystical, and commodified in comparison to Western ones. While the *Washing Clothes* can be seen as a piece of cultural appreciation, the reiteration of the Japanese as "[primitive](#)," as stated in the creator's artist statement, can be harmful in modern America. Today, Japan serves as a technological apex of the world, and washing machines are the preferred method of washing. Nonetheless, these pieces by the White American artist serves as a praxis of the West's desire to exoticize, other, and mystify global cultures.



[FIGURE 5: GINA LOMBARDI \(B. 1948\), WASHING CLOTHES, N.D., SCREENPRINT ON PAPER, OSU MUSEUM OF ART COLLECTION, GIFT OF GARY WOHRLE](#)



Exploring outside of the OSU Museum of Art's Collection, I aimed to find more works about mundanity that may speak to our contemporary histories that are currently unfolding. [Emily Jacir](#) created the [Where We Come From](#) series to speak on the inaccessibility of one's homeland during war times. She asked 30 exiles of Palestine what they would wish for her to do for them in their homeland that they could not fulfil as exiles. As a Palestinian with an American passport, she then traveled to Palestine and fulfilled these wishes from them. From afar, this photograph seems to be of a simple dinner with a friend. However, upon closer looking, we see English and Arabic text accompanying it, saying that Rami, one of the exiles, asked Jacir to go on a date with a Palestinian girl for him. This piece speaks to the inaccessibility of everyday events that we take for granted, and challenges viewers to see how complex histories are intertwined with the mundane actions we perform.

Go on a date with a Palestinian girl from East Jerusalem that I have only spoken to on the phone.
As a West Banker, I am forbidden entry into Jerusalem.
- Rami
Date in this table and bring three Palestinian passport and West Bank I.D. card Father from Beit Jalla and mother from Bethlehem.

أخرجني في موعد مع فتاة فلسطينية من القدس الشرقية كنت التحدث إليها على الهاتف فقط.
بصفتي من سكان الضفة الغربية، أمتع من الحدود إلى القدس.
- رامي
تاريخ في هذه الطاولة وأجلب ثلاثة جوازات سفر فلسطينية ووثائق هوية الضفة الغربية. والوالد من بيت جالا والوالدة من بيت لحم.

FIGURE 6: EMILY JACIR (B. 1972), WHERE WE COME FROM (RAMI), 2001-2003, WALL TEXT AND C-PRINT. THIS PIECE WAS ORIGINALLY COMMISSIONED BY AL-MA'MAL FOUNDATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, JERUSALEM.

This collection of works shows how contemporary transcultural artists all challenge the assumed White gaze. We, as viewers, have the opportunity to view art as a means to broaden our understanding of diverse people. The everyday person is an “omniscient historian-narrator,” giving transcultural artists the validity of a historic character simply through lived experiences. Historically, the art history cannon renders the everyday person and their mundane experiences insignificant to archives. However, people will always have stories to contribute to history, if only the art historian and viewer accepts their accounts as noteworthy or worthy of documentation. This digital curation project argues that their story not only continues, but also produces a plurality of distinct Vietnamese American identities within American society.