

Impact Statement

Abbie Herrin, Grade 11.
Reflecting Back, 2019.
Digital art, 14 x 11 Inches.
Mill Creek High School, Hoschton, GA
Unsung Hero: Alice Seeley Harris

When I began researching for my Unsung Hero, Alice Seeley Harris' story, "Kodak in the Congo", caught my eye because the just like Alice Seeley Harris, the atrocities that took place in the Congo during King Leopold's II reign are often lost in history. I had briefly heard of the events in the Congo, but only in passing one day in AP World History, it was mentioned then we moved on to something deemed "more important", something that would actually show up on the test or the AP exam itself. It is a shame that historical events such as atrocities in the Congo are (at least in the United States educational system) overlooked, especially in events such as this one where it is estimated that up to 10 million innocent lives were lost.

Upon finding Harris' story on the Lowell Milken website, I looked further into not only Alice Seeley Harris, but the story of the atrocities in the Congo in the late 1800s; after King Leopold took over the Congo region in 1885 he began his private ventures in an effort to accumulate even more wealth. He was initially interested in ivory, but soon his focus shifted towards the harvest of rubber due to the invention of the bicycle causing a high demand for rubber tires. During this time is when missionary Alice Seeley Harris and her husband came into the picture. After moving to the Congo, Alice was often told not to interact with the Congolese and she could not go out without another male to accompany her, but she disobeyed those orders and would often talk to the locals by herself, realizing the torture they lived through every day. She began to chronicle the horrors with her Kodak Brownie, one of the first portable cameras. After taking a series of pictures displaying the injustices, Harris' photos were published garnering worldwide attention to the problem at hand. She would go on to tour throughout Europe to 49 different cities where she would showcase the photographs that exposed the cruelty of the Belgian king as a part of her "Congo Atrocities Lecture". One of the most famous pictures depicts a young man looking at the severed hand and foot of his daughter who was raped and killed just moments before because he did not harvest enough rubber. This image is where I drew much of my inspiration from for my art piece. My piece depicts a more somber tone of what Harris did, rather than some of the other ones (where the pieces are more upbeat); the piece is supposed to show Harris in her old age reflecting back on what she did in her life. In the center is the Kodak Brownie camera and the Congo as without either of those things she would have not been able to make the difference she did. The two men in chains and the man sitting down are artist renditions of two of the most famous photographs that Harris took. Every layer above Harris on in the piece is more stylistic to represent the past, the sharp edges showing the harshness of the torture. The hand and foot are from the picture of the man sitting; they show the jarring reality of everyday life for the Congolese as they saw loved ones ripped away and tortured. Soldiers working for King Leopold would often have to cut off the limb of the person they killed to prove they did not waste a bullet, so severed limbs were commonplace. The gold and chains represent the oppression and slavery in the Congo at the time, while Harris herself was not enslaved, the gold on her glasses and the camera shows how she was haunted by the

acts she saw. While this piece may not be as upbeat as previous pieces, I believe it accurately depicts the harsh reality of what the people in the Congo had to live through and what Alice Seeley Harris had a part in stopping.

While making this piece I believe that the most important thing I learned was just about the profound affect Alice Seeley Harris had on ending the cruelty in the Congo. While her actions might have taken a few years to take full effect, she was instrumental in exposing King Leopold and what was occurring. Harris and her husband would later go on to become secretaries of the Congo Reform Association, devoting the rest of their lives to humanitarian and anti-slavery efforts, which unfortunately goes unnoticed. To share this project with my community I told my friends and classmates about her and presented my art piece in front of the class, giving a brief synopsis of what Harris did and why she is so important to our history. I also posted the image with a brief description on my social media where it could possibly be seen by hundreds of people.

At its worst, humanity is filled with terror, racism, and ignorance, power only by the want for personal gain, but at its best, we work together to build a better world and if we see anyone treated unequally, then we all come together to stop it. Alice Seeley Harris is humanity at its best, she saw a major problem in the Congo and tried to stop it; while she may have not risked her life in a war zone, her actions had profound effects. By exposing King Leopold, she began a movement that would eventually remove him from the Congo, saving millions of lives that would have been lost had it not been for Alice Seeley Harris.