Contents

A Visionary Sense of London, Laura Grace Ford

Bert Hardy: Exercises with Photography and Film, Lynda Nead and John Wyver

Postindustrialism and the Long Arts And Crafts Movement: between Britain, India, and the United States Of America, Sria Chatterjee

Reason Dazzled: The All-Seeing and the Unseeing in Turner's Regulus, Matthew Beaumont


Skin and Bone: Surface and Substance in Anglo-Colonial Portraiture, David Hansen
Introduction

This Cover Collaboration presents the edited and illustrated transcript of a lecture given by Laura Grace Ford at Tate Britain, in conjunction with the conference William Blake and the Idea of the Artist (29 November 2019) and the exhibition William Blake (11 September 2019–2 February 2020), both also held at Tate Britain.

Chartered Streets

My intention isn’t to give an exhaustive account of William Blake’s life, to give biographical details, or to construct an idea of the man in a quotidian sense, but instead to think about how he cultivates a visionary sense of London by walking.

I’m going to speak as an artist, not a scholar, and I’m going to talk about London in 2019, about the city now and how Blake still resounds in it. To me Blake is a spectral force, he haunts the contemporary moment. My own work is generated by walking in London, long dérives that in some way channel the affective currents in the city. My work is socio-geographic—it draws on the experience of the collective, of the social, and this is something I recognise in Blake. His work isn’t made in isolation; it doesn’t come from a position of solipsistic withdrawal. It comes directly from working in London, living in London, and long rambling drifts to the edges of the city.

In the poem London, he’s among people, close enough to read their faces and see what he describes as “Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (Fig. 1). This isn’t a faceless multitude, an anonymous crowd. What he notices, what he feels, is individual suffering folded and multiplied.
This is a deeply divided city, a city riven with injustice, where Blake hears the “cry of every Man”, and the “Infants cry of fear”. These cries reverberate, they are all around him, and he doesn’t seek to insulate himself or block them out; instead, he interprets them, channels them, positions them within the wider context of colonisation and exploitation.

My own deployment of the dérive is a move towards mapping the social, the residual emotions of the collective. The idea of mapping a city’s psychic infrastructure, which is what I think Blake was doing, moves beyond the observations of the individual towards a collective reading of the terrain. Fred
Moten and Stefano Harney talk about “hapticity”, the feelings you can tune into through others. Cedric Robinson said that the dispossessed created “solvent-objects” that could erode attempts to fix the city in a colonial bind.

What interests me in Blake is the idea that sometimes the edge of the city folds back in and the liminal emerges in the centre. It’s in these gaps where political life emerges as a current, where excluded voices become audible and the expression of a collective unconscious can be heard (Figs. 2 and 3).

Figure 2.
When Blake says “In every voice: in every ban, The mind-forg’d manacles I hear”, I think about the UK now: payday lenders, zero hours contracts, inadequate housing. The pressures we experience at work, and how we’re repeatedly told that we as individuals determine our fate; that if we’re poor, it’s our own fault for not constructing a better narrative. This idea lies at the heart of contemporary neoliberalism: it’s there in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), in managerial dictats, in back-to-work schemes, and TV talk shows. It’s almost as if Blake foresaw this contemporary form of psychic binding.

The historian E.P. Thompson found that in an original sketch of the poem London, Blake used the term “german forg’d links” before changing it to “mind-forg’d manacles”. Instead of being historically specific and speaking
about the monarchy of his time—the House of Hanover—I think Blake was writing for eternity, the future, a people yet to come, and our current situation. ³

The first time that I came to see the William Blake exhibition at Tate Britain, I walked from St James’s Park. There was a lot of building work underway, an intensification of it around the tube station, with concrete spines, prefabricated rooms, armatures, fences. The city was under incredible pressure here, they were branding it “Buckingham Green, a new quarter for London.” I think about Blake’s London again, his use of the term “chartered streets” in London to speak about the domination of chartered companies in the late eighteenth century, the parcelling up and privatisation of the city. In Blake’s London, even the river was being chartered by the East India Company. This must have horrified Blake, who revered the river as a site of spiritual significance, who always lived and worked within a mile or two of it, and who wouldn’t have been able to dissociate the East India Company’s activity on the Thames and their overseas colonies.

Blake was living in the time of enclosures, the process of seizing and privatising common land by acts of parliament, which intensified between 1760 and 1820, when in “village after village, common rights [were] lost”. ⁴ To quote E.P. Thompson, “Enclosure […] was a plain enough case of class robbery”. ⁵ This intensive span maps roughly onto Blake’s lifetime, and I think the phrase “chartered streets” draws a line between the enclosures and colonisation—he means he’s witnessing the same process.
Figure 4.
William Blake, Jerusalem, Plate 1, Frontispiece, 1804-1820, Relief etching, 34.3 x 26.4 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection B1992.8.1(1). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art
We see it in London now, contemporary enclosures emerging in multiple forms: Business Improvement Districts, Special Economic Zones, gated communities, and compulsory purchase orders. The desire pulsing through Blake’s work, and the milieu and traditions it emerged from, is to unbind, loosen, and open up those private resources and return them to the commons. In Blake’s longest illustrated book, *Jerusalem* (1804–1820), England (personified by Albion) must be reunited with the eponymous city to connect all of humanity in love, and I think this restoration of the commons is what Jerusalem represents (Figs. 4 and 5).

**Sorcery and Counter-Sorcery**

In London 2019, we can see that four decades of deregulated capital has wrought a systematic attack on the commons. Urban master plans are the kind of single vision renderings Blake despised, which reduce the city to measurements, net worth, securities, and investments. But the marketing of them operates in another terrain. The luxury developments rising in serried formations across the city cast a psychic net over our vision of London, and their promotional CGI images of the future are a form of libidinal engineering, late capitalist sorcery. It’s obvious that neoliberalism has learned to hijack the psychic channels that Blake recognised on his walks through the city.

London is possessed by hoardings promoting private developments (Figs. 6 and 7). These images of luxury lifestyles have become so ubiquitous that we barely notice them; champagne swilling bankers looming over scenes of
abject poverty are part of the urban fabric, internalised in the dream grammar of the city. Eerie and unsettling in their conjuring of the future, they represent something unrealized, something virtual.

Figure 6.
These developments are often accompanied by promotional films to lure investors. Their projections corral us into a hallucinogenic zone in which we’re lulled into a set of dissociative tropes, where in opiate-induced dreams we hover above buildings and drift through walls. This oneiric-delirial time evokes the idea of haunting and absence, a “decanted” and socially cleansed inner London. The halo of films and hoardings make a claim on psychic space, they define the terms of a new social imaginary.

Blake’s own visions of London were a kind of counter-sorcery, a way of reconnecting with an ancient English history that opposed the eighteenth-century rationalism of his time, which to him seemed sterile, calculated, and deathly (Figs. 8 and 9). This lineage emanated from Albion and ran through the true levellers, Winstanley’s Diggers, and the dissenting sects that Blake was born into; it spoke of the commons, a shared experience of joy and abundance, and a glimpse of something yet to be realized, something virtual—a post-capitalist England.
Figure 8.
I think today in London, it’s not just the streets we’re fighting over, but also the psychic terrain. Blake, who lived in a city of the seen and the unseen, understood both. When he says:

The Fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John’s Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold;
And there Jerusalem’s pillars stood.
the earthly and divine appear simultaneously. The London he inhabited was socially divided and politically febrile, it was a city of mobs, of destitution, and eruptions of violence. Blake was swept up in riots, he saw the Albion Flour Mills burn, and wore the red cap of the Jacobins, but he also saw angels in London—it was where he communed with ghosts.

Crossing Victoria Street, I see police everywhere closing roads, Parliament Square beyond, their fluorescent lines jamming the exits. There’s a week of protests by Extinction Rebellion, and Blake echoes through it; his visionary consciousness, his heightened sensitivity, was deployed in the war against injustice and the violation of the earth through exploitation and greed. The protestors are catching up with Blake now, gradually shedding vestiges of liberalism as their exposure to the apparatus of the state increases. Blake’s call to overcome the walls and fences, the chartered streets, is being adopted by greater numbers; if we want to avert climate catastrophe, it’s the only option.

Blake was vehemently against the Enlightenment concept of the individual, the stable unitary subject. He rejected the idea that humans are autonomous and bound individuals who exist above nature; this was not how he saw the world. Instead, he saw forces, energy flows, light, he saw immanence and connectedness (Figs. 10 and 11). This worldview upsets the neoliberal privileging of the sovereign individual by calling upon the collective to free ourselves. The self in Blake’s work is present not as a monolithic, insoluble I, but as a vessel channelling signals. His work is a contribution to and enunciation of the collective, and speaks to what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari called a people “yet to come”—in our counter-national anthem, it is WE who can build Jerusalem, not I. ⁶
The Extinction Rebellion protests also carry traces of the London I came across in the early 1990s—threads unspooling from Reclaim the Streets actions against environmental degradation, Spiral Tribe parties under the
strobe of Canary Wharf, and also convoy culture, the protests and festivals at Stonehenge. I connected with these counter-cultural scenes and protest movements—that’s how I mapped London. The free party scene opened up radically different perceptions of the city and temporary occupations forged a reconfiguration of architecture, a new way of negotiating the terrain. I recognise the same forces in Blake, he haunts these movements, these visions of a decolonised city without gated communities or private property and locked down riverside developments.

It’s Blake's capacity to radically reimagine the city that I think is so necessary, so urgent. His writing resonates most strongly in the sites where we’re radicalised in effervescences of collective joy. You can sense the force of Blake’s work in experiences of psychedelic intensity. My own perception of London was affected and intensified through my experience of rave—which felt like tapping into that same counter-history, a subterranean current. The cultural theorist Mark Fisher, in an essay called “Baroque Sunbursts”, talks about rave culture within the context of the compulsory individualism of neoliberalism, and the crushing of collectivity. He says:

Rave’s ecstatic festivals revived the use of time and land which the bourgeoisie had forbidden and sought to bury. Yet, for all that it recalled those older festive rhythms, rave was evidently not some archaic revival. It was a spectre of post-capitalism more than of pre-capitalism.  

And I think that’s important, that tapping into historical currents is not some form of re-enactment or exercise in nostalgia, but a sense of the melting of linear time, moving into the expanse of what Blake recognised as a collective history (Fig. 12). Mark Fisher goes on to say:

the “energy flash” of rave, now seems like a memory bleeding through from a mind that is not ours. In fact, the memories come from ourselves as we once were: a group consciousness that waits in the virtual future not only in the actual past. So it is perhaps better to see the other possibilities that these baroque sunbursts illuminate not as some distant Utopia, but as a carnival that is achingly proximate, a spectre haunting even the most miserably de-socialised spaces.
To experience freedom and liberation, no matter how temporarily, is to have one’s expectations raised. Emancipatory moments haunt us; they persist as indelible marks, and despite efforts to naturalise the dominant order through the processes of recuperation and repression, these marks are never fully erased. Like a palimpsest with layers of text written and overwritten, there are moments when previous inscriptions are grasped with vivid clarity.

**Quantum Time in Another London**

I walk through Strutton Ground, a pocket of an older, working-class London, a different kind of temporality, which is becoming gentrified but still with some vestige of another London. I used to work around here fifteen years ago, in a
Salvation Army hostel on Westminster Bridge Road. I ran art classes for homeless people and it wasn’t an easy job, sometimes there would be fifty or sixty men crushed into the church hall, for warmth and shelter mostly, and the sweet tea and digestives. I remember their drawings and some haunt me still, images of London which ranged from the cartoonish to the cosmic, from labelled mythologies to mental maps. It was my first job as an outreach worker for Westminster Council, a way in through a class that no one else wanted. I feel Blake’s presence in these neglected, overlooked sites of the city, with those huddled on the pavements, whose abject suffering is so ubiquitous it’s barely commented on.

Then Page Street, I cut through the estates, a mossy path under cherry branches, winter flowering jasmine, a kettle whistling through an open window. These are the unofficial routes through the city, the writing in the margins of official text, moments of epiphany unsung and undocumented.

Then Millbank and the Thames. On the opposite side MI5, the ziggurats of St George’s Wharf, and luxury towers around Vauxhall. This is London in the grip of finance capital and the logic of surveillance, which was being implemented in Blake’s own time. But the river is a threshold site, where time behaves differently. The regimentation of clock time has no relevance, the tidal river is governed by moon phases. And there, for me, in that tidal sequence, the encounter with Blake is the most lucid. I think about Auguries of Innocence, when he says:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour

This strikes me as the essence of Blake’s vision, like the eye of the heart in Sufism, Spinoza’s single substance, or when Hermes Trismegistus recognised that all things are interwoven, and said the words recorded on the Emerald Tablet: “In truth, certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above. And whatever is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of the one thing.” Blake follows when he says ‘All deities reside in the human breast” and that “every thing that lives is Holy”.

Place can be a site of resistance to neoliberalism, and I want to return to the lines where Blake describes Jerusalem manifest in London and names particular places: Marylebone, Primrose Hill, St Johns Wood. This privileging of certain places strikes me as a deployment of the counter-sorcery I mentioned before; one more tactic still relevant today.
If you think about contemporary London, how areas are rebranded, how places are “re-made” under the rubric of urban regeneration, then perhaps we need to re-examine how Blake understood place. It’s important to remember Blake’s years as a boy, making engravings in Westminster Abbey, somewhere he absorbs the aura of the sacred. He develops a deep understanding of Gothic art, and recognises its forms, the living line, as if the stone is animated, moving and flowing, and his sense of a mystical geography must come partly from this experience. A paragraph from Peter Ackroyd’s book *Blake* vividly evokes the intensity of this experience:

> Images of arches and ogres and canopies reappear through his subsequent art, springing directly from his time among the ancient monuments of the church, but there is also a more fugitive and elusive atmosphere that he recreates in much of his later work. He experienced the coolness and seclusion of “masses of stone in ordered forms” in the nave and the ambulatories, he knew the many rooms of intricate workmanship, the great doors, the narrow passages that seem to lead into the interior darkness of some labyrinth. It was an image of a stone world which Blake was to resurrect in his prophetic verse, at once forbidding, austere and inspiring. His art and poetry are filled with the images of steep steps and ancient doorways, of cloisters and arches and crypts that suggest dissolution and decay but which are also often seen as harbingers of a spiritual world still lying upon the surface of the earth. 10

The way time behaves in a sacred place like Westminster Abbey is to do with the eternal. Blake works with this kind of time to map the city, panning slowly across vistas, opening long lines of sight. The visions become eternal, cosmic. But London persists, and the visions contain names, with architectural details that we can recognise in his drawings. This mystical-spatial approach allows contours and edges to emerge, delineations of imaginary spaces, the other worlds we might begin to realize.

The idea of being able to stand in a churchyard in Marylebone and emerge in Primrose Hill is a conversation about quantum time. It’s a move between states or positions, which is different to travelling time, and is a break in the sense that Will Alexander or Fred Moten might talk about it. It also has something to do with the shape-shifting and time-travelling of Detroit Techno. Blake’s idea of the energy field, portal, or star gate is a device I use in my own work to describe the melting of geographical and temporal boundaries and the proximity of other social fields, other worlds
(Fig. 13). In a sense, it operates like Simondon’s privileged points, or Benjamin’s dialectical image, or Mark Fisher’s baroque sunbursts—a moment where past and future can be grasped simultaneously.

**Visionary Consciousness**

Blake’s works are psycho-topographies and fugitive temporalities. They feel contemporary, and fit into current philosophical discussions around entanglement and quantum mechanics, seen in the work of people like Karen Barad. There’s a renewed interest in Spinoza and Lucretius, and Blake fits into that as well; it allows us to occupy multiple zones simultaneously.

In the article “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance”, Barad speaks of a ghostly sense of dis/continuity where, “There is no overarching sense of temporality, of continuity in place. Each scene diffracts various temporalities within and across the field of spacetimemattering. Scenes never rest, but are reconfigured within, dispersed across, and threaded through one another.” For me, she could be writing on Blake.

Years ago, I found a book in a charity shop, a self-published pamphlet of sacred sites. I had always been transfixed by Blake’s drawing of a churchyard in Marylebone, a garden encircling an energy field. We’d searched the neighbourhood before but it had evaded us, slipped out of sight in a skein of scaffolding and railings. Now, it appeared as a hallucination in the pamphlet, the conjuration of something numinous and unworldly from the mottled pages of that book. St Marylebone. A Corinthian portico with eight columns and gilded caryatids around the steeple. It showed a cobbled path and an overarching plane tree in the centre. I felt a euphoric surge, a giddy sensation like clary sage or psilocybin, a trembling beneath my feet, the sensation of standing on uneven flagstones. Those dreams I sometimes have, tectonic plates shifting. I remember someone describing the same dreams to me years ago.

And that brings me to where I want to finish, by thinking about walking as an experience of sensory derangement (Figs. 14, 15, and 16). A teeming metropolis like London can certainly produce this experience. This idea of sharpening our perception, or moving into a higher register in order to cultivate a collective visionary sense, seems pertinent in 2019 when London ripples beneath a veil of weed smoke, alcohol, and SSRIs. There is a desire for collective lucidity and joy in place of atomised intoxication, where drugs are a means of privately managing pressure. Everyone is haunted by that desire, and recognises that the offer of citalopram, supermarket wine, CBT is more often about blocking life than living it.
Figure 13.

Figure 14.
We see sensory derangement and the cultivation of a visionary consciousness in Thomas De Quincey’s London, where the city becomes a labyrinth constructed from his opium-fuelled wanderings. For Walter Benjamin, hashish allows a radical reordering of the city. We also see it in Surrealism, the Negritude movement, and the poetry of Aimé Césaire. Blake’s intoxication seems to come from a similar place, but instead of using drugs to tune in, walking the city seems to be the precursor, perhaps even the prerequisite, for many of these visions and encounters with the divine.

The currents Blake tuned into are live, spectral but live. He shows us glimpses of a higher level of consciousness, and tactics we might need to call forth an absent collective subject to occupy those new social imaginaries, those alternative worlds achingly proximate to ours.

Footnotes

1 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 105–107. Available at: https://link.library.smu.edu.sg/lkcsb_research/5025.
8 Fisher, "Baroque Sunbursts", 45.

9 These quotations are from Plates 11 and 27, respectively, in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–1793).


**Bibliography**


Abstract

The two short films and essay published here come out of a collaborative research project on the aesthetic and historical qualities of Bert Hardy’s wartime and post-war photography for Picture Post. Developing the methodologies being explored in the field of videographic criticism, we use moving images to produce a visual exploration of the material and formal qualities of Bert Hardy’s photographs in the 1940s. Digital moving images and sound, we suggest, expand our potential understanding and analysis of Hardy’s work, in ways in which traditional written modes of criticism cannot. We use the poetic and expressive possibilities of our medium to highlight and examine those material qualities, along with the historical atmosphere of post-war visual media. The two films each explore a particular Hardy photo-story: Fire-Fighters! focuses on the themes of grain in the printed image, the facial close-up as an affective form of national expression, narrative sequence, and the move in the story from figuration to abstraction. The second film, Life in the Elephant develops the concept of narrative and photographic sequence and facial/emotional expression. It also considers the ways in which the photo-story expresses a sense of historical place. The accompanying article develops the historical contexts for the two photo-stories, the theoretical ideas motivating the project, and the technical processes and collaborative partnerships involved in making the films.

Authors

Pevsner Chair of History of Art at Birkbeck.

John Wyver is a writer and producer, and Professor of the Arts on Screen at the University of Westminster

Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt thanks to Matthew Butson, Vice-President and Melanie Llewellyn, Curator, of Getty Images for their help and support at all stages of our research.
Cite as

Everywhere I look, and most of the time I look, I see photographs.

– Bert Hardy.

…moments of emotion and something ineffable, beyond what can actually be said, [inhabit] the image and [overwhelm] it.

– Laura Mulvey

…the video is … a work of material thinking, one that [brings] to the surface of its production new knowledge both about [the object of study] and about this method of re-handling it.

– Catherine Grant.

The three quotes that introduce and frame this essay specify both its object and its methodology. The first is taken from the autobiography of the British photojournalist, Bert Hardy (1913–1995), published towards the end of a long career in news and commercial photography. It is a well-known statement, often quoted, about a way of seeing the world photographically, that is to say, in which the conventions of photojournalism have become entirely naturalised and internalised. It is a claim to comprehending and representing life in visual terms.

The other quotes are taken from two film theorists who have been working recently in the medium of the video essay. In an interview, Laura Mulvey describes how new digital technologies have enabled her to develop an experimental form of audio-visual criticism. She calls this method “delayed cinema”, in which she slows down, freezes, and repeats a short sequence from a classic feature film and, in so doing, reveals or releases a set of aesthetic qualities and affects that are an intrinsic part of the film but that might otherwise be elusive or overlooked by conventional viewing and written analysis. In a detailed reflection on her own practice in videographic criticism, Catherine Grant describes her video essays as acts of “material thinking”, which produce new ways of understanding both the filmic object of study and the research method itself. There is, then, a certain synergy between Hardy’s claim to a visual mode of understanding the world and Mulvey and Grant’s use of audio-visual technologies to explore the aesthetic and expressive qualities of film. The purpose of this project is to engage in “material thinking” about Hardy’s photography through the method of the video essay. Its aim is to uncover the “ineffable” qualities of his work—those aspects that Mulvey writes about so evocatively and that create its affect and historical atmosphere.
The two short films (Figs. 1 and 2) and essay published here come out of a collaboration between art and cultural historian Lynda Nead and writer and media producer John Wyver. We share a fascination with the art and visual culture of Britain in the 1940s and 1950s and, most particularly, we are drawn to the atmosphere and historical materiality of visual media in this period. Developing the methodologies set out by Mulvey and Grant (and others in a rapidly expanding field of scholarship), we wanted to work with moving images and the possibilities suggested by videographic criticism to produce a visual exploration of the material and aesthetic qualities of Bert Hardy’s photographs in the 1940s for the illustrated weekly newspaper, *Picture Post*. We both felt that the medium of film (or, more precisely, digital moving images and sounds) would expand our potential understanding and representation of these issues in a way that the usual ekphrastic modes of criticism would not. As Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, two key exponents of this form, have written:

> ...when working with moving images and sounds, the poetic force of the source materials cannot be ignored or avoided. Many videographic works adopt the rhetorical mode most typical for scholars, offering an illustrated lecture or written essay being narrated, an approach that we term the “explanatory” mode. The most effective videographic works, however—those which produce the most potent knowledge effect—employ their audiovisual source materials in a poetic imaginative way. ⁵

Our aim was to deploy the poetic and expressive possibilities of our medium and to ensure that our films (a shorthand designation that is as inevitable as it is imprecise) were responsive to Hardy’s photography and to the look of *Picture Post*. The films do not seek to explain or straightforwardly contextualise Hardy’s images and the photo-stories built from them. Rather
they attempt to highlight and explore those aesthetic qualities that we had both come to admire in our previous work on post-war visual media. These qualities have to do with *mise en scène*, with the staging and framing of the photographs, with light and shadow, the figures and the locations and, always, we felt, with a set of affects that was more than the form and the content as conventionally understood, something in excess of what the images show or are “about”. There is an ambiance, a richness, in Hardy’s images and in the sheer physical presence of those photographed and their survival through the war and its aftermath. This visual atmosphere of the images is, in part, a product of their constitutive formal elements, but it is also ineffable and overwhelming, as Mulvey puts it; imaginative and poetic, to use the words of Keathley and Mittell.

In recent decades, many scholars in both art history and film studies have shied away from approaches to which ideas like tone and atmosphere are central. They smack of connoisseurship and a patrician style of criticism that were forcefully and justifiably rejected in the wake of Marxist, post-structuralist, and feminist revisions of the arts and humanities. After decades of caution about aesthetic significance, however, there is a new interest in the distinctive characteristics of visual images and a reassessment of close visual analysis as a methodology. This is not to reassert the conservative values of aesthetic judgement but it is to acknowledge the importance of visual atmosphere. Atmosphere may be staged and manipulated; it is culturally highly expressive and addresses collective emotional, political, and social feelings. To overlook these elements of images is to discount a key and defining characteristic of their nature and whilst written criticism can certainly address these matters, we were interested to explore whether the audio-visual method can do this more effectively. And in developing this address, we wanted to produce innovative and creative works that acknowledged the affective power of Hardy’s images and their presentation on the pages of *Picture Post*, and that might, perhaps, prompt complementary emotional responses as well as intellectual engagement. In this, our practice followed the ideas of Catherine Grant, who has written,

The sensuous and affective methodologies of videographic material-thinkers mean that the latter often immerse themselves differently, more completely, in the audio-visual forms of the medium they research and can move around to form new (scholarly and other) objects. In this kind of environment, the critical aspects of the work are inseparable from the creative, affective ones, and lend themselves so well, then, to the kind of exploration that Susan Sontag might have been calling for when she wrote: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art”. 7
Inevitably, the shift from a written to an audio-visual form of research output brings about a change of attention to the objects of study. Old habits die hard; nevertheless, as we worked together, we found ourselves moving away from verbal description, analysis, and context, towards finding audio-visual methods of engaging with Hardy’s photo-essays. The key research question became how to find filmic methods of working with the underlying visual qualities of Hardy’s photography and the pages of *Picture Post*. How to convey the significance of the dematerialisation of the figures in an image of firefighters in the Blitz: the vast expanse of dark, almost black, space in a photograph of a burning building? What was the most appropriate way to show how faces “work” in a story about a poor area of post-war London, or the visual choices made by the photographer, photo editor, art editor, and editor in the final look and atmosphere of the story? Our shared conversations moved from contextualisation to expression, from illustration to allusion. Yet, we recognise that these films are initial and tentative exercises, which we think of primarily as “experiments”. As Catherine Grant has said, “I may not always call my work ‘essays’ but I do see what I do as essaying. In other words trying things out ... I think *lots of experimenting must be done.*”

The viability of this method of research is made possible by online journal publication. Whilst we could use platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo to upload our films, or we could show them at academic conferences or documentary film festivals, *British Art Studies* and other online publications allow us to upload high-resolution films with the accompanying essay (or, entirely free from commentary) and to contribute to ongoing dialogues within and between our disciplines about digital technologies, visual media, and critical discourse.

**Videographic Criticism**

Audio-visual film criticism in the form of digital videographic essays has developed rapidly over the past two decades. As Michael Witt has noted,
The approach developed from, and retains close links with, the practices of the essay film, which has been identified from the mid-twentieth century onwards as a form of self-reflective film that embraces both documentary and experimental or poetic methods. \(^{10}\) Timothy Corrigan has identified the deep links between literary essays and essay films, which he characterises in part as follows:

Straddling fiction and non-fiction, news reports and confessional autobiography, documentaries and experimental film, they are, first, practices that undo and redo film form, visual perspectives, public geographies, temporal organizations, and notions of truth and judgement within the complexity of experience. \(^{11}\)

The expansive tradition of the essay film embraces works since the 1920s by Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard, Humphrey Jennings, Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and many others. \(^{12}\) In common with the practitioners of the videographic essay, many of these film-makers have developed essay films as highly personal responses to or dialogues with sequences of moving images, as notably Godard has done with his series *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998) and Chris Marker in *Sans Soleil* (1983), which begins with a voice-over reflection about a home movie shot of three children on a road in Iceland. Nearly all of the significant videographic essays have similarly employed and engaged with moving image sequences: films on film; and time-based work on time-based objects. Thus, it has been possible for Christian Keathley to comment: “the full range of digital video technologies enables film scholars to *write* using the very materials that constitute their object of study: moving images and sounds.” \(^{13}\)

Such synergy is not the case, however, with moving images about still photography. Here, the two media might be said to compromise as much as to complement each other. Compared to the significant body of videographic work on film, it is relatively undeveloped on photography and other still images and many of the challenges that we have faced during this project have been in terms of the relationship between the film tool and the photographic object. Of course experimental film-makers, notably Marker and Varda again, have worked with and continue to work with the creative tensions between still and moving images, but nevertheless much of the best current analytical work has been engaged with film. \(^{14}\) We see our focus on and concern with photography as one of the main contributions of our work to current debates on audio-visual criticism.
There is an extensive literature on the many and varied connections between the moving images of the cinema and the still images of photography. Reflecting on the centrality of photographs within numerous mainstream and experimental films, David Campany writes:

it begs the question of whether film might in fact be fascinated by, or need something from the photograph. Perhaps film sees photography as something it had to give up in order to become what it did. Is it the photograph’s stillness that film finds so compelling? Its clarity? Its uncertainty? Its privileged status as record or memory? Its stoicism? Its inscrutability?

Yet, despite this rich legacy, including the highly distinctive use of photographs in films such as Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962), Godard’s *Les Carabiniers* (1963) and his collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin, *Letter to Jane: An Investigation about a Still* (1972), and Hollis Frampton’s (*nostalgia*) (1972), as well as more mainstream features such as Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966) and Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), the presentation of still images in documentaries about individual photographers and “the art of” photography has rarely been more than illustrative. In Peter West’s 1987 Third Eye/Channel 4 documentary *Bert Hardy’s World: A Portrait*, for example, the photographer’s images are featured on screen throughout, shown sometimes by respecting their original framing and sometimes as details, and both without movement and within a moving frame. They are integrated into and used to illustrate a narrative about subjects in immigrant communities in Britain in the 1940s, who were photographed by Hardy, and about those people and their descendants at the time the documentary was made. The “documentary” nature of the images is unquestioned, as is the direct, largely unmediated, access they are assumed to give to a historical moment. Nor are either the aesthetic or the material qualities of the photographs engaged with; they are images without size, texture, or tone integrated into and sustaining an anecdotal history. And in using photographs in a primarily illustrative manner, *Bert Hardy’s World* is typical of the dominant presentation of still images in mainstream documentaries about photography.

Our exercises set out to question the presentation conventions of photographs in documentary films, and to work towards alternatives that employ and interrogate such images in new ways, highlighting their materialities and recognising their circulation on contact sheets and within the layouts of *Picture Post*. Our own handling of the contact sheets, of prints, and of archival copies of the magazine, and the specific tasks—undertaken in close collaboration with the film-maker Todd MacDonald—of filming these elements, and subsequently editing and post-producing the recordings, have
also led us to new understandings about the ways in which photographs are and might be shown in moving image sequences. One central aspect of this is that we have come to understand that many of the conventional orthodoxies about film as the time-based medium and photography as the art of the frozen “significant moment” do not stand up to the close analysis of the audio-visual form. Film allows the spectator to explore the temporalities of the photograph, the shadows and lights, the character and narrative traces that give it a temporality and, most especially, when it is part of a photo-sequence or news story. ¹⁶ These ideas are explored in more detail below in the detailed discussions of the two exercises, but one question that we returned to frequently throughout the production was what the appropriate or “right” duration was to hold a photograph on screen. How did our understandings of an image change throughout the duration of a single shot? What elements of an image might an extended duration reveal—or obscure? How long could an image be held on screen, and how might a spectator’s response change throughout an extended period? How, then, were the temporalities of the photograph shaped by the temporality of the moving image—and what were the differences between the camera being immobile versus when it is moving across an image? Such questions are rarely foregrounded in documentary production, although implicit answers are contributed by the skills and experience of editors and directors, who make decisions intuitively on the basis of what “feels right”. In the production of the exercises, we were interested in surfacing such questions, at least implicitly, and in considering what new knowledge might be revealed by sequences that might, in conventional terms, “feel wrong”.

**Looking at *Picture Post***

Collaboration on this project has been painstaking and we both acknowledge the time spent going down blind alleys and the lessons learned as we shifted from our own specialisms to a disciplinary and methodological give-and-take. The most straightforward stage was identifying our object of study. Although we began by discussing a project on Humphrey Jennings, we moved easily to Bert Hardy and *Picture Post*, driven, as it was, by our shared “photophilia” and care for these images. ¹⁷ Laura Mulvey has spoken most forcefully about the importance of “cinephilia”, the love of cinema, for her “delayed cinema” work; “photophilia” is a neologism, formulated to define that fascination with these images which has been one of the driving motivations of the project.
Our discussions moved at an early stage to identifying which stories or images we should focus on. We began, as seemed appropriate, in the photographic archive. Edward Hulton, publisher and owner of *Picture Post*, understood the importance of picture and photo libraries and established the Hulton Picture Library in the late 1940s. The archive was purchased by the BBC in 1958, becoming part of the *Radio Times* photo library; in 1996, the Hulton Picture Collection was acquired by Getty Images, who continue to own and preserve the *Picture Post* archive.¹⁸ The history of this photo archive is relevant to our research; working in the well-appointed rooms of Getty Images and looking at the rows of shelves and storage boxes, there is a palpable sense of the importance and richness of this collection—of prints and negatives catalogued, filed, and awaiting recovery. As well as photographic negatives, contact sheets, and prints, all bearing the marks of
successive editors and curators, Getty Images also has the *Picture Post* day book, which logs each story, the name of the photographer, and every roll of film and negatives that they submitted to the paper (Fig. 3). Our first stage of research was to identify and create a database of every story that Bert Hardy worked on, when it was published, or whether or not it was “killed”, as the day book puts it. With this comprehensive list of his work, we began to narrow down which stories we would focus on for the films.

We knew that one of the subjects we wanted to explore was the material qualities of the images created for and reproduced in *Picture Post*. In an age of digital newspaper media, it is difficult to comprehend how time-consuming, labour-intensive, and skilful the mechanical printing processes were; and we recognised that the physicality of the technologies of making *Picture Post* was fundamental to the subsequent look of the printed photographs and pages. The photogravure process used to reproduce the monochrome images in the pages of *Picture Post* is particularly good at producing rich effects from dark, contrasting subjects. The darker tones are made up of thicker layers of ink than the lighter tones; the highlights are very sharp and the strongest darks are deep and well defined. Furthermore, in the hands of the highly skilled printers at Sun Printers Ltd, where *Picture Post* was published, the range of greyscale tones is incredibly varied and subtle. And these qualities can still be appreciated some eighty years later as one handles the thin, light pages of archival copies and scrutinises the individual images and their placing in narrativised sequences, on both light and dark grounds, with photographs bounded by frames or on occasions bled to the edges of pages. The integration of the text, headlines, and the captions can also be recognised as integral to the impact and meanings of the stories, and it is these and comparable aspects of the photographs that are lost when they are divorced from the page for presentation in a documentary or hung on a gallery wall as conventional art objects. In our exercises, we wanted to retain the “thing-ness” of the magazine copies and the particular images that they carried and circulated.

Along with research in the archive of Getty Images, we also used the published memoirs of staff who worked on *Picture Post* in the 1940s and newsreel from the period. In addition, there were a small number of television films about *Picture Post*, made when Hardy was alive and which are available through the BFI Viewing Service. When the stories had been chosen, we also did extensive research on their historical contexts. To some degree, such work may have been more appropriate to a written study of Hardy’s work; nevertheless, this research informs and underpins the films and is part of their texture and tone. As we came to understand, however, there is a critical difference between the conceptualisation of a written essay and the “material thinking” of the videographic work. The latter involves framing and thinking through research questions in visual and aural terms.
and through the methods of film rather than rhetoric. It is also an insistently practical process, implicated in and impossible to separate from the operations of digital cameras, editing software, and audio mixing systems, and—at least for ourselves as neophytes at videographic production—in collaboration with those experienced with such technologies. In addition to Todd MacDonald, who filmed and edited both exercises, we also worked on Life in the Elephant with the audio producer, Steve Lewinson.

We finally determined to work on two of Bert Hardy’s Picture Post stories, both of which have a London setting. Born in 1913 in south London, Hardy was a Londoner in every sense of that early twentieth-century identification. He was a cockney; his colleague at Picture Post, Anne Scott-James, described him as having the: “ready wit and powers of improvisation of Sam Weller.” He was companionable and chatty, a persona that he took advantage of throughout his working life. He started his photographic career at the age of fourteen, collecting and delivering photographic films for the Central Photographic Service, with a more lucrative sideline in “naughty pictures”. He began taking his own photographs, focusing at first on cycling clubs, which he sent to a magazine called The Bicycle, and bought a second-hand Leica, the camera that is now synonymous with twentieth-century photojournalism. Hardy was always directly involved in the material processes of photography, experimenting with developers, playing with exposure times, and doctoring the standard Leica flash unit to meet the needs of his subjects.

By the 1930s, German photographers and editors were beginning to have a significant impact on the British illustrated press, an influence that would lead directly to the look and style of Picture Post. Its creator and first editor, Stefan Lorant, was a Hungarian Jew who came to England in the 1930s as a refugee from Hitler’s Germany, where he had produced silent films and had been chief editor of the Münchner Illustrierte Presse. Lorant, who was joined by German photographers like Kurt Hutton and Felix Mann, brought with him the new layout and style of continental photojournalism that became a part of the look of Picture Post from the beginning. In 1940, fearing a German invasion, Lorant went to the USA and was replaced as editor by Tom Hopkinson, who remained in this role until 1950.

Stuart Hall has described the distinctive quality of Picture Post as a result of the combination of two “distinctive journalistic traditions”: a tradition of English documentary reportage and a revolutionary visual style that came from avant-garde groups on the Continent. Certainly, Picture Post, with its simple, direct layouts and its emphasis on a varied use of horizontal and vertical images and bold captions, looked different from its rival British illustrated papers. Photographs dictated the appearance of the stories. Tradition has it that the format was based on the proportions of a Leica
35mm negative and staff working on the magazine claimed that: “It reported the news through ... the eye of the camera ... the pictures mattered more than the words.”

The histories of Picture Post and Bert Hardy converge in 1940. Hardy started working for Picture Post on a freelance basis; he had left the Central Photographic Service and with a colleague set up Criterion Press, which he pulled out of after a financial disagreement. He spent the later war years with the Army Film and Photographic Unit and, at the end of the war, he returned to Picture Post as a staff photographer. Hardy worked on an enormous range of subjects for the paper, from serious studies of post-war deprivation, to the most frivolous of “girlie” topics. Some of his stories won photographic awards; others are forgettable. In 1950, Hopkinson commissioned Hardy to accompany the journalist James Cameron on a story about the Korean War. They came back with a report on the treatment of North Korean political prisoners by South Korean forces; Hopkinson planned to publish the story but was stopped by the proprietor, Edward Hulton. Hopkinson was sacked as editor and a number of his staff resigned in support. Hardy continued to work for Picture Post until, with falling circulation figures, the magazine ceased publication in 1957.

There are many histories embedded in these brief facts: histories of the war and of the politics of wartime and post-war Britain; histories of the press; and histories of the business and practice of photography. All of these combine in the photography of Bert Hardy; they are part of its grain and atmosphere. The two stories that are the subjects of our films represent key moments in these narratives, in which the elements are at their most concentrated and pivotal. The first is “Fire-Fighters!”, which was published on 1 February 1941. This was one of the most significant assignments in Hardy’s Picture Post career and marked a turning point in his professional status as a photojournalist. Hardy was still involved in Criterion Press and was commissioned to do a story on the London Fire Brigade as it dealt with the Luftwaffe’s heaviest period of night bombing. He returned with an astonishing range of images of the firemen working on warehouse blazes, some are almost abstract in parts, a compound of fire, water, silhouetted buildings, and figures and, as published on the pages of Picture Post, they reach a crescendo of growing threat and pictorial illegibility. For the first time, the paper departed from its habit of anonymity and acknowledged the name of their photographer:

For a fortnight one of our photographers slept every night at a fire station ... Out all night, in one blazing building after another, he lost a £50 camera, a tripod, a pair of trousers. In return, he got a
The anonymous cameraman becomes the named wartime photographer/hero: “A. Hardy, one of our cameramen”.

The second story is “Life in the Elephant”, published 8 January 1949, a six-page photo-story of everyday life in the Elephant and Castle, a poor and then bomb-damaged neighbourhood of south London. It was the kind of humanist story at which the paper excelled while Hopkinson was editor. With words by the journalist Albert Lloyd, who, like Hardy, was born in this part of London and was very much a local boy, it evokes the people and places of the area in every area of shadow and highlight, in every face, street, and room. “Life in the Elephant” has an almost mythic status in the history of twentieth-century British photojournalism. It won Hardy his second Encyclopaedia Britannica Award and has, ever since, been used to illustrate social histories of post-war Britain.

These are our two stories; we might have chosen others and made different films but, without question, they represent Hardy’s photography and *Picture Post* at their most powerful and expressive. Hardy and *Picture Post*, photographs and printed pages; it was this combination that we were most drawn to and interested in. For this reason, our originals, the objects that we filmed, are the photographs at their grainiest, as printed on the pages of the magazine. In both films, we also use the original contact sheets that were made from Hardy’s rolls of film, traces of the genesis of the story, and Hardy’s working process. We did not use subsequent prints of Hardy’s photographs or digital images because our focus was on the look of the photographs and their consumption by readers of *Picture Post*. The *mise en page*, the design of the printed pages, and the layout of text and images frame Hardy’s photographs and give them their sense of place and time.

**Producing *Fire-Fighters!***

In making the films, we have concentrated on a small number of research themes in each case. In *Fire-Fighters!*, we consider the grain of the photographs both in terms of its poetic and its historical expression. We focus on the facial close-up as it is used in Hardy’s cover photograph and the face as it becomes a symbol of a moral, wartime nation. Finally, we look at the sequence of photographs as they are published in the magazine and their move from figurative composition towards increasing abstraction and formal dissolution, with a single photograph published on the page and given
over to large, negative spaces of grainy black. These final images may be seen as an articulation of the psychic impact of bombing, as much as its physical effects.

Once we had determined that *Fire-Fighters!* would be the subject of one of our two exercises, Lynda Nead wrote an expository script. This included substantial extracts from the text of the story, as are featured in the final version, but there was also a narrator’s voice detailing the historical background of the Blitz, the Auxiliary Fire Service, and the covers of *Picture Post*. A broader range of images was also envisaged, including a selection by other artists, and the key quotations from William Sansom and the scholar Leo Mellor were identified; the latter survived, while the former did not. We used a modestly revised version of this script for our two main filming sessions at Getty Images, which themselves followed initial research visits by Lynda during which she undertook some low resolution reference photography. Todd MacDonald’s digital filming in the archive for both *Fire-Fighters!* and *Life in the Elephant* aimed to produce a wide variety of both still and moving images. Vintage prints, contact sheets, and the photographs as reproduced in the *Picture Post* spreads were shot as stills with a Sony mirror-less full-frame stills camera. Digital video of the images was recorded with a Super 35 4K video camera filming in S-Log so as to be able to take full advantage of the dynamic range of the camera—although this feature had significant implications for the final stages of post-production, as is noted below.

Over a period of months, Todd used Premiere editing software to prepare cuts of both films. Responding to a developing script, Todd employed processes of selection, montaging, re-framing, and layering as well as the introduction of digitally created movement, and in doing so, he offered many suggestions about form and style. Some of these were rejected by us, but a significant number contribute to the distinctiveness of the completed exercises. Both of us viewed these cuts online and provided detailed feedback in note form. The final structures of the two exercises emerged in this fundamentally collaborative process, the concluding stages of which included a small number of detailed editing sessions during which the three of us sat by the editing desk trying out final variants. While we could verbalise why we approved of or dismissed aspects of what was on the screen, there were other moments that had a visceral effect that perhaps escaped explicit justification. Once we had a more or less final version, Todd then graded each of the selected S-Log shots, removing colour to knock them back to more or less greyscale tones, and changing the saturation and contrast of every image. He also added digital film grain emulation, in part to achieve a consistent “look” to each of the exercises. And he used masking to create a digital simulation of a page turn to move from one spread to
another. All of these devices contribute significantly to the complexification of debates about the ontology of the photographic image, fundamentally challenging the long-established binary of “still” and “moving” images.

Turning back to “Fire-Fighters!” on the pages of *Picture Post*, the publication of the story in the issue of 1 February 1941 was highly significant. The German bombing offensive, known as the Blitz, took place during 1940 and 1941. From September 1940, London and other British cities were systematically attacked by the Luftwaffe and by mid-November more than 12,000 tons of high explosive had fallen on the capital. Sunday 29 December 1940 witnessed one of the most destructive attacks on the City of London, later referred to as the Second Great Fire of London. Bad weather in January 1941 limited the bombings and offered some respite, but on 29 January conditions changed and there was another heavy attack. This was the precise moment of the publication of Hardy’s story; two weeks of relative calm and then the storm of renewed bombing. Readers of the issue of *Picture Post* may well have been caught up in this raid, and would probably have been affected, one way or another, by its violent and traumatic consequences.

Consider, in this context, the cover of the issue, a detail of which fades in from black as our opening shot in the film exercise (Fig. 4). The contact sheets show a number of different shots of this subject, with subtle differences, a slight shift in the angle of a face or hand, as the photographer moves around his subject taking a series of photographs (Fig. 5). It is a bold, arresting, and brilliant cover. The red of the background on the title and banner offsets the deep chiaroscuro of the black and white portraits. Our attention is drawn immediately and deeply to the faces of the men: their eyes, focused on the blaze in front of them, their expressions, concentrated and unwavering. Is it a composite? The direction of their gaze does not follow that of the water from the hose, and the stream of water is not visible on the contact sheet. Our sense is that it has been collaged from two negatives in order to enhance its visual power, and the water flow has been drawn in. These are ordinary faces, those of working men and somehow they are also the faces of wartime Britain, with a look and style that evokes the 1940s. They look like Tommy Trinder and other actors who played the ordinary protagonists of British films in these years. This cover moved people; it had an emotional impact. Readers wrote to *Picture Post* and asked for it to be turned into a print or a poster. These faces, and those of their colleagues, haunt our film.
Figure 4.
Picture Post (cover), 1 February 1941, featuring photograph by Bert Hardy. Collection of Getty Images Hulton Archive. Digital image courtesy of Getty Images Hulton Archive (All rights reserved).
Figure 5.
Bert Hardy, Contact sheet with versions of the cover image of “Picture Post”, 1 February 1941, photographic contact sheet. Collection of Getty Images Hulton Archive. Digital image courtesy of Getty Images Hulton Archive (All rights reserved).

The firefighters were not a professional service at this point in the war. The National Fire Service was established in autumn 1941, but in February, the fires were being fought by local fire brigades augmented by the volunteers of the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS). The AFS came from “all walks of life” and they were the “front line of defence” between London and the Luftwaffe.\(^3\) 31 They were ordinary heroes, everyday men and women showing extraordinary courage; they were individuals and they were the nation. These are the faces on the cover of Picture Post, which are focused on in our extended opening shot. And these are the bodies in Hardy’s photo-story, which fade in as silhouettes after the title frames, before being revealed as set within a complex layout that includes a headline, text and a full-page advertisement for “The Wisdom Toothbrush”.

The story runs in Picture Post across pages 9 to 15. The first single page has a half-page photograph of roof spotters; then there is a double-page with six images of a control room and a fire station. The voice-over, drawn from the Picture Post text and spoken across a dark screen introduces the narrative and, initially without identification, Hardy as the photographer. Camera moves underline the insistent horizontality, and the normalcy, the
groundedness of the spread, before Hardy is named and pictured in a contact sheet image clearly taken by another, in this case, an anonymous image-maker. Next to him, inverted, is one of the images collaged for the cover.

On the next double page, after one of the film’s structuring titles (drawn from the captions), there is a change of style; in “The Height of the Blaze”, we see dark, shadowy images of broken streets, fires, and firefighters set against a black ground (heightened in the film by a further red surround). The figures are silhouetted and abstracted, faces either in deep shadow or being reproduced at the edge of representation. The grain of the photographs is strong here. And the film contributes a further level of abstraction, with fragments of photography set in a moving frame resonating with and echoing, but never quite illustrating, a 1942 quotation from AFS fireman and writer, William Sansom.

The final opening is extraordinary: two full-page photographs, with only captions and a few lines of small text at the bottom to supplement the images. The first, on the left-hand page, is a man at the top of a turntable ladder, with the dark street illuminated only by the glow of the fire. The camera underlines the perilous verticality of this world, such a contrast to the earlier spread. Then, before we turn to the facing page, the film interjects with another quotation, this time as text, and from a much later period. We wanted to suggest how fire creates uncanny time and space; how it disorientates and dissolves form. In his book, Reading the Ruins, the literary historian Leo Mellor, puts it this way, as we have on screen: “fire allows disorientation to be part of the material subject ... Issues concerning representation, readability and verisimilitude ... become problematic.”

This unmooring of space, form, and subjectivity is also seen in the prose of Sansom, who is quoted for a second time and who evoked this experience in his published stories in the 1940s: “one is encompassed by disintegration ... enclosed by material that is warping, blistering, weakening, sagging and falling”.

Above this swamp a fireman seems to float in mid-mist. If you had stood below and looked up, you would have thought he was actually riding the steam ... straddling with the grip of his oil-skinned knees the white cloud itself.

The second Sansom quote accompanies our first encounter with the facing page and the black outline of a firefighter, set against the almost abstract forms of a blazing roof (Fig. 6). This image fascinated us. Nearly half of the page is in darkness; large areas of deep, black ink that make the space difficult to read. Where is this man standing and where is the photographer
positioned? The impetus towards abstraction from the beginning to the end of this photo-sequence is so striking, as the narrative is overtaken by shadows and silhouettes, formlessness, and negative space. It is an image not so much of humanity and heroism, as of the night, the fire, and destruction. The outline of the torso of the firefighter could be a corpse, with its strange withered hand. The edges of the figure are blurred and grainy against the lights of the flames; photographic documentation has given way to a poetic and deeply expressive visual language.

Figure 6.

This final photograph is a dream image in which blackness and negative space create meaning and feeling. Hardy transforms the weight of this destruction into the sublime. As media critic Sharon Sliwinski has commented in relation to Lee Miller’s wartime photography: “Through such
images spectators can glimpse not only all that air war seeks to destroy, but simultaneously a means to preserve human imagination, and with it, life.” 35 The story’s momentum from figuration towards abstraction and dematerialisation was one of our key research questions: how could the camera film the blackness of that final photograph; how long could we hold a shot of its dark, grainy foreground? How, through duration, movement, and focus, and a near-obsessive attention to the grain of the image, could we suggest and represent its richness and complexity? Our aim was to show how Hardy’s photography worked through the trauma of air war, but also to make the spectator feel this. Hence, the combination of the photographic sublime with a heroic stoicism from the song referenced in the article’s text: “Keep Your Thumbs Up and Say It’s Ticketty Boo”. From which, eventually and with relief, we return to the faces of firefighters. To dozens and dozens of faces, individual and full of character, packed tightly together in a collective image of wartime resilience. This was not taken by Hardy and was not part of the photo-story, but was captured by an unknown photographer and featured in a contemporary publication. Here, Todd’s subtle, distant audio mix of song and found sounds comes to the fore, with an affective force of considerable and concluding intensity. And in the use of this song, the distinctive materiality of post-war British photojournalism is matched by the period grain of music, sound, and voices. The contemporary recording of this song by the British actor Jack Warner, uncovers a register of accent, melody, tonality, and attitude that is as expressive as its photographic counterpart.

After the War was Over

Bert Hardy was a storyteller and one of his favourite stories from the Picture Post days was about the making of his photo-story “Life in the Elephant”. He tells it in his autobiography and it is retold in an article in the Listener and in a BBC documentary. 36 Hardy describes how he and Bert Lloyd arrived in the Elephant and Castle on a dreary November day and wandered around trying to get an idea for the story: “We walked around, and I did a few shots—nothing that meant anything, but sort of using the camera.” 37 This style of ambulatory photojournalism reiterates Hardy’s view of seeing the world through the camera lens, surveying and getting a feel of the place by taking photographs. They wander around the back streets until they hear the voice of a woman asking to have her photograph taken. She becomes their guide to the Elephant, taking them through narrow passageways and yards, telling them where to find things and giving them ideas. “After that,” Hardy says “it was just smooth; it went so smooth, it was unbelievable.”

Life in the Elephant as a film essay explores the sense of time and place, as it is evoked in the relationship between text and image. Historical maps and materials from Southwark Local History Library and Archive are collaged with
Hardy’s photographs, together with a short section of footage shot in the area for the film, to create a topographic framing for this highly spatialised story. The atmospheres of the images are interrogated, and the faces are scrutinised. But the strongest theme of the film is narrative.

Hardy’s award for this story was in the “Photo-Sequence” category; it was commended for its command of storytelling as well as its aesthetic qualities. There are, however, many layers and styles of narrative in relation to this story that we explore in the film. Primarily, it is a story about a place and the people who live there, and many of the photographs focus on faces, character, and clothes. On the first page, there is a photograph of people queuing for eels. The camera is positioned inside the shop, looking out towards the street. Hardy captures the sturdy resilience of these people in their overcoats and hats; these are atmospheric portraits, for example, the woman at the head of the queue, with her headscarf resolutely knotted under her chin, with her basket and National Health spectacles. This is the atmosphere of post-war austerity, caught in the resigned and no-nonsense expressions: a mixture of patience, greed, and hunger that makes them ogle the eels and scrutinise the weighing scales. Faces, again, are so expressive. Take the horse dealers on the following page. As usual, Hardy took a number of shots of the crowd of men at the Elephant & Castle Horse Repository. The one that is selected frames and composes the two men, catches them as they bargain, tussle, over the prices of horses. Heavy overcoats faded and worn at the seams, a trilby pushed back on the head at an angle, a stray lock of hair, a neckerchief, and a quizzical expression begin to construct this world of street trading, and of banter that could, at any moment, switch to aggression. The caption acknowledges the power of these faces: “Faces to laugh at. Faces to wink at. Faces that hit you like a blow.”

The story is established in a register of black, white, and greytone; this, the text tells us, is the distinctive colour of the Elephant and Castle: “a rich grey-black. The backstreet bricks are sooted by the wash and drift of railway smoke; and in the centre ... a jungle of black iron railings.” Greyscale is here a tone and an atmosphere that both the text and the photography draw on to create a unifying theme. Photographs dominate the pages and create a visual rhythm in each of the openings and across the article.

Contact sheets tell part of the story of Hardy’s work on this piece. The sheets contain multiple images of all the photographs from the shoot, arranged horizontally across the page and are part of the practice of small-format cameras (Leica and Rollei) and flexible film, enabling a sequence of consecutive shots. With this technology, photographers:
no longer discovered their photographs one at a time, but always in the form of a chain from which a selection could be made—the strip of the sheet then being no more than the collection of attempts arranged in the chronological order of their production.  

Now the photograph is not the “only” but the “best” of many and the images reproduced in *Picture Post* can be seen as part of a sequence of photographs of the subject recorded on the contact sheets. Photography, thus, has another temporal dimension, the unfolding time of the shoot and the movement, in this instance, of Hardy through the spaces of the Elephant.

In our film of the Elephant, we wanted to work with the images left on the contact sheet and the act of judgement involved in choosing the “one” to reproduce. Contact sheets record the dud photographs as well as the good ones; the blanks and the overexposed shots that Henri Cartier-Bresson described as “erasures ... detritus”. In the film, we work with contact sheets relating to two of the published photographs. The first is a small image in the bottom left corner of page 13, showing two women sharing a magazine at a news-stand. “Life is real, life is earnest. But there’s always sports books, dream books, books of true confessions.” We used the familiar, although anachronistic sound of a camera shutter and filmed the sequence of photographs at a speed which gives it a movement and demonstrates the number of pictures that Hardy took of the women and the subtle differences between each shot.

The second image is well known and frequently reproduced. Within Hardy’s narrative of the genesis of the story, it plays an important role; he describes how, through a window, he sees a couple sitting on a sofa and goes into the room and asks to photograph them: “and, somehow or other, took this picture, which became a famous picture.” The contact sheets fill in the absences contained in that phrase “somehow or other”. What they show is a large number of shots, working on slight changes in the pose of the couple and then Hardy turns his camera lens around the room and registers two additional figures: another woman and a small child, sitting at a nearby table. The addition of these two figures has a radical effect on the meaning of the subject and its subsequent historiography. The caption reads: “In Thousands of Similar Basements Live Tens of Thousands of Similar Folk: Yet Each is Different” and the couple, in their embrace and illuminated by the shaft of light from the window on the right, seem to represent an intense and private relationship. In his autobiography, Hardy endorsed this reading by identifying the woman as a prostitute and the man as a Canadian who had been released from prison the night before. But the woman and baby shift this mood of post-coital reverie
and the room becomes cluttered and overcrowded. The contact sheets give a temporal depth to Hardy’s work, complicating the layers of narrative and Hardy’s claim that: “it was just smooth; it went so smooth.”

Conclusion

The making of these two films seems to us like the very beginning of the work rather than the end. We feel that we have just started to explore the many aspects of Hardy’s photography through the methods of videographic criticism. We have worked across film, photography, and criticism and, in this way, our work could be described as intermedial, or even multimedia. Its purpose has been to incorporate still and moving images, sound, and text in order to create a new knowledge of Bert Hardy’s Picture Post photography, and also to explore the possibilities of this method for our disciplines of art and media history. We are both convinced of the significance of videographic work in the production of new and vivid explorations of visual media in their historical settings. We have looked closely at the photographic archive, more closely, we are certain, than if we were writing only and have reached an increased understanding and admiration of the photographs and their use in Picture Post. The production of art/media history in a multimedia form is one which changes the relationship between the object of study and the language of inquiry.

Footnotes

1 Bert Hardy, Bert Hardy: My Life (London: Gordon Fraser, 1985), 185.
4 On videographic criticism, see Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell and Catherine Grant (eds), The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy (Montreal: Caboose/Rutgers University Press, 2016).
8 Catherine Grant, “How Long is a Piece of String? On the Practice, Scope and Value of Videographic Film Studies and Criticism”, [emphases in the original], presentation given in Frankfurt, 23–24 November 2013, online at: http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/frankfurt-papers/catherine-grant/.
10 For a useful definition, see Essay Film Festival website, http://www.essayfilmfestival.com/.
12 In addition to Corrigan, The Essay Film, see also Laura Rascaroli, How the Essay Film Thinks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (eds), Essays on the Essay Film (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
Both film-makers have made a considerable number of films, but for well-known examples of their work with still images, see *La Jetée* (France, 1962; dir. Chris Marker); and *Salut les Cubains* (France/Cuba, 1971; dir. Agnès Varda).


For a reflection on time and the opposition of photography and film, see Peter Wollen, ““Fire and Ice”, in David Campany (ed.), *The Cinematic*, 1st edn (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1984), 108–113.


See “How Picture Post is Produced”, *Picture Post*, 24 December 1938, 44–52; this reveals the extraordinary complexity of the production process of photogravure images, which included hand-drawn layouts, re-photographing and retouching of negatives, the production of gelatine copies, and their transfer to copper cylinders for the creation of the gravure surface.

See, for example, Hardy, *Bert Hardy*; Hopkinson, *Of This Our Time*; and Anne Scott-James, *Sketches From A Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1993).

See, for example, *The Life and Death of Picture Post* (1977; BBC Wales, dir. John Ormond); *Bert Hardy’s World A Portrait* (1987; Third Eye Productions, dir. Peter West); *Great Picture Chase* (1987; BBC, dir. Hannah Rothschild).

Catherine Grant’s formulation remains the most useful statement of this methodology, see “Dissolves of Passion”.

Scott-James, *Sketches*, 105. She adds: “On his travels, Bert left many bruised hearts behind, so great was his skill in the art of chatting up girls” (106). The gender dynamics of work for *Picture Post* are a fascinating and overlooked aspect of its history. Juliet Gardiner, “Picture Post” Women (London: Collins and Brown, 1993) offers an initial examination of women as producers and subjects of *Picture Post*. For details of his biography, see Hardy, *Bert Hardy*. Sam Weller is a street-wise Cockney character in Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers*.


His first published story was “East End at War”, *Picture Post*, 28 September 1940.

“Fire-Fighters!”, 9 and 15.

See Maureen Hall, *The London Blitz September 1940–May 1941* (London: Chapmans, 1990). *Picture Post* frames the beginning of the article in terms of the timing of the recent raids: “For a fortnight one of our photographers slept every night at a fire station. Nothing happened The Nazis were laying off London. Then came the storm…”

See the cast of the Ealing Studios film about the Fire Service in the Blitz, *The Bells Go Down* (UK, 1943; dir. Basil Dearden), and the uses of facial close-ups in Humphrey Jennings’ *I was a Fireman* (UK, 1943), the original cut of *Fires Were Started* (UK, 1943; dir. Humphrey Jennings).

See Readers’ Letter, *Picture Post*, 15 February 1941, 3. For example, “Your cover is most inspiring. It would make a remarkable coloured picture. Could it not be used to portray the unflinching spirit of the Fire Brigade and British people?”


Hardy, “How Hulton and the Hungarian Made Picture History”, 262.


Olivier Lugon and Laurent Guido, “Introduction”, in Laurent Guido and Olivier Lugon (eds), *Between Still and Moving Images* (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2012), 323. They quote Andreas Feininger, *Fotografische Gestaltung* (Harzburg: Dr Walther Heering Verlag, 1937), who describes the ability to shoot multiple photographs in quick succession of the same subject as “a truly revolutionary breakthrough” (324).

For an excellent account of contact sheets, see Kristen Lubben, *Magnum Contact Sheets* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017).

For a fascinating example of a film-maker using contact sheets, see Raymond Depardon, *Contacts*, 1990, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=luGuHXgbHV5](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luGuHXgbHV5), in which the horizontal strip of contact prints moves at a continuous speed in front of the camera, with an accompanying voice-over.

Hardy, "How Hulton and the Hungarian Made Picture History", 262.

**Bibliography**


Depardon, Raymond (1990) *Contacts*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=luGuHXgbHV5](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luGuHXgbHV5).

Feininger, Andreas (1937) *Fotografische Gestaltung*. Harzburg: Dr Walther Heering Verlag.


**Filmography**

Antonioni, Michelangelo (dir.) (1966) *Blow-Up*. UK/USA/Italy.


Dearden, Basil (dir.) (1943) *The Bells Go Down*. UK.

Frampton, Hollis (dir.) (1972). *(nostalgia)*. USA.


Jennings, Humphrey (dir.) (1943) *Fires Were Started*. UK.

Jennings, Humphrey (dir.) (1943) *I Was a Fireman*. UK.


Rothschild, Hannah (dir.) (1987) *Great Picture Chase*. BBC.


Abstract

This article is part of the Objects in Motion series in British Art Studies, which is funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Projects in the series examine cross-cultural dialogues between Britain and the United States, and may focus on any aspect of visual and material culture produced before 1980. The aim of Objects in Motion is to explore the physical and material circumstances by which art is transmitted, displaced, and recontextualised, as well as the transatlantic processes that create new markets, audiences, and meanings.

Taking two journeys as its fulcrum, this essay traces how Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and his wife Ethel Mairet’s (1872–1952) photographs and studies of craft in India and Ceylon in the 1900s relate to Charles and Ray Eames’ India Report (1958), a photographic research journey through craft communities of India that sought to find form, function, and “Indianness” in a bid to exemplify the future of design in India in the 1950s. Unpacking the different contexts of the two moments, the essay analyses how international interventions on the “Indianness” of Indian design were forged in early and mid-twentieth-century India, particularly within what it posits as the “Long Arts and Crafts Movement” between Great Britain, India, and the United States of America. If the British Arts and Crafts Movement was a combination of progressive and conservative tendencies, this essay investigates how the vexed design historical continuum between the British Empire and the Cold War, Victorian socialism, Indian nationalism, and American development-oriented aid programmes played out in the space of the Indian village. Following the intellectual and design historical trajectories of “post-industrialism” (a term that Coomaraswamy introduced in 1914 when thinking about future anti-industrial societies) to think through the complex and moving parts of the Long Arts and Crafts Movement, the essay pursues the paradoxical nature of the term as it is mobilised in the Eameses’ mid-century America and routed back into the Indian village through American technocrats.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the organisers and participants of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Terra Foundation for American Art “Objects in Motion” workshop in Giverny, France from which this article emerged. I would also like to thank Rachael DeLue for her comments on a very early draft of this article, the peer-reviewers and editors at British Art Studies for their excellent feedback, and the image and digital support team at BAS for all their help.

This project is made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

This publication is made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Cite as

Introduction

This essay draws inspiration from eco-socialist William Morris’ (1834–1896) soft science fiction novel *News from Nowhere* (1891), set in the future and written directly in response to political activist Edward Bellamy’s (1850–1898) *Looking Backward*, which took the United States of America by storm in 1888. In adopting a stance of looking backwards and forwards, and in the vein of Morris, combining design with politics, the essay charts an exploratory trajectory between the United Kingdom, colonial and post-colonial India, and the United States in the course of the twentieth century. It stresses that interrogations around the Long Arts and Crafts Movement were not only transnational but also trans-temporal. It is in the moving across imagined times (historical and speculative) that theories of design and reform are imagined in their particular contexts.

The first of two journeys that this essay focuses on was undertaken across Ceylon between 1903 and 1906, then still under British rule, by the British-Ceylonese geologist Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and his first wife Ethel Mary Partridge (later Ethel Mairet) (1872–1952). As the Director of the Mineralogical Survey of the island, Coomaraswamy made long trips by train and bullock cart with Ethel Mairet, on which they studied, collected, and photographed objects of art and craft and the people who produced them. During their time in Ceylon, the Coomaraswamys adopted ethnographic methods in taking copious notes on their subjects, their processes of making, their tools and craft objects, all with a particular focus on the fact that British colonial rule and processes of industrialisation threatened a complete deterioration of craft in Ceylon. The document that came about as a result of the tour was *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908), authored singly by Ananda Coomaraswamy. The second journey was the American designer duo Charles (1907–1978) and Ray Eames’ (1912–1988) famous tour leading up to the *India Report* in 1958, which became the blueprint for the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India (NID). Almost a decade after India’s independence in 1947, through a small but powerful network of diplomatic and design connections between the USA and India, Charles Eames was invited by the Ford Foundation to conduct a three-month study tour of India with the aim of recommending a design training programme that would aid small-scale industries, and “that would resist the present rapid deterioration in design and quality of consumer goods.” ¹

Although the photographic surveys of craft of the Coomaraswamys and the Eameses were done more than fifty years apart, both journeys focus an ethnographic eye on the villages they surveyed, paying close attention to community structures, customs, and social habits, and the use and production of objects, searching for symbolic meaning in form and daily function. Both journeys take place at critical moments in India’s political and
economic history, and more specifically, at perceived turning points in the histories of craft and design. The first section of this essay considers the role of the visual and how it was crucial to a certain kind of top-down Indigenism that both journeys produced. How, it asks, do the proto-ethnographic methods of the Coomaraswamys relate to Indian nationalism and the constructive Swadeshi movement on the one hand and Victorian socialism and Arts and Crafts ideals on the other? How, it further asks, do the rather similar proto-ethnographic methods of the Eameses relate to the Nehruvian ideal of a socialist state on the one hand and mid-century design and communications practices in the United States and US-led development programmes in India on the other hand?

Alongside its funding for the NID and US artists’ visits to Ahmedabad, the Ford Foundation was funding research into rural India and chemical fertilisers in the lead up to the country’s Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. By the time the Eameses arrived in India, the Ford Foundation had already been there for six years. Agricultural development was highest on the agenda and the grants were directed to the Allahabad Agricultural Institute and other centres for training agricultural leaders. ² There has been a lot of critical writing about the ways in which foreign aid and so-called knowledge transfers for economic and social “modernisation” in a newly independent India were merely “soft-power” initiatives for US diplomatic strategies in the hope of aligning Non-Aligned countries with their vision of a capitalist democracy versus a Soviet communism, especially the need for the USA to cultivate India as a democratic heavyweight to counterbalance China. ³

**The Coomaraswamys in Ceylon (1903-1906)**

Born in Ceylon to a knighted Tamil lawyer and a British mother, Ananda Coomaraswamy moved to England at the age of two, following the premature death of his father. Educated at Wycliff Hall, he earned a degree in geology and botany from University College London in 1900 and met Ethel Mary Patridge (later Mairet) while on a mineralogical survey in Barnstaple in the south of England. They married in 1902 and set sail for Ceylon the year after. On their journeys across Ceylon, Ethel Mairet, who would later come to be known as a hand-weaver and artist of significant repute, took the majority of the photographs. Her journals became detailed inventories about the photographs they took and focused, as did the final document of the research, on process. Ethel Mairet closely photographed processes of craft-making and small-scale industries as well as objects. The Coomaraswamys collected objects on their travels and visited private collections. Ethel Mairet’s first journal, for example, charts eight months of rapid exploration of the crafts and is almost exclusively a study of jewellery and metalwork. Later, there are extensive notes on spinning, weaving, embroidery, and vegetable dyeing processes, tools, raw materials, and interviews with
craftspeople who they invited to their home for demonstrations. By 30 November 1904, Ethel Mairet had taken 378 photographs, only a handful of which, alongside line drawings and commercial photographs of craftspersons engaged in artisanal activities, are published in *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (Fig. 1).  

**Figure 1.**
Untitled Slide, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Papers (C0038), Manuscripts Division, Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Digital image courtesy of Princeton University Library (All rights reserved).

While the comprehensive and documentary style of close photographing (for example, some plates are devoted to specific types of objects such as lac work or embroidery, and others include an array of objects as well as close-up designs and patterns on different objects) is reminiscent of the geological survey, which was purportedly the purpose of their travels, the ethnographic quality of their Ceylon photographs performed a dual function (Fig. 2). First, they served as a precursor to Coomaraswamy’s later interest in pictorialist
and photo-secessionist photography while in America, particularly the use of hands, feet, and gestures in Indian art and dance that allowed him to combine technologies of the body with the more abstract nature of Indian spiritual thought (Fig. 3). At the same time, however, the photographs of craftspersons pointed to the larger religious and social order in which these objects existed and were created. In particular, the photographs (and the detailed notes that the Coomaraswamys took on the tools and technologies used) served as a visual marker for the ways in which the body and the work came together so naturally in these particular crafting methods (Fig. 4). This continuity between body and traditional tools serves to emphasise an absent enemy: machine-led industrial processes, the invasive and disruptive quality of which is contrasted with the fluid movements and intimacy between body, labour, and object.
Figure 2.
There is a sense of gentle manipulation in the objects and processes they photographed. Although photographing contemporary craftspersons, the Coomaraswamys were careful to choose crafts that dated back to the earliest
possible traditions. By the early 1900s, the market would have contained a fair number of hybrid objects, produced in conjunction with newer technologies or using non-traditional materials. By obscuring these processes, their photographs created “medieval time” in twentieth-century Ceylon, producing village communities as reified local structures untouched by the colonial modern but at grave risk of contamination. Two photographs, both taken by Ethel Mairet, show potters at work (Fig. 5). The first shows a potter at his wheel, and a younger assistant seated on the floor surrounded by rows and rows of finished pots and bowls. The finished pieces are neatly stacked pots, upside down to the right and bowls on the left. The bearded potter is bare-bodied save a loincloth. He gazes downwards away from the wheel, taking a mini-break, his spine relaxed and curved and hands lightly resting on the wheel. His assistant seated cross-legged, his back upright, also looks away from the pots. Neither the potter nor his assistant looked directly at the camera. The slightly detached downward gaze is reminiscent in fact of more posed Victorian portrait photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879). For example, Margaret Cameron’s The Rosebud Garden of Girls (1886) is a highly staged photograph evincing a longing for a lost medieval past (Fig. 6). Four young women are framed directly in front of a tangle of branches and flowers, their aloof and other-worldly expressions heightened by the soft focus and elimination of perspective in the photograph. The title of this photograph, as well as many others, was inspired by the poet Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892). Margaret Cameron’s friendship with Tennyson and Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) has been well documented. The soft, golden light that the photographic subjects are cloaked in asserts the search for a distant, temporal remove. It is in this aspiration for a space that is both allegorical and mythological and yet is made real by the accurate and documentary nature of the photograph that I place the link between Margaret Cameron’s methods and Ethel Mairet’s photographs in Ceylon. It is pertinent that Margaret Cameron lived in Ceylon (1875-1879) about two decades before the Coomaraswamys arrived there. Ethel Mairet may have been familiar with Margaret Cameron’s Ceylon photographs, which have, for the most part, been considered outside her canon of photographs.
Figure 5.
In Ethel Mairet’s photograph of the potters, the light catches the glistening of the wet clay and the bare skin of the potters. There is a softness of focus in the photograph which lends the potter’s studio an ethereal quality, gliding over the textures of smooth clay in the unfinished and finished pots, but at the same time, the softness is subtle enough so as not to take away from the documentary quality of the photograph, which one sees repeated in Ethel Mairet’s other Ceylon photographs. It is this quality, I suggest, that makes Ethel Mairet’s photographs so effectively part of the Medieval Sinhalese Art project. It creates the temporal lapse between the contemporary craft and craftsperson and the pre-industrial craft and craftsperson that the Coomaraswamy’s idealised and sought a return to. Ethel Mairet’s photographs in fact work overtime. They achieve both temporal distance and the documentary exactness with which the Coomaraswamy’s hoped to record processes and tools of making. For example, another photograph of a potter
taken outdoors in strong sunlight shows a man seated on a half rolled-out mat on a rough, earthy surface. The potter here is engrossed in smoothing out the bottom of a pot, one leg folded under him and one leg stretched out. The harsh sunlight blurs out the background, leaving only a slim section of shadows to suggest a thatched roof of some sort in the distance behind him. His shoulders and muscly arms glisten in full focus, however, and the folds on his loincloth and stomach can be discerned in full detail (Figs. 7, 8, and 9).

Figure 7.
Untitled Slide, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Papers (C0038), Manuscripts Division, Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Digital image courtesy of Princeton University Library (All rights reserved).
Figure 8.
Untitled Slide, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Papers (C0038), Manuscripts Division, Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Digital image courtesy of Princeton University Library (All rights reserved).
The most practical reason for the photographs, line drawings, and notes on process was documentation to prevent the loss of knowledge that would salvage Ceylonese society and industry from the onset of British industrialisation. For Coomaraswamy, an interest in the object was inextricably tied to the community structures that produced it. In viewing the artisanal structures of the pre-colonial village as closest to the autonomous guilds of medieval Europe, Coomaraswamy—despite a possible blind spot to the complexities of caste and religious hierarchies and vagaries—saw the pre-colonial village as the perfect antidote to a burgeoning British industrialism. His reform-oriented hope was hinged on a return to a pre-colonial social order, which, following William Morris, would have had the advantages of a steady state economy, and the pleasure to be derived from useful work.

Coomaraswamy’s 1907 essay “The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle”, whose title was borrowed from a pamphlet by William Morris, agitated for a cultural nationalism that would renew the economic, social, and religious conditions of India’s distinct identity as the only way to counter industrial capitalism. Morris’ early lectures consistently argued for his position that the only way to ebb the decay of art and artisanship in the nineteenth century (as a result of British industry) was to transform the social conditions of Victorian work, and
reintegrate art and life, labour and pleasure. Ethel Mairét’s own interest in the revival of many of these forms as a practising hand weaver and artist was tied to her background in the Arts and Crafts Movement, while Coomaraswamy’s deep engagement with the movement in Britain was facilitated by Ethel Mairét and her connections. Ethel Mairét’s brother was part of the co-operative Arts and Crafts Guild, founded by the English architect and designer C.R. Ashbee (1863–1942) in 1898. The Coomaraswamyys bought shares in Ashbee’s guild, and on their return from Ceylon they settled briefly at Norman Chapel (refurbished for them by Ashbee) very close to where the guild met. Coomaraswamy also bought Morris’ old printing press from Kelmscott, on which, rather symbolically, Medieval Sinhalese Art and many of his early publications were printed.

Although this essay does not follow the trajectory of Ethel Mairét’s working life, her contributions to weaving, and the importance of the Ceylon trip to them, it is important to point out as an aside that Ethel Mairét and Ananda Coomaraswamy divorced in 1910, after which Ethel married the writer, designer, and organic farming enthusiast Philip Mairét in 1913, whom she met through the same Arts and Crafts circles. She flourished as a designer and expert of weaving and dyeing (with a handle on other cultural traditions, especially South Asian ones) and in an act of inventing Indianness from elsewhere, so common in the entangled relationships between colonialism and nationalism in early twentieth-century India, Gandhi visited Ethel Mairét to discuss ideas around weaving communities, which he would feed back into his famous khadi (home and hand-spun natural fibre cloth) movement and Swadeshi boycotting of foreign cloth.

First published in 1908, Medieval Sinhalese Art, as Coomaraswamy notes, “deals not with a period of great attainment in fine art but with a beautiful and dignified scheme of peasant decoration based upon the traditions of Indian art and craft.” Prefaced by a history of the Tamils before the British occupation of Kandy in 1815, the document was written “not as a work of scholarship but” ... “for the Sinhalese people, in memorial of a period, which at present they are not willing to understand.” This work, therefore, became not only a thorough documentation of craft and design, but more importantly a reminder of the social structures that pre-dated British Ceylon. A few years later, in Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon, published in London and Edinburgh in 1913, Coomaraswamy warns that “nearly every force at work and every tendency apparent in modern India is consciously or unconsciously directed towards the destruction of all skilful handicraft.” “I wish,” he writes, “that I could persuade these teachers that ... craftsmanship is a mode of thought.”
The Eameses in India (1958)

In 1958, about fifty years after the Coomaraswamys had toured Ceylon, Charles and Ray Eames spent five months in India visiting villages and factory towns, meeting with artists, craftspeople, small rural communities, intellectuals, and government officials. Charles Eames and Ray Kaiser met at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan—an institution oft-described as the outcome of an Arts and Crafts vision to reform design in the interwar years, especially in the hands of its first head, the Finnish architect and designer Elie Saarinen (1873–1950). Trained as an architect, Charles’ time at Cranbrook intensified his interest in craft processes and he went on to become head of industrial design at the academy. Ray was trained as a painter and sculptor in New York before she moved to Cranbrook. They married in 1941, in the same year as the Organic Design in Home Furnishings exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that Charles and Eero Saarinen won the commission for and on which Ray worked, along with Harry Bertoia and others. Charles and Ray continued to work together as a designer-filmmaker duo until Charles’ death in 1978. As Pat Kirkham has shown, the Eameses time at Cranbrook was foundational in its consideration of the decorative arts, modern sculpture, and the Arts and Crafts as equally worthy and as important as architecture. While some Cranbrook students later embraced the “Machine Aesthetic” and some “Organic Modernism”, the Eameses embraced both. They bought fully into the Cranbrook ethic which, in the widely optimistic American post-war moment, went beyond style and focused more broadly on how to retain human values while experimenting with new materials and technologies to produce better living environments.

As Fred Turner has argued, the ideals of democratic psychology and democratic polity articulated by wartime social scientists hung in the air in these circles as the Cold War crept across America and Europe. In the United States in the 1930s, anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1901–1978) and Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) and the psychologist Gordon Allport (1897–1967) showed through their ethnographic and interpretative research “how culture shaped the development of the psyche, particularly through interpersonal communication.” Anthropologists and artists gathered together, for example, at Black Mountain College where they trained a new generation of American artists “in the multidisciplinary, psychologically integrated techniques of the Bauhaus, and at the same time, the progressive political ideals that infused wartime campaigns for democratic models.” American economists and experts such as Walt Rostow described the post-colonial condition as one primarily of underdevelopment, thus characterising these societies as Third World and in need of American aid and techno-social support to modernise as a bulwark against communism.
The Eameses’ aim in India was not far from these general principles. To be able to outline a programme of design for a population, they tried to understand how design had evolved over generations and how people used objects, and the ways in which design could improve standards of living. The Eameses came to India on the recommendation of Monroe Wheeler (1899–1988) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where with Alexander Girard (1907–1993), the Eameses had been involved in the *Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India* exhibition, which collected a vast number of textiles, crafts, and decorative objects from India and Indian collections around the world. The Ford Foundation worked closely with the MoMA, drawing especially on MoMA’s *Good Design* exhibitions in the 1950s, which defined and disseminated so-called “Good Design” in an attempt to shape post-war consumer culture through exhibitions at home and abroad. This resonated with the Foundation’s India representative Douglas Ensminger’s (1910–1989) claim that one of the principal problems of mid-century Indian industry was its lack of “competence in design”. The Eameses spent five months travelling in India, photographing widely, to arrive at a sense of “those values and those qualities that Indians hold important to a good life.” Their photographs were less targeted at craft objects and persons than the Coomaraswamy’s had been. Although an extant photograph from one of their India trips shows Charles with the camera, photographs also show Ray in India with a camera slung around her arm. Since their archives form a singular repository, it is impossible to know if it was Charles or Ray or both that wielded the camera during their extensive photographic journey. I will, therefore, use “they” as the agentive pronoun when referring to the India photographs.

Photographing objects and people had a longer history in both the burgeoning fields of art history and anthropology throughout the twentieth century. The relationship between anthropology and photography in the recording of ethnographic data is as old as the discipline of anthropology itself and the uses of photography have ranged from the purposes of scientific racism in the mid-nineteenth century to material culture surveys (such as ones undertaken in the twentieth century by the Anthropological Survey of India), and later Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s well-known *Balinese Character* (1942) research project on still photography. With the rise of photography as an art form in the nineteenth century, photographers documented natural landscapes as well as social settings and individuals. Photographers such as Peter Henry Emerson, who documented rural working-class life—activities such as fish processing or sail making and details of cottages and rural architectures—came to be seen as a precursor to documentary photography that would mobilise social movements and opinion in both Great Britain and the United States of America from the 1930s onwards.
forms. For instance, in the 1930s, the American government’s Farm Security Administration sponsored a decade-long photographic documentation of the American Depression and the effects of the New Deal. At the same time, reflecting contemporaneous Bauhaus thinking, the use of photographs in presentations and exhibitions in the United States worked to actively level the distinctions between fine and applied photography, by using astronomical images, X-rays, advertising illustrations, and press photos, works by the European “new vision” photographers and Herbert Matter’s famous blow-ups. Art historians too relied on photography and the photographic slide as a teaching and research device. The German art historian Aby Warburg’s (1866–1929) so-called Mnemosyne pictorial atlas involved an attempt to continuously rearranged some 2,000 photographs on seventy-nine black cloth backdrops to tease out iconographic patterns and tensions among images without any textual interference. Commenting on his amassing of images and process of comparison, Warburg, in a 1929 journal entry, called his ever-changing photograph-based system, an “iconology of the in-between” (“Ikonologie des Zwischenraumes”). By the 1920s, slide projection had become the standard for art history teaching, up to the 1950s, when the smaller celluloid slides replaced the glass plates. The use of photography by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Ethel Mairet and Charles and Ray Eames at different points in the twentieth century drew from a diverse range of traditions that use photographs and photographic slides to different ends.

The Eameses used the camera as an accumulative eye that created an abundance of images which they would then group together under rubrics such as transport, pottery, cooking, designs on earth, ornaments, and other accessories—how they were made and worn, ways of eating, vernacular architectures, and small-scale industries like block-printing, weaving, and kite-making (Figs. 10, 11, 12, and 13). They photographed people of all kinds and turned their ethnographic eye on people, craft objects, landscapes, industries, habits and homes, zooming in on things like table settings, ornaments, and even hairstyles of government officials and friends such as Pupul Jayakar (1915–1997), the cultural Tsarina of mid-century India in an apparently democratic attempt to slice through at least some of the different strata of Indian society (Fig. 14). This exercise embodies their approach to the photographic image and its crucial role in communication. Their 1976 film Something About Photography, in which Charles provides his insight into the individual choices and opportunities that one has in the making of each photograph, particularly stresses the democratic nature of photography, which tied up perfectly with Kodak’s corporate message in the USA, in which the camera was essential to everybody’s intimate everyday.
Figure 10.
Untitled slides, collection of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, The Work of Charles and Ray Eames. Digital image courtesy of Eames Office LLC (eamesoffice.com) / Photo: Sria Chatterjee (All rights reserved).
Figure 11.
Untitled slides, collection of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, The Work of Charles and Ray Eames. Digital image courtesy of Eames Office LLC (eamesoffice.com) / Photo: Sria Chatterjee (All rights reserved).
Figure 12.
Untitled slides, collection of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, The Work of Charles and Ray Eames. Digital image courtesy of Eames Office LLC (eamesoffice.com) / Photo: Sria Chatterjee (All rights reserved).

Figure 13.
Untitled slides, collection of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, The Work of Charles and Ray Eames. Digital image courtesy of Eames Office LLC (eamesoffice.com) (All rights reserved) | Photo: Sria Chatterjee
The final product of this photographic survey tour, the Eameses’ *The India Report*, which started with a passage from the Bhagavad Gita, stressed that the role of design should lie in defining and elevating “standards of living” through everyday objects and services rather than through a focus on “industrial standardisation”. The Eameses emphasis on exploring “the evolving symbols of India” found its roots in their attempts to be culturally and functionally relevant. The *loka* (a rounded brass water pot) embodied the evolution of Indian design, having been designed collectively over generations to fit various needs. As Saloni Mathur points out, the Eameses’ obsessive elevation of the *loka* was not always shared in the field, where the *loka* was primarily seen as a toilet accessory, a water pot taken along to defecations (Figs. 15, 16, 17, and 18). While aspiring to cultural specificity in *The India Report*, the Eameses saw objects as having a “timeless appropriateness”.

Figure 14.
“timelessness” but to use it, improve upon it, and make it viable for modern living. The focus of the Arts and Crafts Movement on the material culture of “simpler”, pre-industrial (and frequently pre-capitalist) societies, which promoted handicrafts as character-building as well as utilitarian, was key to the Eameses appreciation for Indian handicrafts. After William Morris’ death in 1886, Arts and Crafts admiration for pre-industrial crafts was taken forward by the English architect and historian William Lethaby (1857–1931). Lethaby’s contention that “the best method of designing has been to improve on an existing model by bettering it a point at a time” and his fixation on objects of the everyday as both utilitarian and as art resonated with the Eameses. Where Lethaby departed from the Morris tradition, and where the Eameses followed, was in the promotion of craft values in industrial design. If the photographic surveys of the Coomaraswamys and the Eameses depended upon the fluidity produced by constructing a “craft time” in which the Indian village became a site for temporal manipulations, exemplified, for instance, by Coomaraswamy’s pre-industrial medievalism and the Eameses’ focus on the generational evolution of symbols in Indian craft, what role does this production of “craft time” play in the larger political history of the Long Arts and Crafts Movement between Great Britain, India, and the United States?

Figure 15.
The Lota, photograph from The India Report. Collection of Eames Office LLC. Digital image courtesy of Eames Office LLC (eamesoffice.com) (All rights reserved).
Figure 16.
The Lota, photograph from The India Report. Collection of Eames Office LLC. Digital image courtesy of Eames Office LLC (eamesoffice.com) (All rights reserved).

Figure 17.
The Lota, photograph from The India Report. Collection of Eames Office LLC. Digital image courtesy of Eames Office LLC (eamesoffice.com) (All rights reserved).
Postindustrialism, Constructive Socialism, and Constructive Swadeshi in the British Empire

Coomaraswamy’s attention to Sinhalese craft, as this essay has already articulated, grew out of his familiarity and interest in William Morris’ writings on craft and “constructive socialism”.  For Morris, constructive socialism set his ideas apart from other contemporary socialist positions (such as Marxism) and involved providing a framework for future socialist worlds not only in his own speculative fictional account *News From Nowhere* (1890), but also in his lectures between 1884 and 1896.  In addition to Morris’ projected future socialist societies, Coomaraswamy’s fixation on the remembered traditions and fixed social structures of the pre-colonial village was closely linked to the “guild socialism” theorised by his friend and ally, the British architect Arthur Penty (1875–1937). Taking seriously the projection back and forth in time that the grasping for socialism’s definitions seemed to involve in these networks, Coomaraswamy coined the term “post-industrialism” in 1914 to describe their programme of anti-industrial criticism within and around the Arts and Crafts Movement. Coomaraswamy, Penty, C.R. Ashbee (1863–1942), and others tried to mobilise “post-industrialism” as a reframing of the notion of “progress” as an industrial capitalist phenomenon spreading from the West to less civilised parts of the world into one in which the anti-industrial alternative that they advocated
would become an essential form of modernity, antithetical to European industrial capitalism, and with the potential to exceed it for renewed post-industrial forms of society.

Penty’s preface to his *Post-Industrialism* (published in 1922) introduces a crucial element that ties them to Morris. “From one point of view,” he writes, “Post-Industrialism connotes Medievalism, from another it could be defined as ‘inverted Marxism.’” Penty’s “inverse Marxism” was directed broadly at the point that, unlike Marxism, which according to him did not adequately condemn the advent of machine-led industry, Guild Socialism focused on the regulation of machinery and the abolition of divisions of labour (so typical of industrial processes in which tasks originally performed by a single craftsperson were split between both human and machine chains). 42 “But in any case,” Penty concludes,

> [post-industrialism] means the state of society that will follow the break-up of Industrialism, and might therefore be used to cover the speculations of all who recognize Industrialism is doomed. The need of some such term sufficiently inclusive to cover the ideas of those who, while sympathizing with the ideals of the Socialists, yet differed with them in their attitude towards Industrialism, has long been felt, and the term Post-Industrialism, which I owe to Dr. A.K. Coomaraswamy, seems to me well suited to supply this want. 43

For Coomaraswamy, post-industrialism meant “permanent revolution”; 44 where communities of skilled artisans, drawing on their “intellectual and imaginative forces”, would supersede industrial capitalism from within. 45 Craftspersons would implement, in his words, “individual autonomy”, “a spontaneous anarchy”, a “repudiation of the will to govern” in which case there is “nothing to prevent a recognition of common interests, or cooperation to achieve them.” 46 They would be the masters, rather than slaves to their machines. While neither Penty nor Coomaraswamy advocated a full and literal return to medieval social structures in either Europe or India, their medievalism emphasised the ways in which spiritual values underwrote aspects of daily life and social organisation, in particular through art, as a model for future societies. Coomaraswamy writes,

> We are able to recognize, in the theory of the Syndicalists, as well as in the caste organization of India, a very nearly ideal combination of duty and pleasure, compulsion and freedom; and
the words vocation or dharma imply this very identity. Individualism and socialism are united in the concept of function. 47

In Coomaraswamy and Penty’s 1914 edited volume, Essays on Post-Industrialism: A Symposium of Prophecy Concerning the Future of Society, Coomaraswamy’s contribution was titled “The Religious Foundations of Art and Life”. 48 Unlike Marx’s strong aversion to religion, Coomaraswamy’s post-industrial state depended on its religious foundations. “It is religion,” Coomaraswamy claims, “that makes a community of one mind.” 49 He acknowledges that contemporary religion is plagued by sectarianism but is adamantly optimistic about a future “universal culture—and the world draws too close together for any other to be possible—it must be based on a widely accepted view of the meaning of life.” 50 While the Christian and Brahmanical feudal systems subject to an overarching priestly influence were successful in generating the communal over the individual, their time, Coomaraswamy concedes, is over. He resolves,

If democracy means that obedience, no longer physically or superstitiously compelled, is to become intelligent and willing we may well be right in recognizing in this present moment the dawn of a new age, founded upon religion, like every great culture of the past, and able also to express its vision in noble art. 51

Coomaraswamy’s idealisation of the caste system as well as the role of women in it accentuates his distance from daily Indian life and politics. His role in the elite intellectual Bengali Tagore circles is an essential and complex one.

Coomaraswamy’s time in Ceylon and his many visits to India in the 1900s, when he took up his study of Indian arts, crafts, society, and philosophies, coincided with the Constructive Swadeshi movement in India, in which Rabindranath Tagore and other members of the Tagore household and intellectual circuits were amply involved, especially during 1905–1906. In these nascent nationalist circles, Coomaraswamy found like-minded Indian elites and international scholars and activists such as Sister Nivedita and Okakura Tenshin, all of whom were adequately committed to the cause of cultural nationalism and the search for an “Indianness” and Pan-Asian identity that ran counter to colonial pedagogic impositions under British rule. 52
The Constructive Swadeshi movement emphasised self-reliance, seeking to bolster Indigenous enterprises, building up resources, as well as the self-esteem of the nation. “Self-development” and “self-expression” emerged as key terms of Swadeshi ideology in the cultural sphere in Bengal, not least in Coomaraswamy’s own contributions.\textsuperscript{53} The Coomaraswamys’ soft political activism around the changing culture of British India started in 1905, when they helped found the Ceylon Social Reform Society and the journal \textit{Ceylon National Review} in the hope of encouraging and initiating reform on social customs among the Ceylonese, and to “discourage the thoughtless imitation of unsuitable European customs and habits”.\textsuperscript{54} However, it is important to register here that Coomaraswamy’s crusade for cultural nationalism did not directly translate into a quest for Indian political autonomy and \textit{swadesh} (self-rule), which he saw as unnecessary violence.\textsuperscript{55} In his last major speech before he left Ceylon in 1907, Coomaraswamy tried to explain to his audience that the nationalism he favoured, rather than “differences between men” that hindered “a realization of the brotherhood and unity of humanity”, in fact implied “internationalism”. This “nationalism” was “essentially altruistic”; it was a “people’s recognition of its own special function and place in the civilized world”. Without this “special culture-contribution” and “the recognition of the rights of others to their self-development”, the civilised world is “incomplete”.\textsuperscript{56}

Seen in the light of Ananda Coomaraswamy’s work, the relationships between Victorian socialism and Indian nationalism offer a crucial entry-point to the post-industrialism of the long twentieth century. Patrick Brantlinger has written extensively about the ironies of Gandhi’s attraction to the Victorian art critic John Ruskin, and similarly William Morris’ “Ruskin-inflected Marxism”. While Morris and Gandhi both valued the anti-industrialist, pre-capitalist, community ethic that Ruskin championed, Ruskin’s stance as a Tory imperialist with thoroughly Orientalist views on India and a general distaste of Indian art, ran contrary to Morris’ broadly critical stance on imperialism. Morris never actively advocated for Indian independence, nor did he fully escape from the vestiges of Orientalism, and while Coomaraswamy explicitly brought Morris’ aesthetic and political ideas into the Indian context, his bringing together of Constructive Socialism and Constructive Swadeshi pushed only for a permanent revolution of craft societies, not necessarily the independent India that Gandhi fought for in the years leading up to independence in 1947.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{The Indian Village: Between the Colonial and the First World}

The Indian village existed far beyond the lived experience and daily struggles of its inhabitants. It served as an imaginary in which the fluidity of craft time was performed, and which served as a focal point for discussions around
craft and community since early colonial rule. In the 1880s, for British anthropologists such as Henry Maine (1822–1888), the Indian village was not seen as a site of stagnation or decay, as suggested by J.S. Mill, but as a utopian version of an earlier pre-capitalist stage of Britain’s own evolution to modernity. Scholars such as Saloni Mathur and Arindam Dutta have examined the Orientalist underpinnings of the ways in which Indian craft and craftpersons were imported and showcased in Britain in the nineteenth century. In discussing the massive documentation process that took place after 1857, driven by what Bernard Cohn calls “investigative modalities”, Abigail McGowan suggests that documentation efforts by the colonial government defined crafts via the culturally bound, ethnographically defined artisanal body, rooted in local practices, traditions, and communities as the gazetteers of the 1880s presented products defined by the distinctive features (marriage customs, gods, etc) of the caste and community that made them. Such studies, therefore, operated on the idea that production was intimately linked to culturally connected bodies, thus making the bodies central to craft production severed from industrial factories. By 1902, the nationalist historian R.C. Dutt’s *Economic History of India* (1902) had challenged such spectacles and the conditions of economic dependence that they concealed, while Indian economists such as Dadabhai Naoroji’s drain theories used contemporary agricultural and industrial statistics to showcase processes of natural resource exploitation under the colonial regime. Some British socialists too, such as Henry Mayers Hyndman (1842–1921), held explicit views on Britain’s exploitation of its colonies. Borrowing and building on Naoroji’s work among others, Hyndman’s “The Bankruptcy of India” (1878) advocated for Indian home rule under the British Commonwealth framework. Although Hyndman was not an out-and-out Indian nationalist (only gradually letting go of his Tory Radical imperialism), his political stance on India was clearer than that of, for example, William Morris.

The aesthetic and craft reform arguments from philosophers and art historians such as Coomaraswamy, the administrator and naturalist George Birdwood (1832–1917), who wrote various catalogues of the industrial arts of India (that informed much of Morris’ knowledge of Indian craft), and the arts reformer Ernest Binfield Havell, all celebrated the village as the embodiment of Indian life. For Birdwood, India, “where each community is a little republic,” was "the only Aryan country which has maintained the continuity of its marvelous social, religious, and economical life ...” In accounts such as Birdwood’s and Coomaraswamy’s, the craftsperson and the village emerge as reified categories, a timeless, Hindu entity founded and functioning on underlying religious structures, despite the fact that a large number of communities that they were writing about would have been Muslim. I argue that over the course of the twentieth century, the Indian village did not simply emerge as a timeless entity but afforded a trans-temporal space for experiments in arts and crafts ideas as they transmuted
and coagulated in the exchanges between Britain, India, and the United States, adapting to and contingent on its political contexts. Indian craft would become the leitmotif of South Asian struggles for swadesh and swaraj (self-rule) through its reinvention by Gandhi. 62 As Gyan Prakash writes, although the pre-industrial village “permitted the British to incorporate India in their evolutionary conception of history,” characterising village communities as a “stage before the modern state, the Indian nationalists fastened on precisely this symbol of village communities to signify the difference of India as a modern nation.” 63 An emphasis on the national, public importance of craft directly informed Gandhi’s famous campaign to encourage hand-spun clothes as a commitment to Swadeshi or Indian-made goods, and by the late nineteenth century, craft was no longer the private concern of artisans and merchants but a political act and preoccupation. Unlike Gandhi, who had great hopes for “Gram Swaraj”, a decentralised, non-exploitative form of village self-government through the sarpanchas and panchas (village councils), and who advocated for a “village-based political formation fostered by a stateless, classless society”, the Dalit politician and social reformer Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) had a more realistic and perhaps more nuanced view of the village as a social and judicial structure, declaring them to be microcosms of caste inequality, prejudice, and communalism. 64

The first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, had a more complicated relationship with the Indian village. After independence in 1947, Nehru’s optimistic and socialist frame for a new India hoped to transform it from a rural society into an urban state. Dedicated to conceptualising this framework, he also reached to pre-colonial ideals that would help shape this identity. As a letter from Nehru to Gandhi in 1945 shows, he saw the village as an intellectually and culturally backward environment and sought to develop programmes, the most important of which was the 1952 Community Development Program (the first of fifty-four), that prompted cooperation and community-building and aimed to raise the standards of living in the villages. 65 Dedicated symbolically to Gandhi’s memory (four years after his assassination), the programme followed a somewhat different route towards the emancipation of the village. It became the “method” through which the state sought to “bring about social and economic transformation in India’s villages”. 66 Nehru enlisted the Planning Commission to oversee it, while Douglas Ensminger (1910–1989) arrived from the United States as an official of the United States Economic and Technical Evaluation agency (the precursor to USAID), going on to become the India Representative to the largest private US philanthropic foundation of the Cold War era, the Ford Foundation, where he continued to shape Community Development policy. Gandhians joined the Planning Commission and many of their local organisations were mobilised towards the larger programme. 67 Nehru’s Industrial Policy Resolution of 1953 aimed to establish training and
development programmes that would accelerate the growth of small industries, which in turn would lead to a broader improvement of working and living conditions of the masses.

It was in this context of technocratic international development that the Eameses found their way to India, and the first steps towards a National Institute for Design were drafted. For the Eameses, the village became not only the site of possible social transformation but also the source of symbolic value, where everyday objects could be unravelled into mytho-historical continuums in which one could trace the evolution of design through generational adaptation. For example, as the Eameses almost obsessively photographed object types, such as utensils, or footwear, or transport, they moved (their camera) from villages to semi-rural spaces to cities. The data field that their visual repository created was ripe for searching, almost as algorithms would later do, for patterns that would emerge and point to nodes of evolutionary transformation across generations, to urbanisation and migration with an eye to the religious and cultural significance of the object within the changing social structures of the village.

**The National Institute of Design and the Eameses**

The National Institute of Design (NID), officially founded in Ahmedabad in 1961, grew variously out of an institution-building surge in the 1950s in newly independent India and a long history of debates and initiatives around industrial design initiated by the British in colonial India more than a century prior to independence. NID was enlisted under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, which in many ways followed the conception of industrial design in relation to rural reform already set up by the British. The first Five Year Plan (launched by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1951), following up on the *Report of the Committee for Art Education* (1947), called for the setting up of Regional Design Centres in Bombay, Bangalore, and New Delhi. Based in Ahmedabad, a city dubbed the “Manchester of India” for its proliferating textile mills, and home to Mahatma Gandhi’s Sabarmati ashram, NID was spearheaded by heirs to the wealthy mill-owning Sarabhai family, or more specifically, the brother and sister duo of Gautam (1917–1995) and Gira Sarabhai (1924–present). Gautam had a PhD in mathematics and was, at the time, Chairman of Calico Textile Mills, while Gira had lived in New York and trained at Frank Lloyd Wright’s studio in Arizona.

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Ahmedabad, in the region of Gujarat (also known then as the “Gateway to the West”), was at the crossroads of various major trade routes where merchants carrying textiles, indigo, and saltpetre, among other things, would travel along the major river routes such as the Sabarmati. During the second half of the nineteenth century, soon after the British had introduced the latest technologies and
machinery to Bombay in 1854, Ahmedabad’s cotton textile industry exploded into success. After independence, the mill owners, especially the Sarabhais, targeted their attentions on creating a new consumer market with global connections and thoroughly researched local labour and retail strategies that would replace the military-driven production that had been the mainstay during the war. While Mahatma Gandhi led protests and strikes on behalf of the textile workers in Ahmedabad in the 1930s, he also shared a close relationship with the Sarabhais, who financially supported Gandhi’s anti-British Swadeshi movement as well as his ashram in later years. The personal connections that the Sarabhais nurtured with nationalist thinkers such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Tagore fostered the contradictory ways in which the consumer-oriented nature of their enterprises sat with lofty nationalist and community-oriented goals.

Gandhi was particularly impassioned about Rabindranath Tagore’s rural reconstruction experiment and its craft and design, which included community development and craft training schemes geared towards a self-sufficient design economy. Indeed, such was the influence that it served as the inspiration behind Gandhi’s later Wardha and Sevagram ashram experiments. Ambalal Sarabhai (1890–1967), Gira and Gautam’s father, hosted Rabindranath at his home during his visits to Ahmedabad; Gandhi tirelessly raised money for Tagore’s school; and the Sarabhais became huge (financial and moral) proponents of Tagore’s work and ideas around education, with Gira Sarabhai attending classes in the Santiniketan-Sriniketan school in the 1930s.

This seemingly strange coexistence is a fitting starting point to think about newly independent India’s design history as a constant negotiation between the tenets of sustainability and development.

Almost as if illustrating this tension, Gautam and Gira Sarabhai opened the Calico Museum of Textiles in 1949, motivated by their conversations with Ananda Coomaraswamy (by then the curator of Indian art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston), who strongly recommended initiating a textile museum project in Ahmedabad to showcase its 5,000-year-old textile tradition. Emphasising the “interdependence of design and technology”, the museum showcased the finest pieces of both hand-made and mass-produced textiles with the primary aim of educating the museum visitor about the integration of “form and materials” and “creating a wider understanding of the principles of organic design”. In keeping more with the Lethaby strain of the Arts and Crafts movement, one section of the museum tried to show that “industrial design is not ... distinct from the process of machines production.” Rather than seeing the artistic qualities of an object as simply “applied” to a manufactured object, it tried to frame mid-century Indian design as an integrative process which required an exhaustive knowledge of “technical and aesthetic implications”. In his review in Mulk Raj Anand’s Marg magazine (another nationalist endeavour founded in 1946 and funded by
J.R.D. Tata (1904–1993) of the industrialist Tata family, the German Indologist Hermann Goetz (1898–1976) lauded the museum. “The Calico Museum of Textiles is modern because this survey of Indian textiles ... is undertaken not in the spirit of an antiquarian revivalism but as a substructure for the future edifice of a living and modern Indian.” The museum was one of multiple ventures that the Sarabhais initiated in the interest of creating a cultured and curious consumer for their products. This creation of the consumer, as the Sarabhais and their friends would have seen it, was not divorced from post-independence nationalist efforts. The ideal consumer citizen would, through their lifestyle choices, embrace a nationalist identity, and (eventually) display good taste and pride in both traditional Indian design and modernist innovation.

The Sarabhais worked astutely with both Gandhi’s hand-spun Swadeshi movement as well as independent India’s mass progress-oriented goals, at the time being formulated by another close friend of the Sarabhai family, Jawaharlal Nehru. Fuller, also a friend of the family, was interested in the possibility of having his geodesic domes manufactured in India. In 1964, he would give a special seminar at NID titled “Geodesic Structures”. The Sarabhais, as well as Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi (1917–1984), who would also become prime minister in 1966, were great enthusiasts of Fuller’s philosophical discourse on the architecture of the universe, of doing more with less, of not trying to change humanity but changing the environment, and of bettering the human condition for all. Despite the universality that lent itself to his work, and which inevitably flattened political realities and social difference, Fuller claimed to have admired Mahatma Gandhi’s writings, having read him avidly over a period in the late 1920s, and in the 1960s would have perhaps embraced some of the ideas of Gandhian economist, J.C. Kumarappa (1892–1960), which postulated for a sustainable society, one that manages its economic growth so as to do no irreparable damage to its environment.

Kumarappa’s views on the United States’ involvement in India were in fact not quite so rosy. In an article titled “The Noose”, in response to the Technical Cooperation Agreement that Nehru signed with the United States in 1952 (in which United States granted aid with the intent of “promoting and accelerating the integrated development of India”), Kumarappa cautioned against the tentacles of “the American speciality [of] financial imperialism”. This paradoxical positioning and negotiation between Gandhian ideals and technocratic development seeps through the story of mid-century India in various ways, as this essay shows.
The Paradox of Postindustrialism

The Eameses’ blueprint for NID was drafted in India within a particular US post-war context. In 1953, for example, the American anthropologist Margaret Mead had been similarly funded by UNESCO’s *Tension and Technology* series to edit *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change* (1953). She recognised that modernisation was inevitably a global phenomenon, but rather than railing at it, sought ways to make it more culturally sensitive. Critiques of Mead’s *Culture and Personality* programme show how it identified ideal personality types for different cultures and apparently reduced entire nations to single stereotypes. \(^81\) The modernisation theory of the 1950s coalition of American social scientists who marshalled a new set of blueprints for the Third World, suggested that all “modern” societies were converging around a set of behaviours and forms of social organisation dictated by the needs of industrial society. If the needs could be met, peasant cultures would experience “take-off” and blossom into modern societies. For the economist Walt Rostow (1916–2003), the “head salesman” of this “modernization theory”, and his colleagues, the point was, as Thomas Meaney writes, “to translate America’s peculiar path to modernity into normative theory: they were to be the vanguard of technocratic social planners for young states in the Third World.” \(^82\) While Mead was initially sympathetic to US-led modernisation, by the late 1950s, she had denounced all such modernisation theories for they threatened cultural integrity. For designers such as the Eameses, invited to work with and for the US government on overseas projects, the fall-outs were less focused on cultural difference and much more on the role of design as an agent of social change. The Eameses described the overlap between their office and various government agencies as mutual interests in the natural environment, the objects of everyday life, and “conversations with other nations”. “Our work in education has,” they said, “... provided a natural overlap to the interests of several government agencies.” \(^83\)

They write in the *India Report*,

> The change India is undergoing is not a change in *kind* but a change of degree. The medium that is producing this change is communication; not some influence of the West on the East. The phenomenon of communication is something that affects a world not a country. \(^84\)

The Eameses came to the India project predisposed to the efficacy of communication in design reform, first in the USA and thus, in effect, everywhere else. Their two-pronged approach to communication included a
broad range of experiments in their work as designers and exhibition designers, and also an attempt to participate in a broader conversation around communications theory. Their 1953 film, *A Communications Primer*, for example, tried to interpret and package ideas of communications theory to architects and planners to promote the pivotal role some of these ideas could play in planning and design. As Anthony Acciavatti argues in “Towards a Communication-Oriented Society: The Eameses India Report”, the Eameses envisioned the National Institute of Design as a kind of communications hub or national broadcast centre, where exhibitions, graphic design, photography, and film—all considered a part of information exchange—would be combined with research and training. 85 Indira Gandhi, who served as the Minister of Information and Broadcasting from 1964, also firmly believed in the power of communication in the direction of the masses, especially India’s vast rural populations. 86

The school was to become a conduit that could effectively “communicate” with the people, with itself, and with the government to form an action-driven plan for the future of Indian design. The Eameses’ proposition, beginning as it did, with a passage from the Gita that conflated the message of work (“You have the right to work but for the work’s sake only”) 87 with Morrisian ethics and a communications-cure for a stagnated mid-century India, was a practicable blueprint, adopted largely enthusiastically for the training of India’s new designers and design teachers in the arts of communication and design. 88 The Eameses’ *Communications Primer* was inspired by the 1949 book *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* by Claude Shannon, and the theory of signal processing, which it took as its basis, may be seen as an early beginning of the information revolution that would take the 1960s and 1970s by storm.

By the time the American sociologist Daniel Bell re-coined the term “post-industrialism” in Cold War America, Coomaraswamy’s socialist, religious, and craft-oriented notion was wildly out of fashion and context. In Bell’s 1973 book, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, post-industrialism does not completely displace the industrial but emphasises significant changes to the structures of industrial society to warrant a new title. Bell had used the term as early as 1959, a year after the Eameses were in India, in a series of lectures in Salzburg to denote a society “which had passed from a goods-producing stage to a service society”. His 1962 unpublished paper at a forum on technology and social change focused on the role played by technology and science in social change. 89 Bell’s post-industrialism, unlike that of Coomaraswamy’s future-oriented harnessing of past value-systems, refers to a period of evolution of an already economically developed society, which is making a further leap of affluence away from the citizen as worker to citizen as consumer. This stage-theory oriented notion of a pregnant historical
turning point finds precedent in the writings of figures such as Walt Rostow, especially in his *Stages of Economic Development: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1971). For Bell, the sector changes in the technocratic knowledge economy would, through “new relations between science and technology”, erase social distinctions and class conflict. Seen as a precursor to “communicative capitalism” (where communication is central not to democratic policy or deliberations between citizens but to forms and processes of late capitalism), Bell’s ideas were adjacent to the Eameses’ belief that even in the designing of goods towards development, it was not heavy industry but the role of communication, information, and services that would be key to a modern Indian society.  

If the Long Arts and Crafts Movement’s manoeuvres through the transatlantic political landscapes of Victorian socialism and Cold War consumerism found its ideal trans-temporal lab in the Indian village, this essay shows how the top-down Indigenism and search for Indianness that characterised both endeavours in this period were caught up in a constantly shifting nexus of priorities, between a surge towards modernisation and development on the one hand and a burgeoning nationalism that promoted the pre-colonial Indian village as spaces of sustainable and pure rural economies on the other.

**Footnotes**

4. Margot Coates, *A Weaver’s Life: Ethel Mairet 1872–1952: A Selection of Source Material* (London: Crafts Council in association with the Crafts Study Centre Bath, 1983). 19. On 4 November 1903, Ethel Mairet writes: “The weavers came from Uda Dumbara. They stayed till 29th. Gandeke Korale. Talagau village. Seven of them. 3 men and the others women, Sinhalese. The chief of them was an elderly woman, very stirring; and an interesting face. Her son also weaves, but she is evidently the moving spirit. (He made the mat we first bought from Katcheri which they recognised with great pride and a big grunt of satisfaction.)”
7. Coates, *A Weaver’s Life*, 20. For example, Ethel Mairet duly spent eleven pages on a section titled “Process of putting up loom”; this was accompanied by drawings of each post and part: “comb”, “presser”, made of “dark bamboo”.

A telling early observation, situates their combined project in this background, when, in Ceylon, one of Ethel Mairet’s first finds are embroideries with “large, bold design worked in wools on a coarse white cotton ground—very Morris in feeling”, see Coates, *A Weaver’s Life*, 18.


Saloni Mathur, “Charles and Ray Eames in India”, *Art Journal* 70, no. 1 (2011): 40–42. Saloni Mathur describes the exhibition as an “imaginary bazar” and provides a fuller account of its conception and reception and the role of the Eameses in it.


Mathur, “Charles and Ray Eames in India”.

Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames*, 175.

Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames*, 143.


39 This is a term Morris used to differentiate his work from other socialists of the time; see William Morris, “The Society of the Future”, in Arthur Leslie Morton (ed.), The Political Writings of William Morris (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 190.


43 Penty, Post-Industrialism, 14.


45 Coomaraswamy, The Arts & Crafts of India & Ceylon, 34.


47 Coomaraswamy, The Dance of Siva, 12.


49 Coomaraswamy and Penty, Essays on Post-Industrialism, 28.


51 Coomaraswamy and Penty, Essays on Post-Industrialism, 42.


55 See Mitter, Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922.


59 Abigail McGowan, Crafting the Nation in Colonial India (New York: AIAA, 2009).


62 See Rebecca Brown, Gandhi’s Spinning Wheel and the Making of India (Oxford: Routledge, 2010); and Lisa N. Trivedi, Clothing Gandhi’s Nation: Homespun and Modern India (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).


64 Granville A. Austin, The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 29. Gandhi’s proposal was, in fact, rejected by the Congress.


enlarging the capitalist base of production. For example, the Sarabhai hired A.K. Rice, whose work at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the UK on social systems they wanted to apply to understand and better the organisation of labour practices in their mills. See A.K. Rice, Productivity and Social Organization: The Ahmedabad Experiment: Technical Innovation, Work Organization and Management (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Partha Chatterjee, “The Indian Big Bourgeoisie: Comprador or National?” and “The Nehru Era”, in A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997). As Chatterjee argues, the pursuit of foreign expertise and foreign markets and a class-based social structure was fundamental to big bourgeoisie interests. In the case of the Sarabhais, it straddled Nehru’s general outlook for social betterment, his international Non-Alignment policies, and socialism on the national scale.


L. Steven Sieden, Buckminster Fuller’s Universe: His Life and Work (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2000), 93. More recently, Lorance has provided a less rosy picture of Fuller’s life, claiming that his self-construction as a utopian visionary was a carefully constructed image founded as much on his entrepreneurial skills as other things; see Loretta Lorance, Becoming Bucky Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).


See Peter Mandler, Return from the Natives: How Margaret Mead Won the Second World War and Lost the Cold War (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).


Eames, The India Report, 3.


Indira Gandhi, Years of Challenge: Selected Speeches of Indira Gandhi 1966–1969, rev. edn (Delhi: Orient Book Distributors, 1973), 283. In 1966, she claims, “I am convinced of the importance of information and mass communication in India. It is only in this way that we can communicate ideas to the general mass of the people and induce them or rather direct them in directions which are for their own good.”

Eames, The India Report, 1.

For a nuanced account of the Eameses and the complicated history of the reception of their ideas in India, see Anthony Acciavatti, “Towards a Communication-Oriented Society: The India Report” in Catherine Ince (ed.), The World of Charles and Ray Eames (New York: Rizzoli, 2016).


Bibliography


Abstract

This article proposes a reinterpretation of Turner’s Regulus (1827; 1838), an enigmatic painting named after a legendary Roman general whom the Carthaginians, cutting off his eyelids and placing him in the direct light of the sun, first blinded and then killed. “Reason Dazzled”, which takes its title from a suggestive phrase in Foucault’s account of unreason, reads the painting as an attempt to stage a certain crisis in the Enlightenment, a movement that traditionally identified both light and sight with reason. It takes the picture to be emblematic of the complex, intimate relationship between all-seeing and unseeing states, and relates this to a certain experience, in the early nineteenth century, of the aesthetic of the sublime: to see nothing but light is to see nothing. The article explores this relationship between sight and blindness, in the first instance, through the violent responses the painting provoked in the nineteenth century, especially those of John Ruskin and one Walter Stephenson. After reconstructing their reactions, the article revisits debates about the precise scene the painting depicts, arguing that the composition is best grasped as a kind of “rebus”. Finally, emphasising the apocalyptic dimension of the picture, and its powerful assault on the spectator’s eye, it returns to the claim that, contradicting the tenets of the Enlightenment, this composition demonstrates, at the level both of form and content, the blinding or death-dealing effect of too much light.

Authors

Matthew Beaumont is a Professor of English Literature at University College London.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to Tamar Garb, Andrew Hemingway, Andy Murray, Alex Potts, and the referees commissioned by British Art Studies for their constructive criticisms of previous drafts of this article.
Cite as

Introduction

In the third century BCE, during the First Punic War, the Carthaginians captured a celebrated Roman general called Regulus, and, after the collapse of complicated diplomatic negotiations, cruelly tortured him. A number of ancient historians, in their more or less mythical accounts of this incident, record that the Carthaginians then proceeded either to amputate his eyelids or to staple them open, prior to placing him in the direct light of the sun, so that he first went blind and finally expired from lack of sleep. In the second century BCE, Gaius Sempronius Tuditanus, for example, reported that Regulus “was deprived of sleep for a long time, and thus lost his life”. ¹ In the first century BCE, another so-called “lost historian”, Tubero, elaborated the details of Regulus’ barbaric punishment. He noted that the Carthaginians incarcerated the Roman general repeatedly, and for long periods of time, “in black and deep dungeons”, before taking him out “when the sun was its most fierce” and forcing him “to lift his eyes toward the sky”. “Furthermore,” Tubero continued, “they pulled apart his eyelids, above and below, and sewed them, so that he could not close his eyes.” ² Terminally exposed to light, Regulus’ eyes came to see only darkness.

In the course of the 1820s and 1830s, J.M.W. Turner painted a rather cryptic picture that, though its original title is in some doubt, is today known simply as Regulus (Fig. 1). It is an immensely powerful, if unsettling attempt to dramatise the complex, dialectical relations between light and darkness, sight and sightlessness, the all-seeing and the unseeing, which were increasingly central to the artist’s aesthetic. Turner had long been intrigued by Regulus. In one of the poems discovered among his sketchbooks after he died, composed in 1811, the painter celebrated the heroic patriotism of Regulus—“whom every torture did await”—in some verses indebted to Horace’s portrait of the Roman general as the embodiment of imperial virtue. George Thornbury cited this poem in his Life of J.M.W. Turner (1862), claiming that Regulus was “one of those ‘powerful beings’ and ‘stubborn souls’ the poet [i.e. Turner] seems to sympathise with.” ³
In addition to Horace, Turner’s encounter with the figure of Regulus in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was probably mediated both by James Thomson and Oliver Goldsmith. Thomson, whose poetry influenced Turner’s verse, was an important point of reference for the painter from at least the late 1790s, when quotations from *The Seasons* adorned the pictures he exhibited at the Royal Academy. In “Winter” (1726), the first part of *The Seasons*, Thomson at one point alludes to Regulus as a “willing victim” that, “bursting loose / From all that pleading Nature could oppose”, “nobly responded to “honour’s dire command”.

But a more immediate literary source was Goldsmith’s *The Roman History* (1769), which recounts the legend of Regulus in rich, fantastical detail (it includes a description of his soldiers’ struggle, during an earlier phase of the Punic campaign, against not just the Carthaginians but also an enormous, poisonous serpent). Significantly, in a list of possible subjects drafted on the inside front cover of his copy of the 1786 edition of Goldsmith’s book, Turner recorded the words “Regulus returns”.

It is possible to speculate furthermore that, perhaps in his capacity as Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy between 1807 and 1837, Turner also came across references to Regulus’ fate in two works by George Adams, the distinguished eighteenth-century optician and maker of mathematical instruments. In *An Essay on Vision* (1789), as in the chapter

**Figure 1.**
J. M. W. Turner, Regulus, 1828, reworked 1837, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 123.8 cm. Collection of Tate (N00519). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported)).
“On the Nature of Vision” in his Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy (1794), Adams compared the Carthaginians’ punishment of the Roman general, which “exposed him to the bright rays of the sun, by which he was very soon blinded”, to one of the methods of torture practised by Dionysius I of Syracuse. In the fourth century BCE, according to Adams, this Sicilian tyrant “was accustomed to bring forth his miserable captives from the deep recesses of the darkest dungeons, into white and well-lighted rooms, that he might blind them by the sudden transition from one extreme to the other.”  

For Adams, this sort of mistreatment of the eye must have seemed positively apocalyptic in its implications. After all, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a period in which, partly thanks to contemporaneous technological developments such as the popularisation of the microscope and telescope, the eye became ideologically as well as scientifically pre-eminent. “It was the fundamental organ through which men of taste explored, codified and appreciated their world,” as Alun Withey writes. 

The “century of the Enlightenment,” Jean Starobinski remarked in a classic study, “looked at things in the clear sharp light of the reasoning mind whose processes appear to have been closely akin to those of the seeing eye.” Turner’s picture of Regulus, I propose in this article, dramatises the crisis of this Enlightenment conception of vision, which identified both light and sight with reason. The painting explores the process whereby violent exposure to clear sharp light, in the form of the sun, blinds the seeing eye and pitches the reasoning mind into a state of unreason. Regulus is in this respect an experiment in the limits of the sublime. In his Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757), Edmund Burke noted that “such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye” is an archetypal example of the sublime because it “overpowers the sense, [and] is a very great idea”. In its impact on sight, though, this extreme light pitches the eyes, paradoxically, into a state of blindness. “Extreme light,” he continued, “by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness.” Extreme light, annihilating sight, constitutes a sort of night.

In Regulus, Turner depicts the rapidly creeping but permanent obliteration of objects, and the overpowering of the senses, that is the irrevocable consequence of seeing through lidless eyes. The painting, I contend, stages a dialectic wherein unceasingly clear-eyed, relentlessly rational sight produces its own kind of blindness. This is the process described by Michel Foucault, as part of his attempt to understand the form assumed by “classical unreason”, in terms of “reason dazzled”. “Dazzlement is night in broad daylight, the darkness that rules at the very heart of what is excessive in light’s radiance,” he writes in Madness and Civilization; “Dazzled reason opens its eyes upon
the sun and sees nothing, that is, does not see.” 10 Turner’s Regulus comprises an allegory, albeit an enigmatic, fragmentary one, of this dialectic of Enlightenment. In this mysterious painting, the sun that is, according to iconographic convention, symbolic of the Enlightenment, does not merely illuminate; it obnubilates. And it thus serves, in spite of its characteristic emphasis on light, or because of it, as a portrait of what Foucault, evoking the significance of delirium in the “age of reason”, calls the “night of the mind”. 11

I begin, in the first substantive section of the article, by exploring Regulus in terms of some of the violent responses that this controversial canvas provoked in its own time: first, that of Walter Stephenson, a vulnerable working-class man who, in an incident that has been largely forgotten, physically attacked it in the National Gallery, London, in 1863; second, that of John Ruskin, who made more than one revealingly intemperate reference to it. These reactions, it might be said, are themselves instances of reason dazzled. After reconstructing Ruskin’s and Stephenson’s more or less iconoclastic responses, I use the second section to revisit debates among art historians about the precise scene that Regulus depicts, tracing the shift it describes from history painting to landscape and interpreting it in terms of what Freud characterises in The Interpretation of Dreams (1899) as a “rebus”. Finally, in the third section of the article, returning to the agonising details of the Roman general’s torture and the apocalyptic implications of his lidless and sleepless condition under the pitiless gaze of the sun, I read the picture as emblematic of the intimate relationship between all-seeing and unseeing states, and relate this to a certain experience, in the early nineteenth century, of the aesthetic of the sublime. Reconstructing the optics of contemporaries of Turner whom Regulus profoundly antagonised, I thus build on Jonathan Crary’s brilliant interpretation of this painting as the dramatisation of “an encounter with the sun that is pulling the world back into primal invisibility.” 12 To see nothing but light is to see nothing.

Regulus and its Antagonists

Shortly before 2pm on 16 December 1863, a “tall man of shabby-genteel appearances” entered the Turner Room at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. Standing before the painting numbered 519 in the catalogue, he suddenly produced a penknife and stabbed at the canvas some eight or nine times. Ralph Nicholson Wornum, keeper and secretary of the National Gallery, and the man largely responsible for returning the nation’s Turner collection to Trafalgar Square after its exile to a gallery adjoining the South Kensington Museum, recorded in his unpublished diary that the most serious of these injuries “was about an inch and a quarter long”, but that there were
also “four stabs and four pricks or spots”. For decades, Turner’s paintings had provoked violent reactions from its critics; none more so than this physical attack.

One of the other visitors to the Turner Room that afternoon noticed enough of the man’s destructive behaviour to report him to the National Gallery’s inspector of police, Eleazer Denning. Inspector Denning promptly and discreetly placed the suspicious man under surveillance, watching him “very closely”. Roughly ten minutes after he’d arrived in the room, Denning observed the man once more “near the picture with his hand uplifted”. But, as soon as the man “saw that he was observed”, as the inspector testified at the Marlborough Street Police Court on the following day, “he moved his hand, and leaned on the railing for about ten minutes, and then walked away and sat down on a chair for about two hours.” Bertha Mary Garnett’s 1883 picture of A Corner of the Turner Room gives a sense of the relationship between railing and paintings, more than eighty of which hung on the walls alongside free-standing screens that accommodated a further eighteen pictures (Fig. 2).

Figure 2.

After that lengthy interval, at about five minutes to 4pm, Edmund Paine, a curator at the National Gallery since 1857, who was by then also present, saw the man “make four or five pokes” at the same picture, and immediately apprehended him and handed him over to the inspector. At this point,
Denning asked to see the man’s “eye glass”—a common device used for conducting a close examination of the canvas—which he had first seen in his hand at 2pm. “But instead of giving me the eye glass,” he reported, “he took from his pocket a penknife, and on my asking him if he had used it that day, and for what purpose, he said ‘for stabbing a picture’.” There was a small quantity of paint on the blade. When Denning asked the man why he had acted in this manner, “he replied, ‘I was very much excited. The misty state of the picture and the dislike I had for the man made me do it.’” 15 As far as the Art-Journal was concerned, these excuses did not amount to a cogent motive for committing the crime. Dismissing him as a “maniac”, its correspondent noted that, “when taken into custody,” the perpetrator “could give no rational reason for what he had done.” 16 The Illustrated London News, for its part, noted that “the language and bearing of the offender when apprehended were little better than those of an idiot”, but it emphasised that, in spite of this, “there were no symptoms of insanity about him.” 17

The man arraigned at Marlborough Street Magistrates Court on the following day, when he was charged with “wilful damage to one of Turner’s pictures in the National Gallery”, was named Walter Stephenson. Described at the time of the incident “as an author, of no home”, Stephenson was a 52-year-old man who on the occasion of the trial recorded his occupation as “clerk”, though he was also described as an “accountant”. 18 In his diary, Wornum noted that Stephenson was a “lithographic writer” (this professional title, which had been around since the late 1810s, indicated someone who lettered lithographic pictures). He added that he “says he is destitute”. 19 Stephenson, who reportedly “had no friends or relatives, and came from Newcastle”, was committed to trial on 4 January 1864 at the Clerkenwell Sessions, where he pleaded guilty to the charge. 20 This poor man was clearly in a state both psychologically fragile and socially and economically precarious.

On first being apprehended, according to the inspector, Stephenson expressed remorse for the crime, and told him, “If I had not been detected I should have given myself up to you before I left the gallery.” At Stephenson’s sentencing, which took place at the Middlesex Sessions on 18 January 1864, the assistant judge conceded that the prisoner had “committed the crime through distress of mind”, as enquiries respecting him had indicated, but emphasised that “there could be no doubt that he perfectly well knew that he was perpetrating a serious injury on a valuable work of art”. He concluded that “the property of the public in museums must be protected from such outrages”, before sentencing him to “hard labour for six calendar months”. 21
The trustees of the National Gallery were doubtless gratified by this outcome, since their representative at the sentencing, a Mr Cooper, had insisted that they “would have been failing in their duty to the public had they not prosecuted this man for really one of the most wicked acts of spoliation that could well be conceived.” As the *North London News* reported, it was calculated that it would cost three guineas to repair the damage Stephenson had inflicted on the canvas. This proved optimistic, though, for the specialist who restored the canvas, Charles Buttery, charged eight guineas when, after little more than a month, he returned it to the National Gallery on 1 April 1864. But Stephenson’s symbolic violation both of the painting and the “national property”, in Cooper’s phrase, was evidently thought to be vastly disproportionate to these relatively modest sums. After all, in symbolic terms, it constituted a spectacular rebellion against what Tony Bennett, in his Foucauldian account of the disciplinary politics of the nineteenth-century museum—a politics that entailed “simultaneously ordering objects for public inspection and ordering the public that inspected”—has termed the “exhibitionary complex.”

“What is the picture?” the judge asked when Stephenson was charged. It seems self-evident that the vandal, who hovered in the vicinity of this one picture in particular for most of the afternoon on which he committed the crime, had carefully singled it out (perhaps poor Stephenson, conversely, felt that it had singled him out). “Regulus leaving Rome”, Inspector Denning responded to the judge... This remarkable painting—initially executed in 1828, and repainted and completed in 1837—had generated consternation, if not controversy, from the start of its career. Turner first painted the canvas, alongside his *Medea* and *View of Orvieto*, in Rome at the end of 1828. Charles Eastlake, who later became the first director of the National Gallery, and who was in post when Stephenson defaced *Regulus*, reported to Thornbury that the “foreign artists” who went to see these three pictures in Rome in 1828 “could make nothing of them”. In a later letter, to Maria Callcott, Eastlake complained too that, though he regarded *Regulus* in particular as “a beautiful specimen of [Turner’s] peculiar power”, the Romans who examined it “dwelt more on the defects of the figures, and its resemblance to Claude’s compositions[,] than on its exquisite gradation and the taste of the architecture.”

When these paintings were exhibited in England in February 1829—after a troubled journey back from Italy during which *Regulus* probably suffered the fairly severe tear that has been discovered in the upper-left portion of the canvas—they generated a more mixed response. According to Eastlake’s account, at least a thousand people went to see them—“so you may imagine how astonished, enraged or delighted the different schools of artists were, at seeing things with methods so new, so daring, and excellencies so
unequivocal.” “The angry critics have, I believe, talked most,” he added, “and it is possible you may hear of general severity of judgment, but many did justice, and many more were fain to admire what they confessed they dared not imitate.” ²⁹ Among those who came to value it, incidentally, at a time “when the work was still highly controversial”, was the American novelist Herman Melville, who bought Samuel Bradshaw’s engraving after Turner’s painting, which was instead titled Regulus Leaving Carthage (1859). ³⁰

Turner’s Regulus continued to provoke extreme responses, as Stephenson’s act of iconoclasm most dramatically indicates. One of those persistently angered by the painting was John Ruskin, Turner’s most distinguished and most evangelical champion in the nineteenth century. The engraver Daniel Wilson, no more than an apprentice at the time, testified to this in the late 1830s. He was permitted to visit Turner at his home in Queen Anne Street, London, and there found him in such a tolerant mood that he was led into the “Inaccessible gallery” and directed to the Regulus for the purposes of engraving it on a copper plate—“It was not the one I would have chosen, but it was triumph enough to get one of his choice.” Wilson, who published the Embarcation of Regulus in 1838, recorded in his journal some forty years later that, when Ruskin “commended [his] translation of the picture”, the eminent critic added, “But it is labour thrown away; for the picture is one of Turner’s grand mistakes, an artifice, not a study.” Ruskin classified it, moreover, as one of Turner’s “nonsense pictures”. ³¹

In his Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House (1857), Ruskin reiterated this opinion in public, condemning it as “a picture very disgraceful to Turner, and as valueless as any work of the third period can be; done wholly against the instincts of the painter at this time, in wicked relapse into the old rivalry with Claude.” ³² Regulus, in short, was an egregious example of Turner’s persistent habit of attempting to emulate Claude, whose influence, as Ruskin had complained in Modern Painters, prevented the British artist from successfully imitating nature and therefore honouring God’s creation. ³³ This painting’s “great fault”, Ruskin continued in dogmatic spirit in his Notes,
Regulus, in fact, was one of several paintings that, in a kind of Foucauldian fantasy combining the institutional functions of exhibition and incarceration, Ruskin recommended be “placed in a condemned cell, or chamber of humiliation, by themselves; always, however, in good light, so that people who wished to see the sins of Turner, might examine them to their entire satisfaction.” 35

Stephenson, himself subsequently placed in a condemned cell, was offended, according to his own confession, both by the sins of Turner, as his reference to “the dislike [he] had for the man” indicates, and the painting’s formal execution, which he characterised in terms of “the misty state of the picture”. It is as if he consciously converted Ruskin’s aesthetic and moral attack on Regulus into a physical attack. Ruskin, in fact, as his correspondence intimates, seems almost to have sympathised with Stephenson. He appears, at least, to have felt inclined to overlook the crime, in part perhaps because he regarded the painting as “disgraceful”, in part because he believed that the man’s attempt to deface a single, relatively unrepresentative canvas was insignificant compared to the National Gallery’s corrosive treatment of the Turners in its institutional care. Ruskin, who in the late 1850s laboured intensively on the Turner Bequest in order to conserve and catalogue its contents, was convinced that the colours of its drawings and paintings were already fatally fading.

So, in an undated letter to Georgiana Cowper from late 1863 or early 1864, Ruskin complained that the Turners in the National Gallery had “decayed to absolute death” as a result of the mildewed conditions that, scandalously, prevailed in the room in which they had been temporarily stored. He then commented, in cantankerous tones, that “the stabbing [of] pictures is nothing—one ‘cleaner’ does more harm in an hour than a charge of bayonets and a volley of grape[shot] would.” “My mind has been long made up to the destruction of the whole,” he continued, alluding to the entire collection of Turners for which the National Gallery had custodial and curatorial responsibility:

So that this stabbing is to me just what the prick of a pin would be to a man who had had his flesh cut off his bones in little bits—as far as a multitude of Shylocks could do it without any Portia conditions—except just that they must leave him alive, or a little alive. 36

Ruskin’s personal identification with both Turner and his paintings in this sentence—reinforced no doubt by the curious and mysterious crisis in their friendship that occurred in the mid-1840s—is startling. In rhetoric that seems indebted not only to Shakespeare but to other, even more lurid Renaissance
dramatists, he posits the National Gallery’s negligent preservation of the pictures, which entails above all bleeding the colour from them but leaving them “a little alive”, as equivalent to torture. Moreover, Ruskin implies that he himself experiences this torture almost physically. The National Gallery has in effect entombed both Ruskin and Turner, according to the former, in a “chamber of humiliation” like the one he evoked in conversation with Wilson. Compared to this calculated and protracted persecution, Stephenson’s punctual, spontaneous stabbing of *Regulus*, a painting for which Ruskin felt no affection, clearly seemed inconsequential to the critic.

Why did *Regulus* inspire such savage, vengeful reactions? Ruskin wanted to exhibit the picture, like some criminal monstrosity, in a condemned cell, as an aesthetic and moral example. Stephenson, adopting an approach both more dramatic and more demotic, simply stabbed it. Perhaps the violence of the painting itself, a violence that shapes its composition and its pictorial content alike, provoked these responses. For, in some almost literal sense, it appears to have comprised an assault on the eye. The diarist Joseph Farington recorded after all that, in reacting to Turner’s *Dort, or Dortrecht* (1818), a naturalistic painting far more constrained in its use of light, the Royal Academician Henry Thomson had commented that “it almost puts your eyes out”. This sort of violent rhetoric was not untypical of contemporary responses to many of Turner’s compositions, the blazing, brilliant effect of which, when they were first exhibited, cannot in retrospect be underestimated. In an elaborate, slightly laboured account of *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* (1829), to offer another example, the critic for the *Literary Gazette*, recalling Odysseus’ exoculation of the one-eyed Cyclops, joked that this “is really no reason why Mr. Turner should put out both the eyes of us, harmless critics”, adding that “so red-hot a mass has seldom been applied to our visual organs”. The scorching optics of *Regulus*, like other later Turners, were far more extreme than this painting. Turner’s “sun absolutely dazzles the eyes”, the *Literary Gazette* remarked in its review of this painting. Certainly, it seems to have dazzled Stephenson’s reason—perhaps Ruskin’s too.

Ironically, however, in another context, Ruskin celebrated precisely this offensive aspect of Turner’s art. In *Modern Painters*, Volume 1 (1843), he praised the quality that, as far as he was concerned, made Turner unique among other colourists—“the dazzling intensity, namely, of the light which he sheds through every hue, and which, far more than their brilliant colour, is the real source of their overpowering effect upon the eye.” Here, at his most aggressively avant-garde, Ruskin mocked ignorant gallery-goers who, illogically, made Turner’s forceful use of light in his paintings “the subject of perpetual animadversion; as if the sun which they represent, were quite a quiet, and subdued, and gentle, and manageable luminary, and never dazzled anybody, under any circumstances whatsoever.” The idea of the
sun as an unmanageable, indeed unendurable, luminary is absolutely central both to the literary theme and artistic form of Regulus. It is all about dazzling; and it enacts this dazzlement at the level of form as well as content.

As Ronald Paulson has recognised, in Turner’s paintings of the sun, from Regulus to Yacht Approaching Coast (c.1840–1845), “everything in the picture, from the waves to the clouds and the people, is determined—both created and destroyed—by this source of energy.” He underlines that “over a large number of paintings the sun becomes associated with, on the one hand, fruition, warmth, and energy, but, on the other, with plagues and apocalyptic conflagrations and blood-baths.”

In Regulus, the sun that cultivates is all but obliterated by this cataclysmic one.

Regulus as a Rebus

At the climactic point of his account of Regulus in The Roman History, Goldsmith records the fury with which the Carthaginians greeted their prisoner once the failure of their attempts to make peace with the Romans had become clear on his return:

First, his eyelids were cut off, and then he was remanded to prison. He was, after some days, brought out and exposed with his face opposite the burning sun. At last, when malice was fatigued with studying all the arts of torture, he was put in a barrel stuck full of nails that pointed inwards, and in this painful position he continued till he died.

Turner’s painting, in the 1820s and 1830s, is shaped not by the heroic figure of Regulus he found in Horace but by this sketch of the Roman general trapped for perpetuity in an abject state of agony.

But the scene in which Regulus was blinded and starved in the sun is not in fact the one that Turner depicted; at least, it isn’t the one that he depicted directly. Indeed, it is difficult to ascertain precisely which of the legend’s scenes the painting does reconstruct. If Turner, in Regulus, portrayed what Foucault calls in his account of state executions a “theatre of terror”, then the stage is oddly empty.

What precisely does the painting depict? In the 1860s, when Stephenson defaced it, the curators at the National Gallery evidently regarded it as a “Regulus Leaving Rome”. And, certainly, if the Roman History was the picture’s most important source, it seems likely that this is the relevant scene, since Goldsmith provides a more vivid sketch of Regulus departing from the Roman city than from the Carthaginian one. But
some critics have suggested instead that it represents the general leaving Carthage rather than Rome; that is, at the commencement rather than at the conclusion of his diplomatic mission. Gerald Finley, impressed by the fact that the full title of Wilson’s line engraving, which was overseen by Turner, is titled “Ancient Carthage—the Embarcation of Regulus”, has, for example, made this assumption.  

Turner’s painting portrays a fairly generic seaport, similar to the ones in Dido Building Carthage (1815) and The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire (1817) (the latter a rumination on the theme of imperial decline that was also informed by Goldsmith’s The Roman History). These paintings, which both have a comparatively cool palette, evoke a fairly pacific atmosphere, even if the former in particular portrays a certain amount of industrious activity. In Regulus, a far more fraught composition, the frenetic if not febrile movement in the harbour frames the central image of a blankly blazing, death-dealing sun. This sun, painted principally in the chrome yellow to which Turner was so attached, is not an identifiable focus of the composition, though; it is not an orb whose concentrated force can neatly be contained. For it is in some almost literal sense inscrutable. It is, instead, a sort of sedimented stain; and, at once fascinating and sinister in its potential limitlessness, it metastasises across the sky and threatens to contaminate or corrode the cityscape that, whether Carthage or Rome, lies unprotected beneath it. As Turner’s allegory of lidlessness and blindness in Regulus reveals, the sun is an agent of illumination that, if it warms and illuminates the world, also threatens to plunge it into terminal darkness.

In Regulus, the sun’s light, in spite of its oddly troubling diffuseness, batters down the choppy, fretful waters of the seaport, reducing it to a thin sheet or strip of beaten gold that, as it unfurls into the foreground, fatally tempts the viewer’s gaze. In the immediate foreground, there are the beginnings of a golden-brown beach, on the right of which mothers and children bathe and men and women wait for boats to embark or disembark. On the left, beside a chaotic jumble of commercial boats and ships, the rigging of which is inhabited by several figures, three men roll a barrel and a fourth man gestures savagely and strangely (like the horrified figure, arms outstretched, at the bottom right of Turner’s Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps [1812], another painting centred on the journey taken by an ancient general, this one Carthaginian rather than Roman, beneath an apocalyptic sun). In the middle ground, on either side of the water, there are buildings. The ones on the left, which seem to be deserted, are like half-ruined fortifications. The palatial ones on the right, which are as intimidating as they are immense, pullulate with people. But, like those on the opposite side of the harbour, these buildings too have a faint air of decadence about them,
and the light impasto that ornaments some of their details seems, like algae, to signal some subtle process of organic decomposition. The sun, in this painting, is not only an inflammation, it is a contagion.

*Regulus*, as Ruskin implies, can be interpreted in part as a meditation on Claude Lorrain’s picturesque *Seaport with the Villa Medici* (1637), which Turner had copied into his sketchbook during his first trip to Rome in 1819; or on his *Seaport at Sunset* (1639). But, if this is the case, the British artist’s meditation on his French precursor’s paintings is peculiarly bitter and vindictive. As the critic for *The Spectator* put it in 1837, after peremptorily declaring that “we wish the sun were out of the picture”, in *Regulus*, Turner “is just the converse of Claude; instead of the repose of beauty—the soft serenity and mellow light of an Italian scene—here all is glare, turbulence, and uneasiness.”

In formal terms, at least for heuristic purposes, *Regulus* can thus be regarded, like a number of Turner’s other paintings, as a sublime reinscription of the Claudian picturesque; if not a “primitivist” reduction of it.

Interestingly, J. Hillis Miller has proposed that Turner’s oil sketch *Claudian Harbour Scene* (1828) might in fact have been a preliminary version of *Regulus* (it is usually thought to be a preliminary version of *Dido Directing the Equipment of the Fleet* [1828]). More fancifully, Miller even speculates that:

> the *Claudian Harbour Scene* may show Regulus as a hooded figure to the right being led out to be blinded by the sun or perhaps surrounded by his family and friends in Rome about to embark for his voyage back to certain death in Carthage.

Perhaps there is indeed a spirit of spitefulness as well as sublime grandeur to Turner’s recreation of the Claudian topos—a “wicked relapse into the old rivalry with Claude”, as Ruskin had characterised it.

If Turner was thinking of Claude’s landscape paintings in this picture, then he was also thinking of history paintings that had previously depicted Regulus. The fate of the Roman general had been a far from popular classical theme in the history of European painting, but it was nonetheless not unfashionable in Turner’s lifetime. It served, for example, as the subject matter selected by the French Academy for the Prix de Rome in 1791. Furthermore, both Salvator Rosa and, more recently, Benjamin West had produced distinguished paintings of aspects of the story. Rosa’s *Death of Regulus*, painted in the early 1660s, was exhibited at the British Institution—the “prime objective” of which “was to foster a native school of history painting” —in both 1816 and 1828. West’s *Departure of Regulus*, which George III commissioned in 1769, apparently after reading Livy’s description of the
general’s departure from Rome, was displayed that same year at the Royal Academy’s inaugural exhibition (Fig. 3). There, it “simultaneously projected the Academy’s idealised self-image and confirmed the exalted character of its royal patron”, as David Solkin has observed. Subsequently, in 1824 and 1833, it too was exhibited at the British Institution.

In both formal and thematic terms, Turner’s version of the Regulus legend deliberately refuses West’s example. The latter depicts the self-sacrificing scene when the Roman general turned his back on his family in order to return to Carthage as a hostage; and it therefore calculatedly fostered the aristocratic cult of the hero that prevailed in the late eighteenth century. As Martin Myrone has commented, it presented “the most severe version of masculine exemplarity—a harsh, self-sacrificing hero whose noble sufferings would inspire his people.” Turner, in contrast, depicted a mysterious seaport in which the action, at first far from comprehensible, is performed by an indistinct mass of people rather than a heroic protagonist instantly recognisable as Regulus. In this respect, his iteration of the legend conforms to the political context in which it was painted, that of the 1820s and 1830s, when the political agency of the individual aristocratic subject celebrated by West was increasingly challenged by the emergence of the collective subjects embodied in both the middle and working classes.
In this climate, epic narrative no longer seemed like a viable painterly paradigm, and *Regulus* is in part an expression of what Leo Costello calls the artist’s “ambivalent response to the loss of history painting as it had been traditionally practiced as a locus of significant pictorial statements.” Generically speaking, Turner displaces the Regulus legend, framing it not in terms of history painting, as West had done, but in terms of landscape painting. Even if it is reconfigured as a landscape, though, the scene he portrays is still shaped by its prior inscription in the tradition he inherits. So the composition itself necessarily registers the shift from history painting to landscape. *Regulus* is then one of those pictures that, as Costello puts it, “instantiate the complex ways in which the distinction between landscape and history painting becomes un-decidable” for Turner.

No doubt, the contrast between West and Turner’s approaches to the legend of Regulus was also, and relatedly, the result of the different material and historical conditions in which they were produced. Conceived for a royal patron, West’s history painting needed to render the *exemplum virtutis* of the narrative readily apparent. Turner’s picture, the result of a persistent interest in Regulus dating back to the early 1810s, was in contrast painted speculatively, for the exhibition room, where it might or might not ultimately find a customer prepared to purchase it; and it could therefore afford to be far more elusive and evasive in its treatment of this subject matter, far more experimental. Instead of inviting the spectator to identify with a patrician example of martial virtue, as West had done, Turner confronted the spectator with a mysterious horror that defies coherent narrative form and lacks both an obvious hero and a clear moral. If West’s practice, in Costello’s formulation, “maintain[s] the individual male subject as the primary agent of history”, then Turner’s positively undermines this elitist paradigm. As it happens, like many of the oil paintings Turner exhibited in the 1830s, *Regulus* never did find a buyer.

In terms of narrative content, Turner’s *Regulus* is most productively apprehended, I want to argue, as a composite of several different parts of the classical legend of the Roman general, which it reorganises not as a historical tableau but as a landscape. Time, in this painting, is displaced in terms of space. The departure it depicts, according to this approach, is from both Rome and Carthage (as if Regulus is so remorseless in his pursuit of civic virtue, as his alleged indifference to his family indicates, that both departures amount to the same thing). The people it portrays, seething among the boats and ships on the shore in the foreground, teeming on the terraces of the monumental buildings on the right in the middle ground, are at the same time Carthaginians and Romans. The port, perhaps even the surface of the sea itself, seems to boil with the emotions of the people assembled there, whether they are the general’s enemies or his agitated friends. In a literal rather than colloquial sense, it might be partly because of
this composite form, this topographical expression of narrative form, that Ruskin categorised the painting as one of Turner’s “nonsense” pictures. It calculatedly confounds rational sense.

In *Regulus*, Turner organises his thematic material not diachronically, as a distinctive episode within a coherent narrative, but synchronically (this is consistent with his developing interest, to which Cecilia Powell among others has pointed, in portraying composite scenes). 55 His aesthetic is, so to speak, poetic as opposed to novelistic. In this respect, *Regulus* conforms to the composite, contradictory, and fragmentary logic of the legend of Regulus itself, with its phantasmagoric images of studded barrels, rampaging elephants, and lidless eyes. In short, the painting is a kind of “rebus”, in which several elements of the legend are combined according to the logic of a dream. It will be recalled that, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud compared the dream to a rebus or “picture-puzzle”. There, he observed that his “predecessors in the field of dream-interpretation” had committed the error of “treating the rebus as a pictorial composition”; “and as such it has seemed to them nonsensical and worthless.” 56

Perhaps it is an analogous error to judge *Regulus* as a coherent narrative entity. For it is in the compound, enigmatic terms of a rebus that certain apparently anachronistic pictorial features of Turner’s composition can be understood: the miniscule but brightly illuminated figure “in Roman toga descending the grand flight of steps of the palace” on the right of the canvas, whom Wilson identified in 1889 as Regulus himself; and the cask being rolled by the four men, one of them gesturing angrily or despairingly, on the left of the canvas, which the engraver identified as the spiked barrel into which Regulus was thrust in order to redouble his agonies (it is also possible to speculate that, like the man on the steps, this man too is the Roman general himself, here on the point of being incarcerated in the barrel). 57 These pictorial details, in their non-synchronous relation to the scene, are the components of a dream, and are therefore “no longer nonsensical”, in Freud’s terms again, “but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance”. 58 And to these details might be added other dreamlike features, such as the two small windows beneath the portico that surmounts the imposingly tall building at the right-hand edge of the canvas, which recall a pair of blankly staring, perhaps blinded, eyes.

Alongside its strikingly impressionistic form, it was perhaps this phantasmagoric dimension of *Regulus* that, in its refusal of narrative logic, offended Stephenson, who finally condemned it, after gazing at it for an entire afternoon, as if he too had been half-blinded by its sun, for its “misty state”. In contrast to West’s painting of Regulus, Turner’s refuses to fulfil the viewer’s expectation that she should be able to pinpoint the scene it represents; and, in this sense, it constitutes a “pointed negation” of what
Alex Potts has helpfully identified, in relation to Delacroix, as “the aesthetic of the pregnant moment” that Lessing had sponsored in the late eighteenth century. After all, in spite of its title, and even if a diminutive Regulus really can be glimpsed in the distance, Turner’s picture doesn’t have an obvious protagonist. This is not a “death-of-the-hero” picture. As the critic in the *Literary Gazette* exclaimed, in admitting to the futility of attempts to identify the Roman general: “Regulus! There is certainly a little group of little men, rolling a little spiked cask into a little boat; but, *au reste!*” Here, as in Turner’s other displacements of history painting in terms of landscape, there is no hero. Instead, the sun itself, and the empty space it illuminates with such intensity, is at the centre of this dreamlike composition.

It is because of the protagonist’s apparent absence from the scene of Turner’s painting that John Gage’s highly imaginative claim about the picture—that it is in fact painted from the perspective of Regulus himself; and that it thus depicts the scene on which he has been forced to stare in the course of his cruel punishment—is such a perceptive attempt to resolve its narrative challenges. But this interpretation must be understood not as some singular solution to the picture’s cryptic composition, but simply as one more possibility, if a peculiarly suggestive one, that is opened up by its phantasmagoric organisation in terms of what I have characterised as a rebus.

The persuasive force of Gage’s influential argument that *Regulus* situates painter and viewer in the position of Regulus as he is being tortured does not lie in the fact that this resolves the picture’s geographical ambiguities. Its elaborate intercalation of time as well as space is more complicated than this. No, the advantage of this reading is that it helps make sense of the painting’s subjective topography, as it might be called, rather than its objective geography. For, from this angle, *Regulus* portrays the nightmarish gaze of the general, a gaze that is influenced by an interior vision as much as an exterior one, as it feverishly recombines elements of his past, present, and perhaps even future. It represents the delirious images that, interfering with the logical disposition of space and time, superimposing both memories of his torture and premonitions of his death on the seaport in front of him, unfurl before a man with lidless eyes as he is forced to stare at the sun. This vision, then, also effectively conforms to the dreamlike logic of a rebus. Whether the composition is structured according to the “subjective” perspective of the Roman general, as Gage proposes, or some more “objective” perspective, it is consciously contradictory, comprising as it does non-synchronous scenes, and also consciously cryptic. It can be understood either as Regulus’ rebus or as that of the painter and spectator: as Regulus’ apocalypse or that of the painter and spectator—or as both.
Regulus and the Apocalypse

It is the presence of the sun, rather than any narrative consistency, that imparts a sense of unity to the painting. Turner’s painting, as we have seen, provocatively features a vast, empty space at the core of its composition. The light of the sun, in the magnesium flare of its passage from background to foreground, as it either rises from the sea or falls into it, tunnels out the central picture space before it. This is a moment when, as Crary neatly puts it, “the distance between observer and world collapses in the physical inscription of the sun onto the body.”

As it proceeds implacably towards the spectator, the sun obliterates everything in its path apart from the boats and buildings that, in the violence of its movement, it pitilessly casts to left and right—like elaborately carved driftwood bristling with marine life. Even the swarming Carthaginians, or Romans, seem in the process of “being swept away by the strength of the sun”. The sun bleaches and burns the earth beneath it; and this cataclysmic scene recalls the world that Ruskin described when, in his baroque account of Turner’s youth in *Modern Painters*, he evoked a Europe torn apart by military conflict and in the grip of physical and spiritual death: “Full shone now its awful globe, one pallid charnel-house,—a ball strewn bright with human ashes, glaring in poised sway beneath the sun, all blinding-white with death from pole to pole.”

Costello phrases it, through “a formal and thematic exploration of decay and disintegration”, Turner painted “not a vision of the world being brought together into unity, but rather visions of the world falling apart.”

The celebrated account of Turner’s artistic process given by the nineteen-year-old painter John Gilbert, who observed him reworking *Regulus* at the British Institution on Varnishing Day in 1837, communicates in expressive prose a sense not simply of his method but also the dramatic visual impact of this apocalyptic sunscape:

> The picture was a mass of red and yellow of all varieties. Every object was in this fiery state. He had a large palette, nothing in it but a huge lump of flake-white; he had two or three biggish hog tools to work with, and with these he was driving the white into all the hollows, and every part of the surface. This was the only work he did, and it was the finishing stroke. The sun, as I have said, was in the centre; from it were drawn—ruled—lines to mark the rays; these lines were rather strongly marked, I suppose to guide his eye. The picture gradually became wonderfully effective, just the effect of brilliant sunlight absorbing everything, and throwing...
a misty haze over every object. Standing sideway of the canvas, I saw that the sun was a lump of white standing out like the boss on a shield.  

In its immediacy, this description transmits a vivid sense of the painting’s textures as well as its tones. And it brilliantly evokes the vital force of its pitiless sun, which—because of Turner’s courageous use of impasto—constitutes an irreducible, faintly monstrous physical presence on the surface of the picture: “I saw that the sun was a lump of white standing out like a boss on a shield.” As this martial simile implies, there is something calculatedly combative about Turner’s lump of paint, which might from one perspective be interpreted, in the aristocratic context of the British Institution, as a characteristically pugnacious, plebeian response to what Costello calls the “rhetoric of violence” that, by the 1830s, “had become commonplace in characterizing Turner’s work on the Varnishing Days.”

Turner’s brilliant pale sunlight, distilled from the “lump of flake-white” that Gilbert spotted on his palette, actually seems to be emitting light rather than merely reflecting it. It sears the viewer’s eyes with pitiless intensity. It is surely “the effect of brilliant sunlight absorbing everything” that, responsible as it is for what Gilbert calls the picture’s “misty haze”, overwhelmed Stephenson, who subsequently complained of the “misty state of the picture”. For the sun in this painting positively scours or scoops out our central vision, rendering the core of the composition indistinct and leaving the spectator with only peripheral vision. At the same time, though, and this seems to redouble the picture’s offensiveness, there is something oddly calming and cooling about it. It is as if the artist has bathed the scalding canvas, not in the “soapsuds and whitewash” of which some critics of Turner’s seascape *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth* (1842) supposedly complained, but in the flax and whites of eggs that, in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the servants mercifully apply to Gloucester’s bleeding eye sockets once Cornwall has enucleated them. Regulus’ pain, if we privilege Gage’s interpretation of the painting for a moment and see it as the scene on which he is forced by the Carthaginians to stare, is so extreme that it has been rendered exquisite. There is something cruelly ecstatic about the painting’s use of retina-burning light. Turner’s cataclysmic sun makes us long for complete oblivion. In its uncompromising abstraction, at the centre of the composition, it is an objective correlative for the obliteration of rational consciousness—for reason dazzled.

*Regulus*, in implicitly collapsing the perspective of the painter into the apocalyptic vision of the Roman general himself, at the precise moment when his life is recomposed in front of his lidless eyes in the final minutes
before his death, or in the moment before he is terminally blinded by the
sun, is a picture that appears to revel in the violence it visits on its viewers.
Exposing them to too much light, it blinds and confuses them. Early critics of
it “recognized some obscure danger involved in looking at this picture,” as
Miller suggests: “It is like looking the sun in the eye. There is a danger of
being blinded.” 69 Like Heinrich von Kleist confronting Friedrich’s Monk by the
Sea (1808–1810), it might be said, “the viewer feels as though his eyelids
had been cut off.” 70 And, as we have seen, Turner’s picture also provoked
violent, retaliatory responses from his contemporaries. The most significant
of these responses, arguably, is not Ruskin’s verbal one—though he used the
language of torture, symptomatically enough, to express his desire to confine
Regulus, among other paintings that consciously sought to overpower the
Claudian picturesque, to a “chamber of humiliation”—it is Stephenson’s
physical reaction, his repeated stabbing of the canvas. 71

The shabby-genteel, possibly homeless author—who in his attempt to
express himself substituted a penknife for his pen—confessed that he was
prompted to violence both by his “dislike” of Turner and the “misty state” of
the painting. Moral and aesthetic judgements had long been entangled in the
reception of Turner’s paintings, especially by connoisseurs and conservative
critics. For example, Joseph Farington reported in his diary that, when Sir
George Beaumont and a number of artists came to dinner in 1806, “the
Vicious practise of Turner & His followers was warmly exposed.” 72 In 1863, in
the National Gallery, it seems plausible that Thornbury’s scandalous
biography of Turner, which had first revealed the existence of the artist’s
mistresses and illegitimate daughters, played a part in inflaming Stephenson,
since it had been published only a year before his attack on Regulus took
place. But the gossip that ensued was no doubt inseparable, for Stephenson,
from the cryptic, impressionistic form of the painting, and its depiction of the
sun, since its aesthetics also appear to have upset him. The critic in The
Spectator evoked something like this disruption of the spectator’s
expectations when, in his description of Regulus in 1837, he argued that “the
only way to be reconciled to the picture is to look at it from as great a
distance as the width of the gallery will allow, and then you see nothing but a
burst of sunlight.” 73 The spectator is compelled by Turner’s sun to distance
herself from the composition and to adopt a defensive posture in relation to
it. She is forced by its burst of sunlight to blink, moreover, and thereby to
have recourse, in an irony as painful as it is playful, to precisely the
physiological defence mechanism of which Regulus himself was deprived as
he faced the sun.

Stephenson, prowling around the painting almost three decades after The
Spectator’s critic had insisted on the need to look at Regulus from the other
side of the gallery, collapsed or flouted this very distance to some almost
psychotic extent; and in this respect refused to be “reconciled” to its force. Like Regulus himself, he seems to have been blinded by the sun. It will be recalled from the details of his arrest that, in addition to concealing a penknife about his person, Stephenson also carried an “eye glass”. When Inspector Denning asked to see the former item, in fact, he first produced the latter. These prostheses seem in the end exemplary of Stephenson’s radically ambivalent attitude towards the painting: on the one hand, fascination; on the other, horror. But in this coupling of the blank, staring lens or lenses of the “eye-glass” and the cold blade of the knife, they are also condensed, displaced images of the torture committed against Regulus. It is as if, like the composition itself, the juxtaposition of these objects at the scene of the crime, alongside the painting that stands mutely but provocatively behind the railing, ultimately conforms to the dream logic of a rebus. The Turner Room itself, under the lidless gaze of Regulus, becomes the waking dream of an insomniac or maniac.

In thinking of Stephenson’s violently defensive reaction to the painting, then, it might be possible to interpret Regulus, finally, in an additional layering of the composite scene, not as a seascape, whether it is seen from the perspective of the Roman general or not, but as the shocking portrait of an all-seeing eye of intolerable potency. It is what Foucault, conjuring up “the perfect disciplinary apparatus”, characterises as “a single gaze” that “see[s] everything constantly”; it is “both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known.” From this reverse perspective, wherein the one who sees is seen, and the subject is objectified, as if in a ritual of humiliation framed by the context of the exhibition room, Turner’s picture is thus itself the portrait of a lidless eye.

In Regulus, as it fans out across the thin cloud through which it is refracted, Turner’s sunlight assumes a spherical form. It sculpts the sky, and the seaport beneath it, into a sort of socket. Crary has argued that in one of Turner’s late paintings, Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) (1843), which has a characteristic circular structure related to the production of vignette designs for book illustrations, “the view of the sun that had dominated so many of Turner’s previous images now becomes a fusion of eye and sun.” The same claim might be made about Regulus. Turner’s sun, in this disturbing picture, can be interpreted as a scorched and scorching eyeball that, because of its divine potency, makes everything in its path wither. It is—to cite Foucault again—“a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned.” And in the conditions of the museum or exhibition room, it thus exerts a disciplinary power, especially in relation to a vulnerable visitor such as Stephenson.
In his “Hymn to the Flowers”, probably first published in 1836, and often anthologised in the late 1830s, the dramatist, novelist, and poet Horace Smith innocently, if a little strangely, characterised the morning sun, which he depicts rising benignly above the dewy flowers as they open their “frownless eyes”, as “God’s lidless eye”. 77 In Regulus, completed a year later, Turner effectively excavates the cruelty and ferocity that lies half-concealed beneath Smith’s fragile, superficially picturesque image, and violently presses it to the extreme limits of the sublime. Turner, who allegedly announced before he died that “the Sun is God”, implies in this painting that the lidless eye that is the sun is not merely an attribute of God, as in Smith’s poem, it is God itself. 78 The lidless eyes of Regulus, then, ultimately mirror the lidless eye of a sun that embodies a pagan deity, in all its monstrous, unendurable otherness; and that presides over a godless world, the “pallid charnel-house” evoked by Ruskin.

Paulson has persuasively claimed that, “at his most sublime,” Turner “makes part of the terror the unimportance in every sense of the human survivors.” If the Burkean sublime, as exemplified in pictures like Philippe de Loutherbourg’s Avalanche (1803), “leaves the viewer outside the picture”, and hence ultimately secure in their meditation on catastrophe, then the Turnerian sublime, pressing beyond this paradigm, situates the viewer “in the position of the endangered person himself, leaving no ground to stand on.” 79 Stephenson is emblematic of this endangered person. Regulus is a painting that lies at the extreme limit of the sublime, for it subjects its viewer to a fate in which, like the Roman general, she is poised between seeing everything and seeing nothing. In the same impossible moment, as if on the point of death, or as if trapped in the state of insanity evoked by Foucault when he uses the phrase “reason dazzled”, the spectator too is compelled at the same time to be all-seeing and unseeing.

Here, in Regulus, is an allegory of the crisis of the Enlightenment; a crisis to which Hans Blumenberg gestures, in his “metaphorology” of light, when he distinguishes between light as “an advancing dethronement of darkness” and light as “a dazzling superabundance”. 80 To be all-seeing, to be terminally exposed to light, is to be unseeing; it is to embody not a reasoning but an unreasoning state. Foucault writes that, if “truth and light, in their fundamental relation, constitute classical reason”, that is, the classical reason of the Enlightenment, then “delirium and dazzlement are in a relation which constitutes the essence of madness”. Regulus, in Foucault’s terms, sees nothing but light, as a result of his lidless condition, and he therefore “sees it as a void, as night, as nothing”. Turner’s painting portrays this “secret night of light”. 81
Footnotes

9 Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, translated by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1971), 108. Although there is, of course, voluminous secondary literature on Foucault’s concept of unreason, I have found little that is useful specifically on the notion of “reason dazzled”.
10 Foucault, Madness and Civilization, 103.
12 Ralph Nicholson Wornum, Diary, entry for 16 December 1863 (NGA2/3/2/13).
13 Morning Post, 18 December 1863, 8.
14 Morning Post, 18 December 1863, 8.
15 Illustrated London News, 26 December 1863, 647.
16 Morning Post, 18 December 1863, 8. The Fine Arts Quarterly Review, which identified Stephenson’s forename as “William (or Walter)”, noted that he was “described as an author and also as an accountant”; see Fine Arts Quarterly Review 2, January–May 1864, 405.
17 Wornum, Diary, entry for 16 December 1863 (NGA2/3/2/13).
18 Morning Post, 18 December 1863, 8.
19 Morning Post, 19 January 1864, 7.
20 Morning Post, 19 January 1864, 7.
21 North London News, 9 January 1864, 3; and Morning Post, 19 January 1864, 7.
23 Morning Post, 18 December 1863, 8.
26 Joyce H. Townsend, Rebecca Hellen, and Ian Warrell, “Turner’s Regulus: A Tale of Violence, Abuse and Accident, Illuminated by Technical Study”, in Joyce H. Townsend and Abbie Vandyvere (eds), Studying the European Visual Arts 1800–1850: Paintings, Sculpture, Interiors and Art on Paper (London: Archetype Publications, 2017), 114. This article offers a fascinating technical reconstruction of the material condition of the painting from the moment of its composition to the present time, one that reveals that, in fact, Turner probably repaired and repainted the part of the painting damaged on its journey back from Rome some time before 1837.

“Exhibition at the Gallery of the British Institution”, Literary Gazette; and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c., 1046, 4 February 1837, 74.


Oliver Goldsmith, The Roman History, from the Foundation of the City of Rome, to the Destruction of the Western Empire, Vol. 1 (Dublin: S. Powell, 1769), 152 and 158.


For a neat comparison of the earlier paintings with the later one, see Franny Moyle, Turner: The Extraordinary Life and Momentous Times of J.M.W. Turner (London: Viking, 2016), 350–351.


See Paulson, Literary Landscape, 81, where he calls Turner “a powerfully reductionist painter of the Claude landscape, a primitivist who eliminates every extraneous element except the source of light on the horizon.”


For a neat comparison of the earlier paintings with the later one, see Franny Moyle, Turner: The Extraordinary Life and Momentous Times of J.M.W. Turner (London: Viking, 2016), 350–351.


See Paulson, Literary Landscape, 81, where he calls Turner “a powerfully reductionist painter of the Claude landscape, a primitivist who eliminates every extraneous element except the source of light on the horizon.”


See Powell, Turner in the South, 148. For additional accounts of paintings by Turner in which he appears to incorporate separate scenes, see Eric Shanes on The Fighting Temeraire (1839), in Turner’s Human Landscape (London: William Heinemann, 1990), 40-42; and Costello on The Slave Ship (1840), in J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History, 207-208.


See “Appendix: Daniel Wilson and Regulus”, in Gerald Finley, Angel in the Sun, 213.


For a neat comparison of the earlier paintings with the later one, see Franny Moyle, Turner: The Extraordinary Life and Momentous Times of J.M.W. Turner (London: Viking, 2016), 350–351.


See Paulson, Literary Landscape, 81, where he calls Turner “a powerfully reductionist painter of the Claude landscape, a primitivist who eliminates every extraneous element except the source of light on the horizon.”


See Powell, Turner in the South, 148. For additional accounts of paintings by Turner in which he appears to incorporate separate scenes, see Eric Shanes on The Fighting Temeraire (1839), in Turner’s Human Landscape (London: William Heinemann, 1990), 40-42; and Costello on The Slave Ship (1840), in J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History, 207-208.


See “Appendix: Daniel Wilson and Regulus”, in Gerald Finley, Angel in the Sun, 213.

See Lionel Cust, “The Portraits of J.M.W. Turner, R.A.”, Magazine of Art 18 (1895), 248. Turner’s repainting of Regulus on this occasion was also captured, in oils, by both Thomas Fearnley and Charles West Cope.

The Tate conservationists conclude from their recent technical analysis of the canvas that it is “now impossible to determine whether the depiction of dazzling light was an intrinsic feature, or greatly augmented when Turner was obliged to disguise the large tear in the sky”, see Townsend et al., “Turner’s Regulus”, 122. From my point of view, as no doubt from that of Gilbert and Stephenson, Turner’s repainting is ultimately no less “intrinsic” to Regulus than its original iteration of the sun.

Ruskin, Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House, 15.

Miller, Illustration, 134.


The conservationists at Tate, who have used an X-radiograph to examine the canvas, observe that “the assailant made diagonal strokes rising from right to left”, and speculate that “the attack must have been quite frenzied, much more so than any eye-witness reported.” See Townsend et al., “Turner’s Regulus”, 121.

See Finley, Angel in the Sun, 15 and 18.


Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 173.


Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 173.


Paulson, Literary Landscape, 77 and 78.


Foucault, Madness and Civilization, 108.

Bibliography


Goldsmith, Oliver (1769) *The Roman History: From the Foundation of the City of Rome, to the Destruction of the Western Empire*. Dublin: S. Powell.


Literary Gazette (1837) "Exhibition at the Gallery of the British Institution". *Literary Gazette; and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.,* no. 1046, 4 February, 74.


Abstract

This paper describes a collaborative technical and art-historical study by a conservation scientist and an art historian of paintings by Mark Gertler (1891–1939) produced between 1911 and 1918, sparked by the discovery through X-radiography of a painted sketch for his masterwork Merry-Go-Round (1916).[fn]Unless otherwise indicated, all the technical analysis was carried out by Aviva Burnstock, in consultation with Sarah MacDougall. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of a small grant from the British Academy.[/fn] Paintings were chosen to demonstrate Gertler’s experiments with diverse painting styles and influences ranging from Renaissance art through post-Impressionism to early European modernism; these were investigated in a technical study together with comparative contemporaneous written sources that provide commentary on the artist’s painting practices. Technical examination has shown how Gertler frequently reused his supports and has revealed changes to his paintings, sometimes supported by commentary. The study highlights the relationship between intention and practice in this period of critical change in Gertler’s work, providing insights into his stylistic and technical development.

Authors

Cite as

Introduction

This technical and art-historical study of nine early paintings by the British artist Mark Gertler (1891–1939) made between 1911 and 1918 has led to new discoveries of the artist’s working practices during a period of profound stylistic development in his painted works. *Talmudic Discussion* (Fig. 1), *Rabbi and Grandchild* (Fig. 2), *Family Group* (Fig. 3), *Fruit Sorters* (Fig. 4), *The Creation of Eve* (Fig. 5), *The Pond, Garsington* (Fig. 6), *The Pond at Garsington, Oxford* (Fig. 7), *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* (Fig. 8), and *Still Life with Self-portrait* (Fig. 9) have all been chosen both to illustrate Gertler’s most fluid and intense period of artistic development and to highlight his exploration of the different painting styles and processes that chart his journey into the modern. In the first part of this paper, a number of paintings are discussed in detail in relation to these findings, while in the latter, a number of technical observations have been grouped together to give an overview of Gertler’s “making” in this period.

**Figure 1.**
Mark Gertler, *Talmudic Discussion*, 1911, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 92.5 cm. Private Collection, on long-term loan to Ben Uri Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (All rights reserved).
Figure 2.
Mark Gertler, The Rabbi and his Grandchild, 1913, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 45.9 cm. Collection of Southampton City Art Gallery (SOTAG: 1968/6). Digital image courtesy of Southampton City Art Gallery (All rights reserved).
Figure 3.
Mark Gertler, Family Group, 1913, oil on canvas, 92.4 x 61 cm. Collection of Southampton City Art Gallery. Digital image courtesy of Southampton City Art Gallery (All rights reserved).
Figure 4.
Mark Gertler, The Fruit Sorters, 1914, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Collection of New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester Arts and Museums (L.F3.1924.0.0). Digital image courtesy of Leicester Arts and Museums Service (All rights reserved).
Figure 5.
Mark Gertler, The Creation of Eve, 1914, oil on canvas, 75 x 60 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (All rights reserved).
Figure 6.
Mark Gertler, The Pond, Garsington, 1916, oil on panel, 32 x 42 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Piano Nobile Robert Travers (Works of Art) Limited (All rights reserved).
Figure 7.
Figure 8.
This project was initiated several years ago by a request from Matthew Travers, director of Piano Nobile Gallery, to X-ray Gertler’s *The Pond, Garsington* (1916), a landscape on panel recently acquired at auction. Even prior to technical examination, a series of radial deformations resembling the spokes of an opened umbrella were clearly visible to the naked eye on the surface of the painting, suggesting that there might be another image beneath. With the panel turned portrait-wise, the resulting X-ray revealed an underpainting of a carousel with rudimentary horses running around its base (Fig. 10). This was identified by the authors as a previously unknown preparatory oil study for Gertler’s masterpiece, *Merry-Go-Round*, painted at the height of the First World War and considered his most outstanding contribution to early British modernism (Fig. 11). As the only preliminary study of the carousel, this discovery is of particular importance. The reverse
of the panel also contains a third image: a preparatory study of the writer Gilbert Cannan for the celebrated painting *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* (1916); both discoveries are discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 10.**
X-radiograph (rotated), Mark Gertler, The Pond, Garsington, Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Aviva Burnstock (All rights reserved).
Given the size and complexity of the final *Merry-Go-Round* painting and the fact that X-radiography revealed only minimal changes to the finished canvas, it seemed highly likely to the authors that Gertler would have made further interim studies. ¹ An initial investigation of works completed in the period of the painting’s gestation (1915–1916) followed, including *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* and *Daffodils* (1916). ² Although no further *Merry-Go-Round* compositions were discovered, the investigation of *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* did reveal an underpainting showing changes in both composition and reuse of the painting support. This led to the current research project in which a study of written sources (primarily letters) between Gertler and his artist contemporaries exploring Gertler’s compositional development and working methods was made alongside first-hand technical study including X-radiography, infrared imaging, and pigment analysis to uncover his painting processes and materials. The technical

---

**Figure 11.**  
Mark Gertler, *Merry-Go-Round*, 1916, oil on canvas, 189.2 x 142.2 cm. Collection of Tate (T03846). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0).
themes discussed here address the question of whether changes in Gertler’s painting style were paralleled by changes in his painting materials and techniques. Personal circumstances including his poverty, ethnicity, and class are also considered together with the influence of past and contemporaneous art. By examining aspects of the underlying compositions, reuse of the painting support, and the changes made during the painting process, this study aims to deepen the understanding of Gertler’s wider modernist practice.

A Career in Formation

Mark Gertler was born in 1891 in a slum lodging house in Spitalfields in London’s East End to Jewish immigrant parents, economic migrants who had left their native Galicia (then a province within the Austro-Hungarian Empire boasting the highest death rate and lowest life expectancy in Europe), in search of a better life in England. Like the other so-called “Whitechapel Boys” of his generation (including primarily, David Bomberg, Isaac Rosenberg, and by association, Jacob Kramer and Bernard Meninsky), Gertler was the direct descendant of a shared Eastern-European Jewish heritage, part of a larger wave of mass Jewish migration that between 1880 and 1910 brought some 120,000 newcomers to Britain, where they joined established Jewish communities in the cities of London, Leeds, Liverpool, and Birmingham. Less than a year after his birth, however, during an economic downturn, the Gertler family was repatriated by the Jewish Board of Guardians to Przemyśl, “with only me, as it were,” the artist later wrote, “to show for it.”

After his father left to seek work in America, the family lived on the edge of starvation for four years until they returned to England and were reunited in Spitalfields, less than a mile from where he had been born.

Gertler was old enough to recall the return journey, travelling steerage, the emigrants packed like cargo in the dark, airless hold of the ship on a voyage lasting several weeks. He claimed to remember nothing of his time in Austria, and upon arrival identified strongly with England and subsequently, the Jewish East End, describing himself as “Essentially [...] a child of the ghetto.” His struggles to assimilate into the middle- and upper-class society into which his talent and profession propelled him led to a conflict over his identity and a lingering sense of displacement that runs like a thread through his life and work, informing both his portraits of his own family and the Jewish community and his highly personal, and sometimes ambivalent, engagement with modernism. As Juliet Steyn has suggested, Gertler’s early Jewish paintings can be “Understood perhaps, as a sign of a struggle between identification with Jewish selfhood and alienation from it.”
Gertler nurtured artistic ambitions from an early age. He trained first at the Regent Street Polytechnic (1906–1908), attending lectures on the Old Masters and “haunting” the rooms of the National Gallery, crafting his earliest paintings in their image. In the second year, he took evening classes, while unhappily apprenticed by day to Clayton & Bell, stained-glass makers next door in Regent Street. Between 1908 and 1911, upon the recommendation of William Rothenstein, and initially with a loan from the Jewish Education Aid Society, he attended the Slade School of Fine Art, the youngest Jewish, working-class student of his generation to do so. Although largely isolated from the other Whitechapel Boys who followed him, he was part of the notable “crisis of brilliance” generation which also included C.R.W. Nevinson, Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash, and (Dora) Carrington. He twice won the Slade scholarship, gained a number of prizes for drawing and painting, and left with a British Institution scholarship in 1912.

At the Slade, Gertler’s style was honed by the famous teaching triumvirate of Fred Brown, Henry Tonks, and Philip Wilson Steer. Tonks, the dominant personality, was profoundly influenced by the art of the Italian Renaissance and “encouraged a style that drew on the great European tradition of drawing of meticulous observation and flawless line work”, urging his students to frequent the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum print rooms and to make copies at the National Gallery. After 1910, Gertler was encouraged by his tutors to attend part-time and to concentrate on Jewish subjects, such as Talmudic Discussion, also completing a student portfolio of accomplished family portraits, occasionally of both parents, often of his siblings (Deborah, Harry, Sophie, and Jack), but always centred on his mother, Golda. The Artist’s Mother (1911) represents the culmination of the traditional, naturalistic style developed at the Slade. After exhibition at the New English Art Club (NEAC), the portrait was purchased in December 1912 by the rising collector Michael Sadler, educationalist and vice-chancellor of Leeds University (1911–1923) and loaned to the Tate.

Sadler, whose enthusiasm for modern art dated back to 1909, had begun during this period to amass “one of the largest and most progressive private collections of contemporary paintings of any British collector”. In addition to a wide selection of works by British artists including Steer, Augustus John, and other NEAC members, in 1911, he purchased The Abandoned House (1878–1879), the first Cézanne painting to enter a British collection, as well as five important Gauguins including The Vision after the Sermon (1888) and works by Kandinsky and Picasso. In November 1911, he sponsored the exhibition Cézanne and Gauguin at the Stafford Gallery, managed by John Neville, showcasing many of his recently acquired works. Sadler became a key patron of young British modernists (including Kramer) and an important promoter of modernism in Leeds. Upon his death in 1943, his collection
numbered over 1,200 pieces. 13 When Gertler wrote to thank Sadler for his purchase in November 1911, he admitted that what pleased him most was that his own work would “actually ‘rub shoulders’ with those wonderful pictures I saw at your house.” 14

The effect of this exposure, combined with the impact of Roger Fry’s two groundbreaking post-Impressionist exhibitions in 1910 and 1912, caused a radical new direction in Gertler’s art. Looking back in 1932, he recalled “the entry of Cézanne, Gauguin and Matisse upon my horizon as equivalent to the impact of the scientists of this age upon a simple student of Sir Isaac Newton.” 15 By 1912, Gertler had abandoned the earlier earth-toned palette favoured by the Old Masters, particularly, Rembrandt, 16 and his youthful mentor, William Rothenstein, whose Reading the Book of Esther (1907) 17 had directly inspired Gertler’s early Jewish picture, Talmudic Discussion (1911), 18 but as late as February 1912, in an interview, he reiterated his adherence to the Old Masters with Augustus John, the only “modern” whose influence he allowed. 19

By September 1912, as his much-quoted letter to fellow artist and muse Dora Carrington suggests, Gertler’s awareness of the competing demands of modernism had also increased his own ambivalence towards it:

> So I went out and saw more unfortunate artists. I looked at them talking art, Ancient art, Modern art, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Cubists, Spottists, Futurists, Cave-dwelling, Wyndham Lewis, Duncan Grant, Etchells, Roger Fry! I looked on and laughed to myself saying, “Give me the Baker, the Baker,” and I walked home disgusted with them all, was glad to find my dear simple mother waiting for me with a nice roll, that she knows I like, and a cup of hot coffee. […] You, dear mother, I thought, are the only modern artist. 20

**The Transition to Modernism**

Gertler’s transition to modernism is evidenced by the transformation of his mother, Golda, from a respectable, elaborately dressed matron in the 1911 Artist’s Mother into a coarse-aproned, tightly headscarfed peasant in The Artist’s Mother (1913). 21 In the latter, Golda’s hands, huge and workmanlike, dominate the picture. Gertler wrote to his upper-class English friend, Dorothy Brett, that “The whole suggests suffering and a life that has known hardship. It is barbaric and symbolic.” 22 As Juliet Steyn has observed, Golda’s
simplified, flattened black form, offset by reds and greens, is also reminiscent of Van Gogh’s *La Berceuse* (shown at the first post-Impressionist exhibition), in which the artist intended to “represent not just a woman but someone to comfort and alleviate the pain and sorrow of mankind”. 23 Similar notions inform Gertler’s paintings of Jewish subjects throughout 1913.

Lisa Tickner suggests that in the 1913 portrait, Gertler equates his mother with “‘the *Baker*, the *Baker*’, as a labourer producing the simple necessities of life”. 24 Certainly, the powerful “peasant” paintings, for which she and other members of his family provided the focus, articulate the artistic tensions surrounding his conflicting ethnic, social, and political identities in this period, sharpened by his contact with middle- and upper-class patrons, his unhappy love affair with the middle-class Carrington, and his introduction to the elite Bloomsbury circle. 25 Emma Chambers, however, warns of the problematical nature of simply equating his use of “primitivist source material as a search for a more ‘authentic’ visual language with which to depict everyday Jewish subject matter”, since:

> it not only aligns Gertler’s work with nineteenth-century stereotypes of working class Jewish culture as archaic and uncivilised, but also ignores the complex ways in which subject matter and aesthetics were intertwined in Gertler’s work, and the impact on his work of his negotiation of two very different social environments. 26

She also notes that since “Primitivism was a primary source of inspiration for post-impressionism and explored by the Bloomsbury artists and other modernist groups in London”, Gertler’s “use of the idiom also explicitly aligned him with developments in avant-garde British art.” 27

For the purposes of this study, Gertler’s journey towards the modern can be traced in greater detail through a series of three group paintings of Jewish sitters, all completed in 1913: *Rabbi and Grandchild* (May), *Family Group* (begun in July, but possibly finished after *Jewish Family*), and *Jewish Family* (September). Each work is concerned with inter-generational relationships within the family; two of them specifically cite Jewishness in their titles.

Gertler’s letters show that his National Gallery visits continued regularly until at least the end of 1912. 28 A *Quattrocento* influence also informed the short-lived Neo-Primitive movement, which Gertler co-founded in 1911 with contemporaries including Nevinson, Adrian Allinson, Edward Wadsworth, and John Currie. Together they had visited the “Primitive” room at the Louvre, Paris in 1910 and Currie depicted them in his own tempera painting *Some
Later Primitives and Madame Tisceron (1912). Kenneth McConkey suggests that “the disciplined use of tempera and the conceptual demands” of a contemporaneous revival in mural painting were both part of a concerted pull in a new direction by younger painters, with Gertler’s Apple Woman and her Husband (1912) combining an “enthusiasm for Cézanne [...] with that of the Italian Primitives”. 29 Gertler briefly experimented with aqueous media he described as tempera in 1912, encouraged by Augustus John, as evidenced by his portrait of Carrington, Portrait of a Girl Wearing a Blue Jersey (1912). 30 Touches of tempera can also be found in his work in The Artist’s Brother Harry Holding an Apple (1913), painted on panel. Although Gertler quickly tired of this medium, preferring the fluidity of oil, the bright, plain backgrounds and concentration on the head-and-shoulders format employed in these works were easily identified by contemporary critics as a “Florentine” element. In January 1913, the Observer’s critic, P.G. Konody, observed of the Neo-Primitives that they sought:

for salvation in a return to more or less archaic forms of art, their object being the attainment of a maximum of expressiveness in terms of decorative art, [...]. Pure colour in large, clearly defined masses and elimination of chiaroscuro. 31

Rabbi and Grandchild demonstrates the lingering influence of Renaissance painting on Gertler’s style at the point of its fusion with modernism, as he closed his brief “Neo-Primitive” period. Stylistically, it owes more to the Northern Renaissance with similarities to Portrait of a Woman (ca. 1460) from Van der Weyden’s workshop, particularly in the modelling of the grandchild’s face (especially the shape of the eyes and lips, and the elongated head of the Rabbi in his skullcap). 32 This is supported by Gertler’s letter to his Slade contemporary (Dorothy) Brett, in August 1913, praising the “most emotional” Rogier Van der Weyden pictures in a small book that he had recently sent her. 33 Yet, in the same letter, Gertler reveals his enduring admiration for the Italian primitives, urging her to study Giotto “and at once—He is tremendous!!!”, and also “Dürer—the draughtsman. These men,” he explained, “are a constant cause of inspiration to me. It will never do, unless we too, express ourselves with such knowledge and emotion.” 34

The letter makes it clear that his influences at this juncture remain stylistically diverse. “Newness doesn’t concern me,” he would write to Carrington in December 1913, when at work on the portrait of his mother, “I just want to express myself and be personal.” 35 And yet the compression of the figures squeezed up against the boundaries of the canvas, their exaggerated features and expressions emphasised by the elongated fingers
of the Rabbi’s enlarged hand, made *Rabbi and Grandchild* too unacceptably modern for his Jewish patrons, one of whom suggested “that I would do her a great favour if I would—at her expense—see an oculist!”, thus severing Gertler’s relations with his early Jewish supporters.  

Gertler began *Rabbi and Grandchild* in March 1913 after securing the services of a model simply referred to as an “old Jew” (the same elderly model had sat previously for *Talmudic Discussion* and would also be included six months later in *Jewish Family*). The young girl model must already have been sitting some eight months, according to her own account. Separate drawings of both models date to 1913. In early April, Gertler wrote to Carrington:

> I am still working on my little picture, I have now added another head—a girl—so there is the Jew and two girls. I am working very hard indeed on it and there is still a great deal to do in it.  

Although there is some confusion over the exact sequence of his letters on the picture’s progress, the trajectory of the final composition seems clear, for in a further (undated) letter, he detailed: “an alteration in my picture of the Old Jew, I am going to put another girl’s head in the place of the profile one! I think it is too ordinary. I think you will approve.” Then, finally, he explained that he had:

> turned my “Jew” picture into a different thing altogether. It suddenly occurred to me how wonderful it would be to have my little girl’s head near to his. So now the scheme is just two heads together: his very old, pale and wrinkled head near that healthy, fresh, young face of my little girl. The old man will be with one hand most delicately touching the girl’s face, the other will be round her shoulder. I am terribly inspired with the idea and feel sure it will be one of the best things I’ve done.

An X-radiograph of *Rabbi and Grandchild* supports this documentary evidence, revealing a fully worked-up face of a child on the left of the composition that was later painted out (Fig. 12). Gertler’s signature and the date the work was finished, “May 1913”, painted in red and unusually prominent, appear in this over-painted area possibly to disguise the alterations. In addition, both the X-ray and infrared images show that Gertler initially painted the Rabbi’s left hand around the child’s shoulder, and elements of flowers, and perhaps fruit, are also evident in the lower left,
although these too have been painted over in the final version, in favour of a more dramatic, simplified composition. Technical examination also shows that the canvas has been cut at the bottom edge. This supports the suggestion by Gertler’s patron, the publisher Thomas Balston, that the canvas was much larger at one stage and had been cut down. Balston had visited Mrs Doris Silver (née Dora Plaskowsky), the daughter of Gertler’s butcher, who as an eight-year-old child had posed for the figure of the grandchild in 1949, and observed:

She had to sit many times and got very tired of it, especially as Mark was very stern and never spoke to her except to give directions. [...] Once, when he was not in the room, she got a peep at the canvas. At that time, it was larger and extended below the Rabbi’s knees, on which she was sitting. She never saw the Rabbi, but always sat alone. Before the picture was finished, she refused to go any more. Before the picture was finished, she ceased to go to the studio. Even now she greatly resembles the child. 41

Thirty years on, Dora left her own account of her sittings, confirming that the two models had never met and supporting the suggestion of a larger painting:

He did several pencil drawings of me. I never actually saw him use paints. I think I went to the studio to sit for him for a period of about a year. However, I do remember seeing a very large painting of myself sitting on the knee of a rabbi. It was a full[-]length picture. I remember particularly my socks! I also recall running home and asking my mother how Mark Gertler could possibly have painted this picture—I had never met or seen the old man. 42

This revelation would have astonished contemporary viewers, who understood the painting to be a portrait of youth and old age, painstakingly and sympathetically observed. 43
By June, Gertler’s letters show that he had begun to prefer the “simple, childish expression” of the Post-Impressionists to the “perhaps too dramatic, and sometimes theatrical expression of the early Italians”. His aim was still to produce work that was “genuine” rather than specifically “modern”. His next painting, *Family Group*, in which the composition is reminiscent of Van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), depicted his brother Harry, Harry’s wife, Anne, and their nine-month-old baby, Renée (Irene), dressed as peasants in startling primary colours, their bold, angular forms placed like cut-outs against the bare floorboards of his studio. The baby at the centre (like the Rabbi’s hand in *Rabbi and Grandchild*) both unites and divides her parents, focusing the viewer’s attention on the joining of the figures through the linking of Harry’s hand to hers in an unbroken chain; in his other outstretched hand, he holds an apple. Reduced to simple geometric forms, the figure of the baby suggests an awareness of Cubism, and of Picasso’s
early work. The bold colour scheme may have been inspired by the Gauguins Gertler had seen in Sadler’s collection, but the work also marks the beginning of a more expressionistic style that has been linked to folk art. Harry’s clothes and pose also relate closely to The Artist’s Brother Harry Holding an Apple, his curious, emphatic gesture, possibly relates to an untraced painting of Adam and Eve. Gertler’s experimental work of this period, however, also begins to move “closer in sympathy” to German expressionism, as Frances Spalding has observed, placing him within a wider context of European painting and influences which culminated in 1916 in Merry-Go-Round.

An X-radiograph of Family Group reveals a number of changes in the composition including, most notably, a full-length figure of another girl, originally painted to the right of Gertler’s sister-in-law, Anne (Fig. 13). The red of the girl’s dress can be seen through drying cracks in the background paint used to erase her, while the infrared image shows that she was fully worked up in paint and stood facing Anne. Judging by her height, the girl may have been seven or eight years old; she has not been identified. Family Group is not referred to specifically in Gertler’s letters, but is likely to have been the painting Gertler was referring to when he complained to Dorothy Brett in July that “simplification is terribly difficult in art”, with the overpainting of the second girl very likely part of this move towards greater simplification. The completion date of Family Group is not certain, but the bold colouring and severely simplified figures suggest that it may have been completed after Jewish Family, possibly prior to its exhibition in November 1913.
Family Group also has a clearly painted black border which is found consistently in Gertler’s work of this period including The Artist’s Mother (1911), The Violinist (1912), Portrait of a Girl Wearing a Blue Jersey (1912), and The Artist’s Brother Harry Holding an Apple (ca. 1913). The painted border may point to a lingering interest in the Quattrocento but was also perhaps intended as a frame in a period when he is unlikely to have been able to afford framing (later on he used the services of the dealer and framer Bourlet exclusively for this purpose. Gertler certainly cared about the presentation of his works, asking his patron Edward Marsh (ca. 1913), “to leave the entire framing of my drawing to me,” stating, “I would feel happier about it. I usually include a frame and mount.” 48
This same pictorial device is also apparent in *Jewish Family* (1913), which shows four generations of the same family gathered together and arranged in descending order of height. Golda, the matriarch, again dressed in plain working clothes, faces outward at the edge of this intimate family group, her back towards the young woman at its centre, who is presumably her daughter or daughter-in-law, standing patiently with folded hands. Next to her, the seated old man (the model for the Rabbi in *Rabbi and Grandchild*), leans heavily on his stick, his granddaughter at his knee on the end of the picture, is unfinished, denoted only by one broad, vertical brushstroke. The blocky treatment of the figures has been compared to the work of Stanley Spencer. With no specific setting, the mood of the picture is determined by the subdued palette, evoking both the poverty of the ghetto and the weary resilience of its inhabitants, while the family’s apparent displacement hints at the wider Jewish diaspora. Lisa Tickner, in a long discussion of the painting, suggests that Gertler’s title:

“Jewish family” was richly connotative. Probably the figures stood to Gertler primarily for his own relations. […] But they are by design not portraits. There is too little specificity and too much pathos. It is a small painting but its figures are monumental, carved, full of an eloquent stillness, as though it aimed to be a little Piero della Francesca from the ghetto.

The painting encapsulates Gertler’s own dilemma: on the one hand, drawing “implicitly on positive endorsements of immigrant family life”, but, on the other hand, underlining the stark poverty and alienisation that such a life offered.

Between 1914 and 1916, Gertler began his most intense engagement with modernism, in bold, imaginative works such as *The Creation of Eve* (1914) and *The Fruit Sorters* (1914). The latter, his first major work painted outdoors, emerged from studies from nature that Gertler had made in spring 1914 at home of his friend, the writer Gilbert Cannan, in Cholesbury in Buckinghamshire. The composition with its decorative group of figures shows the legacy of Puvis de Chavannes via Augustus John, as Gertler resolutely transposes a frieze of urban East End costermongers to a rural setting in a journey that very much echoes his own from Spitalfields to Hampstead, where he moved to in January 1915. “There,” he wrote, “I shall be free and detached—shall belong to no parents. I shall be neither Jew nor Christian and shall belong to no class. I shall be just myself.”
The reverse of the support of *Fruit Sorters* carries a stamp by Percy Young, who ran an artists’ supply store in Gower Street during Gertler’s Slade years. This was a popular destination for Gertler and his contemporaries including Gwen Raverat, Stanley Spencer, and Dora Carrington. Gertler probably swapped to the Chenil Gallery, King’s Road, Chelsea, after being invited to exhibit there by the dealer Jack Knewstub, possibly as early as 1910 and certainly by December 1912, when he and John Currie held a joint show. Knewstub continued to represent Gertler until October 1914, when the artist left after a row about payments. In a letter to his patron, Eddie Marsh, Gertler requested £5 to settle an outstanding debt with Percy Young so that he could return there for further materials.

Gertler purchased a range of products from London artists’ materials suppliers. His painting supports for the early works were commercially primed canvases, with the exception of *The Artist’s Brother Harry Holding an Apple* (1913) and *The Pond, Garsington* (1916), for which he chose wooden panels. Canvas-suppliers’ stamps, including the palette-shaped “Chenil London”, can be found on the reverse of the unlined, commercially primed canvases used for *Talmudic Discussion* and *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill*, suggesting that Gertler was consistent in his preference for such medium-weight, white canvases throughout this period. They are mostly primed with lead white and chalk; however, the canvas used for *Pond at Garsington, Oxford* is unprimed. For this and later works, for example, *Seated Nude* (1924), Gertler painted on both sides of commercially primed canvases.

There are several examples of paintings by Gertler’s contemporaries where the commercially primed canvas was reversed, and the artist painted another composition on the unprimed side (for example, a female nude attributed to Carrington shows a Spanish landscape on the unprimed side). This may have been done for either economic or artistic purposes, such as taking advantage of the textured canvas support, although there is no evidence that this was of particular concern for Gertler with his preference for smooth, commercially primed surfaces. Evidence of his habit of wiping his brushes on the reverse of a canvas can be seen on the verso of *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* and *Merry-Go-Round*, which is extensively covered in multicoloured brush marks in the upper half of the canvas. Gertler always stacked his paintings with their faces to the wall so may have used the reverse to clean his brushes in this manner prior to applying the white painted rectangle on which he supplied the title, his signature, and the date, perhaps at the point of display or sale. *The Pond, Garsington* is also signed, dated, and titled on the reverse; and, in addition, displays a rapidly executed sketch of Cannan, a preparatory study for the writer’s figure in the mill painting, beneath the signature.
Painting Techniques

There is evidence that Gertler had a systematic method of painting that involved making a drawing and transferring it to the canvas before working up the image in paint. Although few extant drawings show this specifically, one example is Rabbi and Rabbitzin (1914), a worked-up drawing on paper that has been squared for transfer. This traditional method was common practice at the Slade and can also be found in the work of contemporaries including Bomberg, Nash, Spencer, and William Roberts. While few of the paintings examined show clear evidence of under-drawing of the composition in a carbon-based medium, such as charcoal or graphite, it is possible that Gertler used red or brown chalk for laying out his compositions, such as those used for drawing on paper, but not visible using the methods in this study. The infrared image of Fruit Sorters, however, shows the artist’s use of charcoal to outline the figures and to indicate drapery folds, whereas an infrared image of Gilbert Cannan and his Mill indicates a transfer of the under-drawing through a series of black grid lines in black.

An X-ray of the same painting strongly suggests a direct relationship between grid and image: it shows that Gilbert Cannan was painted over an underlying double portrait that closely resembles the drawing of the couple in Rabbi and Rabbitzin (Fig. 14). The outline of the Rabbitzin’s head is clearly discernible beneath the sky paint in the upper image and the paint of her flesh can be seen through cracks in the upper layer. Elements of the still life including a loaf and a large fish in the foreground of the double portrait are suggested in the X-ray (the fish relates to Gertler’s companion drawing, Rabbi and Rabbitzin with Fish (Fig. 15, 1913–1914). It is possible, therefore, that the squared-up image on paper was transferred to the canvas and worked up to some extent, before being later painted over.
Figure 14.
Mark Gertler, Rabbi and Rabbitzin, 1914, watercolour and pencil on paper, 50 x 39 cm. Ben Uri Collection (BU 2002–104). Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum (All rights reserved).
This theory is supported by a letter from the artist to Carrington in February 1915, explaining that he was working on “a small colour study, perhaps for a large picture, of my Rabbi and Rabbithin.” The reserve suggests that the artist had planned for the Rabbi to be wearing a bowler style hat (as in both drawn versions of the composition). Since there is no surviving painted version of these compositions, however, it is likely that Gertler abandoned the painting, possibly believing he had exhausted this motif and also perhaps because his move to Hampstead deliberately distanced him from his Jewish subject matter. Rebecca Abrams suggests that the surface and over-painted compositions together “provide a palimpsest work that is emblematic of the artist’s lifelong struggle to reconcile his drive to become a successful English artist with his deep attachment to his Jewish roots and identity.” Gertler
then reused the canvas for his painting of *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill*, begun in 1915 and completed in spring 1916, while he worked simultaneously on *Merry-Go-Round*.

Both compositions are carefully structured and painted using a series of complex and repeated patterns. Cannan’s spindly figure, flanked by his two enormous dogs, is almost overwhelmed by what John Rothenstein called the “upright converging gothic forms” of the trees and mill. The careful structure relies on the repetition of a series of triangles and inverted triangles throughout (anticipating *Bathers*), combined with an element of fantasy identified as a “folk-art overtone”. John Woodeson argues that the complex structure conveys “something of the rather gothic nature of Cannan’s personality and continues the strain of naïve primitivism already apparent” in Gertler’s work, as well as reflecting “the narrative, literary, almost mystical quality” of the earlier controversial, Blakean *Creation of Eve*. The stylised treatment of the tree also shows the influence of Jean Marchand and particularly André Derain’s *Window at Vers* (1912), which Gertler would have seen at Roger Fry’s second post-Impressionist exhibition.

As technical examination revealed, several of the paintings were painted on reused supports, presumably as a matter of economy (this practice is also common in Bomberg’s work and in Carrington’s). In most cases, the X-ray images show elements of the underlying compositions together with the final image. For example, *The Creation of Eve* is painted over a male portrait, possibly of the artist’s brother, Harry—part of his head and face can be clearly discerned in the upper part of the background and may conceivably relate to the *Portrait of the Artist’s Brother Harry Holding an Apple*, although there are no documentary sources to support this (Fig. 16).
While we have seen that there is evidence that Gertler planned some of his compositions by making preliminary sketches or transfer by grid, the known preparatory sketches for his major work, *Merry-Go-Round*, have (until now) been limited to four figurative works on paper (all in private collections): Gertler practised the heads and necks of his riders in two drawings (Figs. 17 and 18) and a further pair of sketches show the three-quarter length figures of two straw-hatted women in profile.\(^6\) This is surprising as such a large, complex work—his largest and most ambitious painting to that date—must have necessitated significant planning. However, an X-radiograph of *The Pond, Garsington* (1916) resulted in the significant discovery of an underlying painted version of the *Merry-Go-Round’s* carousel, best viewed by turning the X-radiograph clockwise 90 degrees to reveal a striped canopy, crowned by a flag, with a troop of horses beneath. Their sharp-edged, rudimentary forms with criss-crossed legs, more linear than in the final version, are reminiscent
of Bomberg’s *Racehorses* (1913) (Fig. 19), an ambitious “Cubist” composition that Gertler would certainly have seen when it was exhibited in May 1914 as part of the so-called “Jewish Section” at the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s exhibition *Twentieth Century Art: A Review of Modern Movements*, in which seven of his own paintings including *Jewish Family* were shown. 63

![Image of Gertler's Study of Heads for “Merry-Go-Round”, 1915, red chalk on paper, 56 x 38 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (All rights reserved).]

**Figure 17.**
Mark Gertler, Study of Heads for “Merry-Go-Round”, 1915, red chalk on paper, 56 x 38 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (All rights reserved).
Figure 18.
Mark Gertler, Studies for Merry-Go-Rounds, 1916, red chalk on paper, 56 x 38 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, with kind permission of the owner (All rights reserved).
The fairground horses in Gertler’s finished *Merry-Go-Round* canvas bear little relation to those in this preliminary study. In the final painting, the flag is omitted, the canopy reduced, and the horses—now much larger—are fully realized: joined nose to tail, they plunge forwards, their hind legs kicking out like rifle butts, and their teeth bared. The whirling horses frozen in motion and the mouths of their riders opened in a never-ending scream offer a pacifist vision of cultural disintegration with one of personal despair at Gertler’s unhappy affair with Carrington. The interest in machinery shows an awareness of Futurism and Vorticism, possibly influenced by Bomberg, whose large-scale work it approached in size and ambition, but also Nevinson’s insistent rhythms in his military paintings including *Returning to the Trenches* (1914–1915), which was prominently displayed at the London Group in March 1915, and the terse, concentrated image of modern trench warfare, *La Mitrailleuse* (1915), first exhibited in March 1916. The striking palette of orange, yellow, red, and blue hues contributes to the painting’s violent energy. Andrew Causey has pointed out that the intensity of the colours in Gertler’s palette are “unlike those [...] found in most British painting of the period”, with the possible exception of Wyndham Lewis. 64

Surface examination and elemental analysis have confirmed that the underlying painting was also strongly coloured: the carousel’s top was painted in stripes of cadmium yellow and vermilion. The flag—not present in the final Tate version—is also painted with vermilion and has a texture suggesting a motif that can no longer be read. Prussian and cobalt blues
have been used for the sky together with iron oxide yellow ochre and sienna-coloured paints; bone black was used to outline the features in the composition.

The overlying landscape is painted using viridian and iron oxide pigments mixed with lead white. The paint is applied quickly and blended wet-in-wet in many areas. There is red showing through from the underlying composition in the same mid-ground area of the sienna-coloured tree stump on the landing or island present in the better-known Leeds Art Gallery version of the composition. The largest tree has been broadened to cover the underlining sky paint that was part of the composition below. Both the red stump and broad tree are replicated in the Leeds picture, *The Pond at Garsington, Oxford* (1916), though, in the larger work, red is applied over the green paint. On the panel, the same effect is achieved using a different technique, by allowing red to show through from the underlying paint of the carousel below.

The conception of the Leeds version is documented in the artist’s letters, which shows that it was begun in mid-July 1916. Letters among Gertler’s friends discuss the planned purchase of the picture by the artist’s patron, the barrister and collector Sir Montague Shearman (1885–1940), who deeply admired it.

On the reverse of *The Pond, Garsington* is a rapidly executed sketch of the figure of Gertler’s friend, Gilbert Cannan, the writer whose roman à clef, *Mendel*, based on Gertler’s early life, caused a storm upon publication in 1916. The paint contains a mixture of Prussian blue and lead white for his jacket and bow tie, iron oxide red and lead white for his flesh, and lead white alone for the trousers. The placement of the figure conforms to Cannan’s posture and positioning within the final finished painting. The panel support for *The Pond, Garsington* is an unprimed piece of wood that was not specially prepared for artists’ use and may instead have been taken from a piece of old furniture. It is possible that this panel was used to plan elements of Gertler’s larger paintings, as is the case with both *Merry-Go-Round* and *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill*. *The Pond, Garsington* may also be a study for the very large Cézannesque painting *Bathers* (1917–1918), which after *Merry-Go-Round*, was, in terms of scale, Gertler’s most ambitious painting of the decade. The “Vorticist”-style treatment of the sky in *The Pond* on small panel also mirrors exactly the pattern of the clouds and sky in the later painting. Marks in the paint along the long edges of the panel may indicate that it was clamped during the painting out of doors of the uppermost composition, and then later trimmed for neatness. It is clear that Gertler made the painted sketch in preparation for the larger *Merry-Go-Round*, which shows many changes from this preparatory version, then later reused the panel and
overpainted it with the view of Garsington. This finding raises the question of whether there are other preparatory works or versions that are now overpainted with later compositions.

Gertler began his portrait of Gilbert Cannan and his Mill in 1915, put it aside temporarily to concentrate on a commissioned portrait of Michael Sadler (1915), and then carried out separate studies of the chestnut tree (now lost) for Gilbert Cannan and his Mill, before finally completing the portrait in April 1916. As in Family Group and Rabbi and Grandchild, Gertler sometimes extended his canvas supports while overpainting or altering an image, and also added a strip of canvas to the lower edge of the canvas of the Cannan painting presumably to accommodate the extension of the mill, the figure of Cannan and his dogs in the foreground.

Unresolved Investigations

Still Life with Self-Portrait (ca. 1918) has traditionally been dated to April 1918, based on a series of letters written by the artist between the spring and autumn of that year. It is, therefore, assumed to have been painted in Penn Studio, 13a Rudall Crescent, Hampstead, where the artist worked from January 1915 to 1932. On 2 April 1918, Gertler wrote to fellow artist Richard Carline that he had:

> started a plan of a large self-portrait, seen in my big mirror, with many reflections behind, and my revolving bookcase, supporting a cerulean vase in front of the mirror. It is an interesting though complex subject, and in spite of it being so pleasant here [at Garsington], I am longing to get back to get on with it. 68

The Leeds work, however, although it does show “many reflections behind”, contradicts this account in a number of ways: it is not a large- but a standard-sized work; it was observed in a small, convex mirror, not a large one; and there is a glass flask or jug but no cerulean-coloured vase. 69 Moreover, no mention is made of either the other still-life objects (apples in a bag and a candlestick) in the foreground of the composition, nor of the Japanese print prominently displayed on the wall behind the mirror. Unlike the majority of Gertler’s still-life props, which recur consistently in his paintings, this print appears uniquely in this work. 70 However, the other still-life elements can be found in works both before and after this date, for example, a similar glass flask can be found in Talmudic Discussion (1911) and a similar arrangement of apples in Apples in a Bag (1921).
Compositionally, *Still Life with Self-Portrait* shares the device of using a convex mirror to show the artist at work with William Orpen’s *Mirror* (1900) and both reference Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), which also uses a convex mirror to reveal the artist at work. The artist’s own appearance with short hair and a thick fringe is consistent with his appearance from circa 1914 onwards. A portrait of a single female figure in black, such as found in Gertler’s early Slade work, can just be glimpsed on the easel behind.

Gertler’s letter to Dorothy Brett three weeks later, reporting on the progress of *Still Life with Self-Portrait*, raises further questions:

> It goes well so far. It is a very complex subject and very interesting and unusual. If this comes off at all well, I shall treat it as but a study for a much larger—in fact, huge canvas, which I want to do of the same subject, since in this canvas I had to sacrifice much background which is most important to the whole character of the subject. The canvas I am working on is the same size as my *Fruit Stall*.

The *Fruit Stall* (now lost), a work painted in 1915, and praised by the artist’s contemporaries Wadsworth, Duncan Grant and Clive Bell, presumably for its modernist qualities, has been variously described as “big” and “vast” in scale. However, the complex but traditional *Still Life with Self-Portrait* measures only 50.8 x 40.6 cm, further casting doubt on the likelihood that the letter quoted above refers to this particular work.

Another unresolved question in *Still Life with Self-Portrait* is which of the artist’s studios is depicted? The interior in the painting, seen in reflection in the convex mirror, has large, floor-to-ceiling windows (their reflection can also be seen in the round-bellied glass flask in the foregrounded still-life arrangement), cream-painted panelled walls, a naked light bulb and bare floorboards. The windows conform to those seen in the background of a photograph of Gertler’s former model, Mrs Dora Venn, taken many years later in Gertler’s Elder Street studio in Spitalfields, which Gertler occupied from 1912–1914. Although many works were painted there, few reveal much of the interior, for example, *Penn Studio* (1915) shows only a corner of Gertler’s studio bedroom (in the upper gallery) lit by sky lights. A visit by the authors to Penn Studio (now privately occupied and therefore not photographed or discussed in detail) in 2018, confirmed that it does not have floor-to-ceiling windows. This discrepancy, therefore, also the possibility of an earlier date and that the above correspondence relates in fact to a later self-portrait also painted in Penn Studio.
Further correspondence, however, makes it clear that Gertler continued to work on a version of “the mirror picture” throughout May,\textsuperscript{74} and again in October, when he recorded “a big change in the composition and thoroughly exhausted myself. Today I am too tired and nervous to work. I may rest some days. God knows when it will be finished now.”\textsuperscript{75} At the end of the month, he put “my self-portrait aside, whether permanently or only for a time, I don’t know [...]”.\textsuperscript{76} In November, he observed:

> I have not yet returned to my Self-Portrait. I don’t know if ever I shall again. I am in quite a different mood now, but I have done a charcoal study [not traced] for it, and may commence a painting any moment, but the idea is so vague in my mind that I hardly have hopes of it as yet.\textsuperscript{77}

An X-radiograph suggests that the standard-sized commercially primed canvas, which carries the artist’s supplier’s “Reeves and Sons” stamp on the reverse, was reused for the current composition (Fig. 20).\textsuperscript{78} The canvas was probably turned at 90 degrees to the initial composition, which is characterised by horizontal brush marks and spherical shapes, perhaps indicative of fruit in a still life. It is not clear which way up the underlying composition would have been orientated. Paint cross sections showed that the uppermost composition is relatively thinly painted, directly over the first image after it had fully dried and without another ground preparation in between. The paint in the underlying composition contains emerald green and lead white pigments. Upper paint layers include vermilion and lead white for the pink of the clothing and the flesh of the Japanese Warrior depicted in the print on the studio wall, with black paint beneath and for the Warrior’s hair that contains bone black. The dark paint of the curtain in the background is painted using bone black and emerald green and the fruit using barium chromate yellow and yellow ochre. These results, while adding to our technical knowledge, do not allow us to firmly date or situate the painting. Thus, for the time being, we have to accept the original date of 1918, although it remains unproven, and we hope that further investigations including further technical analysis on other contemporaneous work, may help to resolve this at a later date.
As mentioned above, Gertler had a set of preferred studio props that recur in his paintings. These include a red headscarf with white spots that Golda wears, for example, in The Artist’s Mother (1913); a similar headscarf, this time white with red spots, was depicted in the double-portrait of his parents The Apple Woman and her Husband (1912). One of these two scarves is worn by Golda in Jewish Family and by Anne in Family Group, although in both later paintings the white spots have been touched out in solid red; they appear in an X-ray image of the painting. This compositional change together with the over-painted figure may have derived from a desire to simplify the image and focus on contrasting planes of colour—a clear development away from the decorated and textured surfaces and brown palette of earlier paintings like Talmudic Discussion.

Other props include apples, the most traditional of still-life elements, but also a recurring motif probably of personal significance to Gertler, who lived near Spitalfields market. Paintings of apples punctuate his oeuvre and can be found in several key works, particularly those for which members of his family modelled, including Family Group and The Artist’s Brother Harry Holding an Apple. Although his father was a furrier and was joined in this
business by Gertler’s two older brothers, there is only one portrait of his father by this title (now lost); and an early portrait of his mother wearing fur, but many including *The Apple Woman and her Husband* (1912), in which they are painted with apples. Other still-life elements include a necklace with red beads worn by Dora Plaskowsky in *Rabbi and Grandchild* and by his sister Sophie in *Portrait of a Girl* (1912); a shorter string of red beads worn by his mother, Golda, in the above-mentioned double-portrait of his parents, appears alongside two sets of apples.

Examination of the paint used for this group of works shows that Gertler was surprisingly consistent in his choice of coloured pigments throughout this period. His palette included viridian and emerald greens, cobalt and Prussian and French ultramarine blues, chrome and cadmium yellows, vermilion and a range of red, brown, and yellow iron containing pigments. He used lead white exclusively—in preference to zinc white—and bone black. Many coloured pigments are used in *Talmudic Discussion* for details of the cloth and the embroidered fabric, while the overall brown palette, characteristic of his early paintings, was dropped in some compositions in later works, where pure colour was used unmixed or mixed only with white to give a more vivid effect. Planes of colour are juxtaposed with minimum texture and flat application in *Family Group* to vibrant visual effect. Similarly, colour contrasts and flat planes are used in the *Fruit Sorters*. Close examination and study of the paint layer structure for both these paintings suggests that a traditional painting technique was used for drapery painting, with laying in an opaque underlayer followed by a transparent glaze. The technique of dead colouring was learned by most British painters in the eighteenth century and may still have been taught at the Slade in the early twentieth century or may alternatively have derived from Gertler’s admiration of *quattrocento* Italian painting and the techniques used by these masters from direct observation in the National Gallery. For biblical subjects, such as *The Creation of Eve*, Gertler used a more subdued palette, and his views of the gardens at Garsington, in the works chosen for study, are similarly simplified, subdued in tone, and utilise a narrow range of pigments. Contrastingly, for *Gilbert Cannan*, the paint is applied more freely. The final surface of this work and others that were painted over underlying compositions varies in texture (it is unlikely that Gertler intended the underlying composition to be visible in the final composition). Gertler’s use of unprimed supports presented a more textured surface than in either his works on panel or primed canvas for landscape, still life, or figure painting, suggesting that this aspect was less important to him in this period than other painterly goals.

In conclusion, this combined approach of technical and art-historical analysis has served a dual purpose: first, in uncovering hitherto unknown underpaintings which provide visual evidence to support written sources and/or reveal further clues on Gertler’s journey towards the modern; and second, in allowing a greater understanding of the methods employed upon this
journey. The underpaintings show not only how frequently Gertler reused his supports but also point to a rapid aesthetic development within this period, particularly in the key years of 1913 and 1916, supporting the commentary in his letters. The overpainting in 1913 points to an intention towards greater simplification, also apparent in his compositions, in line with post-Impressionist influences. In 1915-1916, however, it indicates a deeper engagement with contemporaneous modernism commensurate with both personal, wider political, and artistic concerns. Although we still cannot map all the stages leading to *Merry-Go-Round*, the hidden oil sketch supports the idea of a long period of gestation in which initial ideas were worked out preparatory to the final painting. Gertler’s materials are also consistent with these developments—his earlier earthy palette brightening under the influence of post-Impressionism as his technique became increasingly experimental.

In the years immediately following those explored in this study, Gertler was influenced particularly by Cézanne and Renoir, and then, in the late 1930s by Picasso and Juan Gris, demonstrating that his engagement with modernism, while neither immediate nor linear in his early works, was nonetheless significant and ongoing. Gertler’s surviving notebooks for his last decade discuss his experimentation with materials and technique, also citing his discussions with the influential German art restorer Helmut Ruhemann (1891–1973), a refugee from Nazism who settled in England in 1934 and later set up a studio in St John’s Wood. A photograph from Lady Ottoline Morrell’s album (ca. 1934), showing Gertler, his wife Marjorie, Ruhemann, and Philip Hendy (later director of the National Gallery) taking tea together in the garden, is further proof of this relationship. This points to a deepening interest in experimental techniques in Gertler’s later years, following the general *rappel à l’ordre* in the 1920s, and a second engagement with the modern in Gertler’s final period, worthy of greater study but outside the scope of the current paper.

**Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank all our lenders, partners, and facilitators who assisted with this project: Jevon Thistlewood (Conservator), the Ashmolean, Oxford; Ben Uri Gallery and Museum; the Department of Prints and Drawings, the British Museum; the Courtauld Institute of Art; David Hare; the late Luke Gertler and the Luke Gertler Estate; Nigel Walsh (Curator), Leeds City Art Gallery; Simon Lake (former Curator), New Walk Art Gallery, Leicester; Matthew Travers (Director) and Dr Robert Travers (Executive Chairman), Piano Nobile; Clare Mitchell (Curator) and Rebecca Moisan (Conservator), Southampton City Art Gallery; Jenni Spencer-Davies (Curator), Ellie Dawkins (Documentation Officer) and Jenny Williamson (Conservation and Collections Officer), Glynn Vivian, Swansea; Annette King and Rebecca Helen
Footnotes

1. *Merry-Go-Round* has been the subject of previous technical studies at Tate; it is, therefore, referred to, where relevant in this paper, but is not one of the subjects of separate technical analysis or detailed discussion for the purposes of this study.

2. X-radiograph and paint analysis by Aviva Burnstock, 26 September 2013 using paint cross sections prepared and supplied by Jevon Thistlewood (Conservator, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).


6. His job was to produce charcoal cherubim traced from a larger cartoon. He wrote to Carrington that the experience “nearly broke my heart”, see 24 September 1912, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, 47; and, in 1932, told an interviewer that he had “longed to be free of its restrictions and to get forward with my own real work”, see M. Gertler, *Studio*, no. 104 (1932), 163.


10. It was later purchased under the terms of the Chantrey Bequest in 1944.


13. See “Papers regarding the acquisition, administration and dissolution of Sir Michael Ernest Sadler’s art collection”, TGA 8221.

14. Mark Gertler to Michael Sadler, 30 November 1911, Tate Archive.


16. Works on Jewish subjects by Rothenstein and the Jewish artist Alfred Wolmark, who was also directly influenced by Rembrandt, were included in the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s extensive exhibition *Jewish Art and Antiquities* (1906), see Samuel Shaw, “The Ideal Behind the Real’: William Rothenstein, Alfred Wolmark and the Representation of the Whitechapel Jew, c.1905”, in S. MacDougall (ed.), *William Rothenstein and his Circle* (London: Ben Uri, 2016), 22–31. Rothenstein described the scene inside the synagogue as “subjects Rembrandt would have painted”, cited in John Rothenstein “Mark Gertler”, *Modern English Painters, Vol. II: Nash to Bawden* (London: MacDonald & Co., 1984); Gertler also recognised the same quality in the worshippers he saw when returning to his boyhood synagogue in later life, though noting that he no longer wished to paint them; cited in Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 293, n. 115. Gertler named Rembrandt’s *Two Scholars Disputing* (1628) among his favourite works when interviewed by the *Jewish Chronicle* (“A Triumph of Education Aid”) and Randolph Schwabe noted in his diary Gertler’s admiration for this work when it was shown at the National Gallery, London, prior to journeying to Melbourne, in June 1933, see *The Diaries of Randolph Schwabe, British Art 1930–48*, edited by Gill Clarke (Bristol: Sansom & Company, 2016), 140. Lisa Tickner suggests that Gertler’s “Rabbi and Grandchild”—“intimate, domestic and profoundly humanist” is “a way of doing Rembrandt over in modern terms without resorting to the ‘Rembrandttesque’”, see Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects*, 168.

17. One of eight major works on Jewish themes carried out by Rothenstein in the East End between 1904 and 1906.

Gertler, "A Triumph of Education Aid". John was a considerable influence on Gertler's generation at the Slade and he would have seen the exhibition Provencal Studies and Other Works by Aug. E. John at the Chenil Galleries in November-December 1910, see Gruetzner Robins, Modern Art in Britain 1910–1914, 46–49. So too was Puvis de Chavannes, see also David Fraser Jenkins, "Slade School Symbolism", in John Christian (ed.), The Last Romantics: The Romantic Tradition in British Art: Burne Jones to Stanley Spencer (London: Lund Humphries in association with the Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), 71–76. John Currie and Gertler held a joint exhibition of their works at the Chenil in December 1912 with works by Augustus John in the next room. John promoted Gertler's early work to the American collector John Quinn, but in 1916 declared that Gertler's work had "gone to buggery and I can't stand it. Not that he hasn't ability of a sort and all the cheek of a Yid, but the spirit of the work is false and affected", see Michael Holroyd, Augustus John: The New Biography (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 660, n. 41.

Mark Gertler to Carrington, 12 September 1912, Mark Gertler: Selected Letters, 47.
This work was viewed on the easel in the Glynn Vivian's conservation studio in 2016 but was not available for further technical study.


Tickner, Modern Life and Modern Subjects, 295.


Chambers, "Jewish Artists and Jewish Art", 55.

"What more does one want but a room, materials, and the National Gallery?", he wrote to Rothenstein [ca. May–June 1910], Mark Gertler: Selected Letters, 33.


John gave him "useful tips on tempera", Mark Gertler to Carrington (August 1912), Mark Gertler: Selected Letters, 43–44.

P.G. Konody, The Observer, January 1913.

Another version of Portrait of a Woman (generally accepted to be the superior version) is in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

The exact book is hard to trace but published books available on the artist at the time include: Louis Maeterlinck, Rogier van der Weyden (Gent, 1902); Rogier van der Weyden (Rogier de la Pasture) 1400–1464 / Musée royal d'Anvers, Galerie nationale de Londres, Louvre, Musée royal de La Haye, Galerie royale des Uffizi à Florence (Harlem: H. Kleinmann, 1906); and Friedrich Winkler, Der meister von Flémalle und Rogier van der Weyden: Studien zu ihren Werken und zur Kunst ihren Zeit mit mehreren Katalogen zu Rogier (Strasburg: Heitz & Mündel, 1913).

Mark Gertler to the Hon. Dorothy Brett, August 1913, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Mark Gertler to Carrington, Sunday [December 1913], Mark Gertler: Selected Letters, 59–60.

Mark Gertler to Dorothy Brett, July 1913, Mark Gertler: Selected Letters, 54–55.

Mark Gertler to Carrington, March 1913, HRHRC.

Mark Gertler to Dora Carrington, 9 April 1913, Mark Gertler: Selected Letters, 52.

Mark Gertler: Selected Letters, 52.

Mark Gertler to Dora Carrington, [c. end March 1913], Mark Gertler: Selected Letters, 50–51.

Thomas Balston, 1949, HRHRC.


Anthony M. Ludowici, The New Age 13, no. 8, 19 June 1913, 212.

Mark Gertler to Brett, [ca. June 1913], HRHRC.

A similar gesture occurs in The Apple Gatherers.

Frances Spalding, "Mark Gertler: The Early Years", in Mark Gertler: The Early and the Late Years (London: Ben Uri Gallery, 1982), 8.

Mark Gertler to Dorothy Brett [July 1913], HRHRC.

Mark Gertler to Edward Marsh, not dated [ca. December 1913], Berg Collection, New York.

When it was displayed at the Whitechapel in 1914, the reviewer of The Star noted: "So much emphasis is placed upon certain characteristics of the sitters that representation is occasionally pushed to caricature. The seated old man in this picture is as monstrously grotesque as a gargoyle, or some of the figures in medieval wood carvings" but admired it for "stirring our imagination and our sympathies", cited Woodeson, Mark Gertler, 362.
71 Orpen's Mirror was presented to the Tate by Mrs Coutts Michie through the Art Fund in memory of the George McCulloch Collection in 1913, so could conceivably have been seen by Gertler around this date, although there is no documentary evidence to support this. Both Orpen's Mirror and Gertler's Still Life with Self-Portrait were included in the National Gallery's exhibition Reflections: Van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites (2 October 2017-2 April 2018) exploring the impact of the Arnolfini Portrait and its "re-imaginings" by later artists. In the accompanying catalogue, Alison Smith suggests that in Gertler's "seemingly everyday scene, the real and reflected parts of the image draw on earlier iconographic and representational models to both question and affirm existence." She reads the presence of the Samurai warrior as "evoking the memento mori earlier iconographic and representational models to both question and affirm existence." She reads the presence of

72 Mark Gertler to [Dorothy] Brett, 24 April 1918, HRHRC.


74 Juliette Bailleul to Mark Gertler, 17 May 1918, Luke Gertler Collection; Mark Gertler to Richard Carline, 22 May 1918, TGA.

75 Mark Gertler to Brett, 6 October 1918, HRHRC.

76 Mark Gertler to Brett, 6 October 1918.

77 Mark Gertler to Brett, November 1918, HRHRC.
78 According to Jacob Simon, Reeves & Sons Ltd, 1890–1950 was then run by the great-great-grandsons of the original Thomas Reeves and had a factory at Dalston [building extant] devoted to manufacturing artists’ and students’ colours, pastels, artists’ brushes, prepared canvases, and other painting grounds; a leasehold factory at Belsham St, Hackney, used as a woodworking shop for the manufacture of colour boxes, drawing boards, T-squares, easels, palettes, etc; and another leasehold factory at Wayland Avenue, Hackney used to produce sketchbooks, portfolios and other bookbinding work, see Jacob Simon, “British Artists’ Suppliers, 1650–1950”, https://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/directory-of-suppliers/y. Accessed 16 November 2018.


80 Although we would like to know more, this is all the evidence uncovered to date of this relationship. For more on Ruhemann, see Morwenna Blewett, “Refugee Picture Restorers in the United Kingdom”, in Monica Bohm-Duchen (ed.), Insiders/Outsiders: Refugees from Nazi Europe and their Contribution to British Visual Culture (London: Lund Humphries, 2019), 105–111.

Bibliography


Ludowici, A.M. (1913) The New Age, 13, no. 8 (19 June), 212.


**Unpublished Sources**

Mark Gertler, notebooks, Luke Gertler Estate
Abstract

This visual essay takes an exploratory tour through certain aspects of portraiture in Britain, continental Europe, America, and Australia, from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Investigating the physiognomies of politics and sensibility, class and race, across numerous specific historical circumstances and occurrences, it is very much driven by and dependent upon its pictorial content; on the flicker of images in the mind’s eye of the author and in that of the viewer-auditor-reader. This essay considers the relationship between the coastal profile, the silhouette, and the phrenology head; between the theodolite, the pointing machine, and the craniometer; between the contour map, the cameo, and the death mask. It also ventures into the topology of portraiture, the geometries through which portraits and maps are presented: both quadrilateral frames and grids, and oval or circular medallions. By presenting materials which are functionally and materially diverse but clearly related in appearance, and time and place of origin, this essay suggests that the public and popular cultures of the British imperium spread a wider and weirder net than is conventionally supposed.

Authors

Associate Professor, Centre for Art History and Art Theory, Australian National University.

Acknowledgements

In offering Skin and Bone as a time-based digital product, I hope to convey something of the phenomenology of art history, or at least of my art history. I am immensely grateful to Sarah Turner and the British Art Studies team for their willingness to embrace this somewhat unconventional methodology. The first (and only previous) manifestation of this essay was as a keynote address to the 2016 conference Human Kind: Transforming Identity in British and Australian portraits 1700–1914, organised jointly by the University of Melbourne and the National Gallery of Victoria, with support from the Paul Mellon Centre and the Australian Institute of Art History. My sincere thanks to
Deidre Coleman, Vivien Gaston, and Alison Inglis for inviting me to give that lecture. Thanks also to Kate Fullagar, Macquarie University and the Australian Research Council-funded *Facing New Worlds* project, through which I have recently obtained the necessary time to prepare this material for publication.

**Cite as**

Let us start at the beginning, with *The Origin of Painting*. Well, if not at the very beginning, at least with my beginning. Just six months before I was born, Robert Rosenblum, that marvellous, contrarian art historian who gave us the notion of the Abstract Sublime, and who first situated the beginnings of modern art in eighteenth-century neo-classicism, published in the *Art Bulletin* “The Origin of Painting: a Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism”. ¹

In this vintage (though I hasten to add far from geriatric) essay, Rosenblum examines the various transformations from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries of the imagery of the Corinthian Maid, the famous origin myth related by Pliny the Elder. In Book XXXV of the *Naturalis Historia*, the beginnings of art are (quite literally) traced to a young Greek woman, Dibutades, who, knowing that her lover was about to go on a long journey, made a memorial drawing of his facial profile from the shadow cast by a lamp against the wall. Rosenblum notes the clear coincidence of the story’s Graeco-Roman setting with the neo-classical taste of late eighteenth-century Europe, not only in terms of literary pretension but also in what he describes as the period’s “stylistic tendency ... towards increasingly clean-cut, continuous contours and a flattening of forms against the picture plane.” ²

Originating in Early Modern connoisseurship and collecting of antique gems and pottery, accelerated by the excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii, circulated through luxury illustrated publications and advocated in the writings of Johann Winckelmann and others, this taste for the ‘noble outline’ was enthusiastically embraced both by British Grand Tour milordi and by their cultural courtiers: from Robert Adam to William Chambers, from Gavin Hamilton to John Flaxman, from James Tassie to Josiah Wedgwood.

This is where I really wish to begin, then: with the margin, the boundary, the profile; the coastal line of the White Cliffs of jasperware, the *Edge of the Trees* at Botany Bay and Port Jackson. Because what I would like to suggest through this lecture is that in the period between the late eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century, over that couple of generations we might designate the Romantic Period, there appears, or possibly reappears, a discernible correlation between the geographical and the somatic, between science and sensibility, between empire and the skin. ³ In other words, the
visual cultures of this time demonstrate a preoccupation with measurement in relation to both land and people. The annexation of territory equates to the capture of likeness.

3:36
While the following presentation deals primarily with the British imperial world, and very much from an Australian perspective, I start on the Continent. The first general maps of the Kingdom of France were produced for the Académie Royale des Sciences during the eighteenth century by four generations of the Cassini family: this vast undertaking took almost 60 years to complete, running from 1756 to 1815 (the surveys alone took more than 30 years), eventually producing a map of 182 sheets at a scale of 1:86,400. That’s a total area of something like 12 x 11½ metres. What was distinctive about the Cassini map (other than its Borgesian ambition) was its technical innovation: it was the first such project to be based on geodetic triangulation. The laws of plane trigonometry state that if you know precisely the length of one side of a triangle, its baseline, and the degrees of two of its angles, it is a straightforward matter to determine the other two sides and angle by mathematical calculation. Once this first triangle is established, it in turn can provide baselines for adjacent triangles, permitting infinite extension.

Indeed, during the 1780s an Anglo-French survey—suggested by the Comte de Cassini and conducted by General William Roy—established the relative positions of the observatories at Greenwich and Paris. Working with Jesse Ramsden’s new theodolite, and with his more precise steel bar measuring chain replacing the old wire Gunter chain, Roy established the Hounslow Base Line, from which he was able to knit together the triangulations of the two nations just prior to the French revolution.

Such cartographic developments have evident parallels in the domain of art. Since the Renaissance recovery of classical geometry, artists had been using Pythagoras and Vitruvius to map not only the ideal body, but also specifically the ideal head.

6:07
Geometry is particularly helpful in facilitating the articulation of forms in space, and the conquest of perspective certainly enabled artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to describe location and structure with compelling veracity. But the proportional-symmetrical impulse, one might almost say imperative, also extended to the *dramatis personae*. As it always has, always will. From the canon of Polykleitos in the fifth century bc, with his famous declaration that “perfection comes about little by little, through many numbers”, to the data-crunching software packages that underpin twenty-first century CGI figures, the human figure and face have long been subject to precise mathematical analysis and projection.
So when the tools of mensuration were so prodigiously enhanced by concurrent advances in engineering, instrument-making, and science, or as it was then called, Natural Philosophy, right through the eighteenth century, it comes as no surprise to find technology applied to the making of likeness. Dibutades’ simple tracing on a wall, or the freehand scissoring of a cut-paper shade portrait or silhouette, becomes perfectible and repeatable through the refinement and precision of the physionotrace. With this device, invented in 1784 by the French court musician Gilles-Louis Chrétien, the artist—or more correctly the operator, the mechanic—would follow the line of a profile shadow on a screen, while a pantograph system recorded the line on paper. In turn, and again with the aid of a pantograph, the image was then scaled down and transferred to a copper plate for printing. Working in partnership with a painter of miniatures, one Edmé Quénéday, in the twelve months from 1788 Chrétien produced no fewer than 850 physionotrace portraits.

Now this mechanical, labour-divisive, mass-reproductive function had significant political import. The accuracy of the profile was a virtual guarantee of likeness, and indeed, when Chrétien first began promoting his device in 1786, he suggested to the Académie that it might be used to record the images of new army recruits, a precautionary portraiture in case of future desertion. More importantly, the relative ease of production speeded up, demystified, de-skilled and hence democratised the whole process of face-making. In the early 1790s the physionotrace became a popular tool—not only for the production of cheap editions of portraits of political and theatrical celebrities, but also for the commissioning of portraits of members of the Third Estate: now working with another miniaturist, Jean Fouquet, Chrétien exhibited 100 engraved profiles at the Salon of 1793 (l’An II), and two years later no fewer than 600. The Cabinet des Estampes at the Bibliothèque Nationale holds something like 2,800 examples of the genre.

Unsurprisingly, the democratic confrères of the French across the Atlantic adopted the physionotrace with enthusiasm, although—as an image of the slave woman Flora attached to her sale document indicates—occasionally as much for Chrétien’s surveillance purposes as for bourgeois portraiture. Initially the invention was promoted by expatriates such as Jean-Jacques Boudier in Philadelphia, and Charles de St-Mémin and Thomas de Valdenuit in New York, but soon enough it acquired a local accent, through a refinement of the mechanism by John Isaac Hawkins. Hawkins’ machine, patented in 1802, was significantly different from Chrétien’s model in that instead of tracing around a shadow with a pencil, it involved running a brass gnomon down the sitter’s actual profile; it could even be operated by the sitter him or herself. Furthermore, instead of moving a pencil to produce an
interim image prior to editioning, Hawkins’ pantograph was connected to a steel point, which incised a line onto folded paper, which was in turn cut with scissors to produce a number of negative profiles.

The ‘facie-trace’ was an immediate success. Hawkins sold his invention to the entrepreneurial artist, soldier, scientist and politician Charles Willson Peale, who included it as an interactive in his Philadelphia museum. Access to the machine was included in your 25 cent admission, with just one penny extra for the paper, and scissors provided gratis. Or you could pay the freed Peale family slave, young Moses Williams, to cut it for you. At between 6 and 8 cents per portrait, Williams was soon enough able to afford to marry, and to buy a two-storey brick house. Peale estimated that in 1802, 8,800 profiles were taken—that is to say something like half of his visitors for that year availed themselves of the opportunity to take a sideways selfie.

The abstracting and indexical nature of this new physionotrace, and its phenomenal popularity, has prompted the American scholar Wendy Bellion to argue for a metaphoric equivalence (if not a causal relationship) between pictorial and political representation in America during the 1790s and 1800s. Immediately following the War of Independence, state legislatures were dominated by politicians with a shared conception of the national interest. However, as the independent federalist nation-state developed, and especially in response to the French Revolution, instead of depending on a landed, educated “natural aristocracy” (political leaders who could supposedly perceive and promote the communal good in the abstract), newly enfranchised US citizens preferred a clearer and more direct (if more local and partial) delegation of popular authority. As Bellion puts it, “each of these modes of representation stressed that the nature of the relation between a referent and its representative vehicle was to be exceedingly direct.”

13:18
If we take this metaphor into the third dimension—into sculpture—Bellion’s suggested equivalence between the physical and the political can even be extended to encompass the philosophical and the moral. Here, the machine is not Hawkins’ physionotrace, but the pointing machine, as developed by Nicolas-Marie Gatteaux (or possibly John Bacon) in the 1760s and perfected by Francis Chantrey (or his friend Antonio Canova) in the 1810s. An elaborate framework of wood and brass, needles and wing nuts, this device permits highly accurate translation and re-scaling of an original clay or plaster model into a finished work carved in marble.

It was the pointing machine that enabled the American sculptor Hiram Powers to produce six identical versions of his 1847 sculpture The Greek Slave. A highlight of the United States court at the Great Exhibition of 1851, this work was widely celebrated for its naturalism, one report claiming that it
“outshines Madame Wharton [a contemporary tableau vivant performer] in the execution of poses plastiques.” ⁹ First, there was its depiction of the female nude—shockingly naked, but idealistically conceived and modestly posed. Then, there was the broader truth to be found in its representation of the subjugation and abduction of Greeks by the Ottoman Turks during the War of Independence of the previous generation, and, by contemporary analogy, the oppression of African-American slaves on Southern plantations. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it:

They say ideal beauty cannot enter
The house of anguish. On the threshold stands
An alien image with enshackled hands,
Called the Greek Slave! As if the artist meant her...
...To so confront man’s crimes in different lands
With man’s ideal sense. Pierce to the centre,
Art’s fiery finger! And break up ere long
The serfdom of this world... ¹⁰

Such was the fame of the sculpture that even before its London exhibition, Powers actually applied for a patent on the work. He well knew the capacity of his professional technology, manufacturing almost 200 versions of his 1843 bust of Proserpine, at various scales.

15:55
Powers’ compatriot Joel Hart also submitted a patent application, for what he called a “portrait-measuring invention from the life, having 200 steel needles”. ¹¹ The more points, the greater the accuracy. The more facts, the greater the truthiness. Out of this impulse to maximise the mathematics also comes the nineteenth-century obsession with craniometry, with the collecting and analysis of ethnic and criminal skulls, exemplified in Joseph Barnard Davis’ Thesaurus Craniorum, with its 1,474 skulls and 25,000 individual measurements (and that was only in the first edition). But I am getting ahead of myself, both temporally and thematically...

The Enlightenment, Encyclopédiste, rationalist approach to face-making, as embodied in the physionotrace and the pointing machine, was reinforced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the Dutch surgeon and anatomist Pieter Camper. In 1770, Camper gave two lectures to the Amsterdam Drawing Academy in which he drew students’ attention to the underlying structure of the skull, and to its variations from infancy to old age, from ape to Apollo. Following the lectures’ delayed publication in 1791,
Camper’s analytic system gained wide currency, being reiterated in Charles White’s 1799 *Account of the Regular Gradation in Man, and in Different Animals and Vegetables*.

The original lectures were intended primarily as an aid for artists, a response to the common failure of some painters to represent Balthazar, the African Magus, with convincing naturalism, and more broadly as a challenge to the conventionalised oval blocking of head shapes. By addressing the underlying osseous truths of human difference, Camper established in the so-called “facial angle” a geometric template or equation through which artists could describe “all sorts and conditions of men”.

However, it was not long before Camper’s empirical analysis began to attract and accrue secondary meanings. For Johann Caspar Lavater, the Swiss pastor and poet, differences in physiognomy indicated not merely distinctions of age or race, but were a reflection of a person’s inner life and fundamental character. Riffing on the Italian Renaissance scholar Giambattista della Porta’s *De humana physiognomica* (1586), with its matching of human and animal characteristics, Lavater’s *Physiognomische Fragmente* suggested that temperament—the old doctrine of the four humours—was visible and legible in the “constitution, the form and the curvature of the skull”, and in the shape, position, and relative dimensions of eyes, ears, noses, and so forth.

Perhaps most significantly, Lavater’s ideas were quickly adopted and adapted by the German physician Franz Josef Gall, in the practice he called “organology”, but which was subsequently denominated “phrenology” by Gall’s former assistant and disciple Johann Spurzheim. This study was actually based on an accurate intuition, that is, that the several distinct parts or regions of the human brain—the brain stem, the cerebellum, and the four lobes of grey matter that make up the cerebral cortex—have distinct and separate functions, and Gall’s underlying thesis is in fact strongly supported by modern neuroscience and advanced medical imaging.

Ultimately, however, phrenology’s pretensions to scientific validity are totally undone by several false assumptions: that the size of a particular “organ” or region of the brain determines its capacity; that the external bony carapace of the skull is a direct extension or reflection of the state of the soft tissue beneath, and finally, by a topography which maps temperamental inclination and potential skill sets—or in phrenological jargon “propensities”, “feelings”, “perception”, and “reflexivity”—as if they were one and the same.

Many contemporaries diagnosed these flaws immediately. Phrenology was investigated and dismissed as unscientific as early as 1808, by a committee of the Institut de France chaired by Georges Cuvier. It was condemned by the
Edinburgh Review in 1805 as “a piece of thorough quackery from beginning to end”, and it was mocked mercilessly and repeatedly by Regency caricaturists. Nevertheless, this pseudo-science continued to maintain and extend its popularity throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. Its adherents including many who should have known better, amongst them the scientist Alfred Russel Wallace, the inventor Thomas Alva Edison, poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, even four-times British prime minister William Ewart Gladstone. Perhaps it is just that people with insistent, bumpy middle names were particularly susceptible.

Belief in the system was as wide as it was high. The discipline’s classic English-language text, The Constitution of Man, by the Scottish lawyer George Combe, sold 350,000 copies between its publication in 1828 and 1900—an average of 5,000 copies per year, and seven times the sales of Darwin’s Origin of Species. Phrenology even enjoyed a twentieth-century revival in the United States; at the 1924 kidnapping and murder trial of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, the court was shown phrenology cards, with the defendants’ “propensities” clearly written in their profiles.

Of course, the Australian colonies were not immune, either; our own prime ministers Alfred Deakin and George Reid both had their heads read at different times. When in 1838 the convict artist Thomas Bock was commissioned to draw a portrait of Jane, Lady Franklin, wife of the Governor of Van Diemen’s Land, the sitter wrote to her sister:

> … would you believe it that I am having my portrait taken again to please Mrs McConochie ... This time I am to be without a cap, and it is three quarters face in that position which is to bring to light very conspicuously, by Mrs McConochie’s express desire, my two great bumps of causality.

While in the colony of Victoria in 1855, the Select Committee on Aborigines commissioned a report on the heads of the Kulin nation from local practitioner Philemon Sohier.

23:22
A few years later, in 1859, the prominent colonial phrenologist Archibald Sillars Hamilton gave an extensive series of lectures in Sydney which included, inter alia, character studies of the Governor, Sir William Denison, and of John Bede Polding, the Roman Catholic Archbishop. Further, working from the evidence of Edwin Dalton’s recent composite photograph of the Legislative Assembly, Hamilton confidently declared that some of the politicians had “brains so formed as to disqualify them from putting
themselves forward as lawmakers for the people.” But then Hamilton’s attitude to the law was somewhat ambiguous. The following year, he was charged with incitement to grave robbing, in a case involving the heads of two prisoners recently executed at Maitland jail—the skull of Wonnarua Aboriginal man Jim Crow was returned to his people for burial as recently as 2015.

The pseudo-science of phrenology appealed to the Romantic era because it brought together the senses of vision and touch, and because—like palmistry or astrology—it seemed able to integrate the subjectivity of boundless emotion and the objectivity of measurable dimension. In the physionotrace or pointing machine, we have an instrument which preserves and effectively translates data from one form to another, that is, from a 3D living subject to a 2D graphic analogue, or from a plaster model to a reduced or enlarged stone replica. In phrenology, the intention, the ambition, is likewise to convert the data from one form to another, but here it is from a set of empirical facts to the abstract domain of values, of personal, moral, emotional, spiritual engagement.

Furthermore, phrenology’s apparent validity was enhanced by its easy-to-read graphic manifestations. The organic divisions of the phrenological model head or chart presented the various mental faculties as administrative divisions within a wider polity of identity and character, in a way analogous to the counties and parishes of England, or, for that matter, of New South Wales, or indeed, to the nation-states that constituted Europe. At the same time, in the storage and display of skulls and plaster casts and in the tabulation of cranial measurements, there was a comforting regularity. The literal collectors of heads and their metaphoric companions, those book-breaking, extra-illustrating hobbyists who filled their volumes of James Granger’s *Biographical History of England* with engraved portraits of historical worthies, held the intemperance of character and behaviour in check, sealed within the geometric matrix of the table, the shelf, the box, the book.

26:31
This is a matter worth further consideration. According to convention, most portraits (other than miniatures) were painted on quadrilateral supports, and throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, indeed, until James Whistler’s radical “Arrangement in white and yellow” and “Arrangement in flesh colour and grey” in the 1880s introduced colour and air into painting display, it was usual for pictures at exhibitions to be shown jammed up tight, frame abutting frame. Juggling the competing claims of excellence, genre, scale, and symmetry (not to mention patronage and lobbying), exhibitions at
the Paris Salon or London’s Royal Academy ended up presenting varieties of plaster-gilt grids—not entirely regular, of course, but essentially a territory of canvas divided into preferential physiognomic and corporeal allotments. Concurrently, as we have seen, the grotesque wall paintings of imperial Rome, and especially those uncovered at Herculaneum and Pompeii, served as models for neo-classical interiors, and their assertive rectilinearity was widely adopted not only in the formal paint-and-plaster designs of Robert Adam, but also in the contemporary ephemeral practice of pasting prints directly onto the wall. At Calke Abbey, Derbyshire, the eccentric Sir Henry Crewe, the 7th Baronet, stuck up caricatures, filling an entire room, and there is another such survival at Rokeby Hall, County Durham. When, after the collapse of his marriage in 1816, the aristocrat, poet, and exemplary Regency buck George Gordon Byron, Baron Byron put his library up for auction before departing for Italy, the catalogue included a portable print medley: “a screen covered with portraits of actors, pugilists, representations of boxing matches etc.”

In their interior paste-ups, these amateurs were replicating, or echoing, at least, not only the traditional Academic hang, but also the natural habitat of late Georgian caricature, the London print-shop. In numerous contemporary etchings and engravings, we see crowds of gossip-gawkers and/or individual victims of the satirist’s burin, standing before print shop windows—Hannah Humphrey’s or Samuel Fores’, William Holland’s or William Hone’s, indulging in that free metropolitan entertainment known as “picture-fuddling”. Like the ranks of natural history specimens in the vitrines of Sir Ashton Lever’s Holophusikon, mocking depictions of English politicians, aristocrats, churchmen, military commanders, actresses, sportsmen, criminals, and other public characters were shown in close array for public amusement and discussion (and hopefully purchase), one in each pane of glass.

Capturing, squaring up, enclosing—these are functions of observation and representation as much as they are of conquest and property development. So perhaps the most secure location for portraiture is within portraiture itself.

29:55
What do I mean by this? Well, it is common practice for beggars to avoid the necessity for verbal complaint by displaying a written sign indicating the nature of their affliction or the extent of their need. Paul Strand’s photograph Blind Woman is a particularly memorable example of this kind of advertising, and the whimsically, ironically, or topically re-worded placard next to the donations hat became a favourite device of twentieth-century cartoonists. In 2005, Finnish artist Jani Leinonen presented an installation entitled I Want to
Get Rid of Class Distinction but All I Think and Do is a Result of Class Distinction, which consisted entirely of roughly scrawled placards he had purchased from beggars around the world.

This auto-advertising was already a regular practice amongst the street people of Georgian and Regency Britain. One of the characters described in John Thomas Smith’s account of London beggary, *Vagabondiana*, is a charlatan—“a foreigner, and probably a Frenchman”—who “throws up his eye-balls” in pretence of blindness. Smith notes that this man:

> is now and then detected, in consequence of a picture, which is painted on a tin plate, and fastened to his breast, being the portrait of and worn many years ago by a marine, who had lost his sight at Gibraltar.

Likewise, in a portrait by itinerant miniaturist John Dempsey of Billy the Match Man of Liverpool, we can see hanging around the man’s neck a placard on which is pasted a pair of silhouettes, with text beneath. Remarkably, these would appear to be copies of a silhouette, in all likelihood also by Dempsey, contained in a miscellany of Liverpudlian character profiles compiled around 1830. It would seem that Dempsey’s 1844 portrait of this man is actually his second, and that Billy is wearing the first, drawn and printed some 15 years previously.

Or, to locate this same phenomenon in the colonial setting, there is William Fernyhough’s silhouette of Jemmy Piper, the Wiradjuri man who served as a guide and Indigenous go-between on surveyor Major Thomas Mitchell’s 1836 expedition into the interior. This lithograph was evidently issued by local printer Thomas Austin in December 1836, to capitalise on popular interest following the Mitchell party’s return to Sydney in the previous month. It shows Piper as subaltern “mimic man”, in cast-off European clothes, wearing—as Mitchell would later recall—“my own red coat and ... a cocked hat and feather which had once belonged to Governor Darling.” Not long afterwards, Austin offered a portrait of the Major himself as an extension to Fernyhough’s earlier series “Military and Editorial Sketches”, in which the sitter’s Wellingtonian profile addresses a copy of what is clearly the Piper print.

33:06
This could be a relatively simple master–servant trope. Alternatively, it may signify a public farewell to Mitchell on his departure from the colony, or, as Elisabeth Findlay has argued, a deliberate attempt to rehabilitate his reputation following a public enquiry and press commentary arising from the killing of Aborigines at Dispersion Creek during the expedition.
the case, the work’s reiterative, almost recursive nature, its in-line advertising, if you like, functions as does Dempsey’s portrait of Billy the Match man, emphasising both the accuracy and the artifice, the whole abstract, geometric dimension of portraiture in the early nineteenth century. Mitchell with Piper might not be Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer, but it is not far from Hamlet with the skull of Yorick, and very close to the phrenologist and his tools of trade. Mitchell was, after all, a surveyor: a definer of property, an explorer and explainer of space, a ruler of lines and a former of squares.

The compartmentalising tendency in British social relations, the ingrained habits of survey and enclosure, is famously, Whiggishly expressed in George Cruikshank’s British Beehive of 1867 (from an idea first sketched in 1840), a print which was subsequently re-issued with the title A Penny Political Picture for the People. The royal family may be at the summit of this humming polity, but there are more than fifty other cells in the hive, not only a variety of trades and professions, but also more abstract domains such as the constitution, the rule of law, and freedom of religion and of the press, while the whole edifice rests on a foundation of an imperial military and, as the sign proclaims, the “bank of the richest country of the world”.

Despite a moral gloss, this is also the class ideology implicit in both the look and the dynamics of Edward Wallis’ 1825 children’s board game, Every Man to his Station, in which charity and modesty are rewarded by social advance, while slothfulness or theft see you sent to the House of Correction. In the real world of Regency Britain, such transgressions often actually meant transportation to Australia.

And here we find the ultimate identity warehouse: the Benthamite panopticon architecture of the 1849 “Separate Prison” at Port Arthur. Hooded, de-socialised, alienated, Van Diemen’s Land’s “worst of the worst” entered the Penitentiary Chapel separately, and took their places in individual, isolated, side-screened pew-stalls. 26 From the point of view of the Chaplain and the Commandant, the refractory, recidivist convicts were here pacified, homogenised, contained and made manageable by the simple device of framing.

36:26
As for class, so for race; from the same period, there is the manner of display of George Catlin’s 300 portraits of Native North Americans, as presented at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, between 1840 and 1845. All three-quarter lengths, Catlin’s pictures completely covered the walls of the exhibition room: an acrostic of the exotic, a table of tribes, a geometric containment of the vastness of the New World. Later in the century, we see the same regulation of Indigenous people in Charles Walter’s disciplined array of photographs of Aborigines at Corranderrk, shown at the Melbourne
Intercolonial Exhibition of 1866-1867, and in the two-inch chequerboard backgrounds of anthropometric photography, as recommended by Jones Lamprey, Assistant Secretary of the Ethnological Society of London in 1869. Later still, we have the quadrangular display of Prince Roland Bonaparte’s photographic collections in the early years of the twentieth century. 27

Again, there is an implicit association here between the mapping of imperial expansion—the framing grid evoking lines of longitude and latitude—and the mapping of the Indigenous body. James Ryan tells a nice story about the explorer, scientist, and eugenicist Francis Galton working in 1852-1854 amongst the Nama people of present-day Namibia and Botswana. The steatopygous (fat-storing) buttocks of sub-Saharan desert women were objects of intense fascination for the scientific gentlemen of the early nineteenth century. The celebrated Saartjie Baartman was the subject of the first chapter and first two plates of Hilaire and Cuvier’s 1824 Natural History of Mammals, and another “Hottentot Venus” was exhibited nude in Paris five years later. 28 Galton, too, was intrigued by steatopygy, and one particular Nama beauty left him “perfectly aghast at her development”. However, although “anxious to obtain accurate measurements of her shape”, he was constrained by a Victorian sense of delicacy. His solution was to measure the woman at a distance, taking observations with his sextant and converting them using tape, trigonometry, and logarithms. 29

Less frivolously, we might also remember the Noongar warrior Yagan, murdered by a settler in 1833 for government reward money, his head cut off, smoked to preserve it, then sent as an ethnological specimen to the Liverpool Institute’s museum in England. When it became seriously decomposed in the middle of last century, the head was placed in a plywood box, together with the head of a Maori and a mummy from Peru; all three were buried in Everton cemetery. The remains were exhumed in 1977, and Yagan was finally put to rest on his country in 2010. In a poignant note in his diary, settler George Fletcher Moore records his encounter with the awful object. He draws Yagan’s head in profile, and beneath it writes: “I could not get his head out of my head till I put it on paper.” In an inked-in square within the rectangle of the page. 30

40:07

Finally, perhaps the ultimate demonstration of the collision and incompatibility of rhizomic, dreaming Aboriginality and four-square settler surveying (or, if you like, of Makarrata treaty 31 and constitutional preamble) can be found in The Aboriginal Puzzle of Australia, a turn-of-the-twentieth-century jigsaw-joke in which the direction to “make a complete figure out of the four portions” is, quite simply, impossible.
So let us think outside the square for just a moment. Allow me to digress or rather diverge momentarily, into the domain of physics and geology. In 1774, following a suggestion made almost a century previously by Isaac Newton in the *Principia*, Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne attempted to calculate the mean density of the earth (and hence a value for Newton’s gravitational constant) by measuring the deflection of a pendulum caused by the mass of a nearby mountain. With sponsorship from the Royal Society and its wonderfully named Committee of Attraction, Maskelyne spent three months living in the wilds of the Scottish Highlands in order to map Schiehallion, the eminence most appropriate (because most regularly shaped) for the purposes of the experiment. Maskelyne’s companion in the survey was the mathematician Charles Hutton, whose system for representing the mountain’s volume involved plotting a series of concentric lines linking points of equal elevation around the mountain’s circumference—what we now know as contour lines. These were not the earliest contour lines in the European cartosphere. As early as 1701, Edmund Halley had connected points of equal value on his map of magnetic declination—that is, the difference between geographical and magnetic North Poles—in the Atlantic Ocean. And with regard to topographical measurement, Domenico Vandelli had mapped the Duchy of Modena in 1746, while Philippe Buache had traced the submarine gradient of the English Channel in a chart published in 1752. Nevertheless, Maskelyne and Hutton’s were certainly the first in Britain.

Of course, the device of curvilinear parallels was not completely unfamiliar in the United Kingdom. Celtic spirals were being recorded by contemporary antiquarians and Claude Mellan’s 1649 *Sudarium*, engraved in a single-line expanding spiral, was well known amongst print connoisseurs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Then there are fingerprints. In 1788, Johann Mayer published a volume of *Anatomical Copper-Plates with Appropriate Explanations*, which illustrated in fine detail the whorls, loops, and arches of the ridge structure of human fingerpads. A generation or so later, the Dutch physician Johannes Purkinje identified nine distinct types of these so-called papillary lines. Thomas Bewick probably deserves a place in this paper simply on account of the tailpiece in Volume 1 of *British Birds* with its image of the Corinthian Urinator. But there is another vignette later in the same volume which is even more intriguing. Over the top of *The Returning Cottager*, a tiny wood engraving of a rural landscape with a house and a horseback figure, Bewick has overlaid an actual size *trompe l’oeil* of his fingerprint. And some years later, the frontispiece of his 1818 *Aesop’s Fables* includes both mock-hand-inscription and mock-thumbprint.
Other natural philosophers also described linear structures beneath the surfaces of nature: the bulging striations of musculature in academic écorchés and medical illustrations, for example, or the rippling terrestrial strata illustrated in geologist Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* and *Elements of Geology*. The currency of the ripple-curve was thus increased through the first half of the nineteenth century, until 1843, when the conventional “hairy caterpillar” hatching indicating mountains and hills finally disappeared from all the maps prepared by the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain, to be replaced by contour lines, and until the 1850s, when William Herschel, a British magistrate in Bengal, introduced the use of handprints and fingerprints to police the authenticity of signatures on contracts and government documents.

This 2D rendering of 3D objects brings me to another dimension of the story of Dibutades that I did not mention at the beginning of this essay. In Pliny’s account, Dibutades is the daughter of Butades, a potter, and her father, sympathising with the girl’s distress and much taken with her graphic invention, fills in the profile she has drawn, modelling her lover’s face in clay, which he then bakes in the kiln with his vessels. Thus, in the one myth, we have not only the invention of drawing, or painting, but also of relief ceramic sculpture.

Josiah Wedgwood, who commissioned Wright of Derby’s version of the story in 1782, was well aware of the connection to his business, particularly the portrait busts he had been producing since the 1760s, both monochrome heads in black basalt and the moulded, sprigged coloured jasperware of subsequent decades. In quiet tribute both to Butades and to his much later, industrial-revolutionary successor, Wright includes in his painting the chiaroscuro detail of a white-hot pottery kiln firing away in the room on the right of the picture.

Here then we have a close equivalent to the shade portrait, but one which also has depth: historical depth, in its reference to Classical and Renaissance cameos, medals, and relief sculpture, and depth of resemblance through a close modelling of features which invokes both popular waxworks and the indexical life-cast or death mask. For all British art history’s conventional emphasis on the members and exhibitions of the Royal Academy and on associated literary commentary, we must remember that the deliberate interchange or unconscious slippage between exclusive and popular media, between marble and Parian Ware, silver and pewter, onyx and china, between England and the colonies, is substantial, intense, and complex in this period.
The Wedgwood medallions’ simple, actual, physical, three-dimensional depth is also a direct reflection of their medium, their material.

In November 1788, Arthur Phillip sent to Sir Joseph Banks in London a gift of clay from Sydney Cove. It had been commended to the Governor by the Abbé Mongez, one of the naturalists on La Pérouse’s ill-fated Astrolabe expedition, which called at Port Jackson just a week after the arrival of the First Fleet. Mongez believed New South Wales had some practical, commercial potential in the manufacture of earthenware, or even china. Banks in turn sent the marl to his friend Wedgwood, who declared it “an excellent material for pottery”. He commissioned his draughtsman Henry Webber to design a commemorative plaque, the now-famous Sydney Cove Medallion, also known as Hope encouraging Art and Labour, under the influence of Peace, to pursue the employments necessary to give security and happiness to an infant settlement.

While the ethereal concept and figures of the medal are resolutely European and Classical, we should remember that in bringing the material to Banks’ attention, Phillip specifically noted that this same clay was that “with which the Natives mark themselves”.

What the Governor could not know (especially given the early reluctance of the Australians to engage with the invaders) was that the body decorations of the Eora were directly linked to country, not only through the materials employed, the blood and bone of red ochre and pipeclay, but also through their designs’ reference to totemic ancestors and narratives.

In other words, for Aboriginal Australians, the portrait is the map.

What is passing strange is that the forms through which Aboriginal people declared their belonging to country and hence, through the stories and ceremonies associated with country, their personal, individual identities have a striking resonance with the wobbly contours of settler Australians’ survey maps. Whether in the weapons and tools of the Ngarrindjeri of the lower Murray, or in body paint amongst the Barkindji on the Darling, in the Wiradjuri dendroglyphs of the central west of New South Wales, in the ceremonial feather-lined isobars of the Arrernte of Central Australia, or in the much more recent eye candy of Pintubi artist George Tjungurrayi, the 65,000 year old visual culture of the Aboriginal Australians makes strange, imperfect intersection with European ways of writing place and identity.
Now you may be thinking that the foregoing Sebaldesque meander and this concluding flurry of Aboriginalism tells us little about portraiture; that shadow and profile, squares and contours, phrenology and cartography are at best tangential matters.

So let me finish, then, with a clue, or at least a bump of causality, a point of connection from a few decades beyond this essay’s temporal envelope, an indication that underlying this loosely associated material there are perhaps some perceptual and conceptual fundamentals. Charles Conder’s 1889 sketch _An Impressionist_ is a portrait of the leader of the Australian naturalist painters of the 1880s, and in many ways the greatest face-maker of Marvellous Melbourne, Tom Roberts. First, let me remind you that as a young man Conder worked for his uncle William on the New South Wales Lands Department’s trigonometrical survey. Now look at the painting. Note how, echoing the angular dynamic of Roberts’ arm and leg akimbo, the artist introduces a complementary pattern: a period-appropriate, decorative-linear proto-_art nouveau_ zigzag. If you look closely, you will see it is a surveyor’s Gunter chain.

Footnotes

4. As quoted by the third-century bc Philo Mechanicus of Byzantium in his _Syntaxis_; see J.J. Pollitt, _The Art of Ancient Greece: Sources and Documents_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 77.
Bibliography


Licensing

The Publishers of *British Art Studies* are committed to supporting scholarship on British art and architecture of all periods. This publication is made available free of charge at https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk. We ask users to identify the use of materials made available through this website and to provide an appropriate credit to the author and the publication, so that others may find and use our resources.

Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 UK: England & Wales Licence (CC BY-NC 2.0 UK). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/uk/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

The Publishers fully support the protection of intellectual property and are committed to complying with, and strictly adhering to, all applicable copyright law. In many cases, copyright or other proprietary rights may be held by individuals or entities other than, or in addition to, the Publishers. If a work or a photographic image is still protected by copyright, you must cite the relevant copyright information when using the image and comply with all other terms or restrictions that may be applicable to that material.

In some cases, exceptions to copyright that permit limited use of protected works without the permission of the copyright owner may have be applied. We are confident that we have carried out due diligence in our use of copyrighted material as required, but we apologise for any inadvertent infringement of rights.

Digital copies of resources are made accessible for research for one of the following reasons:

- they are in the public domain;
- the rights are owned by the Publishers;
- we make them accessible under an exception or limitation to UK copyright law, as outlined in the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended);
- we have permission to make them accessible;
- or, there are no known restrictions on use.

If you believe that we have made a mistake and wish for your material to be removed from our site, please contact us at copyright@paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk.

Please include the following information with your request:

- Name and contact information, including email address and phone number.
- Identification of the resource for consideration of removal. Providing URLs in your communication will help us locate content quickly.
- The reason for the request.

The Publishers respond promptly, normally within 21 business days. We may remove the resource from our site while we assess the validity of the request. Upon completion of the assessment, we will take appropriate action and communicate that action to you.