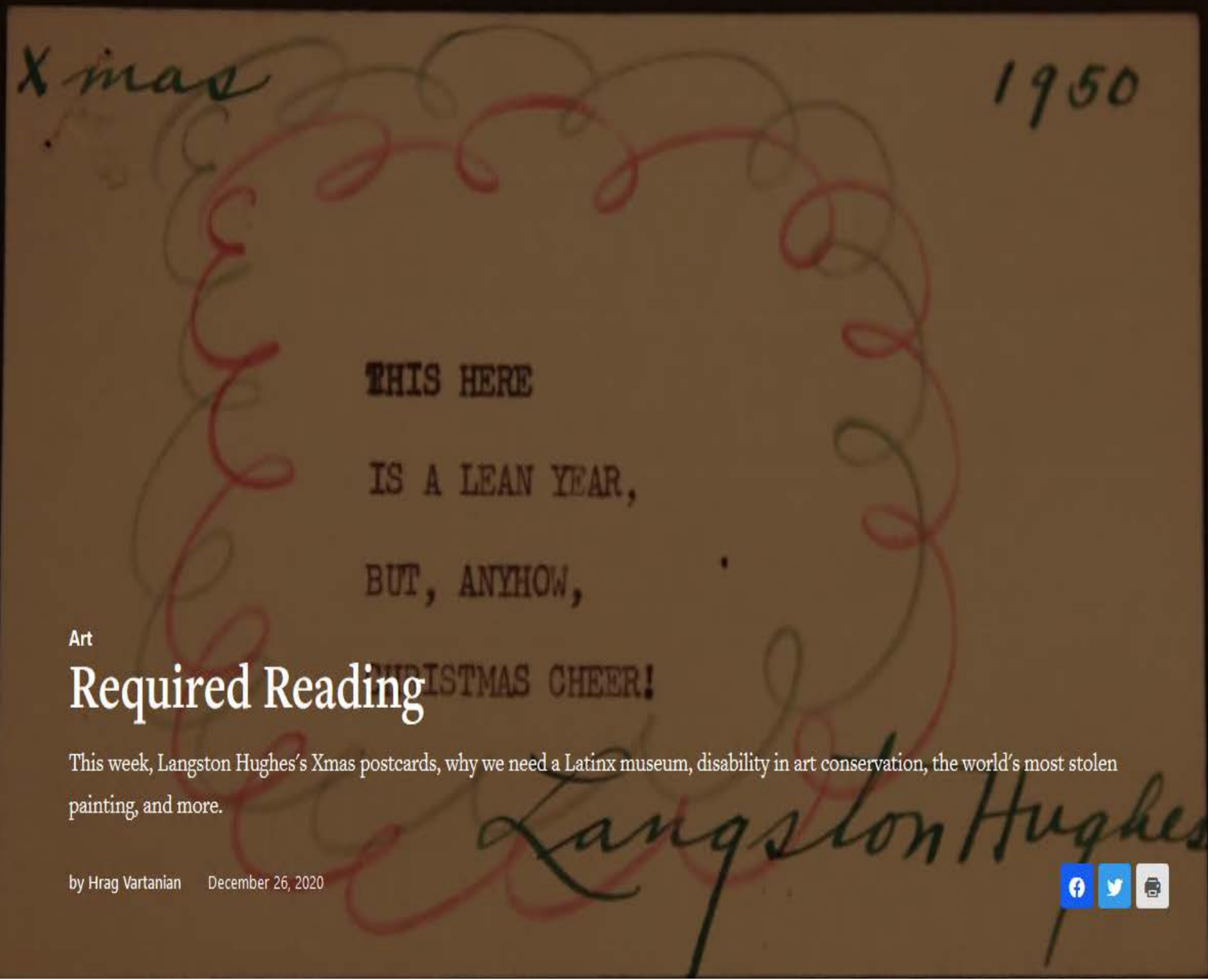

Art

Required Reading

This week, Langston Hughes's Xmas postcards, why we need a Latinx museum, disability in art conservation, the world's most stolen painting, and more.

by Hrag Vartanian December 26, 2020

Today is a great day to remind you all of Langston Hughes's typewritten 1950 Christmas postcards archived at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Allison Meier gives us the context: "Christmas in 1950 was a low time for the writer Langston Hughes. The opera for which he'd written a libretto — The Barrier — was a commercial and critical failure; his recently published book Simple Speaks His Mind was critically praised, but not a bestseller. He was living with his friends Toy and Emerson Harper at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, and attempting to work on a new book and opera. So instead of giving his large community of friends Christmas gifts, he sent out typewritten postcards that expressed both his financial state, and enduring holiday cheer." More postcards in her article. Credit: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library / Yale University

Kriston Capps writes that Trump's Executive Order about "classical" federal buildings may be hard to change:

> On Dec. 22, the day after the executive order, the president named four new appointees to the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts, the independent federal agency that oversees design and aesthetic decisions in the nation's capital. All four of the new commissioners — architect Rodney Mims Cook, sculptor Chas Fagan, landscape architect Perry Guillot and architect Steven W. Spandle — are deeply steeped in yesteryear's European art forms. The latter two recently executed projects for First Lady Melania Trump: Guillot designed the controversial Rose Garden revamp while Spandle handled the similarly controversial Tennis Pavilion.
>
> Taken together with the three current commissioners, who were also appointed by Trump, all seven members of the Commission on Fine Arts are now white men — a departure for a commission that, in 2019, included three women and two African Americans. Like their predecessors, they will all serve four-year terms, with the first replacement up in 2022. Trump's fully stafed commission is the first to include only men since 1963 and the first all-white one in a decade.

Arlene Dávila writes an op-ed about why we need a Smithsonian museum devoted to Latinx people:

Yet over the past three decades, the task of reworking a mostly white institutional history and collection at the Smithsonian remains slow and daunting. In fact, a 2018 study by U.C.L.A.'s Latino Policy & Politics Initiative and its Chicano Studies Research Center, evaluating what progress had been made in the 24 years since the initial 1994 study, found that the Smithsonian's Latinx work force failed to keep pace with the growth of the Latinx population, which had doubled to almost 18 percent of the total population since the first report was issued. The 2018 report also found that Latinx people are still missing from executive positions.

Ethnic-specific art and culture institutions hire and exhibit artists of color, filling the void left by the nation's largest and major museums. Indeed, Latinx-specific spaces were foundational to the career and development of many of our current "art stars," from MacArthur "genius" grantees, such as artists Pepón Osorio and Amalia Mesa-Bains — both of whom exhibited at El Museo del Barrio, Galería de la Raza and the Mexican Museum of San Francisco at the start of their careers — to younger generations, such as artist Ramiro Gomez, who was "discovered" after his first exhibition at the Chicano Studies Research Center Library of U.C.L.A. in Los Angeles.

- VOCA Journal has published an interesting discussion about disability and inclusion in art conservation. Apologies for the long quote but it provides important context:

> **Describe your understanding of and/or thoughts and feelings about the word disability and your personal experience with it.**
>
> **Kim:** Let's start with a brief etymology, which is admittedly a bit contested. Currently, we use the term "disability" because "handicap" is considered politically incorrect. According to a common myth, the word "handicapped" originated in the United Kingdom under King Henry VII's reign in the sixteenth century, when veterans became disabled and, unable to find jobs, resorted to begging on streets with "cap-in-hand." In the Oxford English Dictionary, we learn the earliest use of the term was in a British betting game in 1653. In the nineteenth century, the term was commonly used in sports games to describe an act of making games *fair* by putting skilled competitors at a disadvantage, a practice that continues in golf today.
>
> "Handicap" was used in conjunction with disability for the first time in 1915, to categorize physically disabled children, and more widely used in 1958 to describe all disabled persons, whether children or adults, and whether physically or mentally disabled, or both.
>
> Historically, disabled people have been seen as a liability. They were often segregated, forcibly sterilized, institutionalized, or sent to labs: not only in Nazi Germany but also in the United States and Canada. The forced

> sterilization of disabled people continued in the US until 1979, even after the 1964 Civil Rights Act: the Supreme Court ruled that forced sterilization of the disabled people did not violate the US Constitution. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. even once infamously stated: “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime… society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind… Three generations of imbeciles is enough.”
>
> The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) formally granted some civil rights to the disabled in the US. In 1992, it was expanded to be known as “an equal opportunity law”, and recognized the need for accommodations and services in public and private sectors (e.g. transportation services). Access to electronic information technology became a law in 2010 with the Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA), the year I entered my college!

- Why do people keep stealing the Ghent Altarpiece?

- Artist Celia Paul writes for the *London Review of Books* about living in Lucian Freud's shadow, and how she was portrayed in his biography. While I hate people propagating the tired (and untrue) stereotype of the insane and maladjusted artist, the rest is great:

> When I met Lucian in the autumn of 1978, I was 18 and Lucian was 55. He was a visiting tutor at the Slade. I was keen to show him the first drawings and paintings I had made of my mother. I knew I had found my subject matter and I was excited to be making my first real works of art. And I had seen an exhibition of paintings by Lucian a few months before and had been especially struck by the paintings of his mother. I felt connected to him because of them.
>
> I come from a family of sisters. I have no brothers. Lucian was my first lover. My father was head of an evangelical community in North Devon when I got into the Slade, aged 16. I had been brought up to regard sex outside marriage as a sin.

- Eunsong Kim deconstructs Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*, published in 1985, and its violent use of metaphors. She writes:

> The toils of being unknown as a writer — who is talented, prolific — the toils of being unknown because of gender because of structural injustice — such was Dickinson's predicament. To be sure, there is pain in misrecognition; there is pain in dismal: the pain of wanting to be read and

> understood, of wanting to be read and grappled with — I think we can navigate this pain without the instrumentalization of slavery or abolition. In fact, I think perhaps Howe's white feminist critique of Dickinson's anonymity and lack of reception, and her careful reading of "My Life" become eclipsed through her abstraction of slavery and its abolition. To be unknown as apoet is painful, but this pain must be tended to with a full account of Dickinson's whiteness, her settler lineage, her silence and more.
>
> Once more: Higginson was an abolitionist. He was also a writer, an editor, and a publisher of poetry. Dickinson corresponds with him about poetry. Does Higginson's politics — as a white abolitionist — transfer over to Howe's *Emily Dickinson*, because they wrote to each other a few times, about poetry? The linkage between Higginson to Dickinson is reminiscent of the: I have an xyz friend, and thus the critique made of me is invalid but made on behalf of someone else. To what ends?

- Cara Ober writes about artist Monsieur Zohore's guerrilla performance outside the Baltimore Museum of Art, which references the Andy Warhol's "The Last Supper" (1986), which the museum was planning to sell:

> "I have had a long, deep relationship with Andy Warhol's work," explains Zohore. "I have always understood Warhol's practice as being larger than the material objects he made and seen Warhol's personality and practice as a kind of performance. For me, as a queer artist of color, Warhol's "The Last Supper," and its specific relationship to the AIDS epidemic when it was collected by the BMA in 1989, signifies the museum's ongoing commitment to diversity." Zohore says he was a little shocked when he

> learned about the museum's intended sale of the painting because he had no idea that the work was here in Baltimore. Although it had been on display at the center of the BMA's contemporary wing for close to twenty years, the painting was kept in storage during the two years that Zohore lived in Baltimore as a MICA student.

- Tammi Lawson writes about Augusta Savage, the only Black woman commissioned to create art for the 1939 World's Fair:

> Savage — also known for being a gallerist, art teacher and activist — was one of the earliest American artists to celebrate Black physiognomy in her sculpture. In 1929, She created a portrait bust of her nephew entitled GAMIN which won her a Rosenwald Fellowship and Guggenheim Award to study in Europe for 3 years.
>
> When she returned to Harlem she was eager to share what she learned and opened and managed several art schools, one of them located in the basement of the 135th Street Branch library, today known as The New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

- An Xiao Mina offers her predictions for journalism in 2021 for Neiman Labs (you can read all the opinions here). She writes:

> We have a rare opportunity to start making structural changes in our newsrooms, our business models and funding incentives, our ways of operating.
>
> We can start by abandoning the elitism that guides so much of journalism

> today and put money behind the calls for racial justice, making room to center the most marginalized by hiring journalists of color, journalists from the global south, journalists who are queer, trans, and disabled, and giving them leadership roles.
>
> We can diversify funding streams so we are less dependent on attention economics and advertising as the guiding force behind so much of our storytelling platforms and technologies.
>
> We can trust our audiences to understand complexity, rather than shy away from it, and tell the deeper stories of the interconnected systems that shape our daily lives.
>
> We can reimagine an internet where we scale up human rights and civics, not just data, profit, and infrastructure.

- ProPublica's important investigation into the impact of COVID-19 on a generation of young Black men is chilling. Akilah Johnson and Nina Martin write:

> While COVID-19 has killed 1 out of every 800 African Americans, a toll that overwhelms the imagination, even more stunning is the deadly efficiency with which it has targeted young Black men like Bates.
> One study using data through July found that Black people ages 35 to 44 were dying at nine times the rate of white people the same age, though the gap slightly narrowed later in the year. And in an analysis for ProPublica this summer using the only reliable data at the time accounting for age, race and gender, from Michigan and Georgia, Harvard researcher Tamara

> Rushovich found that the disparity was greatest in Black men. It was a phenomenon Enrique Neblett Jr. noticed when he kept seeing online memorials for men his age. “I’ll be 45 this year,” said the University of Michigan professor, who studies racism and health. “I wasn’t seeing 60- and 70-year-old men. We absolutely need to be asking what is going on here?”

- I wish the US and other countries did this:

> Hundreds of immigrants in France working on the coronavirus frontline have had their service to the country recognised with fast-track citizenship.

- This deepfake of the British Queen is creepy. Also, I will never understand (as a Canadian) the tendency for the Brits to make fun of Canadians. It’s just bizarre to me:

> An alternative message for a very alternative year. Watch on Christmas Day, 3:25pm. #AltXmas pic.twitter.com/L0qYL8jncI
>
> — Channel 4 (@Channel4) December 23, 2020

The internet gets me:

Required Reading is published every Saturday, and it is comprised of a short list of art-related links to long-form articles, videos, blog posts, or photo essays worth a second look.