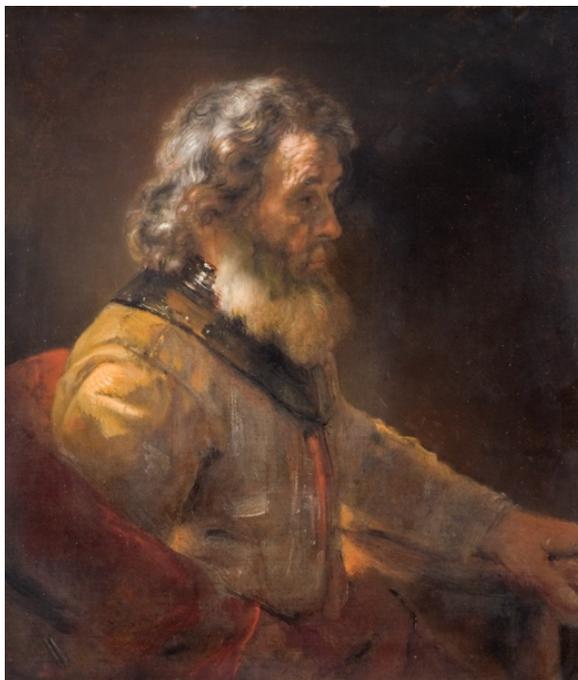


Art that Defies Ageism: Jon Sleigh



Portrait of Mrs Harriet Onions by Nestor Cambier (1879 - 1957) about 1928, oil on canvas, 57 X 47 cm, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham



An Old Warrior, follower of Rembrandt Harmensz Van Rijn (1606-1669) Amsterdam, 1650s, oil on canvas, 74.7 X 64.6 cm, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham

Transcript

Hello and welcome to this week's Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff, students and associates of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, the art gallery and concert hall on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. My name is Jon Sleigh, I'm an Arts Educator and the Barber have invited me to share my interpretations of two works with you today and we'll be exploring ageism in art. During this short talk, I'll be using two images from the collection to consider what it means to depict ageing. Each is a powerful artwork that tell a story not just of their sitters, but also, I believe, a challenge to the prejudice we encounter in society towards the elderly.

The 'sweet old lady' stereotype is both pervasive and commodified in society. It's a stubborn prejudice we inherit culturally. Across a thousand biscuit tins, postcards and media adverts, you'll find an elderly lady smiling benignly. Victorian tradition will dictate that she's well fed with rosy cheeks, living in an ivy clad rural cottage, perhaps having a tea party. She will be adored by children, most probably will have a pet cat and is caught mid wholesome activity. She's neither aggressive, nor problematic or threatening. Cuteness radiates from these images, a comforting myth (or lie) we reach for culturally in art when we consider ageing. You'll find what I believe is an excellent example of this at Wolverhampton Art Gallery titled 'Old Woman Pouring Tea' C 19th Century British (English) School by searching on artuk.org

Filters such as this are deeply ageist. They can reduce depictions of ageing into a marketable form that patronizes and removes the humanity of a long life. Nuance is lost, sociology denied us, and instead a two-dimensional version of ageing becomes a template on how to age. Two paintings in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts challenge this and shine an emotive light on how age can be portrayed.

An Old Warrior, by a contemporary follower of Rembrandt, is a dazzling example of a study in art that examines the aging man. The title is traditional, having been used for the last 100 years. The painting

may have been intended as a depiction of the god Mars, or a head study taken from life. The male figure is seated in profile, looking away from us. The background is dark, enveloping the figure and rendering him somehow smaller, cocooned almost in his red chair. Light bathes him – pulling our eyes first to his curling hair in hues of silver, brown and black. Metal armour around his neck (a gorget designed to protect the throat in battle) glimmers a dull grey steel, indicating perhaps a reflection, patch of wear or rust on the shoulder. Attention is lavished on the face and broad beard – wrinkles and creases capture the light whilst the sunken eyes attract shadow. His expression is impassive, lost in thought or perhaps memory?

Dignified or vulnerable? He straddles both states. The title ‘An Old Warrior’ draws attention both to the subject’s age and status. He remains a warrior, a man of action. Is this title at odds with the image? The artist relishes the subject’s physicality and vulnerability. The man is not posed in action or fight, but in reflection. He has no say in the objectification, he is pictured for us to decide and does not connect or look to us. Are we invited to pity this state? Or recognize the dignity of the figure dressed as a warrior?

Models of real old soldiers would have been aplenty for this unnamed follower of Rembrandt. The Eighty Years’ War or ‘Dutch War of Independence’ had just been concluded in 1648, marking generations of conflict. The Netherlands stood united when this was painted in a precarious and new Republic. To see the ageing warrior is to see a weaponized national identity. Add further the image of an ageing man in itself. Life expectancy in 17th-century Europe was markedly less than in our own day, so to be elderly would have stood out visually. Hard lives in combat or physical work prematurely aged a body. Consider his survival as well – we may presume this figure lived through the conflicts that defined a lifetime or beyond. It’s a remarkable piece that defies the idea of ageing as weakness or benign. His is and remains a warrior, juxtaposed in the ageing body.

Contrast this with another artwork in the collection – titled ‘Portrait of Mrs. Harriet Onions’, by Nestor Cambier (1879-1957), about 1928. A favored artist of Barber Institute founder Hattie, Lady Barber, the Cambier portrait represents her mother. She was the widow of

Simon Brookes Onions, of the Birmingham family of bellows makers, J. C. Onions (later, Alldays and Onions Engineering Company), who had died in 1926. Lady Barber had a long-standing creative relationship with Cambier who was a resident guest of Sir Henry and Lady Barber at Culham Court, near Henley, Oxfordshire for several years. He painted numerous portraits of Lady Barber as well as pictures of the interior of Culham Court and the surrounding gardens. You'll find examples of these in the Barber collection if you explore the website further.

When we first look at this portrait, an older female figure stares past us, framed again in darkness but this time the effect is achieved by swathes of fabric, a widow's black garments. Harriet wears clothes typical of the Edwardian era, fashions slightly at odds with the roaring twenties imagery in our minds. She is clearly of some wealth, and her black attire contrasts with the murky browns of the background. She has pulled back a voluminous black veil, offering under her wide brimmed hat a hint of what may be silver hair. The painting is currently compromised by a white surface 'bloom' or blanching of varnish across much of the image. This can confuse our reading of her face, for example, by changing colour values and details. It's a challenging piece that's open to numerous readings so we should interpret colour values with caution.

Her face is both rigid and emotive. A tight-lipped expression pulls in the cheekbones, elongating shadows across the face. It's a face of strong lines and symmetry – differing hues in beige, caused either by design or blanching, can serve to mark the appearance of ageing gracefully without being graphic. The eyes though are where she comes alive. Large pale blue eyes radiate a mixture of emotions – pain, weariness, resignation, disappointment, anger perhaps? The contemporary appearance of colour in the sclera or white of the eye offers so much – yellowing, for example, is indicative of ageing, possibly we reach to link this with a soreness in the eye. We can interpret this as possibly tiredness, a lack of sleep or perhaps recent tears. Her face is a mask of control, whilst the eyes radiate a powerful narrative of emotion and intelligence.

Again, as with the old warrior, she is presented to be objectified by us. Again, we consider the invitation to pity versus dignity. She is, however, no patronizing chocolate box version of an elderly lady. Far from it, she is a complex map of emotion, status and energy. Victorian and

Edwardian mourning practices were on the decline in the late 1920s, however they would have been formative when this woman was younger. Strict expectations were placed on a widow, with a two-year period of mourning and beyond, a status signaled by permitted clothing and which helps us identify this lady as recently widowed. Social isolation was also a noted factor in widowhood, with set standards in place forcing the woman into a period of withdrawal.

Both of these figures provide rich, sensitive and arguably very real depictions of ageing. Each of them is emotionally complex, uneasy to consider, and designed to challenge us. As both artists bask in the chance to portray ageing with virtuosity, we are pushed to contemplate the latter stages of life and the associated prejudices. Any sentimental attempt to consider these sitters as 'adorable' cannot stand up to the emotion we find in their eyes. When we think of ageism in its many forms, it's also powerful to consider these artworks.

Thank you very much for listening, and thank you to Jack Davies for composing and playing the guitar music that introduces and ends these weekly talks. There will be another talk in two weeks' time by one of my colleagues, so please do come back then if you would like to hear more.

Further Reading

<http://barber.org.uk/a-follower-of-harmensz-van-rijn-rembrandt-1606-1669/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestor_Cambier

<https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/news/age-positive-image-library-launched>

https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/old-woman-pouring-tea-19226/view_as/grid/search/keyword:old-woman-poring-tea/page/1

<http://barber.org.uk/portrait-of-a-lady/>

Speaker Info



Jon Sleigh (he/him) is a Learning Officer, Learning Curator and art history writer. He works nationally freelance as a specialist in fine art engagement with a diverse portfolio of arts institutions, museum and heritage sites across the UK. Clients include the National Portrait Gallery, The National Archives, Historic Royal Palaces, Art Fund, The V and A, The Government Art Collection DCMS and the Arts Council Collection.

Prior to this Jon worked for Birmingham Museums Trust / The

Arts Collection in round one of the acclaimed ACE National Partners Program.

He produces, delivers and consults on art engagement. Jon has built a national reputation for innovation, applied ethics and delivery of projects reflecting inclusive futures. He has a passion for challenging and underrepresented narratives in art – co-producing with communities to bringing their lived experience to artworks for advocacy. Key engagement fields in his practice include projects on ableism, representation of communities of colour, LGBTQ communities, living well with dementia and adult wellbeing.

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Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.