

Public outcry forces Manchester Art Gallery to restore censored painting

John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) taken down for a week

Dennis Moore
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The blatant act of censorship by the Manchester Art Gallery (MAG) in removing John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) in late January generated such a public outcry that gallery officials were forced to hang the painting again after seven days.

The work depicts a scene from Greek mythology in which Hylas, the young handsome companion of Heracles (Roman Hercules), is surrounded by enchanting nude nymphs looking up from tranquil water. In the myth, Hylas, who came to the spring looking for water, is dragged in by the nymphs and never seen again.

The well-known painting by Waterhouse (1849-1917) was completed when the artist was 47. He was influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the artistic movement of painters, poets and critics founded in 1848 by William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

The gallery, in the north west of England, owns numerous paintings produced by this influential movement, with several on display in its renowned Victorian collection. *Hylas and the Nymphs*, seen and admired by millions of people over the years, was purchased by the gallery the same year Waterhouse painted it.

Waterhouse's paintings are among the most popular with the public, and his *The Lady of Shalott* (1888), on permanent display at the Tate Britain, is beloved by many.

Hylas and the Nymphs was a popular theme among artists. The prominent late Victorian artist Henrietta R. Rae based a painting—*Hylas and the Water Nymphs*—on the same myth and motifs in 1909.

MAG officials took down the painting on the pretext that its removal was part of an ongoing project with contemporary artist Sonia Boyce, leading up to her one-woman show in March. The gallery website asserted the event was conceived as a “take-over” of “some of the gallery’s public spaces” by Boyce, “to bring different meanings and interpretations of paintings from the gallery’s collection into focus, and into life.” This included a “series of performances, all filmed by

Boyce’s team, addressing issues of race, gender, and sexuality, culminating in the careful, temporary removal of the Waterhouse painting.” This is academic double-talk and damage control.

Postcards of the Waterhouse painting were also removed from the gift shop—all in the name supposedly of bringing the “male gaze” into question. In the painting’s place a blank space was left, with those responsible saying its aim was “to prompt conversations about how we display and interpret artworks.”

This was never a “conversation,” but an act of censorship, and was recognised as such by hundreds of concerned visitors who left responses on Post-it notes. The gallery’s website received nearly 1,000 comments.

Many of the Post-it notes condemned MAG’s action. The general flavour of the sentiments can be found in such comments as “Hands Off Our Painting,” “This is censorship,” “No to censorship—what is art without freedom?,” “Censorship is the thin end of the dictatorship wedge,” “1984,” “Glad to see this beautiful picture up—Got a little scared it may be books rejected next,” “Feminism Gone Mad—I’m Ashamed to be a Feminist” and “It’s the people’s gallery, not the directors’.” This past weekend, more than a week after the painting was restored, gallery visitors were still surrounding the picture with Post-it notes.

Philip Dantes, a writer and poet, sent a tweet to MAG and Boyce, with Rae’s painting attached, that read, “The same scene, painted in the same period, by a woman, Henrietta R. Rae, who, according to Christie’s, ‘saw herself primarily as a painter of classical themes with a strong emphasis on the female nude.’” He added, “[P]erhaps artists find inspiration in beauty, sensuality and the human form irrespective of their gender.”

Local artist Michael Browne said, “I don’t like the replacement and removal of art and being told ‘that’s wrong and this is right.’”

Liz Prettejohn, professor of history of art at the University of

York, who curated a major Waterhouse retrospective at the Royal Academy in London in 2009, told BBC News, “This is a painting that people love and the most ridiculous thing is the claim that somehow it’s going to start a debate to take it out of public view.”

Hylas and the Nymphs normally hangs in a room titled, “In Pursuit of Beauty.” During the process of removing the painting, Clare Gannaway, the gallery’s curator, said the room’s name was a bad one: “For me personally, there is a sense of embarrassment that we haven’t dealt with it sooner... We’ve collectively forgotten to look at this space and think about it properly.”

She told the *Guardian* that the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements were in mind when the decision to remove the Waterhouse was made. These are the words and actions of a censor-in-chief and not those of a responsible curator. #MeToo has served as a means of attacking elementary democratic rights, including the denial of due process and presumption of innocence.

The *Guardian*’s editorial board played a critical role in endorsing or apologising for the taking down of the painting, giving ample space to voices supporting it.

In a wretched editorial, “Hylas and the Nymphs: not censorship,” published after the painting was back in place, the *Guardian* commented cynically, “Taking down a Waterhouse for a week need not send anyone to the barricades.” While arguing that in the painting, “The women are the predators, not Hylas,” it continued, “At the same time, the painting clearly invites the viewer to enjoy the nymphs’ naked breasts, while betraying more than a little anxiety about female sexuality.”

The anxiety referred to is that of the editorialists alone.

The reference to the “male gaze” is an ahistorical, moralising approach to art history in keeping with academic postmodernism. It contributes absolutely nothing to our understanding of the social context in which a work was produced or its objective value. No artist jumps out of his or her own skin. But such operations as those undertaken by the Manchester Art Gallery are misguided and reactionary attempts to project middle-class identity politics back into art history and “straighten out” the latter in accordance with the outlook of contemporary feminists and others. If triumphant, the results would be ghastly.

Why stop with Waterhouse? Why not remove every female (or male) nude from galleries and museums? Many of them no doubt reflect “troubling” and “voyeuristic” tendencies.

Nothing good can possibly come from attempting to ban or “regulate” appreciation of the human form by artists of either gender in past or present work. The notion that such appreciation is reprehensible, whether it involves detached aesthetic appreciation or even an overt and carnal desire to portray the form in question, is an offense against the history of art and humanity itself.

The number of works of art that could be denounced and

taken down on this basis by the new puritans is truly frightening. Even a *Guardian* column opposing the removal of the painting, by Jonathan Jones, accommodated itself in philistine fashion to the censors, ignorantly referring to Waterhouse as a “kinky old Victorian perv” who “has his right to paint soft-porn nymphs.”

When the painting was again hung, the *Guardian* referred to it in its headline as “soft porn” in reference to Jones’ description.

Fellow columnist Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett expanded on the theme, writing of the Waterhouse painting, “No, of course, I wouldn’t ban it, just as I wouldn’t ban filthy old pervert Degas and his pre-teen ballerinas. But I would like to see it as part of an exhibition that interrogates why so much of our artistic energy as a society has been devoted to sexually objectifying young girls.”

This prudish idiocy passes itself off as the latest in aesthetic and social commentary. In fact, this type of “contextualising,” in which identity politics watchdogs determine what the public may or may not see, has more than a whiff of the Nazi campaign against “degenerate art.”

In late 2017, an online petition was circulated urging the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to remove or “contextualise” *Therese Dreaming* (1938), a painting by the Polish-French artist Balthus. Launched by a human resources professional at a finance company, the petition argued that the work “depicts a young girl in a sexually suggestive pose.” It too demanded that the museum censor the work, “by either removing the piece from that particular gallery, or providing more context in the painting’s description.”

On that occasion, the Met refused to take the painting down. However, it too spoke about “an opportunity for conversation.” The next stage in this “conversation” was a more successful act of censorship—the removal of *Hylas and the Nymphs*.

The broad public opposition to MAG’s shameful censorship and the identity politics agenda that informs it is a positive development. There should be no concessions made to political and social reactionaries masquerading as “progressives” who have only repression and conformity to offer.



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