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Critical Terms: Essentialism Transcript

RENATE DOHMEN: Hello I'm Renate Dohmen. I'm a lecturer in modern and contemporary art at the Open University.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: And I'm Kathleen Christian. I'm a senior lecturer in art history at the Open University, specialising in Italian Renaissance art.

RENATE DOHMEN: I work on issues of gender in relation to women. I also have an interest in the - interest in the global in terms of contemporary art but also in terms of questions of empire and particularly the British Empire and their work on British India. And what unites all these research areas or one term, which is really essential for work on these topics, is the concept of essentialism, which is what we're going to talk about here today. And I've brought a few props to talk about this today.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Thank you.

RENATE DOHMEN: So I wanted to have a little conversation about what essentialism is about, and at the most basic level, of course, it's what we associate with somebody's essence or we refer to it as an inalienable quality. So it's inherited - the thought is that it's inherent, it's inborn, it's natural in inverted commas, of course, quite often, and - so the idea is it can't be changed.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So, for example, I think the origin in Western thought is classical philosophy where things are defined by their essences. And maybe an example, we can think of is apples and pears. So apples can be red, they can be green, but they're round and they come from apple trees. Pears come from pear trees, and they have a pear shape. So those are the essential qualities that for us would differentiate an apple from a pear.

RENATE DOHMEN: That's a great example because with the apple, as you mentioned, it has different colours, but it's always going to be an apple. So the essential aspect of the apple is not the colour, but it's something to do with the shape, the taste, and where it comes from, the apple tree. And so this is an idea of an essential quality, but when we apply to people, it's a lot more problematic.

And first of all one obvious way it's been applied is in relation to gender. So this idea, for example, that women can't drive well, and it's supposedly inherent in the different nature between men and women, of course, is highly problematic. And in a similar way, notions of essentialism, which really became very powerful in the 19th century were applied to cultures and to nations because nations were defined or thought to be defined at the time by a shared culture.

So every - so the idea was that the time that every member of that particular culture was considered to be part of this essential nature of a culture. So if you were a British painter, let's say, and - of whatever period almost, whatever you paint is essentially British. It has a British expression in it. So this is how essentialism was applied to culture and with it where it becomes relevant to art history.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: It is very relevant art history. And you've provided an image of the plan of the National Gallery in 1905, which I think is a good illustration of how people thought of cultures as being separate and having essential identities, that paintings represent those different cultures. They're the illustrations of the essential properties of those different cultures.

RENATE DOHMEN: Exactly, and this is why they were organised in national schools as you see on this floor plan. Obviously, these ideas have been criticised now. They're no longer commonly assumed to be valuable, or they're not being used anymore in the humanities. Nonetheless, these histories linger, so there are still these arrangements of art in a lot of museums by national school, for example.

And I've brought another illustration. There's a watercolour, which is now in the British Museum, by a 19th century artist called Stephanoff. And he highlights, again, 19th century thinking about this - essential idea of cultures have unique, inalienable characteristics, which they all share. And because this was thought to be expressed in the arts, the idea was that you can look at the art of a nation and can rank them according to development. And this is what we see in this watercolour.

So if you look closely, you can see Greek art is at the top in the pediment area, then you have Egyptian art in the middle, and at the bottom it's Indian art and Mexican art. And this is not - and this is expressing this idea of where a ranking of culture is possible or was thought to be possible in the 19th century based on the idea if you look at the art, the art expresses the culture, the cultural essence, the national essence of the people. So you look at the art. You can rank it according to hierarchy, so that was a very important thought.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So you have the concept of paintings from a particular nation representing the essence of that nation. But how is the concept of essentialism used when you talk about cultural encounters or cultural mixings, and how do the eggs that you've brought in relate to this concept?

RENATE DOHMEN: Ooh, excellent question. This is where these guys come in. I thought these exemplify the idea of essentialism really well because you have this cultural core or the egg yolk and then a bit around, and it's a definite shape. From a 19th century point of view when essentialism was really the way to think about the world, what happens when you have some cultural encounter?

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: The eggs - yolks don't mix with each other. They stay solid and yellow.

RENATE DOHMEN: So the idea was, of course, if you make a scrambled egg out of it, which actually is what happens when cultures encounter - you learn from each other, you adopt certain ways - but - so from a 19th century point of view that was dangerous because you'd lose your essential national characteristics. And so you don't want the scrambled egg. You want to keep them all - and I've bought a lot more. So this would be the idea of the global in the 19th century. You have these distinct units, and they don't overlap. They don't mix.

It also means from a 19th-century point of view and art history point of view, if you want to be an artist and you want to be famous or you want to be recognised, you have to stick with your national tradition. Of course, I work on empire work on British India, so that means British artists were not interested in looking at Mughal art or Indian art and trying out some of the styles because that would be scrambled egg. It's - from an essentialist point of view, you have to stick to essences. And so the encounter happens at the periphery, and it can't ever be more than the periphery because the whole notion is based on essentialism.

And where as now, of course, we're looking at the world very, very differently. For example, work on the transcultural where exactly where we are looking at these instances of encounter, and, of course, they've happened all along throughout art history and you work on the global so - global and the Renaissance, so there are many, many examples where you know these exchanges have happened. They have enriched culture, so it's actually - so essentialism is a way of thinking about culture which doesn't represent the actual thing that happens. What happens is the scrambled egg if you like - yeah - and all kinds of whatever, omelets, and all kinds of dishes with all kinds of additions and spices and so on.

And so this has been a great move in art history to do - as you're well aware - to do the global, which means to show all these elements in art where these exchanges have happened, and it's been very enriching. And you as a specialist on the Renaissance, you are very - you obviously know how global the Renaissance, for example, was.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right I think if you look back on the traditions that have seemed to be essentially Italian, for example - Italian Renaissance painting - one of the shifts in art history in the last, let's say, 20, 30 years in particular has been to see that Italy was always a place of trade, exchange with other cultures. And the Italian Renaissance was shaped by contact with the Islamic world and also all sorts of ideas that were transmitted through the translation of Arabic.

For example, science was changed. So to talk about the essence of what Italian national identity is, you get this scrambled egg. It's always been a mixture.

RENATE DOHMEN: And, of course, this idea of essentialism is integral to conceptions of Eurocentricity. So post-colonial, decolonial thinking is very much along these lines.

I just wanted to get back also to show some more examples to think about. So because of this idea of essentialism, artworks which showed a degree of cultural exchange or any kind of artefacts and objects were, of course, from a 19th century point of view not of any interest, and they were also not representative of the purity of any cultures. So these objects wouldn't be

collected. They wouldn't be shown if they ended up in collections. And one example here is this 18th-century Chinese bowl so-called export art.

If you look at this bowl, you can see it's obviously made in China. It's made for the European market. And as you can see, it's got some European musicians and some Chinese musicians, so uniquely both cultures are actually represented.

And if you look, they're small vignettes, these kind of medallions, and they showed Chinese landscapes. So this is a wonderful example of the kind of export art that was commissioned in huge numbers. It was shipped to Europe and the United States and was sold there, but it wasn't shown. It's only relatively recently thus objects like that have surfaced.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Another shift has been the way in which we look at canonical works of art that have been seen as the Western core. And if we look at this portrait by Rembrandt, for example, you see a Man in Oriental Costume. And that in the past might have been seen as a representation of the Western tradition with a bit of exoticism added onto it.

But if you consider this outside of the concept of essentialism, you might see it as representative of a culture that is encountering the east. And it has a real meaning inside the Western tradition because it's not just an exotic add on. It's created by the fact that the Dutch are trading with the east, and they have this relationship that has entered into the Dutch identity.

RENATE DOHMEN: All our examples are - it's kind of obvious they're not 19th century because this sort of work would less likely have happened in the 19th century when essentialism became really dominant as a thought. In the area of painting, there's another example I'd like to talk about. And, again, it's telling. It's an 18th-century example. What we're looking at is a painting by Zoffany, also attributed to an Italian artist called Renaldi, and it's of Major William Palmer in the period of the East India Company in British India.

And you can see him here as - this is a family portrait. So he married a Mughal princess, and you can see there's this really loving engagement, and they're painted in their respective clothing. So he's got his European outfit, and she's got her Indian outfit. And it's shown as a loving family unit. A painting like this would not and was no longer produced and wasn't possible to produce in the 19th century when these ideas essentialism became really strong and became the way of looking at the world. And this kind of cultural encounter that you have within the family this kind of real cultural mixing was no longer considered desirable for the very reasons that we get - we would get our scrambled egg.