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**Beer Bottles and Saints: A Postcolonial Reading of
Jim Logan's *Let Us Compare Miracles* from His *Classical Aboriginal Series***

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Abstract

*Colonization, modernism, and postmodernism have challenged the way First Nations people are looked at, and how their art is perceived. As a result, First Nations artists and theorists are challenging the "otherness" that has been assigned to them through these discourses and are striving to find a place for their art practice in the art canon. In this climate, Jim Logan, a Métis born Canadian artist, challenges tradition through his incorporation of Native imagery into significant Christian works that are part of the Western art canon. In Logan's work an apparent dualism exists: the works reflect Native art production, writing, and discourse, and yet also strive to locate themselves within the European art tradition. To understand this dualism, a post-colonial analysis will be applied to the art conventions incorporated into Logan's work *Let Us Compare Miracles*, painted in 1992 as part of his *Classical Aboriginal Series*.*

Jim Logan's *Let Us Compare Miracles* (1992) is a layered work. On the surface, Logan has painted a martyr-like figure reminiscent of St. Sebastian, tied to a pole with arrows embedded in his brown flesh (Fig. 1). Blood trickles from the wounds. Behind the martyr is a column, one half inscribed with text, the other with an ornate pattern. Behind the column is a landscape composed of bright primary colours. A red train passing through yellow and red mountains intercepts an emerald green plain. The landscape behind St. Sebastian reflects the landscape of the Rocky Mountains where meadows are broken by rivers, mountains, and forests. Like the Rocky Mountains, this painting combines elements of the sublime wilderness with the invasion of technology. The train, plane, and automobile are juxtaposed to the image of the teepee—a symbol of the traditional way of life for Plains Indians. Logan has made the martyr Native. This man stands against the pole with his eyes looking heavenward, his identity as a Native person disclosed through the colouring of his skin and his feather headdress.

Extracted from this surface reading of Logan's

Let Us Compare Miracles is a much richer message. Issues relating to Christianity, Native identity, and alcoholism are explored by Logan as he manipulates Andrea Mantegna's *St. Sebastien*, circa 1455–60 (Fig. 2), repainting the work to include an Aboriginal person set in a Canadian landscape. The canvas becomes a "third space," where Logan is able to freely address Aboriginal issues in relation to European conquest.¹ *Let Us Compare Miracles* is part of Logan's *Classical Aboriginal Series*, in which he has taken famous works from the European art canon and reworked them to incorporate Aboriginal people. Containing over a dozen paintings—many of these exploring Christian themes—the series includes *A Rethinking on the Western Front* (Fig. 3), a parody of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (Fig. 4); *Jesus was not a Whiteman* (Fig. 5), which references El Greco's *The Savior* (Fig. 6); *The Annunciation* (Fig. 7), a twist on Fra Angelico's fifteenth-century *Annunciation* (Fig. 8), and Paul Gauguin's *Tahitian Woman on the Beach* (Fig. 9).

Born in 1955 in New Westminster, British Columbia, Jim Logan was raised in Port Coquitlam. While growing up, Logan was aware of his "otherness." His mixed Cree, Sioux, and Scottish background set him apart from the white children in his classes. Otherness became a daily issue. When learning about evolution, differences based on skin colour were reinforced for him. Diagrams showing the evolutionary development of man would depict an "evolving" string of characters: Homo Erectus—a black figure; Peking Man, resembling an Oriental; Neanderthal Man—a Jew; and, as Logan points out,

coming after him would be Cro-Magnon Man, and 'jeepers,' this fellow looked like our people! He could be a Sioux or a Cree, a Plains Indian. All these people would be naked, hairy, but when it came

¹ Homi K Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Dishart, 1990), 207–221.

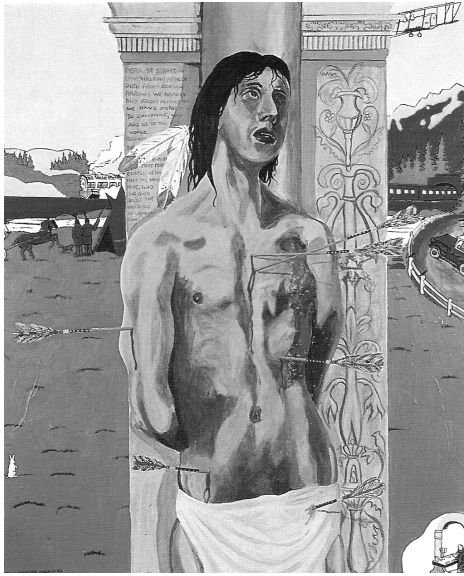


Fig. 1: Jim Logan, *Let Us Compare Miracles*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 84 cm. Reprinted with permission of the artist.



Fig. 2: Andrea Mantegna, *St Sebastian*, c. 1455–1460. Source: Wikipedia Commons (<http://commons.wikimedia.org/>.)

to representing *Homo sapiens*, modern man, it would be a short-haired White man strutting along!²

Experiences similar to the one described above have emerged visually in Logan's *Classical Aboriginal Series*; for example, this evolutionary chain can be seen depicted directly in the top left corner of *A Rethinking on the Western Front* (Fig. 3).

Christianity is a prominent theme within Jim Logan's artwork. His artwork does not undermine Christianity, but rather seeks to relocate the context of viewing to a Western perspective. Unlike many of Logan's contemporaries, who use Christian iconography to challenge Christianity, Logan uses Christian imagery to claim ownership of Christian tradition. Logan writes:

When you're brought up as a minority looking at all the structure of the Church [and] all the imagery of the Church, and realizing that you're not there, it leaves you feeling that you're not supposed to be there...³

The canvas is the medium through which Logan addresses his own spiritual beliefs, concluding that

Native people should be represented as part of the Christian tradition. By making St. Sebastian a Native person, Logan finds a way to incorporate his own heritage into the Christian dogma.

Logan's decision to address religion through art was made after his graduation from the Kootenay School of Fine Art in 1983, when he moved to Whitehorse to take the position of graphic designer at the *Yukon Indian News*. During this time he served as a lay minister, working with Aboriginal people in the Kwanlin Dun Village.⁴ The living conditions Logan found in the village opened his eyes to the realities of Native oppression. Logan realized that he needed to do more for the people than his ministry allowed. From an interview with Logan, Alexander Easton explains that

...over time the overwhelming poverty and oppression of so many people, and the seemingly entrenched systematic racism which dominated so many lives, was greater than one man's personal faith.⁵

To raise his voice against the oppression of his people, Logan has

channeled his rage at the economic and social conditions of Native life in the North into

² Allan J. Ryan, *Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 125.

³ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴ Allan J. Ryan, "In Profile: Jim Logan," *Native Peoples* (Fall/Winter 1995), 96.

⁵ Alexander N. Easton, "Lower than the Angels: The Weight of Jim Logan's Art," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 10: 1 (1990), 139.

what he sincerely believes to be an effective medium by which to promote social change.⁶

Let Us Compare Miracles, therefore, is Logan's visual attempt to draw attention to the social conditions of his people, and to help his people locate themselves within the tradition of Christianity.

David Chidester, a professor of comparative religion at the University of Cape Town, explores the impact that religion plays in colonialization. He suggests that religion is a tool used to manipulate the "other" in a colonized country. Chidester argues that once difference is established, consequent action is justified. Thus, otherness "served the colonial project by representing indigenous people as living in a different world."⁷

Through the *Classical Aboriginal Series*, Logan hopes to diminish the gap that has been created between the worlds of European and Aboriginal people. Logan addresses the wounds that religion has caused his people through colonialization. He writes:

It is hard for me as a Christian to imagine how this system could develop in the name of Christ. I hope that by painting the stories it will help to bring healing. I hope my paintings will play a part in this.⁸

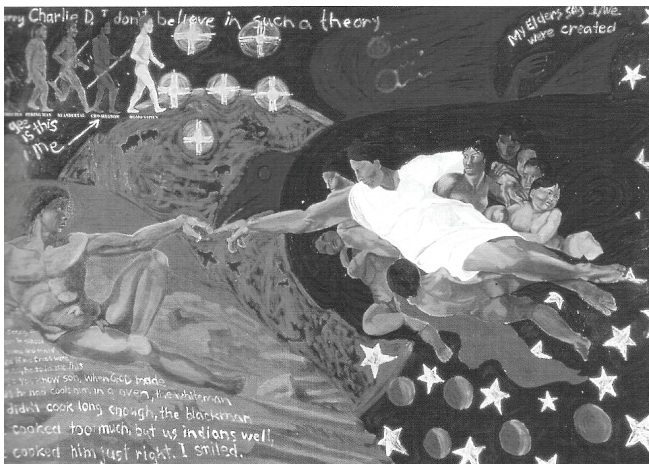


Fig. 3: Jim Logan, *A Rethinking on the Western Front*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 167 x 244 cm. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

⁶ Ibid., 137.

⁷ David Chidester, "Colonialism," *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (New York: Cassell, 2000), 428.

⁸ Fredy Baglo and Donald Johnson, "Jim Logan the



Fig. 4: Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508-1512. Fresco. Source: Wikipedia Commons (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>).

To bridge the difference between Aboriginal and European people, *Let Us Compare Miracles* uses Andrea Mantegna's *St. Sebastien*, circa 1455–60, as a template, a characteristic common to Logan's *Classical Aboriginal Series*.

In Mantegna's painting, we see the wounded martyr St. Sebastian tied to a pole. According to scholar Jack M. Greenstein, the rubble in which Mantegna has placed Sebastian is a derelict Romanesque basilica indicated by the archway and the column. Mantegna has manipulated the background in which Sebastian is set: the architecture and the landscape on the right side of the column speak of the artist's own time period, while the scenery to the left of Sebastian depicts the historical period that Sebastian lived in. To the right, off in the distance, the viewer can see a busy harbour. This reference to modernity, trade, and commodity speaks of progress, and is juxtaposed to the ancient ruins in the background of the left landscape. On the left, we also see Sebastian's executioners moving away from the viewer.⁹

While Mantegna used his *St. Sebastien* to merge Roman and Renaissance epochs, Logan uses *Let Us Compare Miracles* to merge divergent cultures. Echoing Mantegna, *Let Us Compare Miracles* speaks of the progress of time. In the background of the work, the viewer sees the introduction of mechanization to the environment. The horse and carriage and the teepee are juxtaposed with items of modernity: the train, plane, and automobile. Despite the advancement of

Painting Prophet," *Canadian Lutheran Magazine* 6:11 (December 1991), 37.

⁹ Jack M. Greenstein, *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 71–80.

time, the native man is depicted in the guise of the “Stone Age Indian.” Though the sublime is conquered by the scientific advancement of mankind, the Indian remains static—the image to which First Nations people have been assigned since conquest.

Many First Nations artists want to be true to their Native heritage while also challenging and expanding the borders of their art practice. First Nations artists are stereotyped by traditional handicraft and have difficulty finding acceptance in contemporary art circles. George Longfish, a First Nations artist who first challenged this conception, is quoted by Young Man as suggesting

While we as cultural people have learned and changed in order to survive, we find that the dominant society no longer wants the Indian to change. An interesting dilemma. We are much less threatening to the white man when we are uneducated in his ways, and we are unable to have our Indian ways.¹⁰

Jim Logan is in the position to challenge this conception. Like St. Sebastian, who confronted the emperor about his treatment of the Christians, through *Let Us Compare Miracles*, Logan is standing before his audience and voicing his concerns about the mistreatment of First Nations people, while simultaneously challenging his audience to recognize the capabilities of First Nations’ artists.

The *Classical Aboriginal Series* speaks strongly of the need to re-examine the way in which art is perceived. In an interview with Alfred J. Ryan, Logan states:

I went through art history in school and was taught how glorious European art was. It seems to be the standard to judge all other art, and I question that. . . . Is it the standard, and [if so] why is it the standard? What makes masters masters?¹¹

Master works, such as the ones referenced in the *Classical Aboriginal Series*, are made to be the standard by which all other art is judged by the art

¹⁰ Alfred Young Man, *Indian Art: It’s A Question of Integrity* (Kamloops: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1998), 14.

¹¹ Allan J. Ryan, *Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 120.

community. Native handicraft and contemporary native art do not fall within this narrowly focused spectrum. If it is looked at under the guise of the canon, it is labeled “primitive.”¹² If a work is not part of, or built upon the ideas of the European canon, it can not be “high” art. To draw attention to this biased system of evaluating art, Logan has reworked many of these famous images, inserting Native figures, Aboriginal mythology, social concerns, and religious imagery as a way of making political and social statements and a means to address a Western approach to art. Referencing past artists has been, and continues to be, an established method of justifying future developments in art. Thus, Logan has placed himself in the canon amongst other great past artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Andrea Mantegna, Edouard Manet, Paul Gauguin, Fra Angelico, Jacques Louis David, Andy Warhol, and Russian Icon painters. In Logan’s case, however, he is recreating these masterworks in a Canadian context to address Aboriginal identity. By situating himself as an artist in this cultural context, he is not compromising himself as a Native artist, but grounding his work in a context that can help the viewer understand art. Once establishing his presence within the canon, he is taking the message he has incorporated into the *Classical Aboriginal Series* beyond a simple critique of the canon. He uses this as an opportunity to address social, religious, and political concerns. Logan has achieved this by playing with Mantegna’s image.

On the pillar of Mantegna’s *St. Sebastien*, the artist has inscribed his own name in Greek. Logan, in contrast, has inserted a social message onto the column:

¹² Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Stiener, “Art, Authenticity, and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter,” in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (California: University of California Press, 1999), 7. This article goes beyond defining the colonial attitude towards “primitive” art to also explore the notion of authenticity of artwork produced by colonized people. The concept of authenticity discussed by Phillips and Steiner provide a useful framework to understand the criticisms brought up by George Longfish. Traditionally, if First Nations artists were not working in their stereotyped style their work was not considered to be authentic. Logan’s attempt to situate himself in the European canon can be viewed as a means to generate authenticity while also attempting to evoke change in viewpoint.



Fig. 5: Jim Logan, *Jesus Was Not a Whiteman*, 1992. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 100 x 84 cm. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

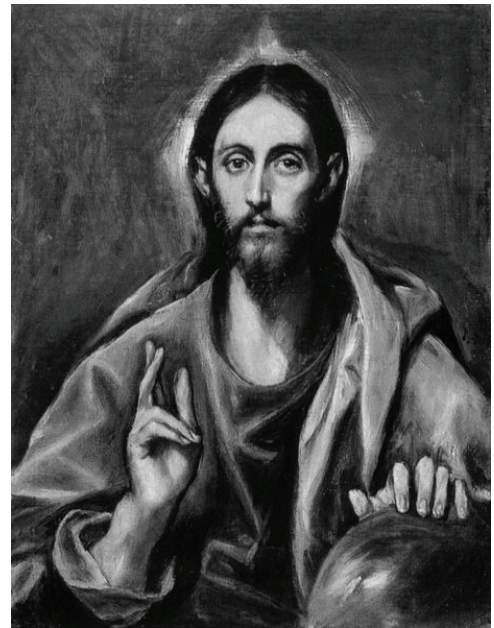


Fig. 6: El Greco, *The Savior*, 16th century. Source: Wikipedia Commons (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>).



Fig. 7: Jim Logan, *The Annunciation*, 1992. Acrylic and gold leaf on masonite, 61 x 61 cm. Reprinted with permission of the artist.



Fig. 8: Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, 15th c. Tempera. Source: Wikipedia Commons (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>).

Dear St. Sebastian, like you who nearly died from Roman arrows we nearly died from alcoholism we have miracles to compare, you and us of the same world.

Logan has used the canvas as a third space, a space to bring two different cultural groups together to open dialogue between these groups. While St. Sebastian was pierced with arrows for his faith, since first contact, First Nations groups have struggled for survival, fighting disease, persecution, environmental change, and alcohol addictions.

Let Us Compare Miracles speaks of the struggle that First Nations people have had with alcohol. Mantegna deliberately chose to situate his Sebastian in a Romanesque Basilica, an environment that reflected the reason for his suffering; Sebastian was martyred for his faith. Logan's Sebastian is suffering because of the effects of alcohol on Native communities. It is not surprising, therefore, that the landscape in which Logan has deliberately set his Sebastian figure is not just a generic image of the Canadian Rockies, but the landscape that figures prominently on the label for Pilsner Beer (Fig. 10). Pilsner beer, a Molson product, has a longstanding tradition in western Canada. According to Molson's website,

Pilsner is the beer that sparks pride in the down-to-earth values that endure in Western Canada. The beer has been brewed in the west since 1926 and has an extremely loyal following. Pilsner remains true to its western roots. . .¹³



Fig. 9: Paul Gauguin, *Tahitian Women (On the Beach)*, 1891. Oil on canvas. Source: Wikipedia Commons (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>).

The visual elements in the Pilsner Beer label show not only the progress of time, but also first contact, depicted by the stagecoach moving toward the teepee. The introduction of alcohol to the First Nations people is the result of European contact in Canada, and its effects have been destructive to First Nations communities. Many First Nations people have turned to alcohol as a means of coping with the destructive changes to their lifestyle caused by modernity, the loss of language, culture, and the aftermath of colonialism.

The train, plane, and automobile, pictured in the Pilsner Beer label, are incorporated into Logan's work and speak of the destruction of the landscape, the end of nomadic lifestyles, and the need for First Nations people to adapt to a new environment. Alcohol provides an escape for those who can not adjust to these forced changes in lifestyle. This phenomenon is exemplified by the Lubicon nation. Once living as hunters and trappers in northern Alberta, their lifestyle was disrupted when Shell Oil gained the rights to drill on the land that they inhabited. With the invasion of the rigs, the moose population migrated further north, and animals that the Lubicon once trapped followed. Without food or livelihood, the Lubicon turned to alcohol, and there are now few families not affected by suicide, depression, or addiction.¹⁴

The use of a beer label, therefore, highlights issues of alcoholism addressed by Logan. The tiny scene in the right corner of the work of a monk brewing beer is directly taken from the Pilsner ad; however, in Logan's

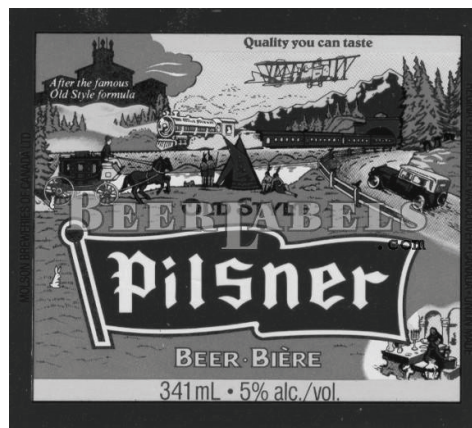


Fig. 10: Molson Breweries, *House of Lethbridge Old Style Pilsner, Centennial 1885–1985*. Reprinted courtesy of BeerLabels.com.

¹³ Accessed from www.molson.com/en/molson_brands. 26 March 2004.

¹⁴ Jack Todd, "Why an angry Lubicon Indian band will picket the Olympics' opening: they claim their land was stolen, resources given to corporations," *The Montreal*

work, it reinforces the cause of the martyr's suffering. Mantegna painted the archers strolling away from the torture scene; while Logan has depicted the monk brewing beer as his interpretation of Mantegna's convention. This painting, however, is not meant to cast blame, but instead, to alert the viewer to the issue of alcoholism. Logan states:

The comparison is one of recovery rather than suffering. Just as St. Sebastian made a miraculous recovery from wounds inflicted for his spiritual beliefs, so too Native people are beginning to recover from wounds incurred over a century of alcohol abuse.¹⁵

Like so many of his contemporaries, Logan situates himself as an artist/healer,¹⁶ and has created a visual environment where "cultural and cross-cultural healing can take place."¹⁷

Art is the medium by which Jim Logan has found his voice. Through the *Classical Aboriginal Series*, Logan has evoked conversation about First Nations people; conversations that challenge the location of Aboriginal people within Christianity, while drawing attention to the compromised status given to First Nations artists. *Let Us Compare Miracles* provides Logan with the means to open channels of communication between Native and non-Native communities. Through this complex work, Logan has subverted the traditional "white" viewpoint of Western art by integrating a Native person into Andrea Mantegna's *St Sebastien*. The incorporation of the Pilsner Beer label locates Logan's painting in a Canadian context, further removing the work from a European basis. This action also provides Logan with the context to discuss alcoholism and contemporary Aboriginal social issues. Through the combination of beer bottles and saints Logan reminds the viewer of the miracle of survival.

Gazette (13 February 1988), A1 Front.

¹⁵ Allan J. Ryan, 194.

¹⁶ This is a strategy taken by other Native artists such as Rebecca Belmore, whose works aim to initiate healing regarding land loss, and lack of voice, or Joane Cardinal-Schubert, who works through issues such as residential schools in her art.

¹⁷ Allan J. Ryan, "In Profile: Jim Logan," *Native Peoples* (Fall/Winter 1995), 96.