

The Translation of Dr. Apelles by David Treuer

We started with a discussion of the complexities of this double narrative harking back to Ancient Greece (Apelles the artist (known for being able to draw a perfect circle, freehand) and Campaspe his muse and mistress). Also a retelling of Daphnis and Chloe (the book wherein the “translation” ends up being hidden) and whose story is mirrored in the story of Eta and Bimaadiz.

Object 1: Paintings by Charles Russell



We discussed how Russell was among the first to accurately depict Native Americans. Honor, dignity and above all beauty and pride in that beauty. In his prologue, Treuer’s narrator offers up the story as a “gift of beauty”. I hope that in this tour we can see some of the spiritual source of that beauty.

Object 2: (No image is available.) Two warrior shields (as could be seen in Charles Russell’s painting) and the importance of the spiritual aspect of them. The designs on the shield come to the warrior as a vision after a long and difficult spiritual experience. At the end of the book, Apelles has a dream-like vision of his “work”. Like the shield for a warrior, the book becomes Apelles’ personal icon. We talked about the spiritual aspect of NA imagery and the mythological aspects of the imagery in Treuer’s book.

Object 3: Rendezvous by Allan Houser - a NA artist who started out imitating Charlie Russell and went deep within himself to find his own voice - as Apelles eventually does in his translation. We looked at this sculpture envisioning her as Eta. The sculpture nearly floats in space as she goes to meet her lover. Houser is known for his Pygmalionesque attitude towards his pieces referring to them as ladies and men, as does Apelles in his creation of Campaspe/Eta.



Object 4: Red Totem by George Morrison (Anishinabe, like Treuer) Both Treuer and Morrison have taken their art out of the so called “mainstream” of Native American art and created their own voice. (Morrison was once rejected by a jury for inclusion into a NA Art show - juried by NA - because it wasn’t “Indian enough”) Morrison uses pieces of wood as brush strokes, creating a 3 dimensional abstract painting in wood. Morrison is also known for his horizon line that appears in nearly all his work. The horizon line is a place that you can see but never get to.



Object 5: Bandolier Bag (Anishinabe) one of the clues that perhaps Eta and Bimaadiz were Anishinabe.

We discussed the spiritual nature of beading in the NA culture, that each bead sewn is like a prayer or meditation meant to protect the wearer. We looked at pictures of beaded cradle boards as Eta could have been found in. We see in this beaded bag the full life cycle from seed to blossom to flower to fruit to seed. Circles and cycles are significant in many cultures including the Native Americans. (Note that Treuer’s book cycles back to the beginning to complete the circle.)



Object 6: Dance Blanket/Marriage Blanket

“Something sacred wears me” or so the saying goes in reference to the way these beautiful beaded items transfer their spiritual power to the wearer. All the materials used to make this exquisite blanket are trade goods from Europe, demonstrating how these artisans used material available to them to create items of originality and beauty. This blanket was seen on Antique Roadshow:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/archive/200401A45.html>



Object 7: Anthropology: We're Not Your Indians Anymore by Francis Yellow



Speaking of available material, when incarcerated into prisons and relocation camps, native materials were no longer available to them. History and stories were preserved pictographically, many times on buffalo hides, no longer available once imprisoned so many used what they could get which in many instances were ledger books or notebook paper. Yellow has used this technique, creating his art/commentary using computer print out paper. From the gallery label, “While visiting the Peabody Museum, a museum known for its large ethnographic collection, Francis Yellow requested a copy of their cultural term list. This list corresponds the inappropriate name for Native American tribes with the names that the tribes call themselves.”

I liked this imagery because it, like Treuer’s book is a narrative within a narrative and, demonstrates how many artists, regardless of their nationality are reclaiming their history to tell it in their own context.