

FEATURES



Kent Monkman: History Painting for a Colonized Canada

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Kent Monkman, *The Scream*, 2016.

It started in the archive.

Two years ago, when artist Kent Monkman began working on “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience,” opening tonight at the [University of Toronto Art Centre](#), his first step was research.

"I travelled across the country with my studio manager, and we went into the archives of as many institutions as possible," said Monkman at an exhibition preview last week. "We looked at the permanent collection that was on display, but we also went into their stacks and looked through drawers and tried to find as many relevant materials as possible."

The resultant collection of archival objects—shown alongside new, sprawling canvases created by Monkman in the exhibition—offers a visceral representation of Canada's colonial history.



Chief Poundmaker's moccasins from the collection of the Canadian Museum of History. Artifact V-A-26 a,b.

The show begins with manuscript pages from *Wilderness Kingdom*, the journal of a Jesuit priest from the 1840s, that Monkman found in a Montreal archive of the religious order, which includes an illustration of an Indigenous easel painter.

The moccasins of Pîhtokahanapiwiyin (also known as Chief Poundmaker), who was convicted of treason in 1885 and imprisoned in Manitoba's Stony Mountain Penitentiary, sit near Monkman's painting *The Subjugation of Truth*, which depicts Pîhtokahanapiwiyin and Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) in chains.

In another gallery, a pair of leg irons used on an Indigenous prisoner, from the collection of the [Museum of Vancouver](#), are flanked by photographs from the [Glenbow Museum](#) of Pîhtokahanapiwiyin, Mistahimaskwa and Riel Rebellion prisoners under arrest.



Kent Monkman, *The Subjugation of Truth*, 2016.

Surrounding these objects, Monkman's large-scale canvases, which riff on the genre of Western history painting, hang from the walls, and several large installations draw out the themes highlighted by the objects.

"Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience," marks the Canadian sesquicentennial with a clear critique.

"It was a pretty deliberate effort to have people reflect on the last 150 years in terms of the Indigenous experience," said Monkman of the show. "Canada's 150 years old—what does that mean for the First People? When I thought about it, I thought it includes the worst period, because it goes all the way back to the signing of the treaties, the beginning of the reserve system, this legacy of incarceration, residential schools, sickness, the removal of children in the '60s, missing and murdered women.

"So there's a lot of material in the show that tries to encompass and stitch together this narrative that reflects back on 150 years."

Amid the dark vestiges of history, though, there are moments of humour, too—as in much of Monkman's work. Here, Monkman has arranged the exhibition as if it's a memoir of [Miss Chief](#), his time-travelling, trickster alter ego.



Kent Monkman, *The Daddies*, 2016.

"I decided to stitch the narrative together as though it was her point of view, and to talk about each one of these themes and each one of these chapters as though it was in her voice.

"I think that it's an effective way to deal with the subject matter, because she can be present in all of the different time periods... She could be present at the signing of the treaties, she could be there when the fathers of Confederation had their meeting to shape the country. That she's always there and experiencing these things, or relating these experiences to her own community and her own family, makes it real."

Divided into nine sections, each presented as a chapter, the exhibition covers a wide range of ground: the "urban rez," sickness and healing, the "rez house," incarceration, forcible transfer of children, starvation, wards of the state, fathers of the Confederation and New France.

Some of the sections represent the themes that kept coming up in Monkman's research.

"Some themes emerged that I wasn't expecting—like food and drink, in particular people who have food and drink and those who don't. Starvation became one of the themes and one of the chapters in the exhibition," explained Monkman. "And then, there were also a lot of animals: beavers represent the fur trade and the period of New France, bison represented food for Plains people, and then the bear represents a spiritual force."



Kent Monkman, *Seeing Red*, 2014.

The show will have a life well outside of Toronto and well beyond Canada 150: it's travelling to the [Glenbow Museum](#) in Calgary in June, and in 2018 will make stops at the [Agnes Etherington Art Centre](#) in Kingston, the [Art Gallery of Nova Scotia](#) in Halifax and the [Confederation Centre Art Gallery](#) in Charlottetown. Even more showings are scheduled across the country through 2020, and a Monkman exhibition that draws on related subject matter is [currently on view at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery](#).

And the exhibition may take on different formations when it travels to new venues, as Monkman anticipates rearranging the various chapters—but expect the show to retain its critical edge regardless of the formation.

"I can't think about the Indigenous experience without being critical of colonial policies that were genocidal," said Monkman. "There is no lighter version of that—it's pretty clear that I have to speak directly to these issues."
