

The Object of History and The History of Objects

by CAROL DOUGHERTY. 1994

Handout by a professor of Greek and Latin for the premiere of O'Grady's installation *Miscegenated Family Album* in *Body As Measure*, The Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley, MA, 1994.

"(My history) is to be a possession for all time rather than an attempt to please popular taste." Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.22

"The British say they have saved the Marbles. Well, thank you very much. Now give them back." Melina Mercouri, Greek Minister of Culture, asking the British government to return the Elgin Marbles to Athens, *The London Times*, May 22, 1983

When Thucydides wrote his famous history of the Peloponnesian Wars, he not only produced a masterful account of the monumental conflict between Athens and Sparta at the end of the fifth century B.C.E., he also shaped the way we have come to define history—as factual, impartial, and objective. Furthermore, disdaining immediate public approval, Thucydides wanted to create "a possession for all time," and it is precisely this choice of metaphor that has produced our now pervasive view of "history" as an object of value, something that can be owned and appropriated like the famous Elgin marbles that once stood upon the Parthenon. Today's academic journals and editorial pages, for example, are full of battles over "the stolen legacy" of the ancient Mediterranean—were the Egyptians black? Have northern Europeans suppressed valuable and influential contributions to intellectual and cultural life made by ancient Egyptians? Did the Greeks borrow from the Egyptians or vice versa? These debates stem in large part from Thucydides's success in packaging the past as a metaphorical commodity. He has given us the very language to describe history as "mine" or

"yours," as an artifact in danger of being stolen, in need of being defended, demanding to be regained.

Lorraine O'Grady also uses valuable—and thus contested—artifacts to explore the relationship between ancient Egypt and contemporary America in her work *Miscegenated Family Album*. In a series of sixteen diptychs, she matches photographs of twentieth-century African-American women (members of her own family) with published photographs of ancient Egyptian sculpture. Although not an historian, O'Grady reminds us of a very different way of casting the relationship between objects and history. Rather than enshrining history as an artifact that controls interpretation and asserts ownership over what happened, the ancient sculpture opens up a dialogue—a discussion of how history continues to influence our present experience as well as how contemporary issues and ideological battles determine exactly what we value from the past. The title *Sisters* (assigned to images 1-4), for example, emphasizes a relationship of equality, reciprocity, and shared experience rather than insisting that chronology determine the nature and direction of cultural influence. The bust of Nephertiti certainly adds stature and historical context to the 1940s picture of O'Grady's own sister. Yet the contemporary photograph, remarkable in its similarity in light, pose, and gesture to that of the ancient sculpture, recharges and animates the weighty monument typically forced to represent the significance and substance of African culture. The collective impact of the series encourages us to construct a multiplicity of connections between the many sets of images.

A generation before Thucydides, Herodotus first coined the term "history" to describe his account of the events leading up to and including the Persian Wars. History, as Herodotus invented it, is not a matter of objectivity (although he includes objects in his account—they produce stories). His was a process of enquiry: a *histor* is an arbitrator, someone who adjudicates competing claims. More important, Herodotus's approach is noisy. His text preserves a multiplicity of voices, the cacophony of conflict, and does not always offer an opinion about who is right. Ever aware of the instability of world affairs, Herodotus's historiographical method lays contradictory claims side by side, forever open to discussion and debate. In his account of Egypt and its relation to

Greek religion and culture, for example, he refuses to choose a Greek *or* an Egyptian Heracles. Instead, Herodotus makes room for both: "I heard the following story about Heracles—that he was one of the Twelve Gods; but as for the other Heracles, the one the Greeks know about, I was not able to hear a word anywhere in Egypt." (*The Histories*, 2.43.1)

With a similarly open-ended strategy, O'Grady refuses to freeze the relationship between contemporary African-American women and ancient Egypt within the frame of her work. In this series of paired photographs, the artist juxtaposes past and present, stone and flesh, Africa and America, history and politics, art and life. She then leaves us to assume the authoritative role of *histor*: to compare, to evaluate, to make connections, to determine the nature of the family ties. Lorraine O'Grady shows that in spite of Thucydides's masterful attempt, history cannot be reduced to the status of a polished marble statue—a possession for all time. These artifacts will always be part of the picture, but their real value lies not as objects of custody battles for the past. Instead, she suggests that we begin to dispossess history of its images of ownership and commodity and begin to value in their place the many stories these artifacts continue to generate—an ongoing and reciprocal dialogue between the past and the present.

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