



**ART AND RACE MATTERS: THE CAREER OF
ROBERT COLESCOTT**

DISCOVERY GUIDE

Take a closer look at the career of Robert Colescott and his paintings.

Please begin your visit on the 5th floor and continue to the 4th floor gallery.

Robert Colescott's *1919* is a good way to dive into his style, influences and who he was as a painter.



As you look at this painting, ask yourself:

Who was Robert Colescott?
What kind of painter was he?
What inspired him?

This painting celebrates his parents' union and decision to move from Louisiana to California in search of a better life for Colescott and his brother.

What is the American Dream?
What was it in 1919? Has it changed? If so, how?
Was/is the American Dream attainable by all in the US?



Robert Colescott, 1919, 1980, Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Although well-known painter Vincent van Gogh revered the peasants he portrayed in the *Potato Eaters*...

...his portrayal of them was influenced by physiognomy, which was promoted in the late 18th century by philosopher Johann Kaspar Lavater, scientist Franz Josef Gall, and others in the 19th century. Physiognomy is the practice of judging a person's character or personality from their outer appearance. These theories would have suggested to contemporary viewers that van Gogh's peasants were unintelligent. In the US, these same theories developed into the racially charged images of "the mammy," "sambo" and others found in post-Civil War minstrel shows.

Why do you think Colescott used stereotypes to depict blacks in his paintings?

How do these paintings read today?

Why do you think Colescott chose van Gogh's painting to appropriate?

As you look at other works in the galleries, what meanings can you unpack from Colescott's choice to appropriate historical imagery and popular culture?

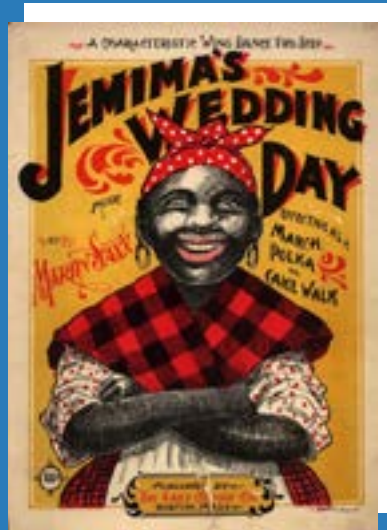


Robert Colescott, *Eat Dem Taters*, 1975, Courtesy of the Rosenblum Family



Vincent van Gogh, *Potato Eaters*, 1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Aunt Jemima is a household name. Families across America have her face in their pantries. Colescott challenges our understanding of Aunt Jemima by satirizing the history of her identity.



Martin Saxx (words by Jere O'Halloran), *Jemima's Wedding Day*, sheet music cover, 1899, Saxx Music Co., Boston, MA

The inspiration for Aunt Jemima came from the minstrel song "Old Aunt Jemima." Although written by a black performer named Billy Kersands in 1875, it was performed by white men in blackface. The image of Aunt Jemima was based on female house slaves and depicted in popular media as middle-aged, overweight, dark-skinned, and asexual. The reality of house slaves was very different. They were often younger, attractive, and light-skinned. They were typically the child of a slave and the male slave owner, and a victim of sexual assault. Colescott portrays Aunt Jemima in the manner of popular media; however, he imbues her with sexuality, both twisting the reality and challenging 20th century conventions of beauty.

When looking at more paintings in the gallery, in what other ways does Colescott challenge societal expectations of beauty?



Robert Colescott, *I Gets a Thrill, Too, When I Sees De Koo*, 1978, The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Gift of Senator and Mrs. William Bradley



Robert Colescott, *Cactus Jack in El Dorado*, 1977, Collection of the Newark Museum, Gift of Gregory A. Lunt, 1988



Robert Colescott, *The Colonel Sanders and Aunt Jemima Trilogy: Instant Chicken!*, 1972, Private collection, New York City, NY



Robert Colescott, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, 1975, Private collection

The title for *Colored TV* is a play on words.

Here, Colescott uses the word “colored” to point out that television shows in the 1970s may have been in color but were far from diverse. On the TV is a blond white woman, a typical American ideal beauty in the 70s. However, the black woman’s eyes are on the shooting star outside.



Robert Colescott, *Colored T.V.*, 1977, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Vicki and Kent Logan

What do you think this means?

Do you think the woman is wishing on a star?

What could she be wishing for?

Robert Colescott once noted that the only blacks he saw in the media were on the sidelines.

In many of his compositions, white figures are centralized, while black figures create a frame around them. In this painting, the focal point is a white woman sitting on a man’s lap. She wears a pot on her head that mimics his hard hat. Behind the woman is a kitchen with a sink full of dirty dishes, firmly asserting her domestic role.



Robert Colescott, *Hard Hats*, 1987, Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Judith and Howard Tullman, M1998.79

What roles do women and men play in this work?

How have these roles changed?

What caused those changes?

As you continue to study this work, note the black woman in the lower right. Why do you think Colescott places her there?



Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott is curated by Lowery Sims, with assistance from Matthew Weseley. The exhibition is organized by the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH. It is made possible by generous support from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation and the Harold & Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation.

Cover: Robert Colescott, *Shirley Temple Black and Bill Robinson White*, 1980, Acrylic on Canvas, 84 x 72 inches. © 2019 Estate of Robert Colescott / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Collection of Arlene and Harold Schnitzer.