Restor(y)ing Colonial Public Art

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A few years ago, as a work of performance art, I dressed as Louis Riel and visited statues of John A. Macdonald. While I wished these metal effigies gone, I did not dream it would happen. I appreciate their later removal in Regina and Kingston as a sign of post-TRC progress. That said, should all public art deemed sexist, racist, and/or colonial propaganda be purged?

H.G. Glyde's "Alberta History" (1951) is large (6.40 x 2.59 metre) mural painted directly on a wall in the University of Alberta's Rutherford South Reading Room. It is deteriorating. A 2019 Canadian Conservation Institute report[1] determined that it is inherently unstable. Expensive monitoring and treatment could slow its ruin but, eventually, a ruin it will be. In 2021, a working group was struck to consider options. After several years of professional and public consultation, Dr. Verna Yiu, Provost and Vice-President (Academic), is soon to decide its fate.

If it were simply an object, there would be little debate about the University's spending tens of thousands of dollars to slow its deterioration. But the mural is not just an object. It is a work of art. Western culture elevates artworks to a status above mere real things.[2] Many are considered near-persons. Some are even treated as if more valuable than people. During war, for example, select art works are rescued and sheltered more securely than their makers and neighbours. Glyde's painting may not be quite at that level, but its content does have the power to excite debate nearly three quarters of a century after its execution.

According to their website, the working group's attention was attracted to the mural by two forces: "reports of harm and its actively deteriorating condition."[3] While its fragility is thoroughly documented, the website does not illustrate or explain what "reports of harm" means. The phrase reduces legitimate critique to a red flag waved to incite a reaction rather than a response. If not for its volatile content, the mural may have been allowed to molder into oblivion. It may soon be 'erased' for the same reason. Does it, and like works, deserve a stay of execution?

H.G. Glyde immigrated from London in 1935. He established the Fine Arts program at the University of Alberta in 1946 and was its Head until he retired in 1966. He took nearly a year to research and design the mural. It took a further four months for he and his students to complete the work.[4] The mural is a technical extravaganza (charcoal, pencil crayon, crayon, casein, dammar varnish on plaster), an unconventional mix that accounts for its material instability. The scene is a compressed collage of regional events and places from a century earlier. On the north bank of the North Saskatchewan River, Fort Edmonton is bookended by two churches. On the left, a tipi village sits between the Fort and the Catholic church, and another three tipis lie between that church and the foreground, in front of which an Anglican minister, Reverend

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[1] https://www.ualberta.ca/en/museums/media-library/documents/about/131594--report-on-the-glyde-mural---with-information-on-treatment-darkened.pdf

[2] Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[3] https://www.ualberta.ca/en/museums/about/alberta-history-mural-project.html

[4] https://search.museums.ualberta.ca/g/6-1775/11-3577

MacDougall, preaches to First Nations folks. One hand points to the sky, the other holds an open Bible. He pauses to give the side-eye to his rival, Father Lacomb. The Catholic priest ministers to a group of First Nations men and one woman, and some white or Métis men. There is not enough space to unpack this complex scene, to explain, for example, the waves of good, and torrential harm, these two men and their churches generated; to wonder why the folks on the left are swathed in blankets and heavy coats while those on the right are pictured in loin cloth; to contemplate the meanings of the white businessmen, police officer, the cowboys, Métis carters, and a few women. And not enough room to consider the formal and art historical aspects of this mural that is at once in the Thomas Hart Brenton, W.P.A mural tradition, but also less mannered, les jingoistic, and less certain of manifest destiny than is the American strain.[5]

The mural's seeming racist and colonial content has been a matter of discussion in Edmonton classrooms, student paper articles, and podcasts for nearly twenty years. In 2011, I gave my two-cents worth at a keynote at the U of A: "Representing "Indians": H. G. Gylde's Rutherford Library Mural as Seen by a Métis Artist." My view was contrary to the more obvious decolonial critiques; not because I am by nature contrary, but there is that. I first saw the mural in the spring of 2011. I churned with mixed feelings. My knee-jerk urge was to write it off as an expression of mid-century colonial gloating. While uncomfortable, I did not wish the painting to no longer exist. I wanted to know more about it and about my ambivalence. Later that summer, I taught a class at the U of A and brought my students, mostly Indigenous, to deconstruct it. I was astonished by their responses, by their restor(y)ing the painting.

Many were enthused to see versions of their appearances and sort-of ancestors on campus. They recognized the propaganda potential, if read through one eye alone. The competing ministers are elevated, and the First Nations folks seem bowed. But are they cowed or just listening, gaining knowledge, doing some comparative theology, weighing their options? From one eye, some seem underdressed. From the other eye, they are dressed for the weather. The rest are sweltering in fashionable but inappropriate gear. Unlike the ministers, who are elevated by the hierarchal and racist conventions of European paintings, the white businessmen in the huddle on the left, have the sense to get closer to the ground and engage in face-to-face negotiations with their potential partners. The mural shows not only the divisions created by the competing versions of colonial Christianity, but also the roots of Indigenous patriarchal capitalism that now competes with traditional First Nations governance, economies, and worldview. The mural presents uncomfortable, messy, and competing truths rather than settled colonial propaganda.

Students noticed that many of the Indigenous folks on the Catholic side are armed, suggesting agency. While the Church was a repressive institution, it did encourage syncretism slightly more than other Christian churches. Students read the fort and tipi village as signifying a symbiotic relationship. Unlike Group of Seven paintings critiqued for their erasure of Indigenous presence in the "Canadian" landscape, "Alberta History" features a polyphony of Indigenous presence and possibilities. The mural recollects a moment of crisis, of impending change, of information gathering and negotiation; entreaties, not surrenders. It is only from a later, settled, colonial position, that the scene reverberates with dramatic irony. We later-comers know what's coming: the lying, cheating, dispossession, disease, aggressive assimilation, and so on. However, the

[5] For a deeper reading of this painting see: https://letsfindoutpodcast.com/2018/04/25/episode-22-the-glyde-mural/ click David Garneau's essay on the Glyde mural

painting asks us to consider the period just before everything went wrong. How things might have gone if the Treaties had been honoured, First Peoples, and natural law respected. At the center of the painting sits a man in a Red River cart that I read as Métis. He leans back, arms crossed. He attends but reserves judgement. He models the ideal viewer. H.G. Glyde's "Alberta History" is not a display of conquest but a moment of suspense.

So, what it to be done with the mural? I am not a disinterested party. I am a descendant of Laurent and Eleanor Garneau on whose River lot (#7) the University of Alberta now partially occupies. The Garneau neighbourhood is across the river from the scene depicted in Glyde's "Alberta History." Is that Laurent in the Red River cart just behind Father Lacombe, who petitioned for his release from prison following his arrest and potential hanging after the Métis Resistance of 1885? In the stories I tell when visiting the painting with my kin and they with theirs, perhaps so. This painting is not simply a representation of things as they were, or as the artist and his society wished them to be. It is also what I and mine make with it.

I have worked on several public artistic displays of Indigeneity. The Elders I consulted were keen to put their community's best representations forward. While they want to show the truth, they do not want it to overshadow their joys and aspirations. I suppose we could scrub the world of distasteful representations and reset to year zero, but where do we draw the line? At what point does our cull end up producing Plato's fascist Republic that only permits art that accords with what the philosopher king considers as representing the Truth. The work, after all is in a university, the very locus of difficult discussion.

As an artist and curator, I am dismayed that the mural was allowed to deteriorate. As an Indigenous person, I recognize that works of art, like other human made things, have a life cycle; they live and die. Some public works of art, however—some Haida totem poles and Japanese wooden temples, for example—are considered a social good. When beyond repair, they are dismantled and remade. They die and are revived by those who care for them. Their care and well-being signify the health of the community. Healthy communities care for their wounded and their elderly—even when what they have to say to us is not always politic. However, some are allowed to die, to become ancestors.

While many of the stories that arise from this painting are Indigenous, it was made by a non-Indigenous artist for a Settler audience, and it is the property of the University. It is their painting and their space. They will do with it what they need to according to the values of the moment. If those values include Indigenization and Reconciliation, they will continue to support living First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students and art on campus. They will also look for creative ways to contend with the artifacts of their colonial legacy and its (dis)contents, not by erasure, but through restoration and restor(y)ing.