

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 2
Daniel Bernard Roumain and *American Gothic*
National Gallery of Art

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host, Celeste Headlee. Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music. We see a photo. We walk around a sculpture. We taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint. But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting.

When we listen, what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear? This podcast lives in that convergence. In every episode, you learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

The American flag is a symbol. But what does it mean to you? It's a polarizing question in 2021. And it has been for a very long time.

In 1942, photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks was working for the US government under a fellowship with the Farm Security Administration. The world was at war. But Parks's job was to document the lives and living conditions of Americans here at home.

The American flag was everywhere at the time, fluttering from buildings and homes, blazoned on newspapers and magazines. But Gordon Parks used the flag as a backdrop in his most iconic photograph. It was called *Washington, DC Government Charwoman*. But you may know it as *American Gothic*.

In it, a Black custodial worker poses with her tools in an office she wanted to work in but couldn't because of the color of her skin. The massive flag behind her seems ominous, says composer and string player Daniel Bernard Roumain. We invited him to respond musically to Parks's photograph. And he meditated on what it means to be free, particularly for Black women.

You were really determined to include the voice of a Black woman in your composition. Why is that?

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: Oh, well, as a man and as a Black man, I need to follow. I think all men really need to think about the plight and the sacrifice and the suffering and, quite frankly, the success and the leadership of BIPOC women. So I felt it was very important to literally hear from a Black woman. Lady Caress identifies as a Black woman. And just as importantly, her work oftentimes is about the life and struggle and success of Black women.

As a Black man, I will never be able to speak for Black women. But certainly I will and have supported Black women, and more importantly, as we move into the new year, I want to make sure that I keep myself in check, quite frankly, and follow and listen. So Caress Russell and I danced with one another in an exchange of stories and circumstance.

We've been working together for years. And I respect her. And I think she's a brilliant artist. And I think our job was to not just musically respond to this iconic photograph, but to do it a deeper justice by adding a poem to it. What Lady Caress did, which I think is brilliant, is she created a poetic response to what she saw. And to quote her a bit in a poem she calls "She," even the first stanza is, "her voice is silent as she

stands in the foreground of the Stars and Stripes with no anticipation she, the physical form of stolen expectations.” I thought that line was so important, “the physical form of stolen expectations.”

CELESTE HEADLEE: For more on Gordon Parks and the woman in his most famous photograph, we talked with Philip Brookman. He’s a consulting curator in the Gallery’s photography department. And he actually worked with Parks himself before the photographer’s death in 2006.

PHILIP BROOKMAN: So we’re talking about a photograph called *Washington, DC Government Charwoman*, often referred to and also called *American Gothic*. It was made in July of 1942. And it’s one of the first pictures he made as a professional photographer.

So this photograph, it’s a portrait of a woman by the name of Ella Watson, who was a cleaning woman who worked for the Department of Agriculture at the time. And it shows Ella standing upright, a very dignified woman dressed in her work clothes and with simple polka dress. She’s holding in her right hand a broom. Kind of behind her is the mop.

So she’s there with her tools. And she’s standing in front of an American flag that’s hanging on the wall behind her. She’s looking just a little bit away from the photographer. So it’s not so much a documentary photograph as a portrait that is made with very complex lighting and props or tools. And she’s posed in front of this flag in the Office of the Notary Public at the Department of Agriculture, which was a job that Ella Watson wanted to get.

She felt she had enough government service and was fully qualified for the job. But the job was given to a white woman. I think it’s the juxtaposition of the cleaning woman who could not advance in her job and the symbol for freedom that sets up a kind of irony in this photograph that makes it an icon.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What do you notice first? When you look at this photograph, what’s the first thing you notice?

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: Oh, I see her face. I see her eyes. I see her looking at us. And I see pain, legacy. But I also see an enduring hope.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What is the next thing you notice?

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: Oh, that American flag [CHUCKLING] ominously hanging there in the back. It’s kind of hard to get around, right? Hard to miss.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It is. Why do you say it’s ominous?

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: Oh, that’s how I feel about America right now. I think for at least a lot of my Black friends and BIPOC friends, the American flag has become sinister even. The American flag, like a lot of names and symbols, have been co-opted by others. If I say Charlottesville, Trayvon, Sandra, George, even there’s an immediacy and a conjuring up of feelings and emotion. And I think that, for me, right now that American flag doesn’t really wave for me. It waves for others.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

PHILIP BROOKMAN: One of the things that I discovered in doing research for this project is that in the weeks before this photograph was made, every magazine in the United States had on its cover a picture of the American flag. It was something that was created to celebrate the 4th of July, 1942. And of course,

this is in the early days of World War II. And so patriotism is very much in the air. And the media is doing its part to promote the American war effort and promote the symbols that represent that patriotism.

And so in using that symbol, Parks is also, in some ways, subverting it. He has posed Ella Watson. While at the same time, she was unable to advance in her work because she was Black. In a way, that contradicts the symbolism of freedom, and it makes it stand for something else.

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: I can't imagine what life was like in 1942 for Ella Watson and her family. Specific to this photograph, we just get a glimpse, her glasses, her dress, the buttons on her dress, that particular broom, that particular office building. But 1942 was a very different place for Black Americans. 1942 was a much harder space.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What fascinated him, do you think, about her as a subject? He took so many photographs of Mrs. Watson in all different places, with her grandchildren, at home, at her work. Why did he like her as a subject?

PHILIP BROOKMAN: I think that Gordon Parks first met Ella Watson in the offices of the Farm Security Administration, where he was working as a Fellow. And his mentor at the Farm Security Administration-- we call it the FSA-- was Roy Stryker. And Stryker encouraged Gordon Parks to meet and talk to Ella Watson because he felt that it was somebody that Gordon could relate to.

He had been living in the North. And when he came to Washington, DC, the nation's capital, it was a segregated city, a Southern city. And so Roy Stryker, I think, was very understanding of how hard it was going to be for Parks to both operate in Washington as a professional, and also how hard it was going to be for him to understand the complexity of making a photograph that would actually convey that anger.

Stryker told Gordon Parks that you can't just take a photograph of a bigot and label it bigot because it could be anybody. You have to find a way to represent all of the feelings that you have in a photograph. And I think that Parks and Watson could relate to each other.

So Ella tells Gordon Parks her life story. And it was a very difficult story. She had herself come from the South, grew up in poverty. She described her father being lynched in the South. Parks saw her as somebody who was kind of symbol for the perseverance of the working woman and the working Black woman. And so that's really what he wanted to convey.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Do you think this is an unhappy photograph? Do you think she's unhappy in this picture?

PHILIP BROOKMAN: I think of this photograph as being one of actually great hope. Here's a Black working woman standing up for her rights in front of that symbol for freedom. And I think that's what it really conveys, more than anything.

This is a time that is really the very early days of the modern civil rights movement. And I think the photograph had so much power that the government hid it away. It was never published by the Farm Security Administration.

Roy Stryker told Gordon Parks when he first saw the photograph. He said, you're getting the right idea, Gordon. But you're going to get us all fired because it was a time of real kind of contention within the government. In the late 1940s, it was first published in *EBONY* magazine. And so I think it wasn't really until then that the photograph became known and became the symbol that it is today.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So let's dig into the musical language that you used. To me, it felt almost tidal. It felt like you are recreating the movement of wind or water. It felt like a landscape to me. But I wonder, as you sat down and began to write, what kind of images were in your head?

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: I think I thought about a tableau. I thought about elegy. I thought about mourning, a dirge. How do you honor someone you love but you can't say it to them anymore? When I looked at Ella Watson, I long to have known her. I think about her life's daily struggles.

I think about the circumstances of her children. At the same time, I think about my mother and her as a Haitian immigrant, her suffering, all the work being taken for granted, having to do all the work, provide, and then being left behind, pushed to the side, being taken for granted. So I thought a lot about the sorrow of our lives, of their lives.

CELESTE HEADLEE: There's moments, also, where the chords kind of resolve in this surprising way. I wonder how often you were compelled to do that, whether that came naturally or you thought to yourself, OK, I need these lifts every once in a while that sneak up on the audience?

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: Yeah. Well, it's an orchestra of one, right? So there's probably about—I don't know—10, maybe 15 different tracks. It's the full range from violin to right into the cello range. I'm using extended instruments with extended ranges, large instruments with extended ranges.

There's also synthesizers and all sorts of different computer sounds, if you will, and manipulations. But it's an orchestra of one. You should get the sense that it's many people. And it's hard to do that because you have to remember each time what you're playing. And then the music is complex, in that there's an ebb and flow, what we call an oscillation, the up and down of something.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, that was the tidal movement that I felt.

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: Yeah, like a wave, like a sonic—a sonic wave is just like any wave. It goes up. It crests. And then it comes down. Those oscillations, I thought, spoke to the rhythm of what I would imagine be the rhythm of her life, going to work, taking care of her family, making breakfast, making dinner, hopefully finding time for herself, her grandchildren, making sure the bills are paid, mourning, silent prayers, I hope daydreaming, being rambunctious. That's the rhythm of life, as we say.

And I think what's important is white people have a certain rhythm. Black people have a certain rhythm. I think that those rhythms are different. And certainly in this country, those rhythms oftentimes come into conflict.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Can we talk a bit about *American Gothic*, the original 1930 painting? What does that original *American Gothic* say about America, do you think?

PHILIP BROOKMAN: The original painting by Grant Wood is a picture that Parks would have known. And it's a painting that shows a farmer and his wife. They're standing in front of the iconic American farmhouse in Iowa. And the farmer's holding up a pitchfork in his hand. And they're looking straight out at the camera.

And it's an American regionalist painting. It really tells something about where these people come from and maybe steadfastness and the earnestness and the hard work that is necessary to be a farmer in America in the 1930s. It's a painting about the times, painting about the role of the farmer. And of course, the whole painting is made up. It's not a painting that he made from real people.

He used models. He sort of constructed the painting from the ideals that he wanted to convey. I don't believe that when Gordon Parks photographed Ella Watson that he was specifically thinking about that painting, *American Gothic*. He never called it *American Gothic* until many years later. So I'm not convinced that he was really trying to, in some ways, recreate a painting that he knew, certainly.

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: So it's a mythology. And by that I mean like any myth, there's a certain truth to it. As you look at those two people framed in a certain way and—well, that pervasive quality of the virtuous but hard-working American. I grew up in a household where both my parents had multiple jobs and worked hard. And it was a part of what it meant to be an American.

My parents are Haitian immigrants. That meant you went to school, and you did well. You got a job as early as you could. And everybody contributed. Everybody worked hard. Ella Watson is a part of that American story, that mythology of the American story, right? That if you work hard enough, dot, dot, dot.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Is this the most famous picture Gordon Parks ever took?

PHILIP BROOKMAN: I think it probably today is the most important and most famous photograph that he made. It's the picture he's best known for. And I think it's certainly one of the most iconic, and that's because *American Gothic* is a icon of the modern civil rights movement.

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: For me, the real test of any portrait would be if the subject could look at that, or hear, in this case, hear their musical portrait and say, you know what? You found me or better, you captured something about me that I didn't know was there. Musical portraits is something I've been doing for years, almost like a party trick. And I've enjoyed it because I could then ask the subject, well, what did you hear? What did you think?

Honestly, sometimes people are a little bit taken aback, I would say a third. Another third laugh, or they don't really know what to say or the laughter comes out. But then there's that precious third that sometimes gets reduced to tears. They hear something about themselves that wasn't there before.

I hope doesn't sound cliché or silly. But composing isn't really hard. You just have to kind of listen and get out of the way of it. And that portrait is so musical. The music was always there and always will be.

I believe in heaven. I believe in the soul. And I believe that if you listen deeply enough, you can hear. You can hear ancestors talking with you. And I hope Ella Watson appreciates what Caress and I tried to do for her. I hope Gordon Parks appreciates what we tried to do for him. And by that I mean creating something now from something that was then. And in doing that, I hope that they know that all of that work and all of that sacrifice and all of that suffering has led and will lead to success, joy, and a wonderful Black self-expression.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's the piece Daniel Bernard Roumain and Lady Caress created for us uninterrupted.

LADY CARESS: Her voice is silent.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

She stands in the foreground of Stars and Stripes, with no anticipation. She physical form of stolen expectations.

Held together, no doubt, by safety pins or cotton polka-dot dress, missing two buttons suggests that the expectation of her physical presentation be merely that she be clothed. No royal robes. She stands in front of the American flag, peering off into the distance of a future she will never have. Her hard work used, no harvest.

Her only companions being mop and broom, she stands in a room where she's only truly seen through a camera lens. Those eyes behind her one-inch thick glasses confirm that her dreams were not of hope, but that she copes with the reality of staying in her place. Her race be kin to sun-kissed skin, unbothered by the presence of her melanin, no long beautiful mane.

As she stands in the foreground of Stars and Stripes with no anticipation. She, physical form of stolen expectations.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Daniel Bernard Roumain and Caress Russell, also known as Lady Caress. And a note: DBR has worked with us before and performed in the Gallery's Sunday concert series in February of 2018. *Sound Thoughts on Art* is a production of the National Gallery of Art's Music Department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs, and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, nga.gov/podcast.

If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also leave us a review wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time. Be well.