EDUCATOR GUIDE

Jayson Musson: His History of Art

April 5, 2024 - September 8, 2024

Not for Public Use or Dissemination

CAC
Contemporary Arts Center
Welcome!

Dear Educators,

We are delighted for you to join us at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) for Jayson Musson’s, *His History of Art*. The exhibition is on view from April 5 - September 8, 2024.

Bridging the worlds of performance and visual art, Jayson Musson capitalizes on the success of earlier viral internet fame to create a more produced film experience – but one that is no less biting in its humor and take down of the art world. Using the nostalgic trappings and style of a Saturday morning cartoon, Musson disarms the viewer of *His History*, with jokes flying fast and loose but unearthing biases entrenched in the institutions and gatekeepers of the art world. Who’s pulling the puppet’s strings, so to speak, and are they in on the joke?

**Note:** This exhibition contains some mature content, related to coarse language, marijuana references, and sexual innuendo. While we think art can provide a platform for visitors of all ages to explore challenging topics, we recognize that this work may be mature for some of our younger visitors. Keeping that in mind, this resource was written to present teachers of grades K-12 with lessons appropriate for the classroom. The free school tour program will limit this exhibition to high school aged students, pending teacher approval. Docents have been trained in developmentally appropriate tour practices. All educators are given free admission to view exhibitions in advance of school visits.

In this resource, educators will be asked to challenge themselves and students on the type of art that has been allowed space in classrooms and galleries and why it’s important to question – and even poke fun - at who and how “canon” is created. While not exhaustive, like the artworks themselves, the resources and readings presented are meant to pique a curiosity and start a conversation.

Enjoy!
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About the Artist: Jayson Scott Musson

- Born in 1977, Bronx (NY); son of Jamaican immigrants
- Raised in Spring Valley, a suburb outside of NYC: “My family was one of the first black families to move into our neighborhood, and subsequently, I watched as our white neighbors quickly vacated their homes for whiter pastures while more black families moved in until Spring Valley became what it is today; a suburb of Caribbean and South American families.”
- BFA Photography, MFA Painting University of Pennsylvania
- Lives and works in Philadelphia.
- Musician, performance, and visual art that utilizes pop culture to satirize the art world
- In the early 2000’s, Musson went by the MC name, “PackofRats,” in the Philadelphia-based hip-hop and “party rap group” Plastic Little.

About Jayson’s work

- Musson uses platforms such as YouTube to circumvent traditional art institutions and reach a mass audience on his own terms.
- Notable exhibitions:
  2022: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA “His History of Art”
  2012: Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia, PA “A True Fiend’s Weight”

Quotes

“Good humor always moves toward truth... Jokes uncover, jokes expose, jokes bring into the light things which are oft buried by individuals and a society. Comedy’s propensity to dig up skeletons and parade them in front of an audience with little regard for consequence or moral constraint is one of the main reasons it has been a useful tool in exposing inequality and grand social failings.”
“Comedy, like art, is highly subjective, but with comedy you don’t need an industry of art pundits, critics, and academics to determine if your response to comedy is on the right side of history or some s***. You intake and you laugh.”

“I never went to an art museum proper until I was in college. So my earliest experiences with visual communication that wasn’t television was probably comic books.”

“Elements of pop culture, I don’t find any less important than art.”

(On His Art History short films) “The laugh track is there to annoy smart, art-loving people...They’re so smart they don’t want to be told when to laugh.”

“I think it’s fairly liberating to adopt personas for projects or simply for play... people are essentially quite boring, and a persona allows you to play outside the confines of your social station or crippling boredom personality; to ascend past the data that has composed your upbringing and world view and become another, if only for a short time.”

About the Exhibition


- Musson rose to prominence through a 2010 series of YouTube shorts called ART THOUGHTZ, in which he plays a character who “gives advice” to young artists on how to navigate the racist and classist insularity of the art world. Moving from ART THOUGHTZ to His History shows an evolution of his personal practice and critique from how art is sold to how art history is taught.

Introductory Wall Text

Jayson Musson created *His History of Art* as part of his 2022 artist residency at Philadelphia’s Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM), an institution devoted to artistic collaboration. Inspired by sitcoms and educational and variety television shows, including *Pee Wee’s Playhouse* and *The Muppets*, Musson collaborated with FWM staff, film producers, writers, and editors to create a three-episode series that reconsiders key aspects of art history. The artist breaks down elitist walls surrounding art history and encourages the questioning of long-established beliefs around artistic genius.

Evoking the tone of educational PBS children’s shows and nun-turned-art-critic Sister Wendy Beckett’s BBC productions, *His History of Art* uses humor to explore and critique commonly studied works of art. Musson— who wrote and directed the series, in addition to performing onscreen as “Jay” – attempts to educate his skeptical puppet sidekick Ollie. They journey through time, from the prehistoric era to the present, encountering figures as varied as Spanish painter and sculptor Pablo Picasso and a larger-than-life Venus (now called Woman)
of Willendorf, a four-and-a-half-inch figurine made 25,000 to 30,000 years ago. Jay and Ollie ask these art historical icons questions and listen to their “first-hand” accounts. Their explorations beg the question: is art history still important to our daily lives? If so, why, and how?

Vocabulary and Keywords

Appropriation  
Canon  
Colonialism  
Diaspora  
Elitism  
Eurocentric  
Installation  
Satire  
Visual Culture

Themes

- *Challenging Narratives* - reconsidering the status quo when thinking about how history has been recorded through those in power. This is seen in many ways—challenging who gets to call art “art;” what makes an artistic genius; why certain people become part of the canon and some don’t; questioning the Eurocentric focus in art history; equating popular culture and fine art
- *Importance of Visual Culture* - consistent focus on non-fine art and narratives around popular culture and the importance of accessible entry points to art
- *Humor* - use of satire to address difficult topics and allow people to ease into subjects they may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with
- *Artistic Process* - underscoring the process of making the films (brainstorming, collaboration, partnerships, trial and error, etc.)
CAC PRE-TOUR INFORMATION

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER HISTORY

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, “Why not start something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I’ll help you.”

By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised $5000 (about $93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their “office” consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, “the best new building since the Cold War.”

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to “open their minds” to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building–first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC’s 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid’s first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman.
Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC’s former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis.

Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture. In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine’s “100 Most Powerful Women,” and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the “100 Most Influential People in the World,” and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hadid died in 2016.
TOUR RULES AND GUIDELINES

• Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
• We require that must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.
• No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.
• Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
• Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
• Walk throughout all galleries– no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS

• Our facility is ADA compliant, and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
• Hearing protection is available upon request.
• Fidgets are available upon request.
• Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
• Large text is available upon request.
• Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower Level Lobby and the Quiet Room on the 6th floor.
• For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at sturner@cincycac.org
PRE- AND POST-VISIT DISCUSSIONS

*These discussions can occur during or after viewing.*

- What is art’s value? And, who defines it?

- What objects from the canon of art history can you find in the exhibition? Why do you think Musson copies these well-known pieces? Do the objects function as an homage? A prop? A critique? Or all of the above?

- The vehicle for Musson’s work—the traditional scripted sitcom—is in many ways a love letter to television. As you watch the films, what TV shows, characters, or pop culture references come to mind?

- How does Musson use humor? Is it effective? Why or why not?

- The goal of each “episode” is for Ollie to “learn a lesson”. What are those lessons?

- The use of puppets as a comedic foil harkens back to the historical use of such tools to subvert and expose corrupt and problematic political figures within a society, such as the role of the court jester or medieval traveling puppet shows. Is Ollie a successful vehicle for pointing out the failures of contemporary art education and institutions? Why or why not?

- Is the history of art important? To artists? To society? To you?
LESSON PLAN IDEAS

• Invite students to create another episode in either the Art Thoughtz or His History of Art series. What artist, image, or concept will be the focus of the episode – and what lesson should the viewer take away? Start with a simple storyboard of the concept, and evolve the project with challenges such as creating an original character puppet or set piece, ending with a 5 minute film created by the group.

• Humor is at the center of Jayon’s Musson’s body of visual video art. Help students expand their understanding and presentation of humor through simple improv games, such as “Three-Headed” Expert. This game requires three improvisers who will all act as one, three-headed expert. The audience will ask this expert a series of questions and the expert will answer—with each person speaking one word at a time. When the expert’s answer is finished, the three “heads” will all wave their hands to signify that they’ve finished answering. Then, they take on the next question.

More Lesson Plan Resources

Artistic Appropriation, via InThinking curriculum consultants for International Baccalaureate Visual Arts curriculum: https://thinkib.net/visualarts/page/18882/artistic-appropriation

ARTWORK AND OBJECT LABELS

His History of Art, 2021
3 episodes
“Hey Young World” (11:24): https://app.box.com/s/i5e9znajmm6bu42a0u267m302ibueqns
“Cave Man Days” (8:44): https://app.box.com/s/0hzika6ra0nl90f530wgc5t51o1g160q
“Dipping Toes” (13:43): https://app.box.com/s/549qzgtmwhyl7c02tutiwbwo4ue33zn

Venus of Willendorf prop and Willa costume
The episode “Caveman Days” features a replica of the prehistoric sculpture Venus (now called Woman) of Willendorf and a larger-than-life character, Willa, fashioned after the statuette. The meaning behind the female figurine, which is carved of limestone and scaled to fit into the human hand, remains a mystery. Scholars have suggested that the figurine served as a fertility or good luck charm, functioned as ancient pornography created for and by men, or it may be a self-portrait by a woman.

The Willa costume is large, allowing an actor to maneuver inside. The team of artists at the Fabric Workshop carved its base from foam and applied a mixture of sand and resin to replicate the original statue’s limestone texture.
The Cool Popes

The “hoagie-shaped hats” Ollie refers to in the episode “Hey Young World” are mitres--headdresses made of two triangular pieces of fabric joined at the sides. Historically worn by leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, these hats represent holiness, dignity, and authority. Ollie explains that the Cool Popes, a trio of bullies, ditch their formerly dweeby reputation after they begin to wear mitres, which function as symbols of power.

Caveman Scene Set

In the episode “Caveman Days,” the characters Jay, Ollie, and Willa, who is based on the prehistoric statue the Venus (now called Woman) of Willendorf, travel to 25,000 BCE to observe a caveman painting a bison. The animal lies on its side, assuming one of art history's most enduring poses, often used to depict female nudes. A painted or sculpted subject reclining horizontally conveys status and power, suggesting that they are being waited upon or served by others. It also sexualizes the subject’s body, displaying it for the viewer’s enjoyment.

Musson used pixels from background tiles of the 1987 Nintendo Entertainment System video game Final Fantasy to create the repeating pattern used as the backdrop of this set. Pop culture, in addition to art history, serves as a powerful source of inspiration for the artist.

Main Set

Filming for His History of Art lasted five days and required a production team of more than 50 people. This replica of the series’ main set features original set decorations and props designed to reference important works from art history. Musson, who described his vision for the set as “the lair of a Batman villain,” uses these objects to convey the personality of his character, Jay, a pretentious art
collector. The props and decorations also provide a foundation for Musson’s humorous and educational commentary on the value society places on works of art.

Costumes

Musson describes the costumes worn by his character Jay as “ill-cut suits.” Tailored specifically for the artist, the corduroy outfits help shape Jay’s persona as a pretentious yet knowledgeable art collector. Musson describes Jay as “a little bit arrogant,” but also as a straightforward character “there for the purpose of getting information to the audience.”

The Artist’s Process

The artwork created during Jayson Musson’s residency at The Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) in Philadelphia is the three-episode series His History of Art. The collaboration and experimentation between Musson and FWM staff resulted in the sets, costumes, and objects seen in the gallery. While arguably works of art themselves, they are also evidence of Musson’s process.

Once the artist solidified the concept for the series, he worked with FWM to identify the art historical works that are reimagined in Jay’s (the character Musson plays) living room. The team then experimented with materials, scale, and placement to create a multidimensional onscreen environment for Jay and Ollie to inhabit. All aspects of the production, including storyboarding, scriptwriting, and costume and puppet-making, involved artistic collaboration. The FWM gallery transformed into a functioning set for filming, which took five days and included a team of over fifty people.
**Blooper and Audition Reel**

You can watch at this link: [https://app.box.com/s/vmznyljytn3fco2bkancdmfef8idqzf](https://app.box.com/s/vmznyljytn3fco2bkancdmfef8idqzf)

The two videos playing here are a blooper reel and audition films. They offer humor and glimpses of the collaborative process of making His History of Art. Musson originally planned for Ollie to be a “curmudgeonly East Coast type—Archie Bunker, sans racism.” After seeing Cedwan Hook’s audition for Ollie, Musson transformed the character. About the change, the artist said, “I knew instantly that Cedwan was Ollie. As a writer, you spend so much time with your characters on the page that you assume you’ve developed a solid sense of who they are. But when an actor introduces elements of a character you never knew you wanted, that’s a real gift.”

**Resource Room Texts**

Symbols surround us. Humans have a natural tendency to create associations between objects and ideas. Some symbols, such as bulls, have associations across the ages. Many more are linked to the times, geographical locations, and cultures of those who use them. These symbols were used to communicate to people who immediately understood the visual messages they encountered. The Pieta throne is used as one such symbol. In the first episode of His History of Art, Jay does not allow Ollie to sit on the chair, emphasizing the role Jay plays in the video as the authority figure.

Jayson Musson references the power of symbols in His History of Art. In a scene reminiscent of the science fiction comedy Mystery Science Theater 3000, the character Jay explains the role of symbolism in ancient Egyptian and Roman art to his sidekick, Ollie. Much of the art from these times found in art history texts focuses on the use of visual symbols to justify the power of political and religious leaders.

Jay’s throne in His History of Art is a copy of Michelangelo’s Pieta. This sculpture launched the artist’s successful career and deviated from traditional representations of Mary holding the deceased body of Jesus. Mary is depicted as youthful, and Jesus is idealized and unharmed.
This Biblical scene was represented this way for many years to come. Reportedly, after Michelangelo overheard his sculpture being attributed to another artist, he signed the sash across Mary’s chest “Michelangelo made me.” The idea of artistic genius Jay and Ollie discuss originates in the early Renaissance when artists were “destroying the old” and becoming famous.

Destroying the old and making it new again is a stereotypical characteristic of “good art.” Many stories about the creation of artworks studied in the history of art feature that narrative. Early 20th century artists like Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso pushed artistic representations by simplifying form and imagining space differently than the artists before them. Matisse and Picasso also appropriated non-Western art, such as Western African sculpture, in the process.

In His History of Art, Ollie destroys a Yoruba bust to achieve “genius” status. The Yoruba people live in parts of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo and have since at least the 11th century. Once boasting the largest cities in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Yoruba were a dominant cultural and political force until British colonization in the early 19th century. When their sculptures were “found” in the early 20th century, Europeans, in their supremacist mindset, argued that they must have been made by a Greek colony because of the works’ realism and skilled craftsmanship.

Throughout art history, Western perspectives dominate how artworks are understood, attributed, and even named. Archaeologists dubbed the small sculpture of a nude woman found in Willendorf “Venus,” following the assumption that she must be a fertility figure and despite being created 30,000 years ago, a “Venus” after the Roman goddess. Now referred to as the Woman of Willendorf, this is just one example of how scholars are attempting to reverse the colonialist perspective in art history.

Jayson Musson embraces art and design from all aspects of life. We are surrounded by visual culture that offers powerful messaging in museums, galleries, comic books, advertisements, and television. By blending Salvador Dali’s Persistence of Memory with Nino Brown’s Rolex from the 1991 movie New Jack City, or Paleolithic cave paintings from Lascaux or Pech Merle with graphics from the video game Final Fantasy I, Musson dismantles art world hierarchies that continue to persist today.
RESOURCES

**Artist's Website:**  [Jaysonmusson.com](http://Jaysonmusson.com)

**Social Media:**  [https://www.instagram.com/jaysonmusson/](https://www.instagram.com/jaysonmusson/)

**YouTube:**  [https://www.youtube.com/user/HennesyYoungman](https://www.youtube.com/user/HennesyYoungman)

**Read**


**Listen**

Why Artist Jayson Musson is Clowning a Humorless Art World via The Art Angle Podcast sponsored by ArtNet:  [https://youtu.be/UZUZ7OC5dPE?si=Y0OmY4hCeVsi5U7](https://youtu.be/UZUZ7OC5dPE?si=Y0OmY4hCeVsi5U7)

**Watch**

LEARNING STANDARDS

Common Core Standards
http://www.corestandards.org/

Ohio Common Core Links
http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/OLS-Graphic-Sections/Learning-Standards
http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Standards

Kentucky Common Core Links
https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Pages/default.aspx
https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_Arts_and_Humanities.pdf

Indiana Standards Links
https://www.doe.in.gov/standards
https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/fine-arts-dance-music-theatre-visual-arts

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change
http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives