

# Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience

## *The Art of Kent Monkman*

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*“After some 500 years of a relationship that has swung from partnership to domination, from mutual respect and cooperation to paternalism and attempted assimilation, Canada must now work out fair and lasting terms of coexistence with Aboriginal people.”<sup>1</sup>*

The year 2017 witnessed a full calendar of commemorative events across Canada dedicated to honoring 150 years of the adoption of the British North America Act of 1867 and Canadian confederation. However, the celebratory nature of this achievement was often unwelcomed and challenged by many Indigenous, First Nations, and Metis peoples who have suffered from a legacy of attempted “cultural genocide”<sup>2</sup> by their European colonizers and successive governments of Canada over the past 500 years.

One unique form of critique came as an exhibition of paintings, drawings, and sculptural works in dialogue with historical artefacts and art works borrowed from museum and private collections from across the country. Initially commissioned in 2014 by Barbara Fischer of the Art Museum at University of Toronto, “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience” will find its way to nine venues coast to coast across Canada over the next three years. Ms. Fischer invited Kent Monkman, “...who has made a career of defying the privileged myopia of official histories...”<sup>3</sup> to participate in telling a very different story to the image of peace, generosity, inclusivity, and compassion that Canadians like to promulgate about themselves. Of both Cree Nation and Irish descent, Monkman’s self-curated, solo exhibition provides, in his own words, “...a counter-narrative to all the celebration”<sup>4</sup> through the lens of First Nations’ displacement and resilience, dating back to 150 years prior to confederation.

Juxtaposed with excerpts from the 1996, Aboriginal and Northern Affairs Canada’s Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and the 2015 Report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the Indian Residential School System, the paper will attempt to demonstrate how Kent Monkman’s unique artistic style exhibited in “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience” demonstrates the clashing of fundamentally disparate cosmologies that ensured the inevitability of a disastrous relationship for Indigenous peoples with their originally welcomed European visitors. A Euro-centric cosmology founded on the precepts of Christian evangelization, jurisprudence associated with the rights of ownership and private property, and colonial exploitation came into direct conflict with an indigenous cosmology founded on an understanding of the natural world as sacred, a more considered stewardship of resources, and the notion of fluid boundaries between nation territories where the concept of ownership was inconceivable.

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, *Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p.4* <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014597/1100100014637>

<sup>2</sup> “Cultural genocide” is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the targeted group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. In its dealing with Aboriginal people, Canada did all these things. Excerpted from the 2015 *Report on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p.9* [http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive\\_Summary\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> From an article by the Toronto Star Art Critic Murray Whyte <https://www.thestar.com/.../2017/.../22/kent-monkman-fills-in-history-blanks-with-hu...>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

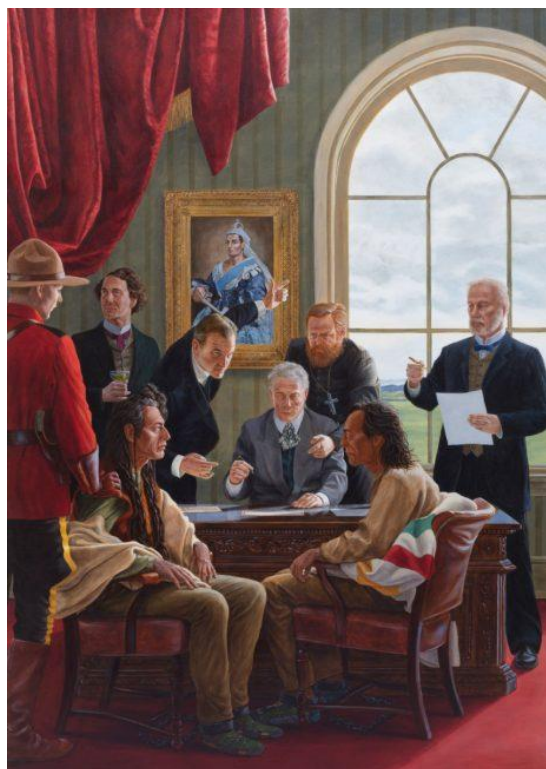


The presentation will examine exhibition works such as, Monkman's *Slaughter of the Innocents* which re-constructs Reuben's *Massacre of the Innocents* from St. Matthew's gospel within the context of a bloody beaver hunt in pre-confederation Canada. Juxtaposed against a romanticized Canadian landscape, early settlers, drawn by the lucrative fur trade to satisfy the European fashion for beaver garments, are seen here brutally slaughtering one of Canada's most iconic native creatures while an indigenous "mother" fearfully covers behind a tree with her "infants", a helpless witness to the frenzied carnage unfolding before her.



In the similarly thematic painting *The Scream*, Monkman captures the legacy of the Residential School System that sought to separate Indigenous children from their parents “...in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into a new culture—the culture of the legally dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society, led by Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald.”<sup>5</sup> Roman Catholic nuns and priests identified by their iconic vestments along with Canadian Mounties who embody Canada as an iconic symbol of national government and law keeping are seen here forcibly removing children from their parents who live in squalid conditions on a reservation. Some children in the background are seen attempting to run away, a reference to the many children who died trying to find their way home over hundreds of miles. From the 1880’s to as recently as 1996, indigenous families were subjected to this shameful policy. In government sponsored schools set-up and run by Roman Catholic, Methodist, and Anglican Dioceses, children often suffered emotional, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of their caregivers and died in numbers that would be unacceptable in any other school system in Canada or anywhere else in the world.<sup>6</sup> Displaced physically, forced into marginal lands that could not support their traditional ways of life, many “Status Indians” who live on reservations are still under boiled water advisories. Substances abuse, broken families, and significantly higher than national average suicide rates, continue to represent painful reminders of this horrific legacy. Only through the courage of survivors was their story recently brought to the attention of Canadians. And although The Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission represents an important first step in identifying the systematic subjugation of the truth regarding Canada’s treatment of indigenous peoples and our attempt at redressing that legacy, it will likely take several more generations before full healing and reconciliation can be achieved.

Signing away the Chiefs’ freedom  
*Subjugation of Truth*



Detail from *Miss America* showing arrival of the Spaniards



<sup>5</sup> Excerpted from the 2015 Report on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p.7  
[http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive\\_Summary\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.7