

The Canadian Cree Artist Remixing History in the Met's Great Hall

By Jarrett Earnest



Photo: Aaron Wynia

Isn't a time-traveling, gender-fluid, indigenous sex goddess exactly what art needs right about now? The Met seems to think so and has commissioned the Canadian Cree artist [Kent Monkman](#), whose work often features his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, to produce a pair of 11-by-22-foot paintings titled *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)* for its [Great Hall](#) (opens December 19). Monkman, 54, gave up abstraction to communicate ideas about the history of colonial settlement in North America to a more mainstream audience, and somehow as a result he has become "about as famous as a living painter can be" in Canada ([according](#) to the *Globe and Mail*). Created in part in the spirit of the carnivalesque "history paintings" of Robert Colescott, the Met commissions are pastiches that draw on works in the Met's collection to foreground the perspective of indigenous peoples. Monkman's canvases come to life thanks to Miss Chief; the character was previously invited to give commentary in one of the galleries of the Met's American collection, where she was quoted in the wall text alongside Ralph Earl's *Marinus Willett* (ca. 1791). She notes that, "limited by colonial blinkers," Earl failed to "adequately depict" her "radiance" as one of the three tiny Native figures in the distant landscape, going on to detail Willett's atrocities against Native Americans before signing soon-broken treaties with the Crees in 1790.

What attracted you to the representational language of European painting?

After several years as an abstract painter, I realized that the language was so cryptic and personal that the themes I wanted to address in my work, like colonized sexuality, were being missed. As an indigenous person, I was looking at European art very objectively from the outside and noticing that their most sophisticated form of visual storytelling had been discarded by Western artists as something passé. Unlike Mexico, where they actually painted the atrocities perpetrated by the Spanish colonizers, in the United States and Canada, there is no tradition of history painting that reveals the history of colonialism. So it's an opportunity to fill in these gaps in the art history of this continent, to talk about these experiences of indigenous people during the colonial period and that are still continuing — I still consider colonization as ongoing.

How would you describe these works?

There are two paintings. In the first, we see settlers arriving on the shores of North America and being welcomed by the First People. Miss Chief is there, helping people ashore. Behind her are scenes populated by other indigenous peoples I drew from the museum's collection, images of different interactions. For the second painting, Miss Chief is in a boat, posed like *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, along with a variety of indigenous people piloting this boat through a stormy sea. The themes are of displacement and migration: Indigenous people are being displaced again, and they're setting sail. But it also refers to other populations around the world that are being displaced now, not just for political reasons but because of the shifting climate as well.

How did you choose the artworks you wanted to reference from the collection?

I was interested in the sculptures and paintings made by Europeans and European settlers who had chosen Native Americans as their subjects. Much of my work has been about challenging the limited representations — broad stereotypes and biases steeped in ignorance, fantasies, and distant views of indigenous people — that were present in the themes of their work, such as the "vanishing Indian/dying race" and the "romantic savage." There were a few notable, and prominently displayed, examples of this kind of work at the Met that I have been able to riff on and invert their meaning.

For instance, Eugène Delacroix's painting *The Natchez* laments the end of the Natchez. French artist Delacroix had never seen a North American indigenous person before he made this painting, which was based off François-René de Chateaubriand's novella *Atala*. This story romanticized the apparent fall of indigenous people after the French and Indian War; the scene depicts a Natchez family, which the novella claims to be the last of their kind. In the story, the newborn baby dies shortly after birth because his mother's milk is tainted by the grief of losing her people. The perception that indigenous people were dying out was mistaken, as the Natchez people and their culture continue to survive today. I use the image of a young indigenous family, echoed in both paintings (in the second as a same-sex couple), to emphasize indigenous resilience and survival. I will draw out the similarity of Delacroix's Natchez family to depictions of the holy family and Nativity scenes to speak to the devastating impact of Christianity on indigenous cultures. The presence of the wooden boat in the background is echoed in both of my paintings.

There were other choices based on the dynamism or struggle depicted in the painting such as versions of *Venus and Adonis* by Rubens and Titian. Both of these have been referenced. Adonis becomes a European fur trapper and Venus is cast as an indigenous woman who reaches out to restrain him.

How did you first invent Miss Chief?

I wanted an artistic alter ego who could live inside the paintings to reverse the gaze and to riff on 19th-century American artists like George Catlin, [who] would paint Native Americans but would also place himself inside his own paintings to self-aggrandize. I wanted to create a character who presented an empowered example of decolonized indigenous sexuality and our understanding of multiple genders. She was inspired by people like We'wha, who was an accomplished Zuni potter as well as a *lhamana*, or two-spirit individual. She also represented her nation in Washington. I stole Miss Chief's first outfit from Cher's "Half-Breed"—Bob Mackie outfit for her cultural and gender cross-dressing.

Kent Monkman's mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People) is on view at The Met Fifth Avenue December 19 to April 12, 2020.

**A version of this article appears in the September 2, 2019, issue of New York Magazine.*