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Cover image: Victor Ehikhamenor, *The King Returning from Holy Aruosa Cathedral* (detail), 2018, rosary beads, bronze statuettes, and thread on canvas, 116 × 71 in.. Digital image courtesy of Victor Ehikhamenor (all rights reserved).

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# Millais's Metapicture: *The North-West Passage* as Distillate of Arctic Voyaging from the Anglosphere

Mark A. Cheetham

## Abstract

John Guille Millais reported in his 1899 biography of his famous father, John Everett Millais, that *The North-West Passage* (1874) was “perhaps the most popular of all Millais’ paintings at the time”. The picture’s adoptive subtitle—“It might be done, and England should to do it”, purportedly uttered by the aged sailor in the painting—captured the patriotic zeal for the British Arctic Expedition of 1875–1876, rather than the past glories (and tragedies) of the British quest to traverse the Northwest Passage. “It” in this motto looks ahead to the planting of the British flag at the North Pole and to the treatment of the Arctic in contemporary art. Looking closely at this complex painting and its surrounding discourses in the Victorian period and in related works from our own time, I argue that *The North-West Passage* was and remains a “metapicture” that distilled speculation on Arctic voyaging from the Anglosphere in the 1870s and does so again today.

[img]

## Authors

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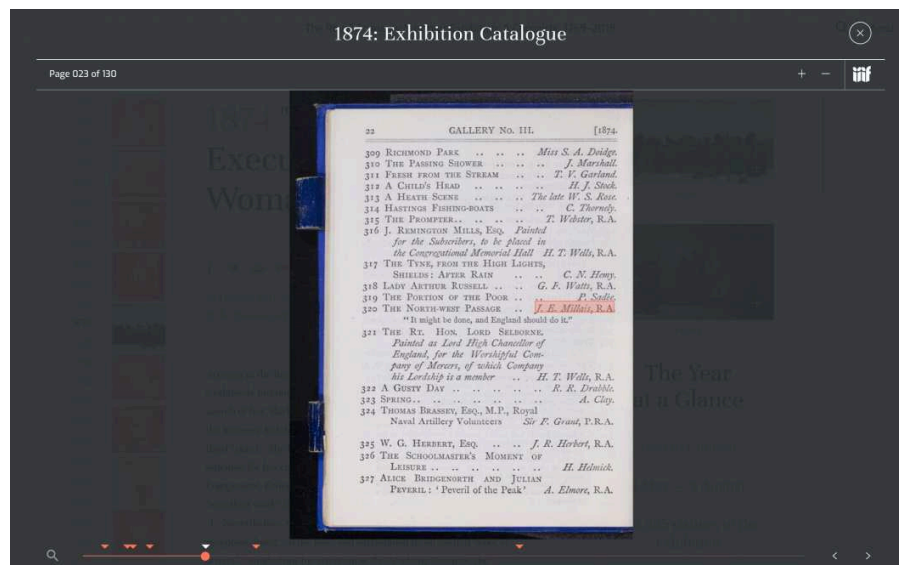


## Moving Away from the Past in 1874

John Everett Millais presented *The North-West Passage* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in its 106th annual Summer Exhibition, from 4 May to 3 August 1874 (Fig. 1). His son, the artist John Guille Millais, reported enthusiastically in his 1899 biography of his famous father that this complex picture was “perhaps the most popular of all Millais’ paintings at the time”.<sup>1</sup> Over three hundred thousand people attended the Academy exhibition in that year. The painting represented England at the 1878 Exposition Universelle in Paris and was given to the nation by Henry Tate in 1897. Celebrated in its time, I will argue that the painting also repays close attention today because it compels our attention to issues surrounding British interests in the Arctic. Extending the rekindled appreciation of Millais’s post-Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood work in recent scholarship, I will claim that *The North-West Passage* was and remains what W.J.T. Mitchell defined as a “metapicture” and an “image-text”.<sup>2</sup> For Mitchell, “the power of the metapicture is to make visible the impossibility of separating theory from practice, ... to reveal theory as representation. The power of the imagetext is to reveal the inescapable heterogeneity or representation.”<sup>3</sup> As I extend the concept, Millais’s painting is a metapicture because it focuses our attention on the representation of Arctic exploration as crucial to the British state and empire in the nineteenth century, including views of masculine heroism and female quietude that supported Arctic exploration and the status of technology and science on these journeys.<sup>4</sup> More than an individual visual object of its own time, the painting is a concentrated, multivalent meditation on Arctic voyaging from the Anglosphere, one surrounded by texts pertaining to these expeditions. When I compare Millais’s *The North-West Passage* with contemporary artworks that again reconnoitre the Arctic—including our inheritance from nineteenth-century visual and cultural conventions about this region encapsulated in Millais’s painting—I underline the import of this painting for at least two generations of viewers in the nineteenth century and its potency in the present through the state and private affairs it captures. Looking back from the present, the contemporary artworks discussed below also amplify—without anachronism—our understanding of Millais’s painting by heightening our awareness of the racial and ecological issues pertaining to the Arctic, which were elided in the nineteenth-century and remind us of ongoing exploration and exploitation in the Arctic.

Why was this work so celebrated in its time? In addition to its “intrinsic merit”, John Guille Millais held that the picture was “an expression more eloquent than words of the manly enterprise of the nation and the common desire that to England should fall the honour of laying bare the hidden mystery of the North”. Yet, to secure his reading of the work, the younger Millais immediately ranks text over vision. Disparaging the ability of words,

he nonetheless misquotes the motto recorded in the Academy catalogue entry for the painting, repeating a revealing error about this caption made when the painting was first reviewed by changing 'should' to 'ought': "It might be done, and England ought to do it" (Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> We can imagine hearing this jingoistic tag—sometimes taken to be the work's subtitle, uttered by the "brave old sea-dog", who dominates the interior scene—intoned by visitors standing in front of the picture, catalogue in hand.<sup>6</sup> Similar prompts in poetry and prose were common in these catalogues, and commonly forgotten. Why was this line so often repeated—and often misquoted—in the quarter-century between the exhibition of the painting and the publication of *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* in 1899? Through his recapitulation of what evolved into a maxim, John Guille Millais both extended and obscured what I will argue was the import of this painting in its own time and once again in ours: its status as a focused reflection on Arctic voyaging from the Anglosphere.



**Figure 1.**

Screenshot of digital facsimile, Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition Catalogue, 1874, p. 22, <http://chronicle250.com/1874>. Collection of the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Digital image courtesy of Paul Mellon Centre (CC BY-NC).

The future conditional tense of the sailor's putative exclamation should make us wonder to what "it"—the first and last word of the motto—refers. Despite its seemingly unambiguous title, the painting presents the British obsession with the Northwest Passage as something of the past.<sup>7</sup> The quest to discover this quicker and thus cheaper trade route to the Far East, over the top of what is now Canada, was the locus of swashbuckling heroism from Martin Frobisher's three excursions in the 1570s through to the early nineteenth century. The old sailor was modelled on Edward John Trelawny. For the many



Victorian viewers of the painting who recognized him, he was the personification of this recent past. A friend of Millais, Byron, and Shelley's, and a combatant in the Battle of Trafalgar, we are reminded of his vintage by a picture of Lord Nelson that hangs above him. Recent commentators are more confused by the title than was its audience in the 1870s. The domesticity of the scene led to Bury's view that "the Northwest Passage is *curiously* conspicuous by its absence" in the work.<sup>8</sup> A nineteenth-century source explains this puzzlement succinctly: "The subject has only a general reference to arctic discovery, for the North-West Passage—the mere possibility of getting sea-wise from the Atlantic to the Pacific via the North—had been long proved when the picture was painted."<sup>9</sup> For patriotic Britons, this feat was believed to have been accomplished—through toil, technology, unprecedented expense, and loss of life—as early as circa 1847 by the disastrous 1845 voyage of John Franklin, or by Robert McClure in 1850, or John Rae in 1854. As John Guille Millais implied, the more relevant context is that of the British Arctic Expedition of 1875–1876 under the command of George Strong Nares.<sup>10</sup> "It" refers to planting the British flag on the geographic North Pole in the near future—the mission's main goal.<sup>11</sup> Viewers at the time understood that *The North-West Passage* was not primarily about the Northwest Passage. Instead, the painting and its reception projected a complex temporality that looked back to heroic voyages personified by the old sailor, ahead to Nares' imminent departure and, as I will argue, further ahead to visual art about the Arctic today.

Ian Stone records references to the Nares expedition in *The Times* coincident with Millais's work on *The North-West Passage*; he correctly recontextualized the memorable phrase "and England ought to do it" to 1874.<sup>12</sup> Nares himself found *The North-West Passage* such an inspiration when he saw it at the Academy that he wrote admiringly about the painting to its author.<sup>13</sup> Of equal importance, however, is the afterlife of what seems to be Millais's memorable phrase.<sup>14</sup> That resonance began when the painting was still on display. In a lecture given to the British Association for the Advancement of Science's annual congress in August 1874 and reported in several British newspapers, the eminent surveyor and geographer Charles W. Wilson (1836–1905) spoke on exploration across the British Empire. He concluded "with a few words on Arctic exploration". He emphasized that Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli seemed inclined to support the British Arctic Expedition.<sup>15</sup> Wilson, it was recounted, also "believed the Pole could be reached, and England ought to do it". We are also told that applause followed this, his final point.<sup>16</sup> Many who repeated this phrase were inattentive to its exact wording. All seem to have remembered the punch line—but imperfectly. In a lecture in December 1876, for example, the Reverend A.M. Hoare "spoke of the advantages derived from ... Arctic expeditions, and concluded with the

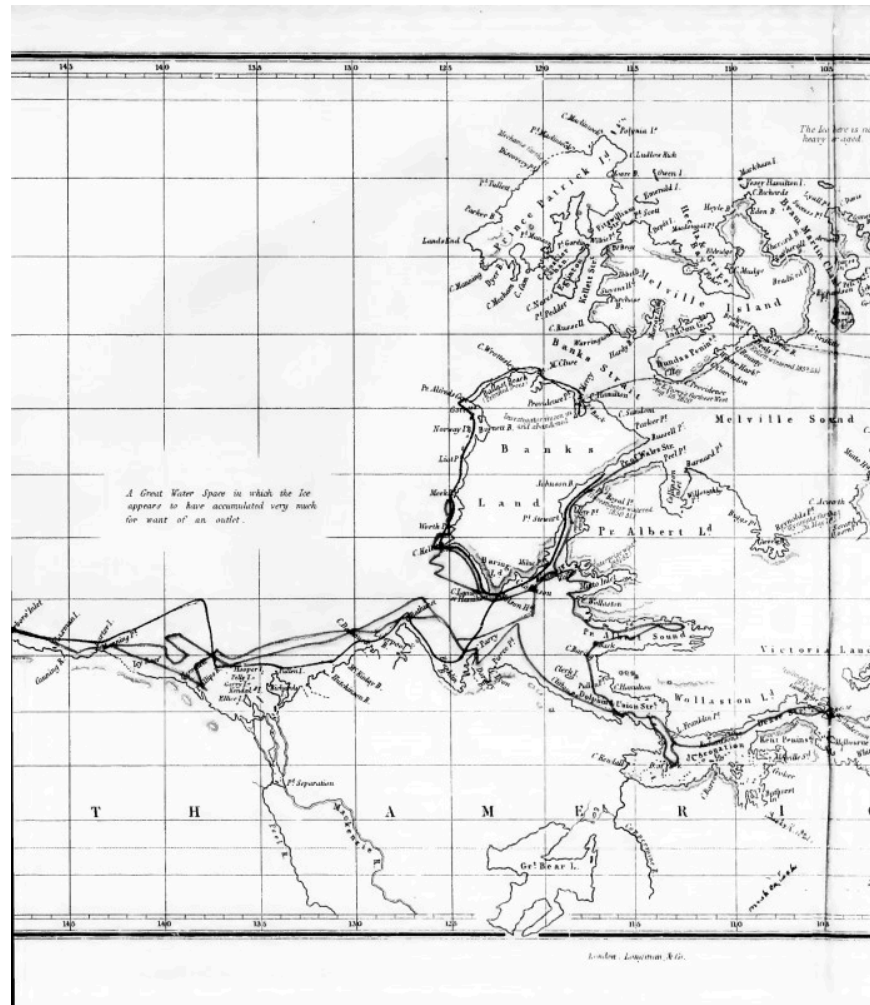
remark of an old voyager, 'It may be done, and England ought to do it.'" <sup>17</sup> As if thrown by Millais as a ventriloquist—first to the sailor in the painting and then across British society—"England ought to do it" resounded finally in his son's biography at the end of the century. Its abbreviated references were clear in a telling parapraxis from 1874. Covering the same lecture by C.W. Wilson, the reporter for the *Leeds Mercury* assigned to himself, not Wilson, the opinion that, "in the words attached to a picture in the last *expedition* [sic] of the Academy in London, 'It is to be done, and England ought to do it.'" <sup>18</sup> Millais's painting encapsulated and encouraged the British public's appetite for Arctic glory to the extent that its "exhibition" and Nares' "expedition" became one. The complex, evolving, and even contradictory agendas for such voyages, I suggest, can be traced through the (mis)rememberings of Millais's chauvinistic admonition in 1874. "Should" is strengthened to "ought". The oscillation among "might", "can", "may" and "is to be done" in repetitions of the first half of the quotation suggest the increasing urgency of England's missions in the Arctic.

We can appreciate Millais's painting as a metapicture that allows us to ponder the implications of Arctic voyaging, then and now, by reorganizing its many details into those about Britain's past imperial exploits in Arctic voyaging, current attitudes towards such heroics circa 1874 when the painting was conceived, executed, and exhibited, and in terms of the future glory that it projects with its bombastic subtitle. These temporalities are not independent and do not form a simple chain from the past to the present. For example, in another telling slip, the younger Millais signals to us once more the importance of layered temporal references in *The North-West Passage*. He writes that the Nares expedition to the North Pole was in 1879, when in fact it had departed four years earlier. Instead, the planning and public discussion of the British Arctic Expedition was exactly contemporary with the painting, even its "stimulus". <sup>19</sup>

The complexity of *The North-West Passage* stems from the compression of its myriad details, the concatenation—or psychoanalytic condensation—of what we see, read, and even hear. Trelawny rests his left arm and hand on a large, cloth-covered table, across which is spread an open chart that we might imagine to be by Robert McClure—the first to document the successful navigation of the Northwest Passage (1850–1854) (Fig. 3). <sup>20</sup>, <sup>21</sup> McClure was closely tied to Nares: the latter served on the Belcher mission in search of Franklin from 1852–1854 and combined forces with the McClure search for Franklin's two ships. On the table, we also see two bouquets of flowers, one on each side of the chart, partly supporting it. Mauve gloves lying at the right corner of the table suggest that the young woman in the picture has been out of doors to collect the flowers. A basket on the floor at the far right has one flower draped over it, again implying a recent excursion to the garden. On the table also lie the folds of British flags—a Union Jack and a Royal Navy



White Ensign, to the right—the types used by Arctic expeditions to mark encampments and claims, including the North Magnetic Pole. The ensign had been arrogated to use by the Royal Navy only in 1864 and was, as I will emphasize below, seen on images from the Nares polar expedition in 1875–1876. The flags spill onto the table in a way that mirrors the cascade of the woman’s skirt across the floor in the right foreground.



**Figure 2.**

Robert McClure and Sherard Osborn, Left portion of fold-out chart from “The Discovery of The North-West Passage by H.M.S. ‘Investigator’”, Capt. R M’Clure, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854, edited by artist, mapmaker, and later rear admiral Sherard Osborn, 1st edn (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1856). Digital image courtesy of Mark Cheetham (all rights reserved).

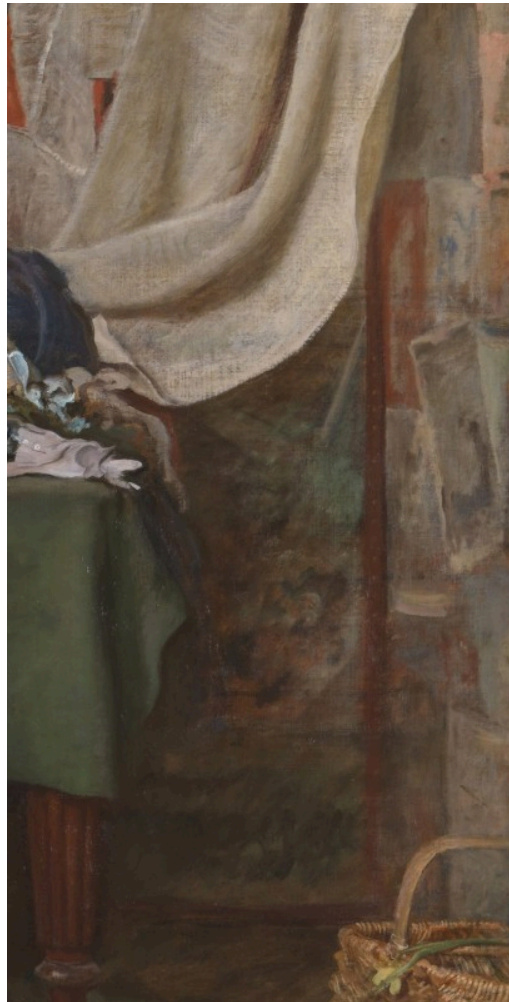
This young woman is perennially identified as the sailor’s daughter, for whom Millais employed the professional model, Mrs Ellis. Her head is framed by the chart. She looks down at a book on her lap; her left index finger marks a point on the page while she rests her right hand consolingly over her father’s closed, some suggest clenched, right fist. Though assumptions have been

made, we cannot be sure what type of book this is or whether the woman is reading from it or pointing to an illustration. Two other books lean against the leg of a smaller table at the right of the painting. The topmost is clearly labelled “Logbook”. We know from a preparatory sketch that this arrangement is significant because it replaced a figure group showing two children turning a globe. John Guille Millais reports that his father removed this anecdotal scene (which the younger Millais mistakenly remembers being at the right of the picture) for which John Guille and his sister, Alice, had posed for a “fortnight”, substituting the desk and books that we now see.<sup>22</sup> We do not know, but are thus invited to wonder, whether the book so evidently at the centre of the woman’s attention is also a logbook, an imagetext in which one could read of past Arctic adventures but as readily look at watercolours, graphs, or maps that were sometimes included in such accounts.<sup>23</sup> We might even imagine that she reads from or points to the published record of McClure’s famous voyage, which was illustrated and from which the map on the table could easily be have been separated.<sup>24</sup> Such accounts were important scientifically, visually, and were also—like flags—a way to stake climes. As noted above with reference to the picture’s dictum, this image plays out visual, textual, and aural details simultaneously. Precise details and purposeful ambiguity exist in balance, if not harmony.

Before considering the sailor’s ambiguous expression and placing the painting’s many elements into the simple temporal grid proposed above, other specifics need to be noted. On the smaller table in the left foreground sit more books, a telescope, a plate with a partly peeled piece of citrus fruit, and a glass with a stirring spoon, identified by John Guille Millais as grog. Behind him is a window; through its bottom pane we see a nearby shoreline and an expanse of calm water, across which a small pleasure craft sails. This framed view is a characteristically English—as opposed to Arctic—seascape, reminiscent of Whistler.<sup>25</sup> Tracing clockwise, as noted, a print of Horatio Nelson in effect frames the sailor’s head as the chart does that of his daughter. Beside it, to the right on the room’s back wall—itsself covered with a floral wallpaper—hangs a painting of a ship caught in ice. In a study for *The North-West Passage* dated 1884, which we can compare with Figure 5, below—we see this painting within a painting and a note by Millais stating “where the ship broke up”. All three framed views are partially hidden by furniture, the man’s body, the angle from which we see the room, or the flags. Like the sailor’s memories, I would claim, each image is partial, yet legible enough to generate a narrative. To the right of these flags and partly shadowed by them, above the basket with one flower, however, is a perplexing pictorial space between the right end of the table and the wall of the room. Whether or not this is the right-hand corner of the room is difficult to fathom because a vertical line is made by the pole of one standard, which also casts a shadow into this area. In this space, loosely attached to the wall and in one case curling away from it, are what appear to be unframed



images (Fig. 4). No amount of looking at the painting in Tate Britain or at details illuminated on screen makes this passage less obscure visually or thematically. Is this ambiguity purposeful?



**Figure 3.**

John Everett Millais, *The North-West Passage* (detail), 1874, oil on canvas, 176.5 cm x 222.2 cm. Collection of Tate (N01509). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0).

There are reasons to adopt ambiguity as an important theme in the work. The sailor's demeanour is more difficult to decipher than is usually proposed. He looks off into the distance rather than meeting our gaze, as has been suggested. His mouth is closed, as are his hands. If he uttered the phrase "and England ought to do it" while pounding his fist on the table, as imagined in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, he did so before or after the moment we observe.<sup>26</sup> While it is easy enough to think that he dwells nostalgically in the midst of so many relics of Arctic exploration, we can only suggest with

confidence that he relives scenes that his daughter orchestrates. His gaze in the final oil painting differs from another sketch Millais did of the figure group in 1874, in which his eyes appear closed (Fig. 5). These two changes to the painting—the replacement of the children and globe by the smaller table and the sailor’s eyes—suggest a question: in what temporal dimension is the sailor living, the past of Arctic exploration, the present of his daughter’s attentions, or the future accomplishments of the soon to depart British Arctic Expedition of 1875–1876? The painting shows that he—and we—can journey among all three.



**Figure 4.**

John Everett Millais, Study for “The North-West Passage”, 1874, watercolour with touches of graphite and coloured pencil on wove paper, 17.5 × 19.7 cm. Collection of The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens (77.34). Digital image courtesy of The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens (all rights reserved).

These overlapping temporalities are readily legible in *The North-West Passage*. Many details suggest the past, both of Britain’s Arctic voyages and of the sailor himself. McClure’s map of the Northwest Passage was almost twenty-five years old by 1874. While the painting of the ship in the ice is not identified—there were dozens of such expeditions, and many ships were “nipped” in or destroyed by pack ice—McClure’s HMS *Investigator* was famously trapped in the ice for three years and abandoned in 1853 (the wreck was found in 2010). There are numerous images of this calamity.<sup>27</sup>

Millais has framed a stock image, not a particular view.<sup>28</sup> Because McClure searched for the Passage and also for Franklin's overdue expedition of 1845, this reference is tied to the most obvious "past" in the painting, its title. The logbook is not visibly dated but, like the map, suggests a complete record from an earlier voyage. The image of Nelson, who died heroically in 1805 at the Battle of Trafalgar, proclaims the legacy of British naval heroism and physical sacrifice (an eye and an arm by age forty). Not always recalled but germane here is Nelson's service as a teenage midshipman on a 1773 polar expedition seeking the Northeast Passage. On Spitsbergen, he battled a polar bear for its pelt, an event retrospectively lionized by Richard Westall's *Nelson and the Bear* (1806) and subsequent prints. All this was received as history by 1874.

The tripartite temporality of the painting registers in more and more details. If we imagine that the sailor is not fully engaged with his daughter in the present—that he is recalling his past or imagining the future of the Nares mission—the painting nonetheless insists on mainly domestic material realities in the moment, including her actions, the fresh flowers, the fruit, the libation, the weather outside, and the passing sailboat. We might also hear several voices in the present: that of the daughter and those of viewers at the Academy as they vocalize the popular motto that became the de facto subtitle of the painting. These elements have been divided into "female" and "male", the familial versus the expeditionary by Jayasena:

the division between the male sphere of activity and the female are clearly distinguished by Millais' work. The man in *The North-West Passage* has surrounded himself with the accoutrements of travel and exploration. A map, a telescope and a ship, visible through the window in the background, all point to the stately, but curiously perturbed, male.<sup>29</sup>

[View this illustration online](#)

### Figure 5.

Franklin exploration 2019: guided tour of HMS Terror by Parks Canada, 2019, video, 7 minutes 8 seconds. Digital image courtesy of Parks Canada (all rights reserved).



**Figure 6.**

Blue Willow Dinner Plate from HMS Erebus, circa 1826. Digital image courtesy of Parks Canada (all rights reserved).

While Arctic exploration from the Anglosphere was largely a male activity, to separate it from the domestic is too simple. All that we see is within the domesticating frame of painting, yet Millais has been careful to place technologies of external exploration (the chart, telescope, and flags) *and* household life (the flowers and food) on both tables. These objects are not physically or thematically divided but rather are put into mutual play. Moreover, the all-important telescope seems to have been used both domestically and professionally. The eyepiece of this instrument faces into the home; the glass is ready to hand for either figure to spy the passing sailboat, which is a local craft not rigged as a three-masted, steam-powered, naval ship such as HMS *Alert* and HMS *Discovery* of the British Arctic Expedition of 1875. Expeditionary ships were nonetheless floating examples of Victorian domestic sensibility. Extensive libraries, personal stores of liquor, central heating, and many other accoutrements made them as home-like as possible. As we see in graphic detail in the AMC television series *The Terror* (2018), based on Dan Simmons' novel of 2007, Franklin's officers and crew went to great lengths to maintain this floating bubble of home. Less sensationalistic, more self-conscious about the hubris of Arctic exploration at this time, and more authentically inclusive of Inuit perspectives is the docudrama *Passage* (2008), directed by John Walker. If one prefers a non-fictionalized account, you may travel via a robotic camera tour of *Terror* right into the galley stores and Captain Crozier's cabin as the ship rests on the seabed in 2019. The most popular china of the day in England, Blue Willow, sits undisturbed (Fig. 6, see 2:43). Such whiteware had been manufactured in great quantity and variety in Britain since the eighteenth century. Its commonplace, orientalist fantasy patterns should remind us that trade with the East was the initial impetus for the centuries-long British search for both the Northwest and Northeast passages. China is an illustrative commodity in



this potent loop of affirmation that was Arctic voyaging from the Anglosphere. Blue Willow was sent to the Arctic (and accidentally remained there) (Fig. 7) . On the other hand, so-called 'arctic scenery' transferware showing epic landscapes and deeds was manufactured in Staffordshire in the early mid-century and was popular in Britain and colonial Canada. Arctic flora and fauna are surrounded on these plates, serving platters, and tureens by exotica from other parts of the extensive British Empire, conveying an ideology of possession rather than of geographical continuity.

*The North-West Passage* is an inverted analogue of Arctic territory. Where its details punctuate a homey setting in the south with moments of the far north, the Arctic allows voyagers only partial “southern” domesticity. Continuous with the Arctic tableaux that the sailor’s daughter conjures with her book, the chart, the flags, and the grog is a private reflection of the more elaborate Arctic panoramas and plays staged onshore and also aboard ships in the Arctic.<sup>30</sup> “Home” was part of a circuit that included “away” and vice versa. Attempts to make ships voyaging to the Arctic self-sufficient Victorian capsules included dramas (where men played women’s parts) and newspapers produced on board.<sup>31</sup> “Male” and “female”, distant and local, were part of an elaborate and multivalent cycle that we see in Millais’s metapainting. Arctic voyages functioned fully only when this circle was complete, when voyagers return and recount their exploits, when images of the Arctic are disseminated, and when scientific data are presented and discussed.<sup>32</sup> It is this cycle of expansion and return—which we can rightly call imperialist and colonial, and which was infamously not achieved by John Franklin’s expedition because his entire crew perished, and only scant written records have been found—that the Nares voyage seeking the North Pole sought to extend and perpetuate.<sup>33</sup> Millais invoked its nationalist priorities in 1874 and cast them into the future.

Carrying standards very like those in Millais’s painting, the Nares expedition tried valiantly to stake Britain’s claim. One testimony is that of Dr L. Edward Moss, a surgeon on the expedition’s ship, *Alert* and a skilled amateur artist who made watercolours “faithful to ... the face of nature in a part of the world that very few can ever see for themselves”. He saw the Arctic first-hand and delivered its verified particulars into the cycle of Arctic voyaging, publishing, and commentary with his 1878 book *Shores of the Polar Sea*.<sup>34</sup> Keen to supply readers with a full sense of the Arctic, he included sixteen chromolithographs in the publication. Plate XV, *Back from the Farthest North*, shows the expedition’s sledging parties returning to the ships after their lengthy, arduous, and unsuccessful attempt to place the British standard at the North Pole (Fig. 8). Moss tells us that only four of the seventeen men who set out were able to pull the sledge at journey’s end. Nares eventually abandoned the expedition, the last mounted by Britain to the Arctic in the

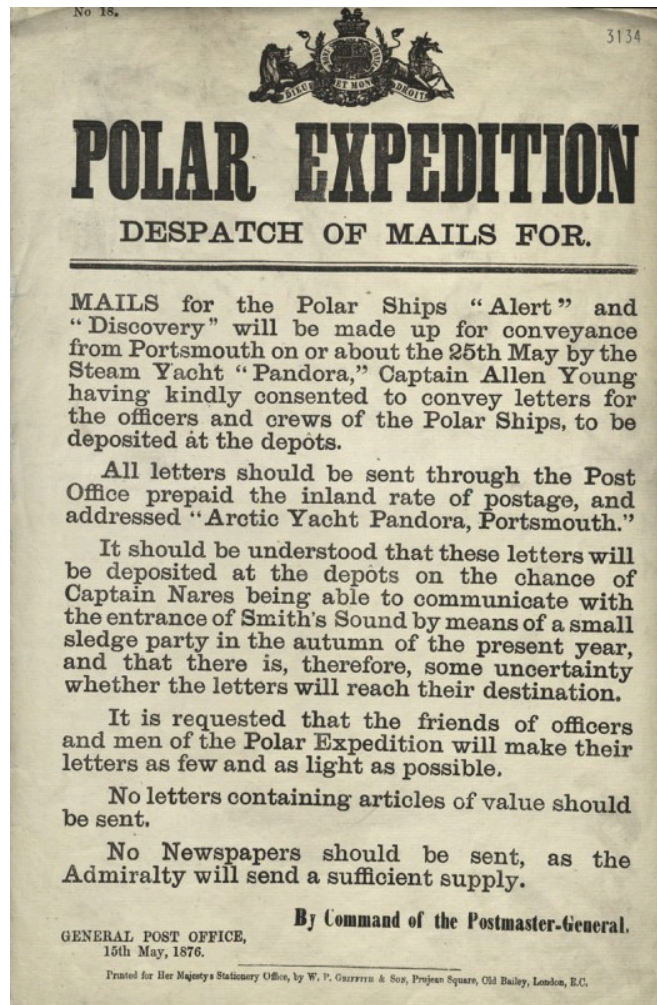
nineteenth century. In temporal and official contexts, then, the tense of Millais's painting is "imperfect", whether we take the sailor to be dwelling in the past or the future, or exhibiting anxiety as we look on. The immediate future imagined by Millais's *The North-West Passage* and its echoing subtitle—Nares planting the British flag at the North Pole, and from that accomplishment, Britons looking back nostalgically at what would have been the culmination centuries of British Arctic exploration—did not come to pass. Yet, the British Arctic Expedition was largely successful in the public's opinion because it provided a satisfying, predictable exchange of information and people to and from the Arctic. The crew received mail, for example, a powerful circulatory technology (Fig. 9). Nares disseminated his findings in the expected publication, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Polar Sea during 1875–6 in H.M. Ships Alert and Discovery* (1878).<sup>35</sup> The expedition was fruitful in scientific terms and was the source of a remarkable range of images of the Arctic, both traditional watercolours and in photographs, a medium new to the region at this time.<sup>36</sup> A balanced and still patriotic view was taken in *The Graphic* in a notice headed "Pole Impracticable":

Without doubt the expedition has acquired some interesting scientific information, but the most precious gift ... is the knowledge that our sailors ... have in no way deteriorated since the days of Ross and Parry [circa 1818] ... Although ... we have failed to plant the British flag at latitude 90°, we should be heartily thankful that (with a few sad exceptions) these brave fellows have returned home.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 7.**

Edward Moss, Back from the Farthest North, in Edward L. Moss, *Shores of the Polar Sea: A Narrative of the Arctic Expedition of 1875-6* (London: Marcus Ward & Co., 1878), Plate XV, 1878, chromolithograph. Digital image courtesy of Mark Cheetham (all rights reserved).



**Figure 8.**

Poster for mail deliveries to the British Arctic Expedition, 1876. Collection of The Postal Museum (POST 107/971). Digital image courtesy of The Postal Museum (all rights reserved).

Nares returned from the Arctic in 1876, having over-wintered there but ultimately aborted the expedition because of widespread scurvy among the crews of his two ships. A sledging excursion achieved a "furthest north" record (83°20'), for which there had long been a reward, but they did not reach the pole. Nares' early return encouraged journalists to comment on both *The North-West Passage* and the British Arctic Expedition. Exhibition and expedition were again elided. The *Royal Cornwall Gazette* of 4 November 1876 boldly laid out the comparison: "By art, by literature, by oratory ... England has for years been stirred on to do this thing, 'It can be done, and England ought to do it.'" Recent history summarized, the writer cannot resist continuing, "The new variation of Mr. Millais' picture is 'It can't be done; England has failed'", which is followed by a rant about what science still did not know about the North Pole. In a memorable final flourish, we are told that



the ultimate barrier is climate: “The temperature of the Arctic regions forbids our curiosity.”<sup>38</sup> The negative tone is not unexpected. Arctic expeditions in search of both the Northwest Passage and the North Pole had been controversial since Martin Frobisher’s elaborate, brutal, and failed attempts to find gold and establish a colony on Nunavut (Baffin Island) in 1576, 1577, and 1578.<sup>39</sup> While northerly voyages from Britain proliferated soon after the 1815 victory over Napoleon, which were led for four decades by the indefatigable John Barrow, 2nd Secretary of the Admiralty (1764–1848), there was perennial opposition to the human and financial costs, not least because the passage was no longer seen as an economic boon. John Franklin’s third voyage to the Arctic (1845) was supposed to be the last and best.<sup>40</sup> Instead, his disappearance greatly multiplied naval and private recovery missions from Britain from 1848 on (including McClure’s, as we have seen) and, increasingly, the United States. Scientific research was a prime motivation for these ventures in the nineteenth century, even when finding Franklin was the official remit. The British Arctic Expedition was fully consistent with these long-held aims, which are in turn an important component of nationalist pride.<sup>41</sup> Amidst accusations of failure, Nares was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1876.

## **Towards the Present**

*The North-West Passage* crystallized the cultures of nineteenth-century Arctic voyaging from Britain in objects and narratives. My reconstruction of central cultural contexts of Arctic excursions in Millais’s picture plots this density of image and text temporally. Also crucial to my understanding of a metapicture is its resonance in the present. Today, the Arctic is the site of the most rapid climate change on the planet, underling the urgency and precarity of an epoch widely called the Anthropocene, when human activity has become an environmental force at least equal to nature.<sup>42</sup> While the effects of climate change are planetary, both its causes and potential ameliorations tend to be state-oriented, as were the official Arctic expeditions of Millais’s time and before. The imperative to plant a national flag at the North Pole is a case in point. If one thinks—or hopes—that such aggressive claiming rituals are in humanity’s past, recall Robert Peary and Matthew Henson’s declaration in 1909 that they were first to the North Pole, an achievement that is still disputed, or Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong from Apollo 11, bouncing on the lunar surface as they planted the Stars & Stripes in July, 1969 (recently photographed from space, still standing), or Russia’s geopolitically provocative, robot-assisted flag planting on the seabed to arrogate the geographic North Pole in 2007.<sup>43</sup> From Millais’s time to ours, sovereignty—whether Indigenous or colonial—has climate change implications for all beings and territories. We can explore the gaps and connections between Millais’s painting and understandings of the Arctic

today through three potent examples that demonstrate the cycles of Arctic voyage and return articulated in Millais's painting. The first is a photograph taken at the North Pole in 1909 as the culmination of the expedition by Robert Peary, Matthew Henson, and their Inuit guides, Ootah, Egigingwah, Seegloo, and Ooqueah. British artist Isaac Julien's film *True North* (2004) reflects on Henson's relationships with Peary and the Arctic as a black man who—along with the Inuit—for decades disappeared into the “whiteness” of the narrative of accessing the North Pole. Finally, Inuk Jobie Weetaluktuk's film *InukShop* (2009), decries the commercialization and uprooting of Inuit art that is one outcome of the legacies explored by both Millais and Julien.

A victorious image taken by Admiral Robert E. Peary is labelled “Photograph of the Robert Peary Sledge Party Posing with Flags at the North Pole, 04/07/ 1909”. Its long caption is germane to the discussion of flags in the Millais painting: “Ooqueh, holding the Navy League flag; Ootah, holding the D.K.E. fraternity flag; Matthew Henson, holding the polar flag; Egigingwah, holding the D.A.R. peace flag; and Seeglo, holding the Red Cross flag” (Fig. 10). Flags are the focus of several of Peary's photographs from his final excursion in search of the North Pole. He shows them being carried towards the site across flat terrain, multiple as here, or with a single banner decisively lodged atop the pyramidal ice form that powerfully structures these hierarchical images. This image was taken the morning *after* the supposed discovery on 6 April 1909 described below. Peary has presented the five men who made the final push to what they thought was the Pole on a theatrical Olympic dais. While geographers now believe that navigational errors placed them some 50–100 kilometres short of their destination—just one of a legion of intrigues surrounding Peary and Henson's seventh Arctic expedition in twenty-three years, including the competition with fellow American explorer Frederick Cook—it is again the image culture of attaining victory (if not literally staking land, since they were on sea ice), that makes this photograph part of the legacy of Millais's *The North-West Passage* and the British Arctic Expedition of 1875.<sup>44</sup> That Peary posed his loyal and Inuktitut-speaking assistant, Matthew Henson, at the top of his victory triangle in this photograph is both accurate and ironic, given that Henson later maintained that he went ahead and was the first to reach the Pole, which alienated the irascible Peary. We also have Henson's account from 1912 of the importance of the flags:

When we halted on April 6, 1909, and started to build the igloos, ... I noticed Commander Peary at work unloading his sledge and unpacking several bundles of equipment. He pulled out from under his *kooletah* (thick, fur outer-garment) a small folded package and unfolded it. I recognized his old silk flag ... He fastened the flag to a staff and planted it firmly on the top of his igloo ... The stars and stripes were “nailed to the Pole”.<sup>45</sup>

Henson waxes further,

A thrill of patriotism ran through me and I raised my voice to cheer the starry emblem of my native land ... This was a thin silk flag that Commander Peary had carried on all of his Arctic journeys, and he had always flown it at his last camps. It was as glorious and as inspiring a banner as any battle-scarred, blood-stained standard of the world. <sup>46</sup>



**Figure 9.**

Photograph of the Robert Peary Sledge Party Posing with Flags at the North Pole, 7 April 1909. Collection of U.S. National Archive, Robert E. Peary Family Collection (Record Group 401). Digital image courtesy of U.S. National Archive (all rights reserved).

Hierarchy cuts in several directions in Peary's triumphant photograph. Henson was as aware of race *at* the Pole as he was of the competition to claim it. He was temporarily given pride of place here, but he also "knew his place" and internalized it vis-à-vis Peary and white people generally:

The Commander gave the word, "We will plant the stars and stripes at the North Pole!" and it was done; on the peak of a huge paleocrystic floeberg the glorious banner was unfurled to the breeze, and as it snapped and crackled with the wind, I felt a savage joy and exultation. Another world's accomplishment was done and finished, and as in the past, from the beginning of history, wherever the world's work was done by a white man, he had been accompanied by a colored man. From the building of the pyramids and the journey to the Cross, to the discovery of the new world and the discovery of the North Pole, the Negro had been the faithful and constant companion of the Caucasian, and felt all that it was possible for me to feel, that it was I, a lowly member of my race, who had been chosen by fate to represent it, at this, almost the last of the world's great work. <sup>47</sup>

While racism is unacknowledged in Millais's painting, it was blatant in the narratives of the Arctic that the painting enfolds. Prejudice against the Inuit was paraded loudly and publicly by Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens at the apex of the search for Franklin in the mid-nineteenth century. Collins' much-acclaimed play *The Frozen Deep* (1856)—co-written, directed, and starred in by Dickens—was performed for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in July 1857. The play sought to discredit Hudson's Bay Company Scottish explorer John Rae's circulation of Inuit testimony about cannibalism during what was revealed as the death march south by surviving members of the Franklin expedition. To make a long and complex story short, Dickens—a self-proclaimed expert on cannibalism—refused to believe Rae's witnesses, labelling them untruthful savages. <sup>48</sup>

The remarkable story of Matthew Henson and his Inuit collaborators on the Peary quest—Ootah, Egigingwah, Seegloo, and Ooqueah—motivates Isaac Julien's *True North* (2004), a three-channel film and series of still images that revise received notions of race at the North Pole (Fig. 11). As Millais did in his masterly metapainting, Julien threads the implications of the past, present, and the future through imagined Arctic landscapes. Filming in Iceland and northern Sweden, Julien has Black British actor Vanessa Myrie stand in for Henson as s/he wanders through a sublime, frozen landscape (Fig. 12). The narration quotes Peary, Henson, and a book about Henson; Inuit chanting is heard. For Julien, substitutions of person and place create a break with the stereotypical narrative of the conquering, white Arctic explorer (though some



of Peary's quite violent statements are heard), a fissure for our critical understanding of both race and the environment in this region. As Julien states,

you have an African-American [Henson] who is forging this journey into the sublime, into blankness, into whiteness, and almost into a certain disappearing-ness because Henson disappears from history. [And you have the] incongruousness that one may associate with this particular ecological landscape and the way that this subject is ... a subject that wouldn't be considered an authentic part of that landscape. In a way, it is about trying to re-position grand narratives to obfuscate or obscure those histories that have taken place. And, of course, the reason that people want to go to these far away spaces and conditions has a certain colonial aspect to it. <sup>49</sup>

Inspired by Lisa Bloom's ground-breaking book *Gender on Ice* and Paul Gilroy's influential writing on the "Black Atlantic", Julien reimagines the import of gender and race in Arctic and colonialist journeying generally. <sup>50</sup> Bloom, in turn, describes this film as "a cinematic rewriting of the North Pole exploration narratives of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century", including both Henson's and Peary's. <sup>51</sup>



**Figure 10.**

Isaac Julien, True North (film still), 2004, DVD installation with 3 screens and 5 channel sound (edition of 6), 14 minutes 40 seconds. Collection of the Akron Art Museum, purchased by exchange with funds from the Mrs Frederick W. Gehring & Knight Purchase Fund for Photo Media (2005.1), Digital image courtesy of Isaac Julien / The Akron Art Museum (all rights reserved).



**Figure 11.**

Isaac Julien, *True North Series, Ice Project Work No. 1*, 2006, duratrans photograph mounted in lightbox (edition of 6), 120 x 120 cm. Digital image courtesy of Isaac Julien / Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery (all rights reserved).

Henson represents himself in the long passage above as being both subject to racial hierarchies and, sadly, as one who reinforces them. His “savage joy” at reaching the Pole (before Peary) inverts Dickens’ and Collins’ use of “savage” as an insult in *The Frozen Deep* and related texts. Yet, he is as condescendingly grateful to his adult Inuk “boys” as Peary ultimately is to him as a black man that he calls his “manservant”. Silences and elisions remain in *True North*. For example, no one mentions that Peary hired many Inuit, including unnamed women and children, to support this trek to the pole. Their traditional livelihood and culture already much disturbed by Anglo and Danish incursions in Greenland and the Canadian Arctic, it is worth recalling that the North Pole was of no practical interest to people living on this land. Exploration for glory was a foreign practice. Julien’s complex, three-screen presentation in *True North* explores and conveys to viewers the complexity of Henson’s relations with Indigenous northerners. We never see Peary. Instead, Henson/Myrie is shown at a distance, walking across an expanse of snow and ice, and also in a close-up, “Henson” in the middle, framed by two Inuit companions. The effect of both landscape and portrait is at once highly specific and somewhat dreamlike. We see the people and place clearly, but what are they doing there?

That is not a question one would ask of *InukShop*, Jobie Weetaluktuk’s film from 2009 (Fig. 13). This short but purposeful work draws a stark contrast between traditional life on the land and the reproduction of these activities in carvings destined for the global art market. In the film—and, arguably, in art

generally—Inuit life is thus deracinated, made inauthentically portable as it accommodates to markets in the South. “For Indigenous peoples, language and culture are rooted in the land,” write the co-authors of a recent exhibition on circumpolar art, *Among All These Tundras*.

Knowledge is place-based, embodied, and interrelational. This worldview, and the artistic practices based in it, has become politicized by settler colonialism, which is characterized by a historical and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Decolonial thought and aesthetics, therefore, must also centre on the land. <sup>52</sup>

In *InukShop*, we see traditional activities of living from the land that survives but is increasingly threatened. As in the other artworks considered here, the past, present, and future are intertwined. The film opens with close-ups of the feet of a large, seemingly new inukshuk, an example of the anthropomorphic rock “sculptures” that Inuit had placed across the Arctic for centuries to aid in wayfaring, hunting caribou, and to mark food caches. Weetaluktuk soon contrasts this recent example with long-standing correlates in Arctic landscapes and with scenes that alternate between Inuit ceremonies and hunting (thus displaying *Qaujimaqatugangit*: “Inuit traditional knowledge”) and the sculptures that reproduce these activities. Some are exquisite handworks in themselves; others show commercially produced inuksuit (pl. of inukshuk) trapped inside tourist snow globes. For the hunting and ceremonial scenes, he uses archival film, making the inuksuit on the land seem ancient (as many are). “Shop” in the film’s title cuts two ways: it makes reference to an artist’s workshop and to the activity of shopping. Near the end of the two-minute film, we view clichéd, miniaturized inuksuit for sale as tourist ware, with “Canada” announced on small plaques. These mass-produced trinkets are displayed as part of a confusing array of “native” knick-knacks; they sell for \$5.99. The reduction and proliferation of these degraded objects is coincident with the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, which adopted the inukshuk as its logo, a symbol now of Canada, not the Arctic, broadcast to the world. <sup>53</sup> By criticizing commercialization, Weetaluktuk telescopes the effects of European modernity on the Inuit. Western technologies, religion, community settlements, a cash economy, and worst of all, residential school “education” were incrementally forced on these peoples from the sixteenth century through the twentieth century. <sup>54</sup> As Weetaluktuk reminds us in this film, the legacy continues. His closing shot returns us to his opening locale, now identifiably the city of Montreal, where the artist lives. The large, beautifully made inukshuk that we saw at the outset—by Jusipi Nalukturuk (1992) and owned by the McCord Museum—is rendered small by a glass skyscraper. People hurry past, not noticing the



monument. Even this large inukshuk has become a consumable and almost invisible. Where we heard birds in the opening images of this work—as if to proclaim its heritage on the land—here we are overwhelmed by a wash of traffic noise. The inukshuk now marks only the displacements of Inuit culture under colonialism.

[View this illustration online](#)

## Figure 12.

Jobie Weetaluktuk, *Vistas: InukShop*, 2009, film, 2 minutes. Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of Jobie Weetaluktuk / National Film Board of Canada (all rights reserved).

I have claimed that Millais's *The North-West Passage* is a metapicture and imagetext that demands our attention today because it continues to encapsulate colonial paradigms of the Arctic, the assumptions and conditions of exploration, masculinist heroism, Western mapping, disregard of the environment, and flag planting that—broadly speaking—led to the spiral of commercialization and attendant exploitation that we witness in *InukShop*. Julien surprises us by staging a little-known and revisionary depiction of race relations in the Arctic. Weetaluktuk mixes markers of Inuit tradition and Western modernity to describe a still-colonialist present. Both *InukShop* and Julien's *True North* implore us ponder the nineteenth-century roots of troubles that live on today in this region. Whether or not these films can interrupt the control of the ideologies apparent in *The North-West Passage* remains an open and urgent question.

## Footnotes

- 1 John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais, President of the Royal Academy / by his Son, John Guille Millais, with 319 Illustrations Including Nine Photogravures* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1899), Vol. 2, 48.
- 2 See Debra N. Mancoff (ed.), *John Everett Millais: Beyond the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001). Laurent Bury traces responses to the painting from its exhibition through to current readings in "A Certain 'Want of Arch-Inscape'? The Critical Reception of Millais's *North-West Passage* (1874)", in Frédéric Regard (ed.), *Arctic Exploration in the Nineteenth Century: Discovering the Northwest Passage* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 171–183. My concern here is exclusively with Millais's painting in light of then-contemporary and recent reflection on British voyaging to the Arctic, rather than on its place in the artist's oeuvre or Victorian culture more broadly.
- 3 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 418.
- 4 See Roy MacLeod, "Nature and Empire: Science and the Colonial Enterprise", *Osiris* 15 (2000): 1–13.
- 5 John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, Vol. 2, 48. Subsequent references to this book appear in the main text. I have argued elsewhere that this combination of images and texts is typical of a characteristically British practice of art theory. See Mark A. Cheetham, *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The "Englishness" of English Art Theory since the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- 6 Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith extend this nineteenth-century interpretation of the phrase as subtitle in *Millais* (London: Tate, 2007). One example of the assumption that the sailor speaks these words reads: "our great painter ... showed us the fair girl reading out with glowing countenance the story of our British heroes in the icy seas and the stout old sea dog clenching his fist and crying, 'It is to be done, and England ought to do it.'" *Pall Mall Gazette*, 19 November 1874, 3. I will return to the sailor's actions and putative utterance.

- 7 Britain was dominant but was not alone, in this and related quests. Russia was an important competitor, especially in the search for a Northeast Passage. Hester Blum provides a chronology of international Arctic expeditions from 1818–1922 in *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). For contemporary international perspectives on polar exploration, see Gry Hedin and Ann-Sofie N. Gremaud (eds), *Artistic Visions of the Anthropocene North: Climate Change and Nature in Art* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
- 8 Bury, “A Certain ‘Want of Arch-Inscape’?”, 172. My emphasis.
- 9 Mrs Lang [sic], in Walter Armstrong and W. Cosmo Monkhouse, *Presidents of the Royal Academy: Sir E.J. Poynter, Sir J.E. Millais, Lord Leighton* (London: Art Journal Office, 1898), 18.
- 10 This point was made by Ian R. Stone, “‘The North-West Passage’ by Sir John Millais”, *Polar Record* 23, no. 142 (1986): 81–84. This venture was jointly undertaken by the Royal Navy and the Royal Geographical Society.
- 11 The North Magnetic Pole, so important for navigation, had been pinpointed and claimed for Britain in 1833 by James Clark Ross. On the notable literary fascination with the poles, see Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn Press, 2015).
- 12 Stone, “‘The North-West Passage’ by Sir John Millais”. This venture was jointly undertaken by the Royal Navy and the Royal Geographical Society.
- 13 John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, Vol. 2, 51.
- 14 I have been unable to find this phrase used in the context of Arctic voyaging before 1874. While Millais could have been citing someone—perhaps a parliamentary deposition supporting the British Arctic Expedition of 1875–1876—the words *became* his, as I show below.
- 15 Disraeli’s support of the mission in autumn 1874 was lampooned in *Punch*, 5 December 1874. An illustration depicts the prime minister in the place of Millais’s sailor, one hand on a chart of the Arctic and a glass of spirits labelled “popularity” in place of the seaman’s grog. At his knee is a young woman in the guise of Britannia.
- 16 *Watchman and Wesleyan Advertiser*, 26 August 1874.
- 17 *The Hampshire Advertiser County Newspaper*, 20 December 1876.
- 18 *Leeds Mercury*, 21 August 1874. My emphasis.
- 19 Stone, “‘The North-West Passage’ by Sir John Millais”, 81.
- 20 A correction was made on 13 June 2023: an earlier version of this article stated that the open chart was by Robert McClure. Footnote 21 now points out that the map depicts Africa.
- 21 We can in fact just make out “Africa” on the map, just above the sailor’s left arm. We see its northern coast, which suggests that the Mediterranean might have been one area in which the captain sailed. But given the title of the painting, we should leave speculation about Arctic voyaging open. McClure’s map is proposed by the anonymous author at Millais.org, “a personal website covering the career of famous British painter John Everett Millais”; see <http://www.millais.org/north-west-passage>, accessed 16 May 2020. McClure published a large, fold-out map of the Arctic Archipelago in *The Discovery of the North-West Passage by H.M.S. “Investigator”, Capt. R. M’Clure, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854*, edited by artist, mapmaker, and later rear admiral Sherard Osborn, 1st edn (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1856); it went through numerous later editions up to 1969. Given that John Franklin’s voyage of 1845 did not return to Britain, and that claims that he traversed the Northwest passage cannot be proven, despite Lady Franklin’s Herculean efforts and the 1866 monument in Waterloo Place, London, which claims this achievement, the McClure account was especially welcome and celebrated.
- 22 John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, Vol. 2, 52.
- 23 An example is the logbook of Captain George Back (1796–1878) from 1833–1835, now in the McCord Museum, Montreal, which displays both written accounts and skilled watercolours of, for example, meteorological phenomena in the Arctic; see George Black, *Journal d’observation des aurores boréales de Sir George Black*, Musée McCord, M2634, <http://collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/fr/collection/artefacts/M2634>, accessed 19 May 2020. On the writing and illustration integral to northern voyages at this time, see Adriana Craciun, *Writing Arctic Disaster: Authorship and Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 24 Nalin Jayasena contends that others have not considered “the possibility that the young woman gazing into a book might perhaps be reading about what the man is contemplating”; see Nalin Jayasena, *Contested Masculinities: Crises in Colonial Male Identity from Joseph Conrad to Satyajit Ray* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 20. Because he unaccountably claims that the Northwest passage had not been discovered by the time of Millais’s painting, and is thus not shown by the artist, he does not speculate on the identity of the book in the woman’s lap; Jayasena, *Contested Masculinities*, 21.
- 25 Catherine Roach, *Pictures-Within-Pictures in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 126.
- 26 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 19 November 1874, 3.
- 27 See “The Perilous Situation of H.M.S. Investigator, While Wintering in the Pack in 1850–51...”, Royal Museums Greenwich, <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/156627.html>, accessed 19 May 2020.
- 28 The image is both typical of its period and pedestrian. I cannot agree with Christine Riding’s hypothesis that by including it, Millais “perhaps alludes to Church’s or Landseer’s emotive representations”, *The Icebergs* and the even more epic *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, which were, she notes, exhibited in London in 1863 and 1864 respectively. Millais moves away from the discourse of the sublime found in these works to a more pensive and ambiguous register. See Christine Riding, *John Everett Millais* (London: Tate, 2006), 58.
- 29 Jayasena, *Contested Masculinities*, 19.

- 30 On panoramas and related theatrical devices, see Russell A. Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North and Visual Culture, 1818–1875* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007). On-board theatricals are examined by Heather Davis-Fisch in *Loss and Cultural Remains in Performance: The Ghosts of the Franklin Expedition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 31 See Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth*.
- 32 A rich discussion of the double scientific and aesthetic impact of this painstakingly collected information is found in Benjamin Morgan, "After the Arctic Sublime", *New Literary History* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 1–26.
- 33 Of all these cycles, the most nefarious and tragic was that involving human and animal "specimens", which had for centuries been brought back to Britain. For the early history, see Christopher P. Heuer, *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press Zone Books, 2019).
- 34 Edward L. Moss, *Shores of the Polar Sea: A Narrative of the Arctic Expedition of 1875–6* (London: Marcus Ward & Co., 1878), Preface. These sixteen prints were also published as a suite titled *Polar Sketches* in 1878).
- 35 George S. Nares, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Polar Sea during 1875–6 in H.M. Ships Alert and Discovery* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1878).
- 36 See Richard G. Condon, "The History and Development of Arctic Photography", *Arctic Anthropology* 26, no. 1 (1989): 46–87.
- 37 "Pole Impracticable", *The Graphic*, 4 November 1876.
- 38 *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 4 November 1876.
- 39 See Heuer, *Into the White*.
- 40 Among the hundreds of books and media accounts of Franklin's fateful voyage, a reliable and recent source is Russell A. Potter, *Finding Franklin: The Untold Story of a 165-Year Search* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016). On Barrow, see Craciun, *Writing Arctic Disaster*.
- 41 See Trevor H. Levere, *Science and the Canadian Arctic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 42 The definition and implications of this term, coined in 2000, fills books and is itself part of the controversy around climate change. For an account of the term and its competitors in Art History, see Mark A. Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature since the '60s* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018).
- 43 Unlike Antarctica and the South Pole, the North Pole is not on land but rather on the seabed. The "high seas [are] a global commons beyond the authority of any state" according to current international law; see Philip E. Steinberg, Jeremy Tasch, Hannes Gerhardt, Adam Keul, and Elizabeth A. Nyman (eds), *Contesting the Arctic: Politics and Imaginaries in the Circumpolar North* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 2.
- 44 An authoritative account of this journey is Bruce Henderson, "Who Discovered the North Pole?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-discovered-the-north-pole-116633746/>, accessed 27 May 2020.
- 45 Matthew Henson, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co, 1912), 132–133.
- 46 Henson, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, 132–133. On Henson and Peary, see Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 47 Henson, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, 136.
- 48 See Jen Hill, *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008); and Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water*. The story is perhaps best reassessed in John Walker's film *Passage*, cited above, where a reconciliatory meeting is staged between Inuit MP Emeritus Tagak Curley and Dickens' great-grandson, Gerald Dickens. <http://johnwalkerproductions.com/portfolio/passage/>. Forensic evidence has since proved Rae's Inuit correspondents correct in their report.
- 49 Lara Taubman, "True North: Interview with Isaac Julien", *S&F Online*, 1 July 2005, <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/ice/gallery/julien.htm>, accessed 25 May 2020.
- 50 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 51 Lisa Bloom, "True North: Isaac Julien's Aesthetic Wager", in Viet Görner and Evaline Bernasconi (eds), *Isaac Julien: True North. Fantôme Afrique*, exhibition catalogue (Hannover: Kestnergesellschaft, 2006), 42.
- 52 Heather L. Iglooliorte, Amy Prouty, Charissa von Harringa, *Among All These Tundras* (Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2018), 23. An important comparator is the film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, Directors Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, Isuma TV, 2006.
- 53 The film was produced as part of the Digital Nation Project for the 2010 Winter Olympics.
- 54 For a full account of these and other related topics, see Gerald McMaster and Ingo Hessel, co-curators, *Inuit Modern*, exhibition catalogue (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010).

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# John McHale, Marshall McLuhan, and the Collage “Ikon”

Rachel Stratton

## Abstract

Over the course of the 1950s, the Scottish writer and artist John McHale was committed to exploring the effects of fine art, advertising, and new media on the human experience. He was a prominent member of the Independent Group (IG), which met at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (1952–1955), and was among the first artists in the group to travel to the USA, returning with a tranche of advertising imagery that became influential for their thinking about the mass media environment. McHale was also an early advocate of Marshall McLuhan’s media ecology theory and responded to it in his own artwork and writing. Focusing on a formative period for McHale, between 1954 and 1960, when he developed his collage practice, undertook a scholarship with Josef Albers at Yale University, and became a leading voice in the IG, the essay considers McHale’s writing and art practice as an evolving response to McLuhan’s media ecology. It identifies McHale’s two-part essay “The Expendable Ikon”, published in *Architectural Design* in 1959, as a key text for understanding his artwork and writings on the relationship between the fine arts and the mass media during this period.

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## Introduction: McHale and McLuhan

In 1959 John McHale, the Scottish artist, writer, and participant in the Independent Group (IG) wrote to the Canadian academic Marshall McLuhan, informing him that: “for some years, since *The Mechanical Bride* was published, I have looked out for such articles as you have produced and they have been of immense value to myself and others here who are interested in the mass media”.<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of the same letter had put this in more emphatic terms, insisting that for artists in Britain, McLuhan’s work was “of great interest and considerable influence”.<sup>2</sup> In the letter sent to McLuhan, McHale cited articles dating back to 1947 and the “Culture and Communications” seminars that McLuhan held at the University of Toronto between 1953 and 1955, revealing an early and sustained engagement with McLuhan’s work prior to the publication of his best-known book *Understanding Media* (1964).<sup>3</sup> McHale also shared his own developing theories on media ecology, enclosing with his letter a copy of his two-part essay “The Expendable Ikon”, published in *Architectural Design* in February (Fig. 1) and March 1959 (Fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> This confirmed to McLuhan that discussions he was leading in North America about the language of the mass media were also now taking place in Britain. Furthermore, it posited “The Expendable Ikon” as a complement to McLuhan’s “most stimulating and informative text” “Myth and Mass Media”, which had been published in *Daedalus* a month after McHale’s piece.<sup>5</sup> The artist was at pains to emphasise the didactic function of mass culture, stating that “for myself, and others who are interested in the mass media, this interest has been particularly directed to [its] role [in] the education of the artist and designer”.<sup>6</sup> McHale’s letter initiated a back and forth with McLuhan that lasted throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> The letters underscore the importance of McLuhan’s writing for the development of ideas and practices by members of the Independent Group, a radical group of young artists and architects who met at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London and were concerned with ways technology and the mass media shaped human experience. Lawrence Alloway later cited McLuhan’s publication *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) as a key text for the group.<sup>8</sup>



The essay, “The Expendable Ikon”, which McHale had enclosed in his first letter to McLuhan, examined the communicative function of images and the means by which the mass media conveyed the stereotypical mid-century Western experience. Working on the premise that “the whole range of the sensory spectrum has been extended [such that] man can see more, hear more, travel faster—experience more than ever before” and that “his environment extensions, movie, TV, picture magazine, bring to his awareness an unprecedented scope of visual experience”, the essay made the case that images had to respond in kind and become “loaded” with associations about “man’s total environment”.<sup>9</sup> The term “ikon” signalled that the meaning of mass imagery extended beyond the representation of the figure depicted, in much the way that a religious ikon embodied an inconceivable divine entity and sought to induce a spiritual experience through the image of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or a saint. The unusual spelling may have been intentionally used to foster the connection to Eastern Orthodox ikons but more likely is that McHale adopted it from Reyner Banham, who used the same spelling in the catalogue for the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* in 1956.<sup>10</sup>

In “The Expendable Ikon” McHale categorised some prevalent trends in ikon-making in contemporary mass media. He cited Marshall McLuhan as an important source, describing *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) as a “classic of its kind”, while at the same time distancing himself from McLuhan’s “moralising” tone.<sup>11</sup> Although McHale initially subscribed to McLuhan’s warnings about the potentially corrupting nature of the mass media, by the end of the decade, he was more circumspect. Their ambitions were aligned but not quite the same—McLuhan’s purpose being to understand the social and cultural implications of mass media, where McHale was equally interested in the question of where this expanded visual environment left fine art. By working through McLuhan’s ideas over the course of a decade, McHale came to understand the potential dangers of the mass media but also—as indicated in his initial letter to McLuhan—to appreciate what the fine arts could learn from its advanced methods of persuasion.<sup>12</sup> The distinction he made between the two was based on their longevity or lack thereof. The fine arts—the traditional preserve of ikon-making—stood the test of time, while mass media was characterised by rapid and continual change, its ikons only ever as relevant as the last photo-shoot, movie, or song released. This expendability, McHale argued, gave a more accurate picture of the cultural environment of the mid-century but it also represented a challenge to those artists who acknowledged its didactic potential as they grappled with the question of fine art’s function in a mass media age. The Independent Group, whose first series of seminars (1952–1953) had focused on technology, turned their attention to the relationship between fine art and mass media for their second series (1955–1956), and explored it through exhibitions, including *Parallel of Life and Art* (1953), curated by Nigel Henderson,

Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson at the ICA; *Collages and Objects* (1954), curated by Lawrence Alloway at the ICA; and *This is Tomorrow*, coordinated by Theo Crosby at the Whitechapel Gallery (1956).<sup>13</sup>

In “The Expendable Ikon”, McHale focused on popular ikons like the pictures of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley that pervaded popular magazines. Elsewhere, however, he also applied the term to his own artworks, writing in the catalogue for the exhibition *Three Collagists* (1958) that his works were “in the nature of ikons” because they captured the human image in the “extended environs” of the mass media.<sup>14</sup> A photograph of McHale posing alongside his *Self Portrait* (1955), taken for the journal *Uppercase*, reflects this through its mirrored composition, the subject split between McHale’s exterior appearance and his symbolic representation of self as a television-shaped head covered with advertisements (Fig. 3).<sup>15</sup> The exaggerated sensory features of *Self Portrait*—its enlarged eye, mouth, and outstretched tongue—emphasised the sensory overload of this new media environment, not merely a new visual education but a titillating sensorium. The work disregards formal likeness and instead seeks to capture the impact of the 1950s on the artist’s sense of self. Depicted as a generic receptacle filled with vivid advertising imagery, *Self Portrait* presents McHale as a product of his environment, his identity forged by the consumer boom he experienced while living in the USA in 1955.<sup>16</sup> As this essay will show, collaged ikons such as these served as tools for analysing new media languages and their impact on human experience, a task McHale carried out in parallel and crossover with McLuhan. In this regard, they are not only the products of this expanded visual environment, but they are also a form of research that contributed to the burgeoning field of media ecology.<sup>17</sup>





**Figure 3.**

Unknown artist, John McHale with Self Portrait (1955), 1956, photograph. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, gift of Magda Cordell McHale. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved)

## McHale's Collage Books, 1954

McHale's use of advertising imagery began in earnest in 1954 when he produced a series of collage books for Lawrence Alloway's exhibition *Collages and Objects* at the ICA.<sup>18</sup> As well as contributing artwork, McHale worked closely with Alloway to design the exhibition and its catalogue, using industrial materials such as fencing mesh and perforated bricks for the exhibition design and continuing the theme of assemblage in the catalogue, where quotations from artists were collaged together in a non-hierarchical arrangement.<sup>19</sup> The exhibition traced a genealogy of collage from Cubism and Dada through Surrealism to the mid-1950s, and positioned the IG, as well as the British Constructivists, as the next generation to be concerned with the materials of the modern environment and the disruption of hierarchies between "high" and "low".

Two works McHale produced for the exhibition, *Shoe Life Stories* (Fig. 4) and *How I Took to Washers in Luxury Flats* (Fig. 5), illustrate the decisive shift McHale made at this time, from abstract constructivism to the proto-pop aesthetic that has since become synonymous with the IG. These

participatory works allowed visitors to manipulate the text and imagery covered pages to create different juxtapositions, in an attempt to convey the abundance of information that a person daily consumed. In *Shoe Life Stories*, the pages are covered on both sides with images of luxury consumer goods and the fragmented body parts of glamorous female models, all interspersed with snippets of text, the meanings of which shift as new associations of word and image are brought into relation. The incrementally narrowing pages alter the iconographic landscape with each turn, demonstrating the importance of the medium's structural architecture to how information is received. Similarly, in *How I Took to Washers in Luxury Flats*, the ribbons of paper gradually disclose and conceal images: a picture of a monkey kissing a man, a leggy model, or a fragmented photograph of Winston Churchill in his second term as prime minister. Different combinations of word and image form as the ribbons are moved at random, creating ironic and satiric juxtapositions, as for example when the statement "rich, tender and triumphant" appears below the image of Churchill, whose reputation as Britain's saviour during the Second World War was by 1954 in tatters.<sup>20</sup>

[View this illustration online](#)

#### **Figure 4.**

John McHale, *Shoe-life Stories*, 1954, collage book, 25 x 21 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art (MSS 60 Box 4, item 2a, Cabinet L). Digital image courtesy of Digital facsimile courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved).

[View this illustration online](#)

#### **Figure 5.**

John McHale, *Why I Took To The Washers In Luxury Flats*, 1954, collage book, 46 x 24 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale (MSS 60 Box 4, item 1 (Cabinet L)). Digital image courtesy of Digital facsimile courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved).

McHale's move from the abstract language of constructivism to the language of the mass media arrived just as McLuhan's early media theory was beginning to make him an international name, with the establishment of his "Culture and Communications" seminars at University of Toronto (held between 1953 and 1955) and, shortly after the publication of *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* in 1951. With its Duchampian title, this critical study of popular advertising and media was among the first publications to consider how technology-driven media, such as advertising, altered human perception and experience. McHale drew on the ideas expressed by McLuhan in the central collage in *Shoe Life Stories*, showing how technology had expanded "the range of the sensory spectrum" in the hybrid figure with its binocular legs and oversized sensory features.<sup>21</sup> In forging a comparison between the figure and the dog, the collage asks

audiences to contemplate humanity's exponential development beyond the rest of the animal kingdom; the dog's identity remaining fixed, whereas the figure's is forged by the "environment extensions" available to it. <sup>22</sup>

What becomes abundantly clear in looking at McHale's collage books from 1954 is that the artist adopted a scepticism about mass advertising, which was shared by McLuhan—a facet of the IG's fascination with mass media that is rarely foregrounded. *The Mechanical Bride*, far from a straightforward celebration of the mind-expanding potential of popular culture, sought to raise awareness of the manipulative techniques used by advertisers, stating that:

Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now ... To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike. <sup>23</sup>

The book was a call to arms to make the public aware of these manipulative techniques and to foster a society with "trained perception and judgement", the idea being that basic knowledge of the advertising industry's mechanisms of persuasion would make people less susceptible to blind manipulation. <sup>24</sup>

McHale's collage books also seem to draw attention to the potential of advertising language to manipulate consumers. The shifting configurations of words and iconography make meaning unfixed and entirely context-contingent, and the oscillation between text and image activates the viewer's perception in a Benjaminian-style distraction that challenges the truth-value of the images depicted. <sup>25</sup> The striated faces in *How I Took to the Washers in Luxury Flats*, for example, highlight the tendency of human perception to form a *gestalt*, even where there is none, and thus challenge the truth-value of vision. Similarly, the perseveration of eyes in *Shoe Life Stories*—in both word and image—reveals the levels of perception and interpretation involved in reading symbols. In this latter collage book, the text surrounding the figure offers a coded warning: on one side the words "true" and "you never know" calling into question the notion of absolute truth; and on the other side the phrase "your nerves" evokes the nervous system and its role in governing sensory perception and emotion. In *Shoe Life Stories*, McHale judges truth in advertising to be a faculty of subjective experience and invites audiences to engage actively in the perceptual process, that they may avoid blind manipulation.

The intertextual medium of collage became crucial for McHale's investigations into the dually dangerous and expanding language of mass advertising. *Shoe Life Stories* conveys a message similar to McLuhan's: that humans faced major changes to their environment amid this influx of information. It too warned individuals to educate themselves about the structures and mechanisms of persuasion, to avoid acceptance of all information as absolute truth. These arguments were also central to Alfred Korzybski's pedagogical tome, *Science and Sanity*, which was circulated among the IG and later lionised by Reyner Banham as one of the group's principal theoretical texts in the documentary film *Fathers of Pop* (1979).<sup>26</sup> Within the context of the IG's reckoning with systems of knowledge and notions of truth, advertising gained educational importance, both as a means by which the arts embraced technology and as a source for exploring the processes involved in the construction of meaning. McHale began to explore this in a more systematic manner in 1955, when he undertook a year of study with Josef Albers at Yale, combining intensive training in colour perception with exposure to advanced printing techniques and the methods of persuasion used in American mass media.

## **Colour and American Advertising**

The 1950s was a decade of intellectual exchange between the USA and the UK. Thanks to the Marshall Plan initiated between Western countries in 1948, transatlantic travel and trade became more accessible, and McHale was a direct beneficiary. Only the second member of the IG to visit the USA, McHale's year abroad played a pivotal role in the group's access to American mass media when he returned to Britain with a trunk filled with advertising imagery.<sup>27</sup> In Reyner Banham's words, this collection of images was a "treasure chest that has become something of a legend in the annals of Pop Art", providing one of the first opportunities for artists in London to survey American mass media and to examine its more advanced printing techniques.<sup>28</sup> Many of the images McHale collected are now in the John McHale archive at the Yale Center for British Art and, while frequently studied in relation to his collage work, they have not been taken seriously as a collection in their own right. In fact, McHale's year-long scholarship at Yale has never been properly assessed until now. Thanks to the discovery of unpublished archival material from McHale's time at Yale, we now know more about this formative period and its importance for his own developing media ecology theory.

McHale's tutelage under Albers marked a turning point in his thinking and practice. In letters he wrote to the artist Magda Cordell—another founding member of the IG—he discussed taking electives titled "Man's Orientation" and "Cultural Background", and on the history of art from the Renaissance to

the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> It was also at Yale that McHale met Buckminster Fuller and began a life-long friendship with the designer, who was a visiting critic for architecture at the Yale School of Fine Arts.<sup>30</sup> While there, McHale visited the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Rhode Island School of Design, schools committed to integrating the arts and technology, and immersed himself in American movies and magazines. It was a year of theoretical and artistic development, during which time McHale began to engage more deeply with the issues raised in McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* and to develop his own methods of assessing the language of advertising media.

The trunk of brightly coloured advertisements that McHale collected while in the USA highlights his new fascination with the use of colour in mass media.<sup>31</sup> A photograph depicts McHale and Cordell surrounded by this collection, with magazines haphazardly piled on floors and shelves, and advertisements pinned to the notice board behind them (Fig. 6). The vast repository of images offered McHale and Cordell, who often worked together on design and collage projects, a ready source of materials and ample scope for colour analysis of the kind McHale was learning with Albers. Once back in Britain, the imagery became a resource for other members of the IG, allowing them to study the latest innovations in printing technologies and the effects these had on viewing experiences. The impact of these colourful images must indeed have been profound, a way of puncturing the drab, greys and bleak beiges of the urban landscape and dominant visual culture, a picture of which Lynda Nead vividly paints in *The Tiger and the Smoke: Art and Culture in Post-War Britain*.<sup>32</sup> The repository proved to be an essay, not only on how colours interacted with one another but also in the ways that advertisers sought to exploit sensory and emotional responses to colour to excite desire. Alloway later confirmed that it was *colour* that compelled McHale to gather the imagery, writing that the artist "returned with a great collection of popular magazines and an habituation to colour reproduction of a level not yet usual in Europe".<sup>33</sup>





**Figure 6.**

Unknown artist, John McHale and Magda Cordell, circa 1956, photograph. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved)

In his famed colour courses at Yale, Albers taught students about the subjectivity and contextual specificity of colour perception. The course was structured around a series of exercises in which students brought together three or more pieces of coloured paper and examined their behaviour in relation to one another, in a bid to encourage students to develop their eye through experimentation.<sup>34</sup> Albers wrote that his classes “began with the material, color itself” rather than immediately introducing established theories of colour perception, in the hope that students would learn through experience and avoid “mechanical application” of someone else’s perceptual theory.<sup>35</sup> A photograph from 1952 shows Albers’ students busy at their experiments, cutting and pasting mass-produced pieces of coloured paper to create different patterns like those displayed on the back wall (Fig. 7). Albers maintained that this process of trial and error taught students to decipher “discrepanc[ies] between physical fact and psychic effect” and thus become

conscious of the degrees of abstraction from reality involved in colour perception.<sup>36</sup> Colour, observed as different wavelengths of light that are translated by the eye and computed in the brain, highlighted what Albers described as the “unending deception of our perception”, the gap between experience and reality.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 7.**

Josef Albers and students in the colour course at Yale, 1952, photograph. Collection of The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. Digital image courtesy of The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (all rights reserved).

During this time, McHale wrote often to Magda and her then husband the composer Frank Cordell, to describe the colour problems that preoccupied him, expressing his frustration at the difficulties he faced with the work and with Albers himself. In one lengthy letter, he complained bitterly about his inability to engage directly with colour and material at an emotional-sensory level, writing that:

My thinking in relation to my work seems [to] be initially the strong feeling about something, as yours, but there I go on thinking about it and thinking how I am going to do it and so on, so in the end there is but a very tenuous emotional link with the eventual created object because each adjustment and qualification of it has occurred in the abstract and not on the plane of action about it and interaction with the material ... By the time I put it down, the context has vanished because the subject or event has been changed by abstracting it and so I am stuck with a half dead object which has been strangled by abstraction.

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McHale's irritation at his inability to operate at the level of sensory, material engagement reflects the importance it was given in Albers' courses. As we saw in the collage books, McHale was already concerned with the sensory experience of the mass media prior to going to Yale and his letters from the USA suggest that the tutelage he received under Albers galvanised him to explore this even further. In one, he described his particular interest in the entropic effects of colour, using "bits of coloured photos, so that the edges smear and blur in together". <sup>39</sup> In another, he discussed showing his latest collages and "photo-image[s]" to Albers, and having them dismissed out of hand. Albers, McHale writes, went off "on his usual tirade against expressionism" and claimed that "anyway Schwitters had done all this before". Albers' purism clearly irked McHale, who was as engaged in the idea that 'fashion and style [are] important phenomena' as Albers was in discrediting them. <sup>40</sup> In this remark, we begin to see McHale's attitude towards mass culture shift. Faced with his tutor's essentialising view of art and design, McHale came to value that very thing that Albers despised: its expendability.

Despite their differing perspectives on art, however, McHale seems to have valued what he learned from Albers and was keen to display his acute awareness of the ways in which colour provoked emotional responses. In an article he wrote about Albers for *Architectural Design* in 1956, McHale maintained that "patient research in colour perception has produced colours which blur, melt and flicker as we observe them, in such a fashion that we are forced to participate in their metamorphosis even to the point of disquiet". <sup>41</sup> He explored this idea in the collage *Pink Eyes* (1959), which drew on his studies in colour dynamics to produce a figural work that flickers and flashes at the edges, its instability defying notions of absolute or "pure" form (Fig. 8). <sup>42</sup> The pulsating borders imbue the image with a nervous quality that evokes real and imagined phenomena in McHale's environment, from the pixelated images of the television screen and the frenetic whirring

of the IBM computer, to the flashes of scenery viewed from a moving automobile or the lit-up billboards of Piccadilly Circus and Times Square. Alloway's comment that McHale believed in "no core of human nature, given and absolute" has its visual proof in the figure's instability, which, through the clashing, eye-popping colours creates the sense of a dynamic being constantly in flux.<sup>43</sup>



**Figure 8.**

John McHale, *Pink Eyes*, 1959, oil and paper collage on canvas, 152.4 × 101.6 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale (B1995.24.2). Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved)

To negate any essential core of human nature assumed that identity, personality, and behaviour were shaped by individual experience and interaction with the environment, perhaps a signal as to why McHale deemed it so important to study the effects of new media. Albers' colour course contributed to this endeavour, providing McHale with enough experience of

how colour relationships work to begin his own McLuhanian self-education in the language of advertising. He wrote in a letter to the Cordells in 1955 that, “after the Whitechapel [*This Is Tomorrow*] if all emerges in one piece we’ll have an exhibition of the Expendable Ikon stressing Giantism in Ads ... in building up new images of man”.<sup>44</sup> The advertisements he had assembled abroad provided research towards this project, all using heightened scale and bright, saturated colours set against cooler ones to push the product for sale to the forefront of the viewer’s perceptual field. For example, in an advertisement McHale kept for spaghetti sauce, the composition is organised according to a hierarchy of importance: the sellable product dominates the frame and the vibrant red of the sauce thrusts it forward, demoting the spaghetti and the marble counter to a position of secondary importance (Fig. 9). Advertisements like this one would likely have featured in McHale’s exhibition, were it ever realised. Although it did not come to pass, the idea points to his ambition to explore the identity-forming components of advertising imagery and, through the medium of the exhibition, provide a forum for ICA audiences to familiarise themselves with the tools and methods by which advertising achieved its powerful effects on consumers.



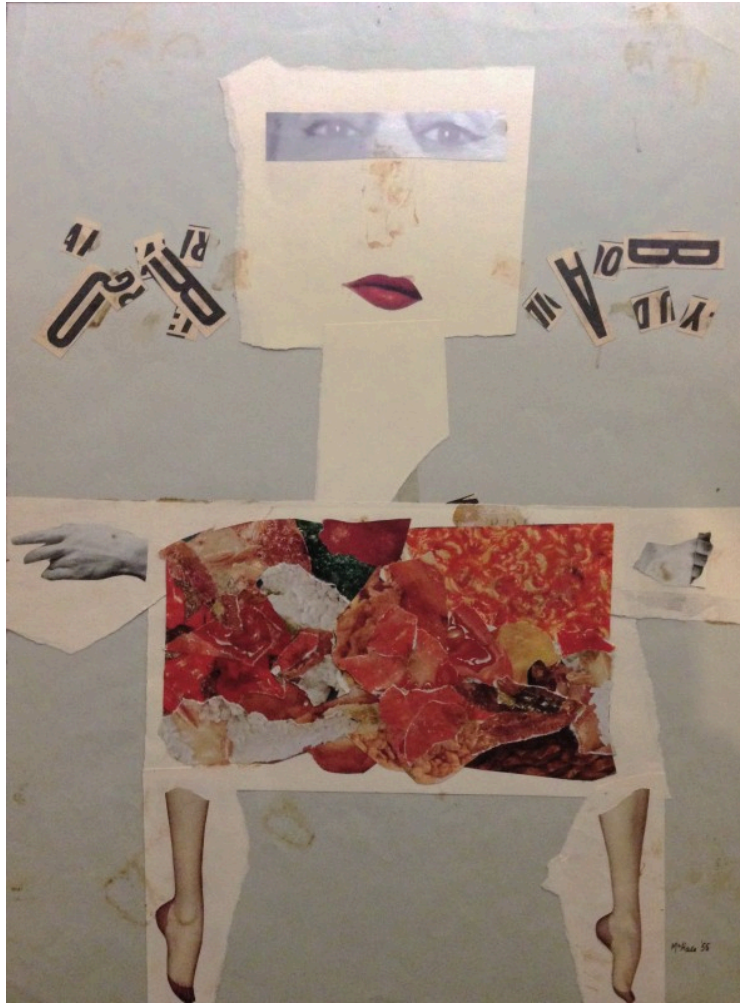


### Figure 9.

Advertisement for Franco-American Spaghetti Sauce, circa 1955, four colour printed. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved)

The advertisement for spaghetti sauce was one among many in McHale's collection aimed at selling food products, all of which used bright colours to entice the consumer. Alloway noted this trend later when he wrote in 1984 that McHale had been fascinated by close-ups of food, "the visions of popular appetite, chocolate landscape cake, salad sculpture, solid-gold chicken".<sup>45</sup> While Alloway emphasised the surreal absurdity and creative licence taken by advertisers to sell products, he failed to make the connection with McHale's concurrent colour studies, in which he was learning about how colour stimulated the senses and provoked emotional responses. Fresh from Albers' instruction, McHale can hardly have been blind to the way advertisers exploited hot, saturated colours to arouse a synaesthetic form of perception, the suggestion of taste evoked through visual perception alone.

A collage by McHale from 1956 explored the emotional effects of colour in food advertising, the characteristically genderless and shapeless figure filled with spliced close-ups of spaghetti sauce, ketchup, and other red food products, all mixed together as though consumed like the products themselves (Fig. 10). The visual connection between these mangled fragments and the figure's luscious red lips conflates consumer desire with sexual desire, and, with the products for sale no longer discernible, the collage strips away all materialistic pretence to reveal the base emotional instincts to which such advertising appealed. McHale maintained that it was this ability to abstract from, distil, and ultimately clarify the human experience that made ikons valuable, drawing on Kenneth Boulding's publication *The Image: Knowledge and Life in Society* (1956) to explain that an ikon or image was akin to a worldview constructed by each individual to make sense of their environment. Thus, in a collage like that described above, the ill-defined figure and fragments of advertising did not have meaning in and of themselves, rather they allowed the viewer to generate meaning through emotional response and personal association. <sup>46</sup>



**Figure 10.**

John McHale, *Untitled 1*, 1956, collage on paper. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Private Collection (all rights reserved).

In the same year, McLuhan published “The Educational Effects of the Mass Media”, which set out the need for greater media literacy in society. Building on his belief that each type of media was like a different language that stimulated new forms of experience, the essay stressed the necessity to “first master and then teach these new languages in all their minute particularity and riches”.<sup>47</sup> McHale’s systematic collecting of advertisements, training in colour perception with Albers, and planned educational exhibition promised to do precisely that. Despite his later praise of *The Mechanical Bride* in “The Expendable Ikon” as a much-needed “quantitative study” on mass media languages, McHale had by this time already conducted his own quantitative study, and amassed a cross-section of imagery to decipher trends within it.<sup>48</sup> McHale’s singular focus on advertising imagery, in contrast to the broader span of media in McLuhan’s project, prioritised changes specifically to the visual experience, which would

become vital to his reassessment of fine art. He distinguished his quantitative approach from the “qualitative” methods employed by his peers Alloway and Banham, whose “detailed researches in iconography” he nevertheless commended.<sup>49</sup> In doing so, McHale aligned his own approach with a McLuhanian methodology and positioned himself as the purveyor of this type of analysis within the IG.

## **Myth and Mass Media**

Concurrent with collecting and surveying mass advertising, McHale was also cutting up and condensing such imagery into collaged ikons like those already discussed, each one an act of restructuring the media’s syntax to, as McLuhan put it, impose “control over media old and new”.<sup>50</sup> Collage thus served as a tool for processing the language of advertising, aligning McHale’s ikons with McLuhan’s definition of myth in “Myth and Mass Media” (1959) as “a static abstraction from a live process”, or the ability to condense the dynamic structures of languages into a “single inclusive image”.<sup>51</sup> This echoes McHale’s own definition of the ikon as a “symbolic construct” that aided comprehension of the mid-century experience. However, where McLuhan’s understanding of myth encompassed all media languages, McHale began to differentiate between types of ikon and their distinct functions: those born out of the mass media, continually reorienting and regenerating in response to the latest consumer desire; and those of fine art, able to stand the test of time. Thus, through engaging with McLuhan’s “most stimulating and informative” essay, McHale sharpened his own position on the relationship between the fine arts and the mass media.<sup>52</sup>

McHale identified two types of ikon: (i) the fine art—or mythic—ikon; and (ii) the expendable, mass media ikon. Collages, such as *Untitled Figure [2]* synthesised the language of advertising into a single image that offered insight into this media language, abstracting from the original images and the products for sale, to focus attention on the advanced colour printing techniques used to structure the image and manipulate consumer desire (Fig. 11). Where advertisements, according to McLuhan, encompassed in a single image “the total social action or process that is imagined as desirable”, myth stood as a record of this anticipated metamorphosis.<sup>53</sup> In this way, McHale’s ikons acted as a McLuhanian myth: an “abridged logic” or a “multilayered ... montage” that rested on top of the language of mass advertising in order to make sense of how its structures achieved this projected reality.<sup>54</sup> The expendable ikon, by contrast, was a product of mass culture that provided insight into societal trends in mass taste and fashion, rather than individual perception and experience. The ubiquitous image of Marilyn Monroe that papered every popular magazine, for example, was plucked from the continuum of images and imbued with “pin-up” status in

what McHale described as an almost “academic gesture”, such that her image came to embody and illustrate mass cultural construction of the sex icon in the 1950s.<sup>55</sup>



**Figure 11.**

John McHale, Untitled [Figure], 1957, pasted paper on paper, 91.4 × 60.3 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Private Collection (all rights reserved).

A film McHale planned to produce in 1959 provided another opportunity to explore the similarities and differences between fine art and mass media ikons. Prompted by the trend towards figuration he identified first among his IG peers, and then among sculpture students at Yale—who were beginning to reject Abstract Expressionism’s hegemony and return to the human form—McHale conceived of a short, colour film called *The Human Image at Mid-Century*.<sup>56</sup> He wrote to Alfred Barr for advice on artists that might be suitable for this project, setting out his intention to include “artists who have in common a preoccupation with an approximate image of man (or woman)



as their main communicating symbol".<sup>57</sup> He listed numerous British, French, and US artists who illustrated this trend: Willem De Kooning, Francis Bacon, Jean Dubuffet, Magda Cordell, and Eduardo Paolozzi among them. The whereabouts of this film, if it was ever made, are unknown but in its concept it had affinities with the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *New Images of Man*, which was due to open a few months after McHale wrote to Barr. Barr passed on McHale's letter to Peter Selz, the curator of *New Images of Man*, who responded to him with an expression of surprise that so similar an idea was being explored in Britain.<sup>58</sup>

However, while Selz enthused about the similarities between McHale's film and his exhibition, there were noteworthy differences, which speak to the Scotsman's greater concern with the relationship between fine art and mass media. Selz's exhibition sought to present, "a new image of man, often shattered, or distorted, reflecting the anxieties of our century", through a checklist of exclusively male artists, including many of those McHale had mentioned in his letter.<sup>59</sup> It was an entirely phallogentric view of the mid-century Western experience and one told solely through the prism of fine art, although many of the artists did incorporate elements of mass culture into their work. McHale's film, although equally Western in perspective, notably included work by Magda Cordell, whose embryonic, sci-fi-inspired figures encapsulated what Giulia Smith has described as a kind of "ur-feminism".<sup>60</sup> Based on an anti-hierarchic stream of images—echoing the very first meeting of the IG in which Paolozzi ran a series of images through an epidiascope—the film would have presented the artwork as a form of communication, and considered the different types of information offered by the expendable mass media ikon and the permanent work of art.

McHale assessed the differences between these two types of ikon, and how they communicated, in his essay "The Fine Arts and the Mass Media" (1959), which responded to Alloway's almost identically titled piece, "The Arts and Mass Media" from 1958.<sup>61</sup> It is in the differences between their writing that McHale's more faithful adaptation of McLuhan's ideas come to the fore. McHale likely agreed with Alloway's assertion that mass imagery "accompanies the changes in our life far more closely than the fine arts which are a repository of time-binding values".<sup>62</sup> It implied that the mass media reflected moment-to-moment experiences whereas fine art preserved human experience for posterity, and prefigured similar arguments McHale put forward in both "The Expendable Ikon" and "The Fine Arts and the Mass Media". However, Alloway conceived of fine art and mass media as two points on a continuum along which all visual culture occupied a position, such that art, movies, and advertising were all regarded as individual channels within a "general form of communication".<sup>63</sup> McHale's vision of

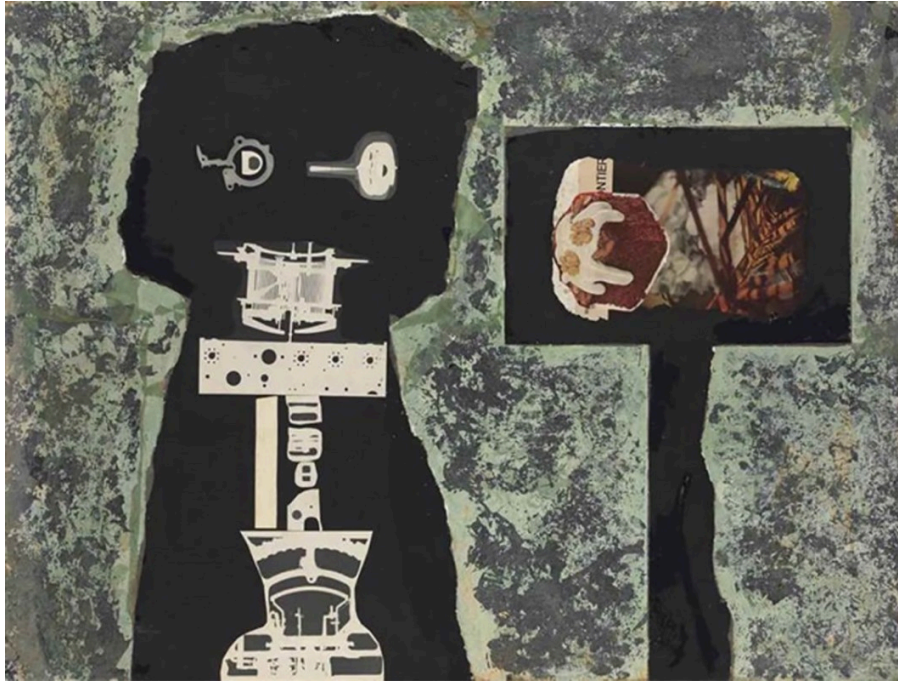


mid-century communication was rather messier and far more resonant with McLuhan's work, which he had been studying for nearly a decade by this point.

In answer to Alloway's continuum model, McHale described art as "one node in a mesh of interrelated networks spread over the communications system", placing greater emphasis on the interaction between different media channels.<sup>64</sup> McHale argued that the mass media actually altered how art was consumed and experienced, so much more likely were audiences to access art through a magazine, newspaper, or television than in person. "Photography and modern printing techniques" he wrote, "produce a new visual image, the 'experience' of which is, in reality at some remove from that engendered by the original artefact".<sup>65</sup> The advent of television had catalysed this perceptual transformation even further through "fancy lighting", the "mobility of viewing", and "transmission through the electronic medium".<sup>66</sup> McHale gives the example of Kenneth Clark and Henry Moore discussing the Elgin Marbles for Clark's series, *Is Art Necessary?* (1958), in which viewers accompanied the two on a night-time tour of the British Museum, their torches accentuating and dramatising the contours of the ancient relief. The scenes were then transmitted by analogue signals to television transmitters and appeared as black and white, pixelated pictures on a small screen, a vastly different experience to that of viewing the works in person.<sup>67</sup> McHale's essay reflected McLuhan's mantra "the medium is the message" in suggesting that the mode of communication, rather than the content itself, shaped the viewing experience.

Television and how it altered human perception became a prominent theme for McHale in the series of two- and three-dimensional collages titled *Telemath* produced in 1958. This is evident in *Telemath* (Fig. 12) and *Telemath VI* (Fig. 13), where collaged ikons of the kind already discussed are accompanied by a screen-shape also filled with images and text from the mass media. McHale exploited the qualities of collage to illustrate the overlapping interaction of different media in the modern environment, returning to his tranche of advertisements for source material. In *Telemath*, McHale paired a picture of a cake with a decontextualised, close-up fragment of imagery, which reads as a series of abstracted forms with a complex rendering of shadows. Much as in Clark's *Is Art Necessary?*, the angle of the television camera and use of spotlights on the Elgin Marbles dramatised the play of light and shade, here the close framing and removal from context enhances the formal qualities of this image and imbues it with an aesthetic quality lacking in the picture of the cake. One fragment appeals, the other less so—yet in subsuming them both to the screen-like form, McHale implied that the experience of viewing was shaped by the same technology,

exploiting the collage medium's ability to layer images to visually illustrate the interrelatedness of all media and his divergence from Alloway's flat continuum model.



**Figure 12.**

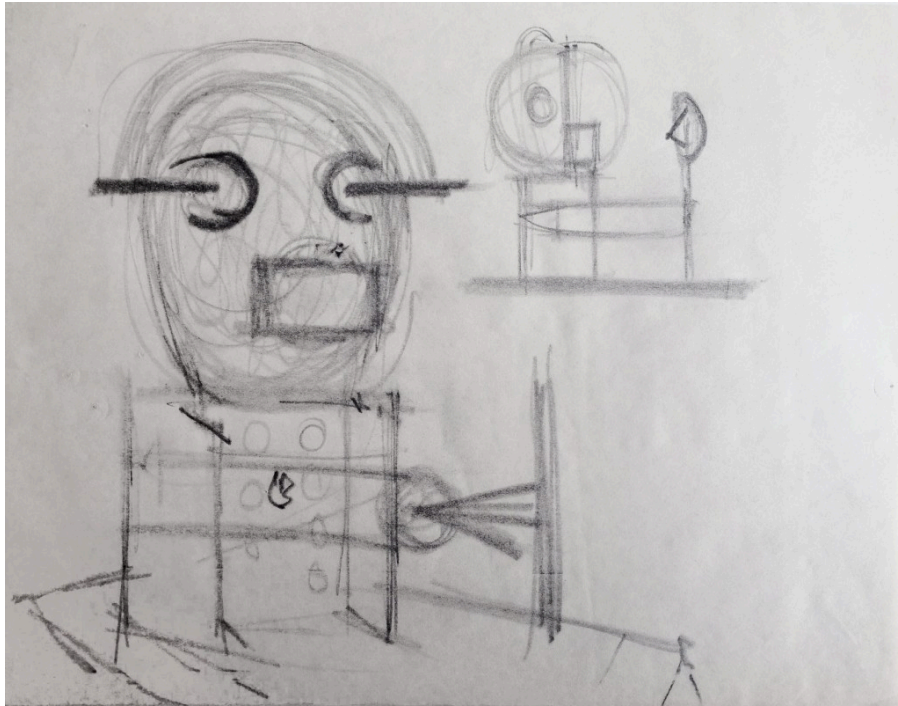
John McHale, *Telemath*, 1958, oil and collage on board, 91.5 × 122 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Private Collection (all rights reserved).



**Figure 13.**

John McHale, *Telemath VI*, 1957, oil paint and printed paper on board, 91.7 × 122.1 cm. Collection of Tate (T07102). Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Tate (all rights reserved).

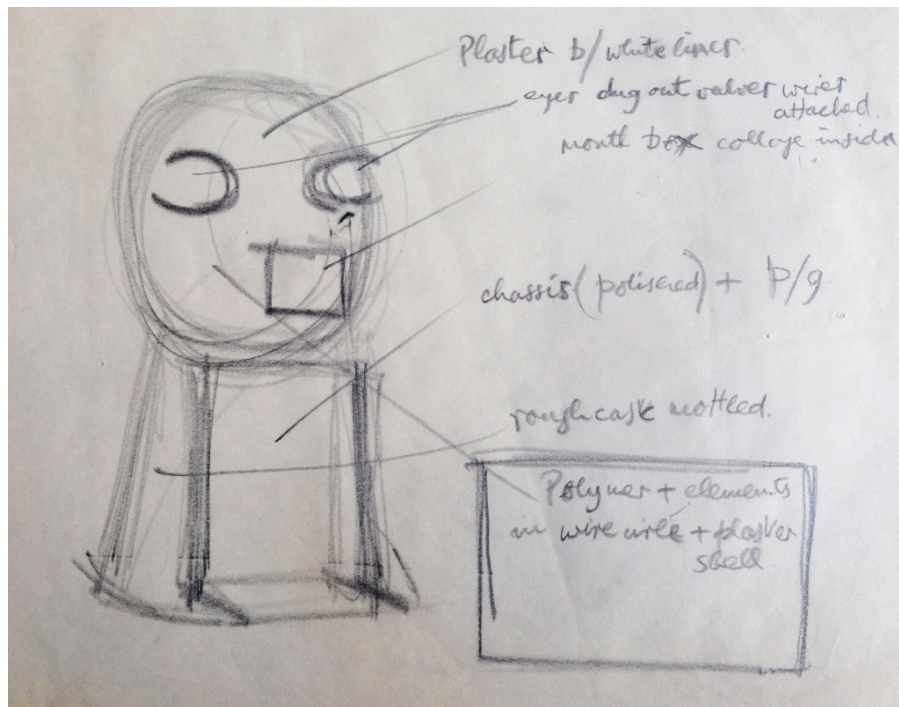
The similarity in the form and shared materials of the figure and screen in both *Telemath* and *Telemath VI* also convey the bleed between mankind and its technological environment. We know from sketches McHale produced for a sculpture in the same series (the whereabouts of which is unknown), that he carefully plotted the materials in advance, labelling each section (Figs 14–16). He ensured that both figure and screen were constructed from the same components: plaster, chicken wire, plastic polymer, and mass media collage fragments. The screen was to be constructed from a transparent polymer, allowing the viewer to physically look through it and take in what McLuhan described as the “striking” feature of television, that “the image is defined by light through, not by light on”.<sup>68</sup> These works offered McHale an alternative medium to writing by which to think through the way screen media shaped human perception, the immediacy of visual comprehension, and the qualities of the collage medium offering a more direct, if less proscribed, statement of his findings than writing.



**Figure 14.**

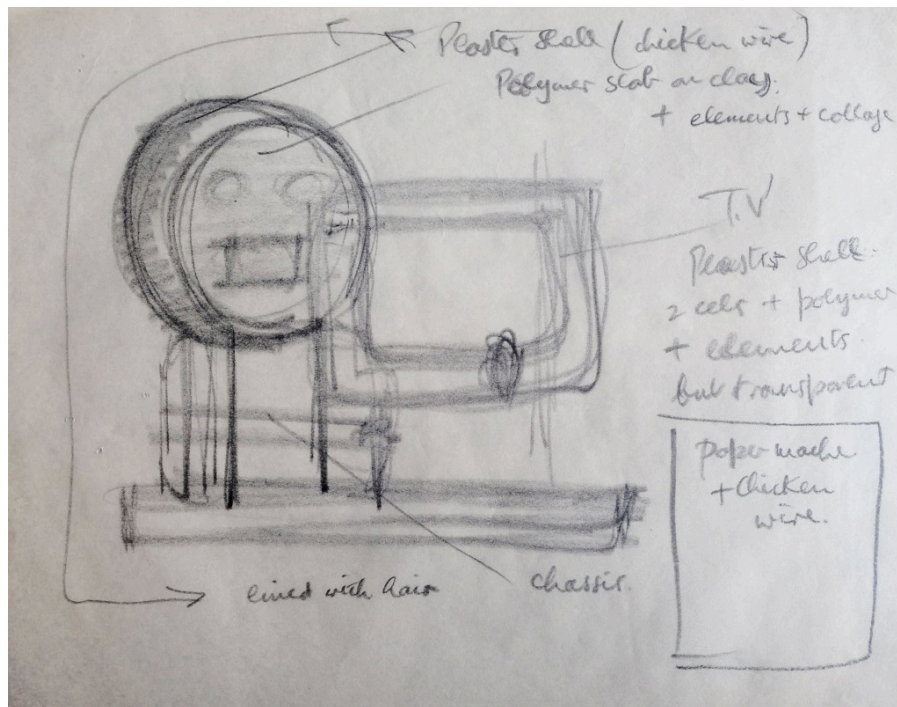
John McHale, *Sketches for a Construction*, circa 1955, pencil on paper. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved)





**Figure 15.**

John McHale, Sketches for a Construction, circa 1955, pencil on paper.  
Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale.  
Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for  
British Art (all rights reserved)



**Figure 16.**

John McHale, *Sketches for a Construction*, circa 1955, pencil on paper. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale / Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved)

The fact that McHale chose to examine the “new languages” of mass culture through different forms of media—including collage, film, sculpture, and the written word—is testament to his close reading of McLuhan and interest in the media ecologist’s methods.<sup>69</sup> In *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan advocated for translating information into different media to raise “awareness of the widest bearings of one [media] situation on another”, the message changing each time it was passed through a different medium.<sup>70</sup> In McHale’s film, *The Human Image in Mid-Century*, fine art and mass media ikons would have been transformed into a curated sequence that invited viewers to compare imagery from across the advertising-to-fine-art continuum. If made, the film would have been screened with a film projector in a dark room, flooding viewers’ vision in high definition but requiring little other interpretative effort. This, McLuhan claimed, made film a “hot” medium, one rich in sensory data that flooded the field of vision with the imagery of the mid-twentieth century. Film lent itself to this type of survey, as it provided a cross-section of visual culture which audiences had little choice but to absorb from start to finish. Individual ikons within McHale’s ordered selection could, therefore, not be easily selected and removed from the continuum without replaying the entire reel.<sup>71</sup>



According to Theo Crosby, collage offered a very different function for McHale: it was a means of “recreating the multi-evocative image”, allowing “contradiction between the whole and its parts”, and “involv[ing] the spectator”. Written in 1958, these statements imply that collage was regarded by McHale’s contemporaries as a cool form of media, one that provided partial sensory data and required “completion by the audience”.<sup>72</sup> In a work like *Telemath VI*, the subject is represented in low-definition, that is, it vaguely resembles a human figure. The placement of the camera lenses, the air-conditioner, and the snippets of text register to viewers as eyes, an ear, and a spinal cord only because of their position in relation to one another. Beside the figure is an almost identical shape yet it reads as a screen, which serves to show the informational gaps filled in by the viewer. Unlike his film, these individual figures did not provide a survey of human imagery at mid-century but rather condensed the expendable mass media into a fragmented and relative structure.<sup>73</sup> The “low-definition” of the collage medium and consequent reliance on active participation meant that McHale’s ikons remained open and sometimes, as in *Pink Eyes*, even visibly unstable.

## **Conclusion: “The Man from Mascom”**

When McHale’s review of McLuhan’s book *Understanding Media* (1964) came out in 1967—titled “The Man from Mascom” in a reference to the field of mass communications—McHale had been contemplating and responding to McLuhan’s ideas about the way technology altered human perception and experience for nearly two decades.<sup>74</sup> McHale was by this time living in the USA and working with Buckminster Fuller on Futurist projects at the University of Illinois, and had a greater breadth of understanding about how these rapid changes in technology affected human sensibility and the future of humanity. Reviewing *Understanding Media* gave McHale the space to summarise McLuhan’s contribution and to synthesise his own engagement with the author’s writing. He credited McLuhan with creating “a new theory of social change”, one that was deemed to be “strikingly apposite to our now global requirements” because of its focus on the *effect* of communication as opposed to its local content or meaning.<sup>75</sup> McHale also touched on McLuhan’s importance for his and the IG’s work, describing *The Mechanical Bride* as “one of the first primers on how to read the Pop environment”, which had allowed McHale to undertake his own investigations into the effect of the mass media on human perception and the impact for the fine arts.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, McHale distanced himself from McLuhan’s “moralising” tone, reading into his media ecology, as so many critics did, an overarching message about the homogenisation of culture by technology. This is perhaps more revealing of developments in McHale’s thinking than McLuhan’s, as it demonstrates a shift from his initial engagement with *The Mechanical Bride*

and its warnings about the dangers of advertising media, towards a greater focus on how McLuhan's methods and ideas could be utilised to study the way fine art transmitted knowledge and was consumed in an age of mass media.

The concept of the "expendable ikon" responded to a belief he shared with McLuhan that reality was a "construct" into which each person was "enculturated".<sup>17</sup> The consequence was a focus on language as a foundational factor in constructing human identity. McHale's artworks, as well as his collection of mass media imagery, attempted to make sense of the languages of fine art and mass media, the one a repository for knowledge that survived through history and the other providing expendable imagery that changed as rapidly as human wants and desires. McHale utilised fine art as a form of McLuhanian myth-making, to make sense of the ever-shifting field of communication that the mass media provided. He began this endeavour with his collage books from 1954, looking at the role of structure and syntax in how human beings formulate meaning, but once enrolled in Albers' colour course, turned instead to the collage ikon, which more directly dealt with the effect of advertising and its advanced colour-printing technologies on identity-formation. Through McLuhan, McHale came to understand that each medium has a unique set of qualities that structure the information transmitted, thus he explored his ideas through his writing, collages, and film. *The Human Image in Mid-Century* removed ikons from the field of visual communication to which they belonged—either the museum or the magazine—and placed them in a successive stream, allowing audiences to undertake their own quantitative analysis of the representation of man and woman in the middle of the century.

Although McHale dedicated his energy in the 1950s to investigating the perceptual changes brought about by the mass media, he continued to believe that art also shapes human identity. Perhaps this is what ultimately set him apart from McLuhan and his media ecology. In emphasising the continuing importance of art as a form of knowledge transmission, and the ability of the arts to open itself up to technology and mass media, McHale offered an alternative to the idea, held by McLuhan and many others in the 1960s, that mass media technologies had the potential to homogenise culture and control mass audiences.

## Footnotes

- 1 Letter, John McHale to Marshall McLuhan, 1959, John McHale papers, Buffalo NY (uncatalogued).
- 2 Letter, John McHale to Marshall McLuhan, 1959, John McHale papers, Buffalo NY (uncatalogued).
- 3 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). Marshall McLuhan set up the "Culture and Communications" seminars with Edmund Carpenter at the University of Toronto in 1953. The seminars, which ran for two years, brought together academics and graduate students from Anthropology, Economics, English, Psychology, and Town Planning to explore how the methods used in each discipline codified reality. The findings were published in the journal founded by McLuhan *Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication*.

- 4 John McHale, "The Expendable Ikon 1", *Architectural Design* 22 (February 1959): 82-83.
- 5 Letter, John McHale to Marshall McLuhan, 1959; Marshall McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media", *Daedalus* 88, no. 2 (1959): 339-348.
- 6 Letter, John McHale to Marshall McLuhan, 1959.
- 7 Marshall McLuhan's archive contains fourteen correspondences between McHale and McLuhan dating between 1959 and 1979: Marshall McLuhan papers, Library and Archives Canada, MG 31, D 156, Vol. 31, file 34; McLuhan and McHale also met in person when McLuhan visited him and Buckminster Fuller at Carbondale, Illinois, where they had established the World Resources Inventory Office.
- 8 Lawrence Alloway, "The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty", in David Robbins (ed.), *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1990), catalogue of an exhibition at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College [et. al.], 1-18 February 1990, 59. According to the art critic and historian Irving Sandler, McLuhan only became influential among American artists after the publication of *Understanding Media* in 1964: Irving Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 79.
- 9 McHale, "The Expendable Ikon I", in John McHale, *The Expendable Reader: Articles on Art, Architecture, Design, and Media (1951-79)*, edited by Alex Kitnick (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 49.
- 10 Lawrence Alloway, Reyner Banham, David Lewis et. al., *This is Tomorrow* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1956), catalogue of an exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, 9 August-9 September, 1956.
- 11 McHale, "The Expendable Ikon I", in Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, 51.
- 12 Letter, John McHale to Marshall McLuhan, 1959.
- 13 The Independent Group programme for 1955 is reprinted in Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-1959* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 142-144; Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson (eds), *Parallel of Life and Art* (London: The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1953), catalogue of an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 30 November-4 December 1953; Lawrence Alloway (ed.) *Collages and Objects* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1954), catalogue of an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 13 October-20 November 1954; Theo Crosby (ed.), *This is Tomorrow* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1956), catalogue of an exhibition at The Whitechapel Gallery, 9 August-9 September 1956.
- 14 Lawrence Alloway (ed.), *3 Collagists: New Work by E.L.T. Mesens, John McHale and Gwyther Irwin* (London: Cambridge Contemporary Art Trust, 1958), catalogue of an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 3-29 November 1958, unpaginated.
- 15 Theo Crosby (ed.), "John McHale", *Uppercase*, 1 (London, Whitefriars Press, 1958), unpaginated.
- 16 McHale spent a year in the USA studying at Yale in 1955-1956.
- 17 Alex Kitnick lays the groundwork for this study in his discussion of McHale and McLuhan in Alex Kitnick, "Hip-Artificer", in *The Expendable Reader: Articles on Art, Architecture, Design, and Media (1951-79)*, edited by Alex Kitnick (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 12-30.
- 18 Lawrence Alloway (ed.), *Collages and Objects* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1954), catalogue of an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 13 October-20 November 1954.
- 19 Letter from Lawrence Alloway to Ove Arup, 20 December, 1954, Collages and Objects exhibition file, 13 October-20 November, 1954, Collection of the Institute of Arts, Tate Archives, 955.1.12.61.
- 20 Winston Churchill served as prime minister of Great Britain from 1940 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1955.
- 21 McHale, "The Expendable Ikon I", in Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, 49.
- 22 McHale, "The Expendable Ikon I", in Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, 49.
- 23 Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, 2011), 4.
- 24 McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, 22.
- 25 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin Essays and Reflections*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 238ff.
- 26 Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (Lakeville, CT: Institute of General Semantics, 1995 [1933]); Julian Cooper, *Fathers of Pop*, 1979, Arts Council of Great Britain, 47 minutes.
- 27 The first member of the IG to visit the United States of America was Geoffrey Holroyd in 1948.
- 28 Reyner Banham on John McHale in Charlotte Kotik (ed.), *The Expendable Ikon: Works by John McHale* (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1984), catalogue of an exhibition at the Albright Knox Gallery, 12 May-8 July 1984, 37.
- 29 Letter, John McHale to Magda and Frank Cordell, Tuesday [undated, circa 1956], 12.30pm, 3 and 4, John McHale papers, Buffalo NY (uncatalogued).
- 30 Buckminster Fuller began as a visiting critic in the Architecture department at Yale University in 1956 on the invitation of the architect George Howe. John McHale became friendly with him while himself at Yale and subsequently wrote the first official biography about Fuller: John McHale, *R. Buckminster Fuller* (New York: George Braziller, 1962). They continued to collaborate on projects throughout their lives.

- 31 Much of the mass media material McHale collected is now in the John McHale archive, Yale Center for British Art, MSS 60 (Cabinet L).
- 32 Lynda Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke: Art and Culture in Post-War Britain* (New Haven, CT: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2017).
- 33 Lawrence Alloway, "John McHale [for a Catalogue of His Collages]", undated, 2, Lawrence Alloway Papers, Getty Research Institute, LA, 2003.M.46 Box 26 Folder 13.
- 34 Frederick A. Horowitz and Brenda Danilowitz, *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes* (London: Phaidon Press, 2009), 73–75.
- 35 Josef Albers, "A Method of Teaching Color Based on Training in Visual Perception", (1958), 1, Josef Albers papers, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, MS 32 Box 2, Folder 27.
- 36 Albers, "A Method of Teaching Color Based on Training in Visual Perception", 2.
- 37 Albers, "A Method of Teaching Color Based on Training in Visual Perception", 2.
- 38 Letter, John McHale to Magda and Frank Cordell, Sunday [undated, circa 1956], 10.30pm, 2, John McHale papers, Buffalo, NY (uncatalogued).
- 39 Letter, John McHale to Magda and Frank Cordell, Sunday [undated, circa 1956], 10.30pm, 2.
- 40 Letter, John McHale to Magda and Frank Cordell, Tuesday [undated, circa 1956], John McHale papers, Buffalo, NY (uncatalogued).
- 41 John McHale, "Josef Albers", *Architectural Design* 26, no. 6 (June 1956): 20; Reprinted in John McHale, *The Expendable Reader: Articles on Art, Architecture, Design, and Media (1951–79)*, edited by Alex Kitnick (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 40–48.
- 42 The IG's disdain for the concept of "pure" form is best evinced by Alloway in Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists, Their Work and Theory* (London: Alec Tiranti Ltd, 1954), 5.
- 43 Lawrence Alloway, "Introduction", *Class of '59: An Exhibition of Paintings, Sculptures, Collages, by Magda Cordell, Eduardo Paolozzi, John McHale* (Cambridge: Cambridge Contemporary Art Trust, 1959), catalogue for an exhibition held at the Contemporary Art Trust, 7–19 February 1959, unpaginated.
- 44 Letter, John McHale to Magda and Frank Cordell, Tuesday [undated, circa 1956], 3.
- 45 Alloway, quoted in Kitnick, *The Expendable Ikon*, 31.
- 46 Kenneth Boulding, *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1973 [1956]); Kenneth Boulding was notable in the 1950s for having founded the Society for General Systems Research in the USA, along with Ludwig von Bertalanffy.
- 47 McLuhan, "The Educational Effects of the Mass Media", *The Clearing House* 30, no. 9 (May 1956), 524.
- 48 McHale, "The Expendable Ikon 1", in Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, 51.
- 49 McHale, "The Expendable Ikon 1", in Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, 51.
- 50 McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media", 347.
- 51 McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media", 340 and 339.
- 52 Letter, John McHale to Marshall McLuhan, 1959.
- 53 McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media", 340.
- 54 McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media", 347.
- 55 McHale, "The Expendable Ikon 1", in Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, 51.
- 56 Letter, John McHale to Magda and Frank Cordell, [undated, circa 1955].
- 57 Letter, John McHale to Alfred Barr Esq., 19 September 1959, John McHale papers, Buffalo, NY (uncatalogued).
- 58 Peter Selz (ed.), *New Images of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), catalogue of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, 30 September–29 November 1959.
- 59 Selz, *New Images of Man*, dust jacket.
- 60 Giulia Smith, "Painting that Grows Back: Futures Past and the Ur-Feminist Art of Magda Cordell McHale, 1955–1961", *British Art Studies* 1, (2015) DOI:10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-01/gsmith.
- 61 John McHale, "The Fine Arts and the Mass Media", *Cambridge Opinion*, 17, (1959), reprinted in John McHale, *The Expendable Reader: Articles on Art, Architecture, Design, and Media (1951–79)*, edited by Alex Kitnick (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 64–73; Lawrence Alloway, "The Art and Mass Media", *Architectural Design* 28 (February 1958): 84–85, reprinted in Richard Kalina (ed.), *Imagining the Present: Context, Content and the Role of the Critic* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 55–61.
- 62 Alloway, "The Arts and Mass Media", in Kalina (ed.), *Imagining the Present*, 56; The term "time-binding" came from the semanticist Alfred Korzybski. It attempted to explain the ability of human beings to pass knowledge from generation to generation through material culture and the written word. Korzybski considered the human time-binding capacity to be the key to the development of the human race beyond that of the rest of the animal kingdom, see Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, 371ff.
- 63 Lawrence Alloway, "Personal Statement", *Ark* 19 (March 1957): 28–29, reprinted in Richard Kalina (ed.), *Imagining the Present: Context, Content and the Role of the Critic* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 52.

- 64 McHale, "The Fine Arts and the Mass Media", in: Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, p. 66.
- 65 McHale, "The Fine Arts and the Mass Media", in Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, 67.
- 66 McHale, "The Fine Arts and the Mass Media", in Kitnick (ed.), *The Expendable Reader*, 68.
- 67 McHale is referring to *Is Art Necessary?*, "Encounters in the Dark", episode 2, written by Kenneth Clark, Associated Television (ATV), 17 March 1958.
- 68 McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media", 345.
- 69 Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, "The New Languages", *Chicago Review* 10, no. 1 (1956), 46.
- 70 McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, 22.
- 71 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 22ff.
- 72 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 22ff; Crosby, *Uppercase 1*, unpaginated.
- 73 McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media", 339.
- 74 John McHale, "The Man from Mascom", review of *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, by Marshall McLuhan (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), *Progressive Architecture* (February 1967), 170–199, reprinted in John McHale, *The Expendable Reader: Articles on Art, Architecture, Design, and Media (1951–79)*, edited by Alex Kitnick (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 74–83.
- 75 McHale, "The Man from Mascom", 82.
- 76 McHale, "The Man from Mascom", 78.
- 77 McHale, "The Man from Mascom", 75.

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# Spratt's Flaps: Midwifery, Creativity, and Sexuality in Early Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture

Rebecca Whiteley

## Abstract

In 1833, an unusual book was published in London, Edinburgh, and Dublin. Written and illustrated by the surgeon and artist George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* stood out among midwifery guides of the period for its coloured lithographic illustrations, mobilised by the construction of paper flaps. This article explores the way these flap prints contributed to medical pedagogy, but also looks much more widely at their cultural resonances. Through their interaction with wider visual cultures, Spratt's tables engaged not only with medical literature, but also with social anxieties over nudity and sexuality, midwifery and propriety, and the power of popular print. By studying Spratt's tables alongside comic and satirical mobile prints, obscene and pornographic prints, and "fine art" nudes, this article demonstrates how medical images can be addressed as rich and complex resources for histories that are medical, visual, and cultural.

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## Introduction

Under our eyes and hands, a woman conceives and grows pregnant; a foetus turns and turns again, presenting different body parts for birth; forceps are applied and an obstructed foetus is delivered; a vaginal examination is conducted; a pregnant corpse is dissected layer by layer.

These are the actions users undertake when they view and handle George Spratt's *Obstetric Tables*: a slim, cloth-bound volume which presents a summary of midwifery knowledge in hand-coloured lithographic plates, most of which are mobilised and complicated by the construction of paper flaps (Figs 1 and 2). First published in 1833, followed up with a supplement in 1835, and then regularly re-issued for roughly the next ten years, this remarkable book had a short blaze of importance for British visual culture in the last years of the Georgian and the first years of the Victorian eras.<sup>1</sup> Cultures of midwifery, of print, and of sexuality were all undergoing change in these decades. Widespread social anxiety arose in response to: the increasing dominance of male obstetric practice; the proliferation of cheap and uncontrolled print; and the questions that both of these threw up about propriety and sexual continence. This article explores what Spratt's flap constructions have to tell us not only about this period's culture of medical illustration and pedagogy, but also about its cultures of print, and of bodies, much more widely.

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### Figure 1.

George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables: Comprising Graphic Illustrations, with Descriptions and Practical Remarks; Exhibiting on Dissected Plates Many Important Subjects in Midwifery*. Second Edition, Considerably Enlarged and Improved, volume 1. (London: The Author, 1835). Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).

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### Figure 2.

George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables: Comprising Graphic Illustrations, with Descriptions and Practical Remarks; Exhibiting on Dissected Plates Many Important Subjects in Midwifery*. Second Edition, Considerably Enlarged and Improved., volume 2. (London: The Author, 1835). Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).

Medical images can be interrogated as historic resources that chart the progress of medical and biological discovery. But they are also parts of visual culture, with complex relations to that which they represent, and when looked at as evidence not of abstract truths but of the cultures that produced them, they can speak in new ways.<sup>2</sup> Spratt's tables, as this article will

demonstrate, can only be fully understood as images that worked both earnestly within the culture of medical pedagogy, and as wider and more subversive commentaries *on* that culture.

Looking at medical images as visual culture can be difficult—there is often little textual evidence for their wider cultural significances, framed as they were in the nineteenth century (and indeed today) by ideals of indexicality, objectivity, and truthfulness.<sup>3</sup> But when we explore how such images actually sort, interpret, and represent information, as well as how they engage with the wider visual cultures and social preoccupations of the time, they become historical sources in themselves, that work outside of the texts that frame them. Artists, often not medically trained, turned an outsider's perspective on what they drew, even where they were directed by medical authors.<sup>4</sup> They also produced outputs that were much more open to interpretation, adaption, and misuse than medical texts. Exploring the variety of influences on and interpretations of a medical image can, therefore, give a much wider view of the place of medicine in a period's culture.

With Spratt's tables, I aim to show that medical authors and artists often felt an ambivalence about the official ambitions and approaches of their profession, and that they were aware of the more critical and diverse ways in which medicine was perceived by non-professionals. Indeed, Spratt makes a particularly rewarding case study for this kind of history because he was both the author and the artist of the *Obstetric Tables*. As a surgeon-accoucheur and a lithographic artist, Spratt was both an insider and an outsider when it came to the medical establishment and its rhetoric. His work as an artist led him to comment with unusual frankness and criticality on the contemporary culture of medical midwifery. It is this cultural commentary that this article seeks to explore.

First establishing the context for Spratt's work—its production history, audience, and visual and material influences—I will then address a selection of the tables. This selection demonstrates the diversity of Spratt's output, and moves through the different ways in which his flap productions engaged with wider medical and body cultures: from anatomy and medical pedagogy; to popular and comic mobile prints; to the complex and intertwined issues of sex, nakedness, pornography, and the nude. Regarding these different contexts, this article demonstrates how culturally complex a medical image can be, and how it can be employed to knit together official medical knowledge with wider cultures of medicine, the body, and its representation.

This article constitutes only the second scholarly work to address Spratt's output, and the first to focus on his medical illustrations.<sup>5</sup> Not known as a pioneer in medicine or lithography, he barely features in histories of

obstetrics or print culture. Yet, the *Obstetric Tables* was popular in its time and has much to tell us about visual cultures of medicine in the nineteenth century. The last decades have seen increased interest among art historians in the visual cultures of nineteenth-century medicine, but the field is still new and by no means well covered.<sup>6</sup> Particularly, the focus within art history has remained, in many cases, on famed practitioners and their interactions with the fine arts. Book illustrations, which make up the core of the period's medical visual culture, are most often treated peripherally. This study turns these trends inside out by placing the cheap, copied, "popular", accessible medical printed image at the centre of a visual culture study.

## George Spratt

Spratt was both the author and artist of the *Obstetric Tables*, but this does not mean that he worked in isolation. He drew heavily on existing sources for both text and images, in a process that was common in the period, but which has received little in-depth study since, either as a general phenomenon or in specific instances.<sup>7</sup> Spratt borrowed images produced for the famed midwifery authors of the eighteenth century, as well as popular contemporary obstetric authors and others who produced flap anatomies.<sup>8</sup> The plates were printed by G.E. Madeley and Charles Hullmandel, the former also undertaking some of the lithography. And while the drafting for the first edition of 1833 was done largely by G. Spratt, the plates from the 1835 supplement, which were incorporated into all later editions, are signed not only by G. but also by E., F., and W. Spratt. These other Spratts were most likely his children, who included William Henry Williams baptised in 1811 and Francis Edgar in 1814 in Blackmore, Essex.<sup>9</sup> The family were in the printmaking line, with George's wife Maria illustrating and publishing at least one book in her own right, and their daughter Julia setting up an art school in the 1840s.<sup>10</sup> George Spratt's status as both a medical practitioner and a professional artist, combined with his sharing of the work with other artists who most likely had no medical training, allowed him to offer a particularly broad and creative view of early nineteenth-century midwifery.<sup>11</sup>

While Spratt claimed to be a "surgeon-accoucheur" on the title page to *Obstetric Tables*, evidence suggests he was not a successful medical practitioner. His simultaneous work as an artist points to this, as do the listings of his bankruptcy in Northampton in 1824<sup>12</sup> and in Chelsea, London in 1828.<sup>13</sup> Various scanty biographies of Spratt have suggested that he was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons or a fellow of the Linnaean Society, yet neither institution has any record of him. It is most likely, then, that he achieved no particular prominence within medicine and was one of that growing class of surgeons who struggled to make a living in what was

becoming an increasingly competitive marketplace.<sup>14</sup> He does seem to have made some headway as an artist, however, producing illustrations for several botanical compendia, toxicology wallcharts, and two series of popular composite caricatures.<sup>15</sup>

While many medical practitioners of the period could draw, learning as part of a liberal education or training themselves in order to publish, Spratt's position is more unusual. Rather than being a doctor who drew, he made his living on the boundaries between medicine and art, cobbling jobs together in the simple pursuit of earning a living. As such, he was oriented not towards pioneering new medical knowledge, but towards producing works that would sell. His perspective on midwifery was both more representative of the profession generally than that of the more rarefied medical elite, and integrated an outsider's perspective. As an artist—a caricaturist no less—he was closely observant, critically witty, and experienced in understanding what would appeal to a diverse audience. Because he was so embedded in the cultures of popular printmaking, his flap constructions are both unusually upfront about their wider cultural affiliations, and remarkably frank in their commentary on the nature of medical practice and its visual representation. Using existing texts and images, Spratt collected, combined, coloured, and mobilised them into a work that was, as I will argue, popular, enticing, and satirical as well as educational. As such, his work offers a remarkable case study for the intersections between medical and wider visual cultures.

## Readerships

Spratt's book, while it would have been enticing and interesting to many readers, was officially described as being intended for the "student in obstetric science, and the more inexperienced accoucheur".<sup>16</sup> *Obstetric Tables* was meant to provide these male, professional readers with a simple overview of the anatomy and practice of midwifery. The coloured and mobile illustrations were valued by reviewers for the way they helped students to decipher and remember medical knowledge. One reviewer for *The London Medical and Surgical Journal* recommended the volume to both students and practitioners, "for it instructs the former, and recals [sic] to the recollection of the latter many most important circumstances, which it is impossible for the memory to retain in vivid and fresh colours".<sup>17</sup> The materially engaging nature of the book was expressed by one American reviewer who told their readers "It must be seen to be appreciated" and that "No single picture could ever convey the same ideas, and enable the student to understand the descriptions, but these dissected plates are almost equal to the manakin itself." <sup>18</sup>



The book was characterised, therefore, as a useful revision guide, a summation of the information and demonstrations on manikins provided in midwifery lecture courses. It was often recommended to students, and characterised as moderately priced, but it was clearly also appealing to more established practitioners, and it certainly wasn't as cheap as many other contemporary student guides. The actual price seems to have varied—between sellers and depending on whether or not the copy was coloured—between £1 5s. and £2 5s.<sup>19</sup> Given that even the much more comprehensive and heavily illustrated manual *An Atlas of Plates* by Francis Ramsbotham sold for only 18 s., it seems likely that at least the less financially secure among students and young practitioners would have balked at purchasing Spratt's book.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the list of subscribers printed in each edition indicates that the actual core audience was more established surgeons and general practitioners.<sup>21</sup> They likely saw the book as both a serious medical study guide and more of a prestigious and beautiful medically themed gift book. Such a visually and haptically attractive book was likely intended to be both studied and shown off. Physicians and surgeons may have made their copies available to colleagues, pupils, midwives, and even patients.

Indeed, many of the same features likely made the work attractive to lay readers. In the 1830s, as I will discuss further, professional and popular medical texts were less distinct, and people also moved in and out of *being* medical professionals in the search for sustaining employment.<sup>22</sup> Interested lay readers with some money to spare might well have purchased such an intriguing book, or browsed in it at a bookshop or a friend's private library. Indeed, a review in the literary magazine *The Athenæum* indicates that this, as well as other medical books, were understood to be of interest to wider and non-professional audiences. However, this particular review also expresses a broader anxiety from the period: that books that were of value to students for their accessibility might also be too attractive to lay readers not trained to use and interpret them appropriately. So the reviewer noted of the plates, with distinctly faint praise: "We hope they may repay the author for the labour and pains he has evidently bestowed on them: their general accuracy, together with their moderate price, will recommend them to those who need their assistance."<sup>23</sup> The reviewer clearly takes a dim view of those who would need such a book, be they under-qualified practitioners or lay people, suggesting that for the accomplished practitioner, the effort Spratt put into creating the tables didn't equal their worth.

Going forward, therefore, we will assume that most early nineteenth-century viewers would have been excited and pleased, if not also puzzled and troubled, to get their hands and eyes on a book with coloured and mobile prints of naked women, female genitalia, and the mysterious unborn child.

Indeed, I argue that Spratt produced his tables specifically for such a diverse audience—catering to the medical and the lay, the legitimate and the illicit reader.

## Medical Pedagogy

Turning to the tables themselves, I will begin with what we might call a “textually sanctioned” reading of the tables as medically pedagogic, before moving on to address wider audiences and more diverse interpretations.

Table 11 shows the dissected body of a pregnant cadaver ([Fig. 3](#)). It follows a long-standing format for exposing the abdomen using a cruciform incision and peeling back successive layers of tissue that was still, in this period, heavily associated with the plates from William Hunter’s *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Exhibited in Figures* (1774). The flap format is lifted from Edward William Tuson’s *A Supplement to Myology* (1828), but the twin fetuses eventually uncovered are copied from Table 10 of William Smellie’s *A Sett of Anatomical Tables* (1754).



[Watch Video](#)

### Figure 3.

E. Spratt (draftsman), Table 11, hand-coloured lithograph, 283 x 222 mm (page), from George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* (London: The Author, 1835). Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).

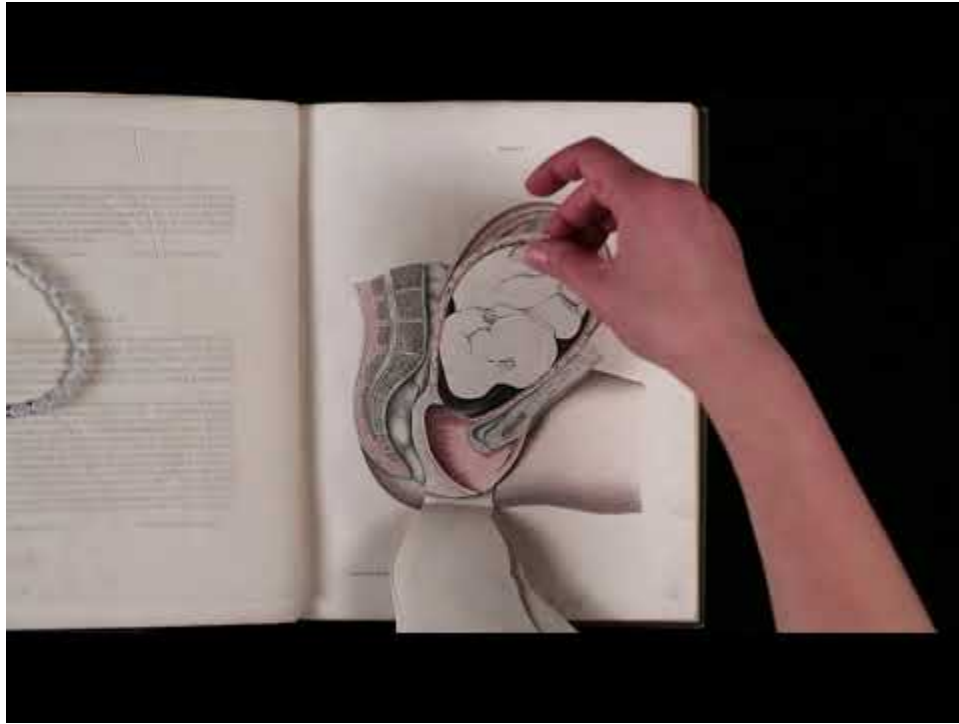
This is perhaps Spratt's most conventional flap construction: it borrows from existing texts on midwifery, demonstrating Spratt's comprehensive knowledge of the canonical literature and visual culture of the discipline. It also engages with the history of anatomical flap sheets. From the sixteenth century, printed anatomical flap sheets, sometimes called "fugitive sheets", became popular. They are described by Andrea Carlino as translating "on to paper the whole concept of anatomical dissection, mimicking the progressive unveiling of the body, from skin to guts".<sup>24</sup> These sheets provided anatomical information in a sanitised, bloodless, and reversible replication of the process of dissection.<sup>25</sup> The popularity of anatomical flap sheets waned from the late seventeenth century, but saw a resurgence in the nineteenth century. Some of the first of these were the large, intricate constructions produced for James Hogben in the 1810s and Edward William Tuson in the 1820s. Later in the century, this style of flap production was continued by Gustave-Joseph Witkowski and James Suydam Knox, among others.<sup>26</sup> These newly complex and delicate flaps describe the minutely detailed, austere anatomy of the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> While they were expensive, professional works, flap anatomies were also produced for wider popular audiences, by authors such as Achille Comte and Frederick Hollick.<sup>28</sup> Spratt's flaps sit somewhere between the technical professional and the accessible lay publication. He saw in the paper technology of flaps a potential for playfulness that attracted viewers; a three-dimensionality that allowed for the description of bodies and operations on them; and a materiality that inclined the constructions to self-referentiality.

In Table 11, what appears to be a quite straightforward paper reconstruction of uterine anatomy is also a meditation on materiality and representation. Moving through the uterine wall, the decidua, and the chorion, we reach the amnion, which is not represented by a hand-coloured lithograph on paper, but by hand-painted tissue paper. With this choice of material, the distance between object and representation is collapsed and the flap comes materially as well as visually to replicate the amnion—not only its translucency, but also its fragility. The care with which one has to handle this layer, sliding a nail under the tissue and gingerly lifting, brings home the fragility of the membrane, and the importance in midwifery and in anatomical dissection of not prematurely breaking it. The tissue also creates a confusion between the image and the material framing of the book pages, as the same kind of tissue is used to protect the plates. The material assonance pulls viewers out of the act of interpretation, to question whether we see something inside or out of the image—bodily membrane or tissue paper. This enforced attention to material also tells us something about the membrane represented: like tissue covering a bookplate, it is fundamentally

protective and yet in itself very fragile. All these material meanings in the tissue layer direct the viewer to a kind of reverence, a carefulness born of material and cultural knowledge, as we expose the foetus within.

Like Table 11, most medical flap prints in the nineteenth century and earlier employ the technology to represent bodily layers as they are peeled back during a dissection. But Spratt's flaps are much more diverse: they are remarkable not only for their self-conscious use of materials, but also for their modes of representation, most often showing not the anatomical body dissected, but the living body in movement or growth, or practised upon. The editors of the American edition of *Obstetric Tables* noted this, claiming that the book was "equivalent to a whole series of practical demonstrations" as well as obviating "the necessity of continual *post mortem* examination".<sup>29</sup> Essentially, the book was a surrogate for the demonstrations done on working models and living women in a midwifery course, as well as for anatomical dissection. It was a portable, re-useable, personal reconstruction of the more physical and temporal aspects of midwifery training.

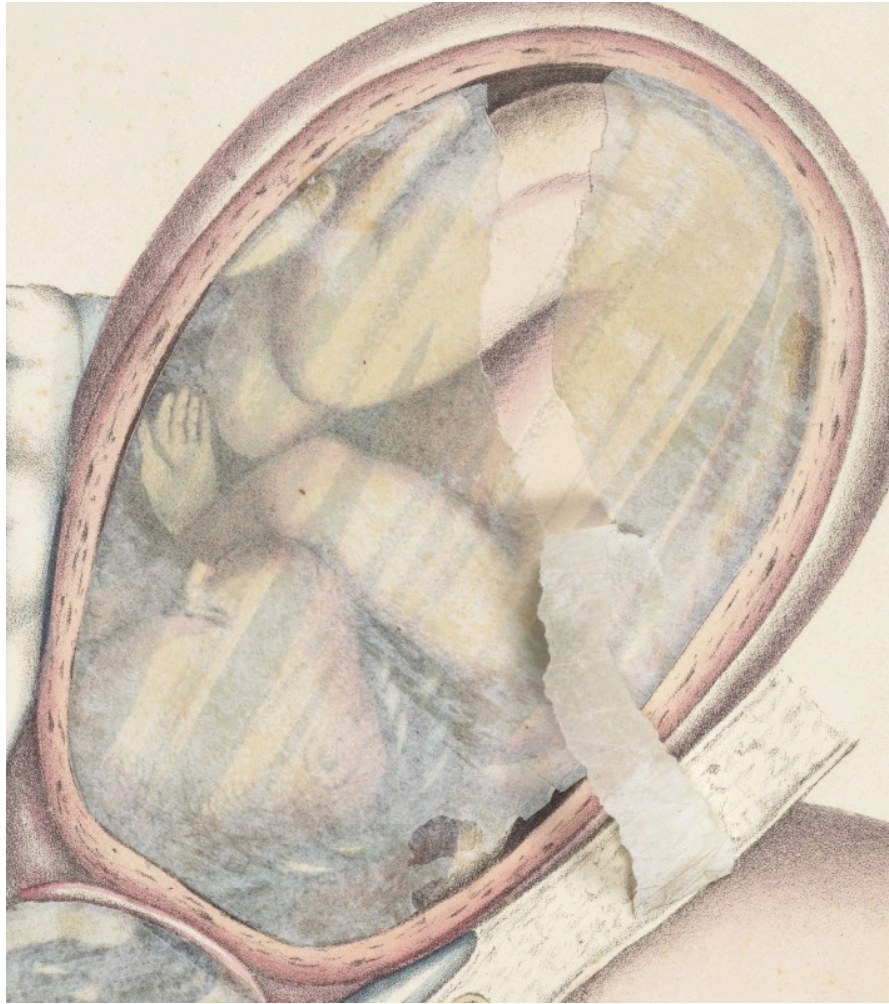
Handling Table 10, for instance, the viewer does not move through the body, but cycles through different possibilities of foetal presentation (Fig. 4). Seeing the foetus shift within the constant maternal body emphasises the variety of possibilities, and the difficulty of establishing presentation, during an actual labour. While in the first three flaps the membranes are broken and the foetus is moving through the cervix, in the final flap, showing the "funis presenting", we find another tissue membrane.<sup>30</sup> Here, the layer is not a flap—it is stuck down, permanently obscuring our view of the foetus, though we are allowed to glimpse the umbilical cord in some copies. Unlike the anatomical flap construction in Table 11, this "practitional" one emphasises the mystery of the unborn child, its inaccessibility, as well as the unpredictable dangers of an umbilical presentation.



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 4.**

George Spratt (draftsman and printmaker), Table 10, hand-coloured lithograph, 283 x 222 mm (page), from George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* (London: The Author, 1835). Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).



**Figure 5.**

E. Spratt (draftsman), Table 11, hand-coloured lithograph, 283 x 222 mm (page), from George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* (London: The Author, 1835). Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).

Trained by the images to search for flaps to lift and explore, when I first encountered this image, I tried to slip a fingernail under the tissue layer and lift it, before realising with a shock that I couldn't and shouldn't. Spratt manipulates the viewer, encouraging us to lift and see, then denying us that power. He balances abstract knowledge with the paucity of that knowledge when attending an actual labour. There is something pointed about this permanent frustration of the desire to see, particularly as the lithograph underneath is detailed and coloured. The table becomes a physical reconstruction of the body, and a physical manifestation of the nature and emotional life of midwifery: the drive to know, the danger of exploring too much, the ultimate mystery of the bodily interior.<sup>31</sup> This is perhaps shown

most starkly in the copies where an over-curious reader has torn the tissue paper, leaving a permanent warning against rough handling and unwarranted curiosity when it comes to both books and the body (Fig. 5).

Table 6 employs flaps in yet another way, describing the body changing over time as the cervix dilates, is examined, and as the foetal head emerges (Fig. 6). In the final image on the paper ground, the uterine wall is cut away to show the foetus. But from the third edition of 1838, an extra flap was added, extending the image *below* the page as the paper ground was cut and another image inserted beneath. This flap is different: materially, the paper is finer and more fragile, the image too is sparser, more abstracted and diagrammatic. It extends the image not just materially but temporally, tracking the passage of the foetal head through the vagina. The folding is also different here, not simply turning down but unfurling with a motion that mimics the movement of the head it represents. The image of the foetus *in utero* is copied from Table 12 of Smellie's *A Sett of Anatomical Tables*, and the extra flap comes from Plate 8 of Maygrier's *Nouvelles demonstrations d'accouchemens*. Spratt's table brings these different visual knowledges together to offer a fuller picture of the process of birth. The unfolding of the flaps describes movement and change in a way that still images could not.



[Watch Video](#)

### Figure 6.

George Spratt (draftsman), Table 6, hand-coloured lithograph, 283 x 222 mm (page), from George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* (London: The Author, 1838). Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).



By some measures, Spratt's tables are derivative, simply taking existing illustrations, layering them and adding colour. Copying in itself, however, was not the problem in the early nineteenth century that it would be today. In fact, collecting and reproducing existing illustrations was a completely naturalised and ubiquitous technique employed by authors to consolidate their authority and guarantee the usefulness of their books.<sup>32</sup> On top of this, Spratt's acts of colouring and mobilisation were innovative and creative in their own right. They added to the source images in multiple ways: making them more pedagogically engaging and communicative; making them enticing and appealing to diverse viewerships; and allowing them to speak about and subvert medical rhetoric in a variety of ways. It is in such processes of copying and adaption, as much as in original invention, that medical knowledge and medical cultures of the period were constructed.

## **Comic Prints**



**Figure 7.**

M. Spratt (draftsman), *The Crown Imperial, or Victoria Lily*, circa 1837, hand-coloured lithograph, 26.3 × 20.5 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1902,1011.9680). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Spratt's tables were created in dialogue with other anatomical flap prints, but these were not the only mobile prints being produced in the early nineteenth century. This period also saw a surge in interest in comic or satirical mobile prints. Indeed, the Spratt family may have been directly involved in producing popular mobile prints: *The Crown Imperial, or Victoria Lily*, in which the head of the young Queen Victoria grows from a flower, is signed "M. Spratt del."—likely George's wife Maria (Fig. 7). Such popular mobile prints used flaps, tabs, and volvelles in order to produce visual jokes. Images that could change allowed artists to set up situations and then subvert or surprise the viewer's expectations. In this period, according to Sileas Wood, many such prints worked on the nuances of public and private life, and family intimacy.<sup>33</sup> Spratt's obstetric flaps work in similar ways, dealing with issues of privacy and exposure, not of the domestic but of the bodily sphere.

Indeed, it is important to see Spratt's obstetric tables, on one level, as visual jokes. They often surprise or misdirect the viewer, working creatively with medium as well as image to draw viewers in, and then to subvert expectations or to pull the viewer back into an awareness of the process of representation. In Table 6B, for instance, as we open the flaps, the movements of a podalic version are enacted—the practitioner inserts a hand into the uterus, finds the feet of a malpresenting foetus, turns it, and then delivers it feet-first (Fig. 8). Opening the first flap, we see that, unusually, the reverses are also printed. With each fold, the whole picture plane is reformulated, extended downwards off the page. Again, the materiality speaks to the content: as we turn the flaps, the foetus slips down and out of the maternal body, and down and off the page. The table not only gives details of podalic version, it also expresses the wider significance of childbirth: the moving of the foetus from the secret inner world of the maternal body to the world at large. As we manipulate the flaps, the foetus seems to be repeatedly slipping out of our grasp, and we continually recalculate the image with each turn to keep him in sight. There is a self-consciousness about this construction, a joking that seems to come both from the artist, and the foetus himself, who gives us a little wave as he leaves.



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 8.**

W. Spratt (draftsman and printmaker), Table 6B, hand-coloured lithograph, 283 x 222 mm (page), from George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* (London: The Author, 1835). Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).

## Midwifery and Obscenity

Comic mobile prints were not, however, Spratt's only point of interaction with wider print cultures. Print as a medium was becoming ever more pervasive, available, numerous, and diverse in its subject matter. Alongside its proliferation grew an anxiety about its uncontrollability and its potentially negative or corrupting influences. This anxiety was most manifest in discussions of what was coming, at this time, to be called pornography.<sup>34</sup> Prints with "obscene" content had a long history, but they underwent changes in both nature and number in the early nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> They proliferated and they pervaded the spaces of the city—displayed in print shops and sold on street corners, they were seen as unavoidable, uncontrollable, and corrupting in a new way. No longer restricted to circles of wealthy men, obscene prints were not just cheap and available to everyone, they were also thrust on those who did not want to see them.<sup>36</sup> As Ian McCalman has shown, the older tradition of employing obscenity in political or satirical prints faded in this period, replaced by material that was more purely erotic.<sup>37</sup> These changes led to a middle-class moral panic about the corruption and sexualisation of women, children, and working people. Anti-vice societies sprang up to tackle the perceived problem, employing methods from entrapping potential buyers in the street to campaigning for stricter legislation.<sup>38</sup> This period saw the rise of the term "pornography" to describe this newly distinct and—according to its opponents—damaging form of print. And it was these very acts of definition and attempts at eradication that gave the genre its furtive, sinister, uncontrollable identity.<sup>39</sup>

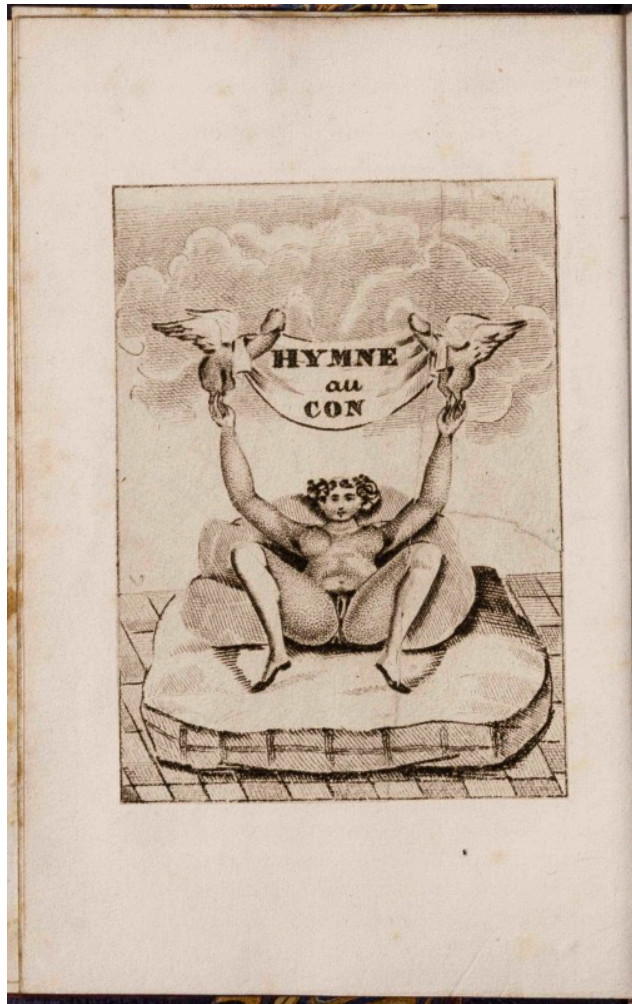
While the vast majority of this cheap printed visual material is now lost to us—neither kept by its original owners nor collected since—what remains indicates wider visual trends. Women who expose their own bodies by lifting skirts or loosing drapery, and who further expose their own genitalia with spread legs and forward-tilted hips, are familiar from the erotic prints of Thomas Rowlandson, which have survived in decent numbers thanks to the artist's wider fame ([Fig. 9](#)). Illustrations have also survived in obscene books, where the same themes of female self-revelation, exposed genitals, and pubic hair are in evidence ([Fig. 10](#)). Some pornographic books also employed paper flaps, or played on the sexually suspect identity of the doctor ([Fig. 11](#)).<sup>40</sup> Erotic "art" prints and obscene books were joined, in the period, by cheap single sheet prints which no longer survive, but which were sold in vast numbers in shops and by street vendors.<sup>41</sup> This sheer availability, and the moral panic surrounding it, means that many people would have had at least a passing familiarity with such images. They would, in short, have been equipped to spot what I argue are intentional references in Spratt's tables.



**Figure 9.**

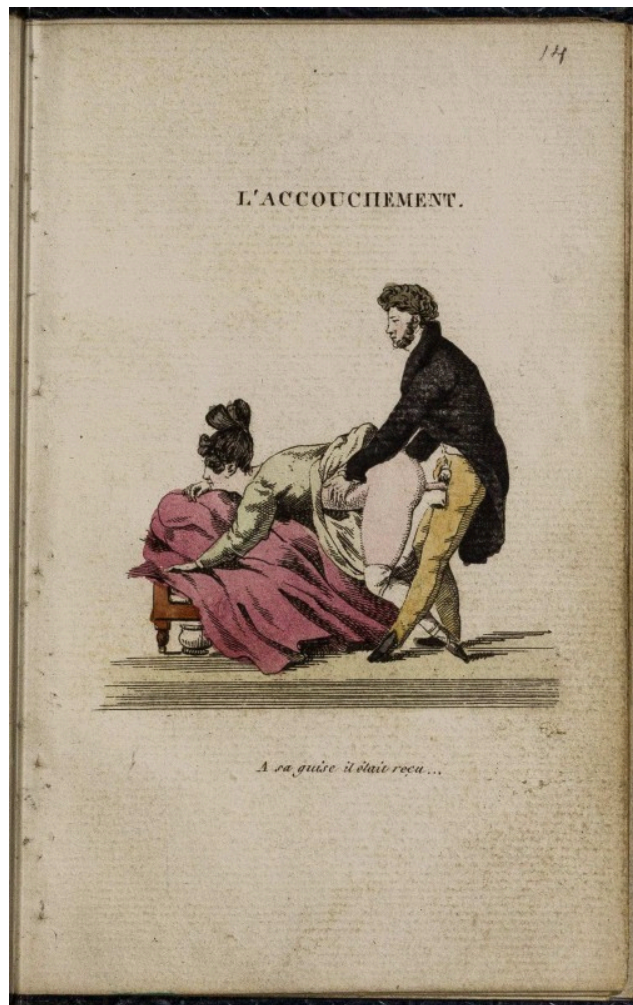
Thomas Rowlandson (draftsman and printmaker), *Rural Sports or Coney Hunting*, circa 1790-1810, etching, 147 × 222 mm (trimmed). Collection of The British Museum (1977,U.570). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).





**Figure 10.**

Anon., Hymne au con, etching, measurements. From Anon., *Chansonnier du bordel, ou veillée d'un fouteur* (1833). Collection of the British Library (P.C.31.a.30, p. [6]). Digital image courtesy of British Library Board (All rights reserved).



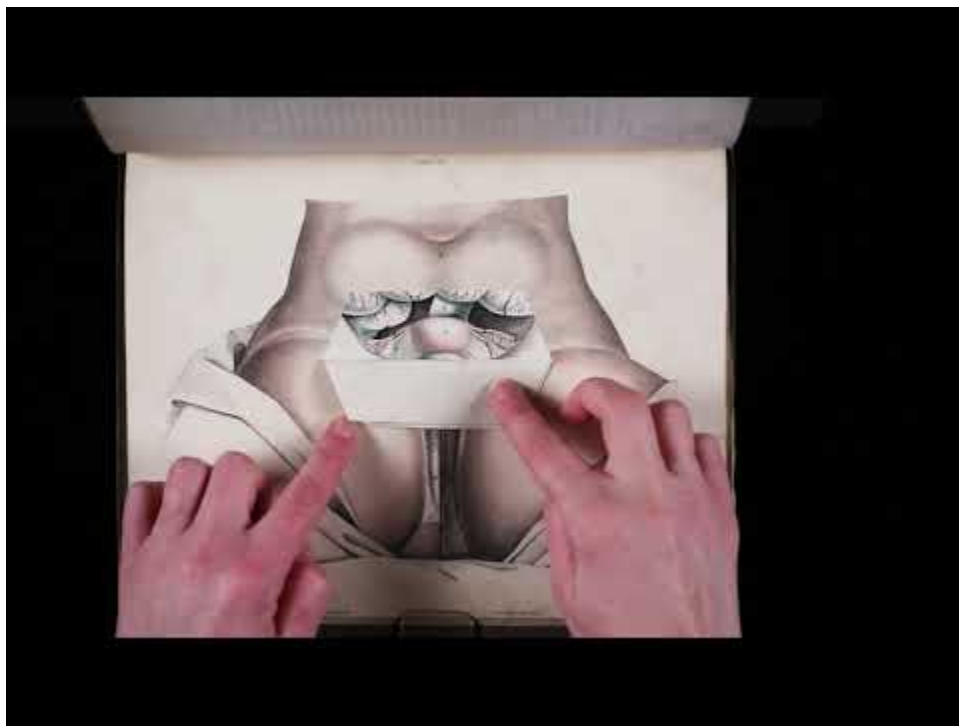
**Figure 11.**

Anon., *L'Accouchement*, hand-coloured etching, measurements. From Pierre Jean de Béranger, *Bérangiana. Mis en action ou choix de ses chansons badines* (1830). Collection of the British Library (P.C.13.a.2, [facing p.26]). Digital image courtesy of British Library Board (All rights reserved).

Two tables in particular from Spratt's book play on these pornographic visual tropes. Table 3 shows a woman's body between belly and thighs, focusing on her genitalia (Fig. 12). It includes two separate flaps, which represent the body in different modes: the upper enacts an anatomical cut, opening up to show the uterus and intestines beneath the skin; the lower describes the body not under dissection but under medical examination with two flaps representing the labia majora open like doors to expose the clitoris, labia minora, and urethral and vaginal openings. These flaps do not represent a cut into the body but a manipulable part of the body itself. As the illustration to *Hymne au con* demonstrates, the view of the female genitalia, with pubic hair, and framed by opened legs and the belly above was common to the medical and the pornographic gaze (Fig. 10). While in the pornographic print



the depiction of the whole figure, the mattress on which she reclines, the flying phalluses, and the title all encourage erotic looking, in Spratt's table, the cropped view and lack of context goes some way to directing away from this kind of looking. Yet, the visual similarities cannot be completely denied, in Spratt's table we may say there is the potential for multiple kinds of looking. To open the flaps in Spratt's table might be interpreted as the enacting of a medical examination, but it might also have been understood as a sexual touching. Mary Hunter has noted the same potential for sexual slippage in the medical image, describing the finger present in some medical wax moulages of genitalia as both a masturbatory agent and a medical tool.<sup>42</sup> When we handle Spratt's Table 3, we ourselves become this ambiguous agent.



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 12.**

F. Spratt (draftsman), Table 3, hand-coloured lithograph, 283 x 222 mm (page), from George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* (London: The Author, 1835). Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).

Table 4 shows a woman in profile from head to mid-thigh. She wears a lace cap and holds up voluminous white drapery to expose her body (Fig. 13). Lifting the flaps, we do not move inside her body, but rather observe her exterior as her pregnancy develops, before finally getting a glimpse of the fully gestated foetus *in utero*. This image is meant to describe for the practitioner the external signs of pregnancy, focusing on the belly and the nipples. But, of course, this kind of close looking at the naked body can also

be erotic, and the contemporary pornographic iconography of the self-exposing woman would have guided viewers towards such a reading (see [Figs 9](#) and [10](#)). Spratt's text also seems to acknowledge the potential for erotic looking. He describes the figure in the first flap as a "virgin female": <sup>43</sup> providing the "standard" body to compare with the pregnant one, but also offering a narrative of defloration. While the presence of pregnancy and the ability to look anatomically within the body might direct the viewer to a more medical interpretation, there is wider evidence that images of pregnancy could, in this period, also function as erotic images. <sup>44</sup> For instance, the illustrations in Wooster Beach's *An Improved System of Midwifery*, published in New York in 1850, include copies of Spratt's tables, as well as some other even more highly sexualised medical illustrations. <sup>45</sup> Incorporating, too, some of the woodcuts from *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, the work is clearly in the vein of a midwifery guide/sex manual. <sup>46</sup> The frontispiece, for instance, shows a naked female figure lying on a luxurious couch, her expression somewhere between ecstasy and pain ([Fig. 14](#)). That she is presented as a sex object, despite her anatomised pregnant belly, is as clear here as it is in the many "anatomical Venuses" produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. <sup>47</sup>



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 13.**

G. Spratt (draftsman), Table 4, hand-coloured lithograph, 283 x 222 mm (page), from George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* (London: The Author, 1835). Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester (All rights reserved).



**Figure 14.**

Anon., *Reclining Pregnant Woman*, from Wooster Beach, *An Improved System of Midwifery*, 1850, hand-coloured lithograph, 29 cm (page height). Collection of The U.S. National Library of Medicine (WQ B365i 1847). Digital image courtesy of The U.S. National Library of Medicine (Public Domain).

These visual associations invite the viewer to sexual looking, and force them to consider the slippages between the medical and the pornographic. Indeed, in their mobility, these tables forcibly implicate the viewer. Responding to the demand for manipulation from the print itself, the viewer becomes an actor in the medico-erotic realm of the image. It might be tempting to deny the sexual in such images, to argue that they are purely medical, intended to be looked at by a specialist trained in objective dispassion. But to do so would be an act of anxiety-induced disengagement, particularly because, in the nineteenth century, to say something was medical did very little to dispel its sexual potential. The two were bound up with each other, and inextricable.

In the eighteenth century, debate had raged in both professional and public print over the propriety of men attending women in labour. So-called “man-midwives” were often looked on with deep suspicion not only as medically incompetent but also as sexually predatory. This did not, however, stop the spread of their practice.<sup>48</sup> By the late nineteenth century, man-midwives, now called “obstetricians”, had established the propriety of their attendance on women in childbirth; the necessity of physical and visual examinations; and the legitimacy of their work as a medical specialism. Slowly, obstetricians gained what Roy Porter has termed a “professional right of entry”, allowing them to touch and look at the body in ways that, outside of

medical frameworks, were deeply inappropriate.<sup>49</sup> While, by late in the nineteenth century, this right had been established, it did not do away with all fears. Indeed, increased access and trust granted to doctors went hand in hand with an increased potential for abuse and raised the spectre of what McLaren calls the “murdering mad doctor”.<sup>50</sup>

Earlier in the nineteenth century, while the “right of entry” was still being established, the acceptability of medical access to the female body was under active debate. Increased drives within medicine to closely examine patients were butting up against hardening notions of bodily modesty, propriety, and sexual continence, particularly for middle-class women.<sup>51</sup> Professional authors of the period sometimes expressed ambivalence over examination, wavering between an ideal of medical access and the reality of dealing with actual women. Francis Ramsbotham, for instance, argued both for the importance of manual intervention and visual examination, but also for not unduly exposing “the patient to the inconvenience of an ocular inspection”.<sup>52</sup> And while some practitioners had increasingly intolerant attitudes to their patients’ scruples, texts that denounced all male involvement in childbirth as “a disgrace to morality and Feminine Dignity” continued to be published.<sup>53</sup> An anonymous pamphlet published in 1826 explained that it was “unquestionably *indelicate* and *unnatural* for a *surgeon* to assist at a child-birth”, particularly because women’s modest “aversion to disclose”, combined with men’s “*natural forwardness*” meant that sexual misdemeanours could be easily committed and concealed by medical men.<sup>54</sup> These concerns were not restricted to a few vocal polemicists. The idea of the sexually suspect doctor appears in many aspects of culture, including contemporary pornography. In the illustration “L’Accouchement” (“Childbirth”) from *Bérangiana* (1830), the medical and sexual touch are explicitly linked, and the caption, which translates as “As he pleased, he was received”, points too to the easy slippage between kind and attentive doctor, and the wily seducer (Fig. 11).<sup>55</sup>

While commentary and debate raged in many spheres of culture, what is clear is that by the 1830s most women who could afford it did call a male attendant when they were in labour.<sup>56</sup> But what is equally clear is that the access granted to such practitioners was tenuous, variable, and always subject to negotiation and worry.<sup>57</sup> In untangling these complex medico-social relations, medical images remain an under-used and often overlooked resource, yet as Elizabeth Stephens has demonstrated, they can be interrogated not simply as “medical representations of sexual bodies”, but also as expressions of the “sexualization inherent in the construction of medical knowledge itself”.<sup>58</sup> Spratt’s Tables 3 and 4, in the context of medical and public debates over access, and visual cultures that associated

doctors with philanderers or sexual predators, must have presented most viewers with the troubling closeness of medical examination with sexual looking and touching ([Figs 12](#) and [13](#)).

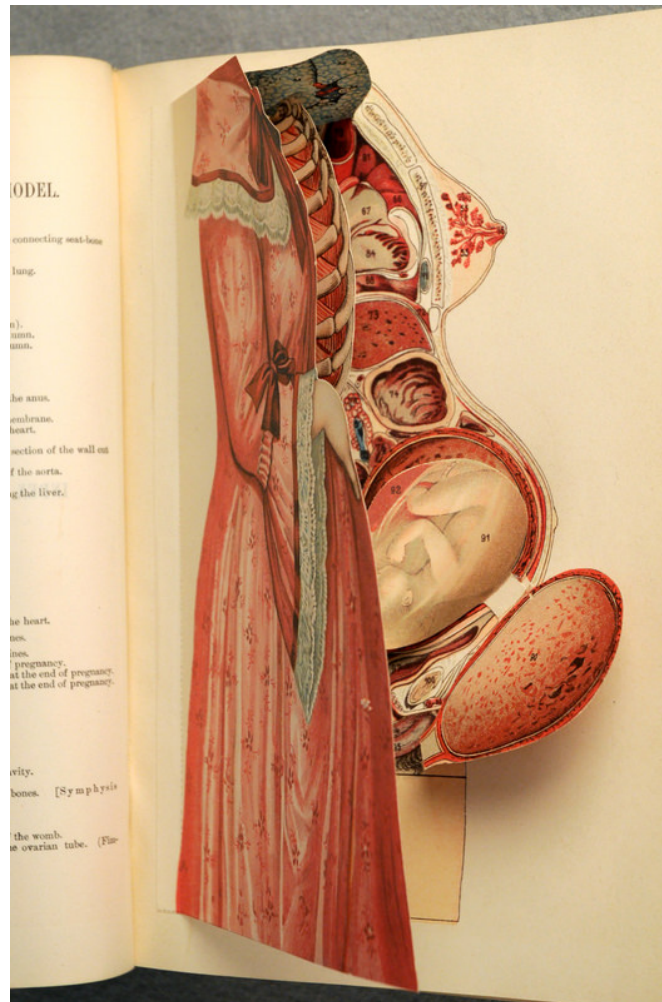
## **Spratt and Sexual Slippage**

The entangling of medicine and sexuality was a public and important issue in this period, as the proliferation of pornographic prints became associated with a new genre of “popular” medical literature.<sup>59</sup> Higher literacy levels and cheaper printing costs saw publishers finding new markets in pamphlets and books aimed at educating a wider readership in all kinds of scientific subjects, including medicine. Before the mid-century, the kinds of information and images that went into these cheap and accessible works were relatively unpoliced and often included information on sex and generation. But, as with pornography, anti-vice societies and the medical establishment felt moved to intervene. As demonstrated by the trials of Frederick Hollick in America in the 1840s, doctors wanted to keep medical expertise in-house, out of the hands of charlatan authors and the paying public alike.<sup>60</sup> And anti-vice groups worried over the moral and social implications of giving people information about sex and generation. By mid-century, popular medical books were largely sanitised of such content and professional works became increasingly inaccessible to lay readers. Popular books that did contain prohibited information were characterised as obscene and indeed were often sold alongside pornography.<sup>61</sup>

A similar pattern has been traced by Sam Alberti and A.W. Bates with regards to medical museums. Early in the century, they were popular and widespread, providing a paying public with medical facts, frightening them with gory specimens, and arousing them with supine and ecstatic female anatomies. By the end of the century, such museums had largely been shut down on the grounds of obscenity, or made private, accessible only to medical students and professionals.<sup>62</sup> Those in power felt that the general public could not cope with, or react appropriately to, the collections in these museums.<sup>63</sup>

Spratt's *Obstetric Tables* has a specific place in this cultural moment: before professional and public had more fully separated, and before medical and legal institutions had settled on what constituted obscene content. His book was able, in the 1830s and 1840s, to cater to professional surgeon-accoucheurs; to students, apprentices, apothecaries, and midwives; to curious lay people; and to those looking for either (or both) medical or sexual content. The text uses technical language and references many canonical obstetrical works, but is also brief and typographically accessible. The tables too are less technical, detailed, and difficult to read than those produced in

many specifically “professional” works. I argue that the tables tread joyfully all over the ambiguities of audience and propriety of medical content that only existed in these decades between the 1820s and the 1850s.



**Figure 15.**

Anon., Anatomical Female Model, from Frederick Hollick, *The Origin of Life* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1902), colour lithograph, 26 cm (page height). Collection of David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University (RC881.H73 1902 c.1). Digital image courtesy of David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University (All rights reserved).

That medical images at this time, and *particularly* Spratt’s tables, had the capacity to accommodate multiple interpretations can be seen by comparing Spratt’s Table 4 to a flap print that accompanied a 1902 edition of Hollick’s *The Origin of Life* (Figs. 13 and 15). Where Spratt’s figure is irrevocably naked, Hollick’s flaps move from full clothing straight to the bodily interior, skipping the naked skin of the woman entirely. Hollick’s print provides only appropriate views of the female body, while Spratt’s forces us into an



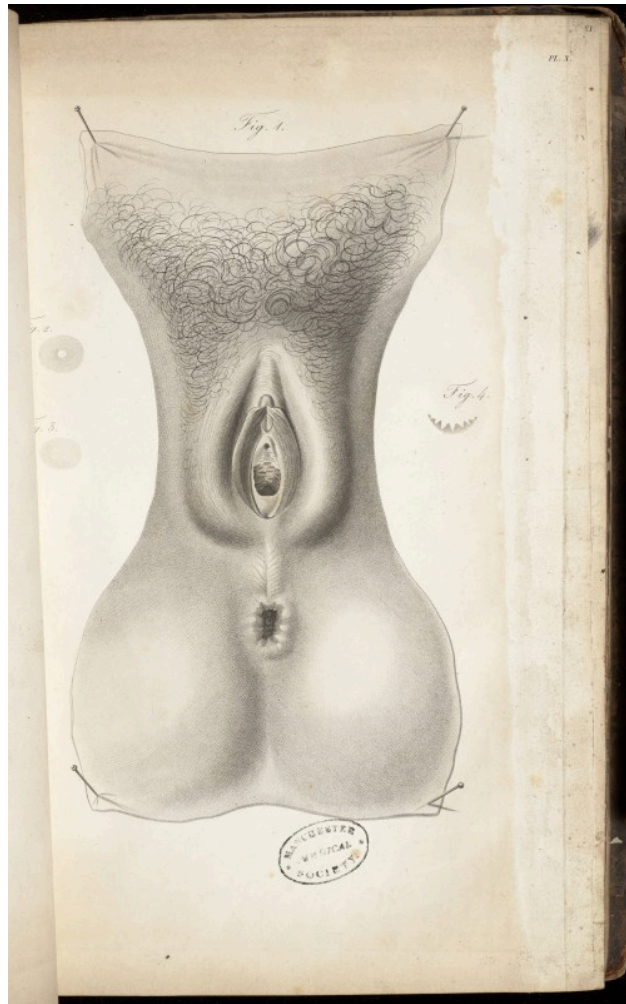
awareness of the potentially inappropriate nature of medical looking. Popular for a short period, I suspect that only a few decades after its first release, the *Obstetric Tables* had gone from a useful medical work to a collectible curiosity; and from one that was intriguingly risqué, to definitively obscene. In fact, Spratt's work not only had its moment in this specific milieu but was also popular then because it commented knowingly *on* the ambiguities and anxieties of that culture. To modern eyes, it may seem confusing that a book ostensibly for medical professionals would also deal with the sexual problematics of their discipline, and even provide pornographic content. Yet this confusion arises partly from our own culture's strict separation of professional medical content from wider cultures of sexuality. What Spratt's book shows us is that in the decades before 1850 there *was* a market for this kind of multiplicity and ambiguity, indeed it is borne out in many illustrated books of the period. For contemporary medical viewers, it was acceptable, and even attractive, for a book to be medically pedagogic, culturally commentative, and potentially pornographic. All three functions were, after all, as interesting to doctors as to anyone else.

Spratt was not alone in producing images that trod the line between medical and obscene, indeed, I argue that this tension infused all medical visual culture of the period. What does make Spratt different is his willingness to directly engage with the issue. His flap constructions do not defuse or deflect, they tackle the sexual in the medical and force us to examine it. This can best be seen by comparing Spratt's images to one of his sources—the illustrations produced by Antoine Chazal for Maygrier's *Nouvelles demonstrations d'accouchemens*. Table 3 in *Obstetric Tables* is an amalgamation of Maygrier's Plates 9 and 10 (see [Figs. 12, 16 and 17](#)). With the flaps closed, Spratt's table looks like a coloured copy of Maygrier's Plate 9 ([Fig. 16](#)). In both, the sitting posture, the sheet covering the legs, and the fact that no anatomical cut has been made indicates that the woman is a living patient. While she is just as naked in Maygrier's version as in Spratt's, in the original, the labia majora are closed over the rest of the vulva, turning the female genitals into a neat cleft. This image, Maygrier declares, represents the female genitalia "in the natural state, and perfectly approximated".<sup>64</sup> He associates the biologically ideal female body with a naturally modest, hidden vulva. Plate 10 shows the vulva under examination, after the labia majora have been "slightly separated" ([Fig. 17](#)).<sup>65</sup> But while Maygrier acknowledges that a separation of the labia majora is something a doctor might enact on a living patient, the image shows what is clearly an anatomical specimen. The pins stretching out the sectioned skin indicate that we are looking at a body *part*, separated not only from a cadaver but more broadly from the idea of a person. Visually, the social problematics of vaginal examination are denied, replaced by an abstracted, intellectualised body which is fully the property of the surgeon/dissector.<sup>66</sup>



**Figure 16.**

Antoine Chazal (draftsman), Plate 9, from J. P. Maygrier, *Nouvelles demonstrations d'accouchemens* (Paris: Béchct, 1822), 1822, lithograph. Collection of The University of Manchester Library. Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester Library (All rights reserved).



**Figure 17.**

Antoine Chazal (draftsman), Plate 10, lithograph, from J. P. Maygrier, *Nouvelles demonstrations d'accouchemens* (Paris: Béchét, 1822). Collection of The University of Manchester Library. Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester Library (All rights reserved).

Even the “naturally modest” image of the female genitalia in Maygrier’s Plate 9 seems to have been powerful and troubling. It has been removed from many copies of the work for reasons, we may suppose, both erotic and censorious. How much more confrontationally shocking did Spratt make his version then, in relocating the entire vulva and the physical act of splaying back onto the living body of the patient. Spratt makes explosive where Maygrier and Chazal attempted to defuse. He doesn’t allow the world of abstract medical knowledge to be separated from that of medical practice, nor does he allow the specimen to be something different to the living body. The turning of the closed labia in Maygrier’s Plate 9 into openable flaps

seems a direct challenge to Maygrier's partial depiction—Spratt not only exposes what is left hidden, he also forces the viewer to acknowledge the action and consequences of exposure.

A similar process lies behind Table 4, which is modelled on Chazal and Maygrier's Plate 26 (see Figs. 13 and 18). In Chazal's version, the body in profile is repeated four times, growing increasingly pregnant. The crucial difference in Spratt's version is not so much the layering of these bodies, as their re-personing. Spratt gives the woman a head, the cloth wound around the shoulders and above the breasts of the original figures becomes a kind of drapery, which she lifts to expose her body. She is even given a lace cap with a bright blue ribbon, a standard item of domestic wear for married women.<sup>67</sup> This cap encourages the viewer to see the figure not in the abstract, but to identify her as a real, specific late-Georgian woman of the middle classes—a young wife. For women viewers, including patients, this adaption must have encouraged identification with the figure, along with awareness (and anxiety? or excitement?) of their own nakedness and vulnerability under the medical gaze.



**Figure 18.**

Antoine Chazal (draftsman), Plate 26, lithograph, from J. P. Maygrier, *Nouvelles demonstrations d'accouchemens* (Paris: Béchét, 1822). Collection of The University of Manchester Library. Digital image courtesy of The University of Manchester Library (All rights reserved).

In Maygrier's version, cloth is used to divorce the body from the face, and from the idea of an actual patient, associating the figures instead with anatomical specimens, which were often represented as partially draped. The drapery in Spratt's, while it lacks sleeves or tailoring that would make it specifically identifiable as a chemise or nightgown, does evoke clothing in the way it is worn, and lifted, by the figure. We are reminded by it not only of

the small practicalities and negotiations of clothing and nakedness in medical examination but also of the much wider cultural significances of veiling. In textual and visual culture outside of medicine, veils were employed not simply to cover the body and ensure modesty, but also to create the *possibility* of exposure. Often translucent, they offered the *form* of modesty at the same time as a transgressive glimpse of the body beneath. As art and fashion historians have noted in many contexts, veiling heightens erotic potential.<sup>68</sup> The lifting of the cloth in Spratt's Table 4 arguably adds a level of eroticism to the image that stark nakedness would not. But this is in itself complicated by the choice not to make the drapery a flap—while we can control the level of pregnancy of the figure, and even lift her skin to peer inside her uterus, we cannot clothe her. It is discomforting to be reminded of the act of unveiling but not given the capacity for re-veiling in an image that otherwise facilitates lifting and covering to such an unusual extent, and in which the foetus remains permanently veiled by the uterine membranes. Lynda Nead has discussed the association in the nineteenth century of sexuality and pornography with newly developing notions of the private and domestic realm.<sup>69</sup> Spratt's image is one that addresses these problematics of privacy, sexuality, and medicine: the woman is an embodiment of the private realm that is destroyed by the examination of the doctor, and of the print's viewer. Both medical and pornographic print exposed what should remain private, and in representing the woman's garment as immovable, Spratt forces us into an awareness of our own discomfort with this exposure.

Tables 3 and 4 force us to recognise the potential for sexual slippage in medical practice that troubled medical professionals and cultural commentators throughout the nineteenth century. Doctors themselves, reluctant to publicly acknowledge that some of their number could and did seduce and abuse their patients, often rechannelled their anxiety into concern over the power of their women patients to maliciously ruin their careers and reputations with inappropriate behaviour and false allegations.<sup>70</sup> This professional anxiety grew up alongside, and strengthened, the cultural enforcement of passivity on women's bodies, both in terms of sexuality, and in childbearing.<sup>71</sup> A good woman was not a sexual woman, and she was a docile patient. These stories are well known: it was in the mid-century that some doctors claimed that women had no sex drive. While the view was never dominant, it did colour wider understandings of sexuality, and helped to disseminate the more accepted idea that women's sexuality was less intense than men's, and was often completely dormant.<sup>72</sup> In childbirth, increasing levels of male medical control rendered the woman's body passive, at least rhetorically. This enforced passivity came from two sources: one had to do with the separation of medicine and physiological understanding from personhood. It was no longer women who laboured in childbirth, but their uteri, which did the job unconsciously.<sup>73</sup> The other

source was the practice of midwifery itself: doctors came increasingly to see their role in childbirth as one of constant supervision, regulation, and intervention. They used forceps to deliver obstructed births; they increasingly employed caesarean section; and they began to administer chloroform, which mitigated pain but also rendered the labouring woman unconscious.<sup>74</sup>

We might see the woman in Table 4 as enacting the prime medical fantasy of docility and patience: she stands, still and exposed throughout the course of an entire pregnancy, permanently available to the doctor's probing hand and eye. She is an expression of the desperate need to pin down and understand the mysterious generative body that is explored in Isabel Davis' article "The Experimental Conception Hospital", on a fantastical thought experiment proposed by the doctor Robert Lyall in 1825. Lyall described a hospital in which women would be incarcerated and raped to schedule by doctors, in order to establish the exact length of gestation. Like this hypothetical "hospital", Spratt's idea of bodily docility is tinged with a violent Gothic eroticism.<sup>75</sup> As we handle the paper bodies, we enact medical examination on a docile patient, but the sexual is never far away: are these women unwilling, afraid? Or are they aroused, complicit in the sexual slippage? These are the unthinkable possibilities that medical culture could not stop thinking about.

## **The Medical Nude**

Preoccupation with and anxiety over sexuality was not restricted to the medical realm but characterised Victorian culture much more widely.<sup>76</sup> The ideal of the angelic, domestic, innocent wife was necessarily accompanied by her double, the prostitute. The need for women to be both safely asexual and sexually available was deep and pervasive. It was the tension that made pornography and medical imagery dangerous, but it was also what made so much of "high art" painting and sculpture so enticing. From Linda Nochlin to Jill Burke, art historians have unpicked the erotics of the artistic nude, exploring how images of naked women were accepted within fine art cultures, while nakedness itself was taboo, and while other kinds of images of nudity were illicit, suppressed, dangerous.<sup>77</sup> The answer, many of these scholars conclude, has to do with audience and power. The "nude" was reserved for educated, wealthy men who agreed on a public code of polite, intellectualised responses that made the images safe.<sup>78</sup>

Yet such distinctions and definitions were inherently unstable: based not on the image but the response, they were constantly slipping or blurring. The artistic nude, the pornographic image, the medical illustration all existed on the spectrum between the artistic, intellectualised, and acceptable; and the



obscene, shocking, and unacceptable. It is important to remember that, behind the public rhetoric of edification, many high art nudes were intended to arouse, and that medical and pornographic images could engage with the visual and literary cultures of high art. What we see in books like Maygrier's and Spratt's are medical nudes: images of naked women with all of the same cultural and sexual dissonances that accompanied the sculpture of Galatea or the painting of Andromeda.<sup>79</sup> Table 4 might be understood best as an image that points in one direction to the self-revealing woman of the obscene print, and in the other to the beautiful vivified sculpture of classical myth: a Galatea to art and medicine's Pygmalion. Pygmalion images had long been employed in expressing artistic agency and inspired creativity, as well as a specifically masculine virility.<sup>80</sup> The classical story has also often been used to characterise the work of nineteenth-century gynaecologists, who created the ideal of the passive, asexual, controllable woman and, using their medical authority, brought her to life in their actual patients.<sup>81</sup> Spratt—artist and medical author—creates his Galatea, then invites the viewer to animate her. His/our intellectual/artistic virility even impregnates her, subsuming the woman's bodily generative capacity under male medico-sexual agency. But as Lynda Nead has argued, the nude was a visual form at both the centre and the periphery of art, constantly challenging definitions and exposing the cracks in dominant cultural practices.<sup>82</sup> The discomfort we feel in handling Spratt's flaps comes from their pointing to the cracks in the misogynistic culture of nineteenth-century medicine.

## **Difficult Images and Cultural Catharsis**

I find Spratt's flaps interesting and rich resources to work with, but this is partly *because* I also find them difficult. Their interactivity gives them a closer relation to the viewer than other kinds of print. They need to be handled, explored, but with that closeness comes a kind of culpability—the viewer becomes part of what the image does. Some of the images tease or surprise, tempting curiosity and then subverting or denying it. Others place the viewer in the position of an obstetrical operator or an anatomical dissector, turning us into enactors of violence upon the body. Some, too, evoke uncomfortable feelings about social transgression and sexual touching. These mobile images are problematic, confrontational, and political as well as medical, to an unusual degree.

To understand why this might be, we need to turn back to Spratt and his wider output. Taking it all-in-all, the Spratt family's wheelhouse was popular works on science and medicine, produced to appeal to wider and non-specialist as well as professional audiences. Spratt's botanical compendia and toxicological posters were highly illustrated and coloured reference works for the apothecary and the amateur botanist. His caricatures show



various scientists composed of the objects of their study—shells, minerals, insects, physiognomies (Fig. 19). James Secord has argued that the primary market for these prints would have been the kind of middle-class educated amateurs who might also dabble in conchology or physiognomy. They were intended to mock gently, to look with humorous observation, to hold a mirror up to the middle-class scrapbookers and collectors who bought them.<sup>83</sup> Spratt's *Obstetric Tables* is less gentle, but these plates also hold up a mirror to contemporary culture. While Secord is reluctant to see this link, preferring to define the *Tables* as more serious and professional than the other works, I see the same skills and artistic inclinations as are at work in the rest of Spratt's oeuvre.<sup>84</sup> In the *Obstetric Tables*, he employs humour, close cultural observation, a critical eye, and material playfulness to engage not only with scientific ideas but also with the culture of science and its relation to wider society.



**Figure 19.**

G. Spratt (draftsman), *The Conchologist*, circa 1830-31, hand-coloured lithograph, 27 x 21 cm. Collection of The Science Museum, London (2002-613). Digital image courtesy of The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

In this article, I have demonstrated the importance of looking beyond medical rhetoric when addressing medical images: to see their wider connections to visual cultures; to consider their creators as artists with agency; and to explore how they might comment on the knowledge they purport simply to convey. While these wider significances are almost never textually discussed, a study of the images themselves and their visual contexts can tell us much about the variety of ways in which they might have been interpreted and used by contemporary viewers. Spratt made works that were not only medically pedagogic but also creatively engaging and funny, shocking, pornographic, subversive, and political. I argue that he expected his viewers to pick and choose between these different modes, but fundamentally to be able to see multiples in each image. Their brief period of popularity in the early nineteenth century can best be understood when we

see this multiplicity and this capacity for commentary. They were culturally cathartic, allowing the viewer to think through the many and varied aspects and significances of midwifery, to use and interpret the images according to their needs and inclinations. Britain in the 1830s and 1840s was negotiating a culture that, beneath hardening medical and moral rhetorics, was fraught, fractured, confused, and therefore deeply attracted to Spratt's flaps.

## Footnotes

- 1 Further editions, first in two volumes and later combined into one were published in 1835, 1837, 1838, 1841, and 1843. American editions were published in Philadelphia in 1848 and 1850.
- 2 See Alexander Marr, "Knowing Images", *Renaissance Quarterly* 69 (2016): 1000–1013; James Elkins, "Art History and Images that are Not Art", *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (1995): 553–571; Mary Hunter, *The Face of Medicine: Visualising Medical Masculinities in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Andrew Graciano (ed.), *Visualizing the Body in Art, Anatomy, and Medicine since 1800: Models and Modeling* (New York: Routledge, 2019); and Kaat Wils, Raf de Bont, and Sokhieng Au (eds), *Bodies Beyond Borders: Moving Anatomies, 1750–1940* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017).
- 3 See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010 [2007]).
- 4 Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 84–98.
- 5 See James Secord, "Scrapbook Science: Composite Caricatures in Late Georgian England", in Ann B. Shteir and Bernard Lightman (eds), *Figuring it Out: Science, Gender, and Visual Culture* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 164–191.
- 6 Hunter, *The Face of Medicine*; Graciano, *Visualizing the Body in Art, Anatomy, and Medicine since 1800*; and Wils, de Bont, and Au, *Bodies Beyond Borders*.
- 7 For an exception, see Veronique Deblon, "Imitating Anatomy: Recycling Anatomical Illustrations in Nineteenth-Century Atlases", in Kaat Wils, Raf de Bont, and Sokhieng Au (eds), *Bodies Beyond Borders: Moving Anatomies, 1750–1940* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 115–138.
- 8 Sources include Jacques-Pierre Maygrier, *Nouvelles demonstrations d'accouchemens* (Paris: Béchét, 1822); William Hunter, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Exhibited in Figures* (Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1774); William Smellie, *A Sett of Anatomical Tables, with Explanations, and an Abridgment, of the Practice of Midwifery, with a View to Illustrate a Treatise on that Subject, and Collection of Cases* (London: [n.p.], 1754); Jean-Louis Baudelocque, *L'art des accouchemens*, 2 vols (Paris: Méquignon, 1781); Edward William Tuson, *A Supplement to Myology: Containing the Arteries, Veins, Nerves, and Lymphatics of the Human Body, the Abdominal & Thoracic Viscera, the Ear and Eye, the Brain, and the Gravid Uterus, with the Foetal Circulation* (London: Callow and Wilson, 1828); David D. Davis, *Elements of Operative Midwifery: Comprising a Description of Certain New and Improved Powers for Assisting Difficult and Dangerous Labours* (London: Hurst, Robinson & Co., 1825); and James Hogben, *Anatomical Tables* (London: The Author, ca. 1811).
- 9 *Essex, England, Select Church of England Parish Registers, 1518–1960*, Ancestry.com. FHL Film Number: 001471885. No candidate for E. Spratt has been found, but given that the family moved often, there may have been further children whose baptism records have not been found.
- 10 See Mrs G. Spratt, *The Language of Birds Comprising Poetic and Prose Illustrations of the Most Favourite Cage Birds* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837); and "Spratt, Julia" and "Spratt, Mrs.", *Database of Scientific Illustrators*, [https://dsi.hi.uni-stuttgart.de/index.php?function=show\\_static\\_page&id\\_static\\_page=1](https://dsi.hi.uni-stuttgart.de/index.php?function=show_static_page&id_static_page=1), accessed 10 July 2019.
- 11 Partly because of the uncertain identity of the other Spratt artists, and partly because the attributions of particular plates change between editions, in this article I assume that George had directorial control over the production of all the plates, and refer to them as "his". The names of all artists associated with each plate discussed are to be found in the figure captions.
- 12 "Notice to Debtors and Creditors", *Northampton Mercury*, 28 August 1824, 1.
- 13 "Insolvent Debtors", *Perry's Bankrupt and Insolvent Gazette*, 17 July 1828, 236.
- 14 See Anne Digby, *Making a Medical Living: Doctors and Patients in the English Market for Medicine, 1720–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6–7; and Irvine Loudon, *Medical Care and the General Practitioner 1750–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 258.
- 15 See George Spratt, *The Medico-Botanical Pocket-Book* (London: John Churchill, ca. 1830); [George Spratt (ed.)], *Flora Medica: Containing Coloured Delineations of the Various Medicinal Plants Admitted into the London, Edinburgh, and Dublin Pharmacopœias* (London: Callow and Wilson, 1829–1830); William Woodville, *Medical Botany*, 5 vols (London: John Bohn, 1832); and George Spratt, *A Table of Vegetable Poisons* (London: John Wilson, [1840?]). Spratt's composite caricatures, printed by G.E. Madeley and published by C. Tilt from 1830, showed figures composed of everyday objects, such as crockery or fish; and the objects of a particular scientific study, such as insects or shells.
- 16 George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables: Comprising Coloured Delineations on a Peculiar Plan, Intended to Illustrate Elementary and Other Works on the Practice of Midwifery, Elucidating Particularly the Application of the Forceps, and Other Important Practical Points in Obstetric Science* (London: The Author, 1833), Preface.

- 17 "Obstetric Tables [...] By G. Spratt, Surgeon-Accoucheur. 4to. Churchill", *The London Medical and Surgical Journal* 3, no. 73 (22 June 1833), 672.
- 18 "Spratt's Obstetric Tables", *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 37, no. 18 (1 December 1847): 363-364.
- 19 I have been unable to find the original price paid by subscribers. The prices quoted are drawn from editions of *The London Catalogue of Books*, *The British Catalogue of Books*, and the sales catalogues of John Churchill and Samuel Highley, published between 1835 and 1851: John Churchill, *Mr. Churchill's Publications on Anatomy, Surgery, Medicine, Midwifery, and the Collateral Sciences* (London: The Author, 1842); and Samuel Highley, *New Medical Works, Published by Samuel Highley, 32, Fleet Street, Opposite St. Dunstan's Church* (London: The Author, ca. 1846).
- 20 "An Atlas of Plates, Illustrative of the Principles and Practice of Obstetric Medicine and Surgery, with Descriptive Letter-Press. By Francis H. Ramsbotham, M.D. Parts I, II. and III. Churchill: London, 1840", *The Lancet* 1 (7 March 1840), 894. For more on the financial situation for young practitioners, see Loudon, *Medical Care and the General Practitioner 1750-1850*, 249-266.
- 21 For example, in the 1835 edition, there were fifty-two subscribers listed from Manchester and surrounding areas, fifty surgeons, one physician, and one medical library. Some of these were the famed teachers and practitioners of the time, Joseph Jordan and Thomas Radford among them. Most were men who had qualified as apothecaries or surgeons in the 1810s and 1820s and either held hospital appointments or had decent private practices by the 1830s.
- 22 Loudon, *Medical Care and the General Practitioner 1750-1850*, 259.
- 23 "Obstetric Tables, by G. Spratt, Surgeon", *The Athenæum Journal of English and Foreign Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, 23 November 1833, 795.
- 24 Andrea Carlino, *Paper Bodies: A Catalogue of Anatomical Fugitive Sheets 1538-1687*, translated by Noga Arikha (London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1999), 58.
- 25 See, for example, Lyle Massey, "The Alchemical Womb: Johann Remmelin's Catoptrum Microcosmicum", in Timothy McCall, Sean Roberts, and Giancarlo Fiorenza (eds), *Visual Cultures of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2013), 208-228; and Rosemary Moore, "Fugitive Sheets and the Spectacle of the Spatialized Body", *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* 25, no. 2 (2018).
- 26 Gustave-Joseph Witkowski, *Anatomie iconoclastique: Atlas complémentaire de tous les ouvrages traitant de l'anatomie et de la physiologie humaines compose de planches découpées, colorées et superposées* (Paris: H. Lauwereyns, 1873-1876); and James Suydam Knox, *Physicians' Anatomical Aid: A Manikin of Superimposed Diagramatic Plates. Designed to Assist in Surgery Diagnoses and General Practice* (Chicago, IL: Western Publishing House, [1888]).
- 27 Martin Kemp, "Style and Non-Style in Anatomical Illustration: From Renaissance Humanism to Henry Gray", *Journal of Anatomy* 216 (2010), 205.
- 28 Achille Comte, *Atlas d'anatomie humaine* ([Paris]: Ch. Lahure, ca. 1850); Frederick Hollick, *The Origin of Life and Process of Reproduction in Plants and Animals, with the Anatomy and Physiology of the Human Generative System, Male and Female, and the Causes, Prevention and Cure of the Special Diseases to which it is Liable* (Philadelphia, PA: David McKay, [1902]).
- 29 George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables: Comprising Graphic Illustrations, with Descriptions and Practical Remarks; Exhibiting on Dissected Plates Many Important Subjects in Midwifery* (Philadelphia, PA: Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co., 1848), Preface to the American Edition.
- 30 George Spratt, *Obstetric Tables: Comprising Graphic Illustrations, with Descriptions and Practical Remarks; Exhibiting on Dissected Plates Many Important Subjects in Midwifery. Second Edition, Considerably Enlarged and Improved*, 2 vols (London: The Author, 1835), Table X, fig. 5.
- 31 See Rebecca Whiteley, "The Limits of Seeing and Knowing: Early Modern Anatomy and the Uterine Membranes", *Object* 19 (2017): 95-119.
- 32 Deblon, "Imitating Anatomy".
- 33 Sileas Wood, "Moving Pictures: Nineteenth-Century British Mechanical Prints", *Print Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2017), 173-176.
- 34 See Colette Colligan, *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998 [1988]); Lynn Hunt, "Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800", in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 9-45; and Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
- 35 See Suzanne Karr Schmidt, *Interactive and Sculptural Printmaking in the Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 353-391.
- 36 Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 149-188.
- 37 McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, 219.
- 38 Ben Wilson, *Decency and Disorder: The Age of Cant 1789-1837* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 106-130.
- 39 Colligan, *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley*, 21; Michael Gamer, "Genres for the Prosecution: Pornography and the Gothic", *PMLA* 114, no. 5 (1999): 1043-1054; and Kathleen Lubey, "Making Pornography, 1749-1968: The History of *The History of the Human Heart*", *ELH* 82, no. 3 (2015): 897-935.

- 40 See Anon., *Grand théâtre des petites passions de société* ([Paris: [s.n.], ca. 1830s]), particularly No. 5. There was a vast amount of French-produced material sold in London in this period.
- 41 Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, 152.
- 42 Hunter, *The Face of Medicine*, 149.
- 43 Spratt, *Obstetric Tables* (1835), Table IV, fig.1.
- 44 Margaret Carlyle and Brian Callender, "The Fetus in Utero: From Mystery to Social Media", *Know: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 3, no. 1 (2019), 47.
- 45 Wooster Beach, *An Improved System of Midwifery: Adapted to the Reformed Practice of Medicine* (New York: Baker & Scribner, 1850).
- 46 Mary E. Fissell, "Hairy Women and Naked Truths: Gender and the Politics of Knowledge in 'Aristotle's Masterpiece'", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003): 43-74.
- 47 Hunter, *The Face of Medicine*, 138-142.
- 48 See Lisa Forman Cody, *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 152-197; Roy Porter, "A Touch of Danger: The Man-Midwife as Sexual Predator", in G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (eds), *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 206-232; and Mary E. Fissell, "Man-Midwifery Revisited", in Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell (eds), *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 319-332.
- 49 Roy Porter, "The Rise of Physical Examination", in W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter (eds), *Medicine and the Five Senses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 195.
- 50 Angus McLaren, "'Not a Stranger, a Doctor': Medical Men and Sexual Matters in the Late Nineteenth Century", in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds), *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 277. See also Coral Lansbury, "Gynaecology, Pornography, and the Antivivisection Movement", *Victorian Studies* 28, no. 3 (1985): 413-437.
- 51 Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulations of Sexuality Since 1800* (London: Routledge, 2014 [1981]), 27-46.
- 52 Francis H. Ramsbotham, *An Atlas of Plates Illustrative of the Principles and Practice of Obstetric Medicine and Surgery* (London: John Churchill, 1840), 55.
- 53 [John Stevens], *An Important Address to Wives & Mothers, on the Dangers and Immorality of Man-Midwifery* (London: The Author, 1830), v.
- 54 Anon., *An Address to the Public on the Propriety of Midwives, Instead of Surgeons, Practising Midwifery* (Manchester: The Author, 1826), 10 and 6.
- 55 Pierre-Jean de Béranger, *Bérangiana: Mis en action ou choix de ses chansons badines* (Brussels: [n.p.], 1830).
- 56 Digby, *Making a Medical Living*, 254-261; and Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), 80-81.
- 57 See Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 122; Porter, "A Touch of Danger"; and Porter, "The Rise of Physical Examination"; and Malcolm Nicolson, "Examining the Body since 1750", in Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (eds), *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body: 1500 to the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 112-116.
- 58 Elizabeth Stephens, "Touching Bodies: Tact/ility in Nineteenth-Century Medical Photographs and Models", in Kate Fisher and Sarah Toulalan (eds), *Bodies, Sex and Desire from the Renaissance to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 89.
- 59 Jonathan R. Topham, "Publishing 'Popular Science' in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain", in Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman (eds), *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 135-168.
- 60 April Haynes, "The Trials of Frederick Hollick: Obscenity, Sex Education, and Medical Democracy in the Antebellum United States", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 4 (2003): 543-574.
- 61 A.W. Bates, "'Indecent and Demoralising Representations': Public Anatomy Museums in Mid-Victorian England", *Medical History* 52 (2008), 14.
- 62 Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities: Medical Museums in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Bates, "Indecent and Demoralising Representations"; Carin Berkowitz, "The Beauty of Anatomy: Visual Displays and Surgical Education in Early-Nineteenth-Century London", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 85, no. 2 (2011): 248-278; and Joris Vandendriessche, "Anatomy and Sociability in Nineteenth-Century Belgium", in Kaat Wils, Raf de Bont, and Sokhieng Au (eds), *Bodies Beyond Borders: Moving Anatomies, 1750-1940* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 51-72.
- 63 See Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities*; and Bates, "Indecent and Demoralising Representations".
- 64 Jacques-Pierre Maygrier, *Midwifery Illustrated* (New York: J.K. Moore, 1833), 47; "dans l'état naturel et parfaitement rapprochées" in Maygrier, *Nouvelles demonstrations d'accouchemens*, 9.
- 65 Maygrier, *Midwifery Illustrated* (New York: J.K. Moore, 1833), 47; "écarte légèrement" in Maygrier, *Nouvelles demonstrations d'accouchemens*, 9.

- 66 For a discussion of the “partible” body, see Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities*.
- 67 See Vanda Foster, *A Visual History of Costume: The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1984); and Stella Blum (ed.), *Ackermann’s Costume Plates: Women’s Fashions in England 1818–1828* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978).
- 68 See, for example, Susanna Burghartz, “Covered Women? Veiling in Early Modern Europe”, translated by Jane Caplan, *History Workshop Journal* 80 (2015): 1–32; Marni Reva Kessler, *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet’s Paris* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 27–28; and Patricia Simons, “The Visual Dynamics of (Un)veiling in Early Modern Culture”, in Timothy McCall, Sean Roberts, and Giancarlo Fiorenza (eds), *Visual Cultures of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2013), 24–53.
- 69 Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 99–100.
- 70 See, for example, Janice M. Allan, “Mrs Robinson’s ‘Day-Book of Iniquity’: Reading Bodies of/and Evidence in the Context of the 1858 Medical Reform Act”, in Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge (eds), *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 169–181; Nora Doyle, *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 14–51; and McLaren, “Not a Stranger, a Doctor”, 275–276.
- 71 See Doyle, *Maternal Bodies*, 16.
- 72 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 50.
- 73 See Ramsbotham, *An Atlas of Plates*, 106.
- 74 See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), Chapter 2.
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Introduction by

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When it comes to the study of artworks as material culture, there are few more familiar idioms than that of the “life-history” of the object. From Arjun Appadurai’s formulation of “the social life of things” (1986) to Bruno Latour’s business-school model of “actor-networks” (1993), over the past generation a particular variety of materialist anthropology has taken root in those parts of historical studies that deal with things.<sup>1</sup> “If humans have biographies, so should things”, some historians of science have proposed.<sup>2</sup> In the history of art meanwhile, the reception of Alfred Gell’s influential text *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* recast artworks as “indexes”, distributing the agency of artists, as part of the “relational texture of social life”, where biography is expanded from human into the non-human realms.<sup>3</sup> As if anthropocentrism were in the top ten problems with art theory (a field that is perhaps more accurately not human enough).

Through this consumption of anthropological theory, the analogy of artefactual histories with human lives has come to be inculcated as a genre of historiography. In the process, I want to suggest, older, deeper, long-standing forms of object-oriented inclinations and prejudices have been refreshed and emboldened. At times the notion of object biography has served to fix the boundaries of things rather too firmly by tending to overestimate physical constancy in the face of movement between shifting human contexts, what Igor Kopytoff called “regimes of value”.<sup>4</sup> But for conservators, archaeologists, curators, and others who work with physical things, it is always clear that any object is at least as unstable as its context; that any life-history is always a life course, with ageing, decay, maintenance, death, rather than just serial recontextualisation. In other words, it is clear that any object or artwork is always to some extent a form of event and an endurance, rather than being purely reducible to some kind of subject. Contexts can also decay. Cultures, as any student of anthropology must learn, can be degraded. No contemplation lasts forever. Even theories can decompose. The world can outlive an idiom. Maybe this is what is now happening to the idea of object life-histories.

The primary institutional context that was physically and laboriously assembled and constructed by anthropologists for their theoretical studies of material culture—those Euro-American spaces, variously called the “ethnological”, “anthropological” or “world culture” museum, filled with the cultural heritage of the global south transported under colonialism—is not simply decaying. It has failed. The central role of such collections in the objectification of so-called “non-Western” human cultures was not

foregrounded in those late twentieth-century theoretical discussions of object agency—but this was doubtless the principal source of the category error through which objects came to be treated analytically as subjects.<sup>5</sup>

Today the role not just of objectification but also of cultural dispossession in the ongoing history of European colonialism is coming into focus in new ways.<sup>6</sup> The legitimacy of institutions in the global north that oversaw and enacted the ideological hyper-concentration of “world culture” during colonialism is evaporating as calls for restitution, reparations, and justice grow. Each stolen object, insofar as it is an unfinished event, is also some form of outstanding debt. And to refuse to return what was stolen, just as Marcel Mauss famously described for the refusal to reciprocate when a gift has been given, is tantamount to “a declaration of war”.<sup>7</sup>

From London and Oxford to Berlin and New York, as these museums start to fail, it is clearer than ever that those anthropological theories of material culture, as they were received within art history, were never innocent metaphors, without histories of their own—or without politics in the contemporary moment. The failure of the world culture museum brings about a kind of flip, some form of figure-ground reversal. This failure is conceptual just as much as it is ethical. I mean that one emerging consequence of the failure of the world culture museum is a conceptual recalibration: with the decomposition of the idea of object life-histories comes the sudden emergence of its counterpoint (which was surely always there) into plain sight.

Take the example of the Benin Bronzes—thousands of sacred and royal artworks from the City of Benin in what is today Edo State, Nigeria, violently looted in 1897 by British naval officers and colonial administrators, now scattered across more than 160 museums around the globe as well as countless private collections (Figs 1–3). Tens of thousands were killed and the spoils of war were chaotically acquired and displayed to illustrate an ideology of cultural supremacy.<sup>8</sup> In spring 2016, art historian John Boardman wrote in the pages of *Common Knowledge*, a respected Duke University Press journal that: “With the Benin bronzes, the rape proved to be a rescue”.<sup>9</sup>



DATE.	DRAWING AND DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT.	PRICE.	DEPOSITED AT.	REMOVED TO.
1898. Feb. 17. 54		£20	<p>St. J. de C. H. Read, British Museum, Bloomsbury, W.C.</p> <p>Museum. 1898.</p>	<p>Room VIII Case 78</p>
	<p>Bronze cast of Human Head. Nepros features. 3 tribal marks over each eye. Pupils of eyes in- laid with iron. Reticulated head- dress of coral or agate. Coral Choker, badge of rank. 12 bands of coral and a band apparently of Plaited hair hanging from head- dress on each side.</p> <p>- Benin.</p> <p>Catalogue p. 32. figs. 91a 91b</p>			

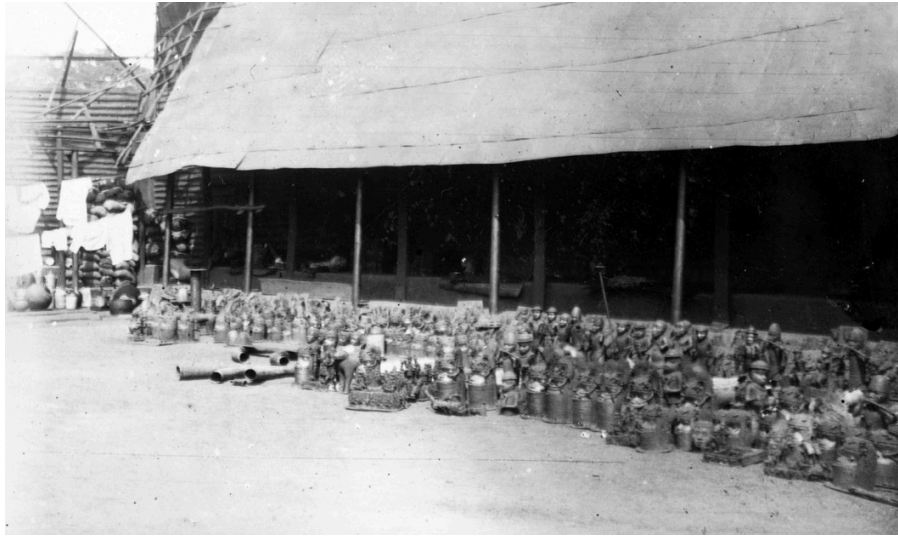
**Figure 1.**

Illustration of a Brass Head of an Oba (1550-1680), with notes on its provenance, from the catalogue of the collection of the second Pitt Rivers Museum at Farnham, Dorset, 1898, ink and watercolour on paper. Collection of the University of Cambridge Libraries (Add.9455), Vol. 5, 1590. Digital image courtesy of University of Cambridge Libraries (all rights reserved).



**Figure 2.**

Brass Head of an Oba, currently on view in Gallery 352 of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1550–1680, metal sculpture, 27.3 × 21.3 × 21.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller (1979.206.87). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).



**Figure 3.**

Bronze Heads and other sacred and royal looted objects lined up by British troops in the aftermath of their attack on Benin City, February 1897, photograph. Collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum Photographic Collection. Digital image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum Photographic Collection (all rights reserved).

Or think of the so-called “Elgin Marbles”—that group of Classical Greek marble sculptures made in the fifth century BCE and brought from the Parthenon to the British Museum by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, just over 200 years ago, in 1812, which are currently living a strange afterlife as an iconic and conventional first point of reference for British conversations about the restitution of looted cultural heritage. Speaking to the Greek magazine *Ta Nea* in Spring 2019, Hartwig Fischer, the Director of the British Museum, said: “When you move cultural heritage into a museum, you move it out of context. However, this shift is also a creative act.” <sup>10</sup>

Such comments are not merely the antiquated views of an outgoing generation; they represent long-standing intellectual positions in art history with roots in extractivist colonialism which have been bolstered over the past two or three decades by the reception of the anthropological notion of object biography—a concept which as we have seen presents a positive, incremental model of recontextualisation, where each new setting is a new accumulated layer of life for an itinerant object, a creative phase full of new meaning, some kind of semiotic patina. The idea of the *cultural biography* of objects has thus served to stifle any discussion of enduring colonial violence and dispossession over time. What is silenced, then, in our model of life-histories are histories of loss and death.

In my new book *The Brutish Museums*, I suggest a name for the curatorial work that can excavate such inverse histories—*necrography*—and a name to the knowledge that emerges from them—*necrology*.<sup>11</sup> These neologisms take inspiration from Achille Mbembe’s inversion of Michel Foucault’s classic account of the “biopolitical”, in his idea of “necropolitics”. Foucault described a transformation that took place during the nineteenth century, through which a sovereign’s power to “take life or let live” came to be joined by the emergent power of the state to “make live and let die”; it was “the emergence of something that is no longer an anatomo-politics of the human body, but ... a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race”, Foucault suggested.<sup>12</sup> The potential of this Foucauldian biopolitical approach, especially as it was developed by Giorgio Agamben through his account of “bare life” has been explored in many different ways in the study of the violent displacement of people under extractive, militarist colonialism.<sup>13</sup> How might it apply to the parallel case of the violent displacement of objects?

Achille Mbembe’s account of “necropolitics” provides a powerful corrective to the Eurocentrism of Foucault’s account, and to the general absence of the enduring and unfinished legacies of empire in uses of Agamben’s account of “bare life” in African Studies and beyond. Crucially, Mbembe underlines the role of colonial histories and their continued after-effects, and in doing so he expands the persistent Foucauldian focus on the living body. For example, he shows how it is the use of the bulldozer for the continual destruction of the lived environment, as much as the fighter jet used for precision strikes targeting individuals, that is central to the practice of neocolonialism in Palestine as an “infrastructural warfare”.<sup>14</sup> We learn then from Mbembe that necropolitical conditions can be made through attacks upon the wider non-human environment as well as just the human body.

If the taking and retention of artworks represents a kind of enduring infrastructural colonial war, made to last in the galleries of museums, then perhaps some kind of forensic death-writing, or autopsy, is part of what colonial collections require of the curator. An exercise in contemporary archaeology (the excavation of the recent past and the near-present). Forensic because this is about understanding the truth at the scene of a crime. Not an object biography but a *necrography*. Central here is what we might call a “Euro-pessimism”—by which I mean that the knowledge that Europeans can make with stolen objects in the anthropology museum will be coterminous with knowledge of European colonialism, wholly dependent upon anti-Black violence and dispossession, until such a time as these enduring processes are adequately revealed, studied, understood, and until the work of restitution—the physical dismantling of the white infrastructure of every anthropology and “world culture” museum—is begun.

The question of restitution requires Euro-American museums not just to generate new top-down curatorial policies but also to collaborate on new bottom-up conceptual realignments, to share knowledge of what's in these collections with full transparency on provenance and archival detail; to listen to and to amplify long-standing demands from Africa and across the global south and First Nations. Our choice of theory is never neutral, not least when the question of returns remains unresolved. The collections of "world culture" museums are a form of colonial archive that wasn't burned or destroyed by the coloniser, in part a kind of unique melancholy index to the central role of art in the history of empire, of dispossession, and of the ideology of "race" and racism. Anthropological/ethnological museums were put to work to make these dispossessions endure. But each museum, like any object or assemblage—and like the disciplines of anthropology and art history themselves—is an unfinished event. We don't know how this ends. We've never needed something like a world culture museum more than we do today—a space in which to encounter and to celebrate art beyond a Eurocentric lens. But can we imagine anthropological museums fit for the twenty-first century—museums where nothing is stolen? Can we hope that a decade of unravelling these *necrographies* of silence and loss, a decade of returns, may lie ahead?

Yes. But for what some call the "decolonisation" of museums or history curriculums, and what others (myself included) prefer to see as the unfinished work of anti-colonialism and anti-racism in the academy, to effect any meaningful change to disciplines or institutions, we need to dismantle and also to reimagine concepts as well as physical displays. Writing histories of theft, co-producing and sharing knowledge of dispossession, involves undoing the renewal of the colonial model of the world culture museum—a renewal wrought through the reception of anthropological theories of object biography. The curatorial work of physical returns of looted objects is urgent, but there is also conceptual work to do.

Response by

**Priya Basil**, Writer

## Writing to Life

Can the task of necrography be left to the very places—the *ethno-illogical* museums—that have long propagated racist classifications and hierarchies, turned stolen cultural artefacts into tools for enforcing white domination? How to guard against necrography becoming yet another form of self-serving inventory—something at which museums are so skilled? How to avoid necrography as a kind of in-house purgatory through which museums pass only to feel absolved? Death writing is necessary, but alone it won't suffice.

"An object is at least as unstable as its context", Dan Hicks reminds us in his provocation for this feature. If we were to replace the term "objects" with "*belongings*", might it help underline that instability, signal the precarious nature of possession, the ever-shifting, *living* relations between people, places, and things? *Belongings* ties up notions of (not) having, of being, of longing. *Belongings* suggests a multifariousness that requires many modes of telling.

A necrography can map the colonial landscape around a museum's collections. Yet, even as it reveals topographies of terror, its contours will repeatedly fade into blankness, terra incognita—ruptures in time, space, and story that cannot be retraced: what of those killed during looting, those who survived and lived—still remain—without their belongings? Which forms of investigation, what narration might give shape to those experiences? And the belongings themselves, imbued as many were—are—with spirit, with symbolism, with more than we can know—how to express the effects of their theft, the ways they were damaged, misused, misplaced, forgotten? Such questions leave one "straining against the limits of the archive", as Saidiya Hartman wrote after a different, if related, search.<sup>15</sup> Her practice of "critical fabulation", melding history, theory, and fiction, aims "to displace the received or authorized account ... to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done".<sup>16</sup>

Museums truly committed to investigating their collections would benefit from a similar, fabular approach. I propose that forensic dissection unite with unfettered imagination; I see necrography mixing with artistry to enable what I will call *fabulography*—a practice of projecting freely, associatively into the gaps of the past to retrieve in any form—song, dance, film, text, drawing, recipe—something of what has been lost. These attempts would create potentiality, other kinds of liveliness, around objects—a challenge to the stifling authority of traditional museums, which have for too long



promulgated their own myths and denied other narrations. Instead, the museum would now, in a sense, voluntarily de-platform itself. The museum becomes a counter-museum in the vein of what James E. Young called “‘counter-monuments’: memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of the monument”.<sup>17</sup> Museum spaces reconfigured to disrupt the usual workings of the museum.

Whereas necrography is likely to be the prerogative of experts within institutions, fabulography can be performed by experts from without, such as artists, and also by anyone entering the museum space—indeed it may be best carried out as an ongoing, polyphonic, collective enterprise. Where necrography necessarily goes down into the deadly depths, fabulography rises in full knowledge of what’s below—with the equally necessary imperative to reanimate, through manifold perspectives and narratives, belongings that have for too long been objectified by the museum. Fabulography is not about filling in or claiming the voids exposed by necrography, but respectfully inhabiting them, imagining in-with-through them, creating from them.

Picture the museum that opens up to such a process, a kind of cultural Truth and Reconciliation Commission: inviting people and artists in communities from which belongings were taken, as well as other artists and even museum visitors, to share—through exchanges, workshops, displays—in shaping other kinds of landscapes for belonging. A landscape where collections are not cut off and fixed in time, but visibly kept in flux as what’s around them changes. A space of reparation—if it might really be possible, as Hartman proposed, “to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive”.<sup>18</sup> A place in which belongings are not just something to look at, but long for-with-through on the understanding that those which are wanted back must be returned (Fig. 4).



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 4.**

Priya Basil, *Locked In and Out*, 2021, film essay, 35 mins 4 secs. Digital image courtesy of Digital file courtesy of Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss (all rights reserved).

Response by

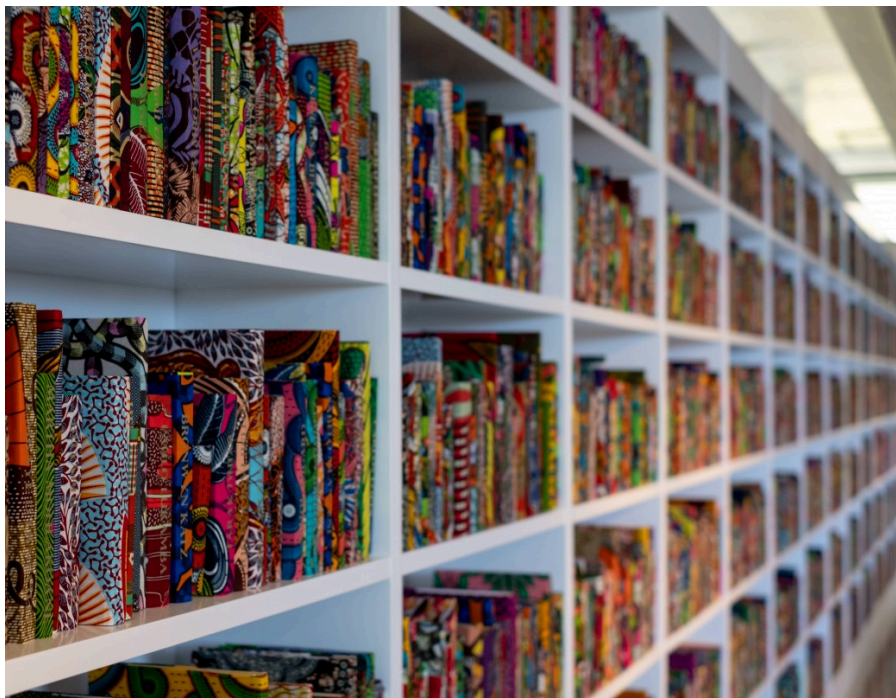
**Haidy Geismar**, Professor of Anthropology, University College London

## **In Defence of the Object Biography**

As Dan Hicks argues, many museums have stuffed the unsavoury histories of their collections, not so much under the carpet, but in the museum equivalents—the storeroom, the password protected database—well out of the public eye. Hicks' recent book, *The Brutish Museums* (2020), follows his own realization, as a curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, of the lengthy (and often wilful) amnesia that has polluted so many of our cultural institutions.<sup>19</sup> The recent publication of the National Trust's Interim Report on the "Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery" demonstrates the start, in the UK, of a more widespread institutional reckoning with these aspects of our history.<sup>20</sup> However, public response to the report, both from a portion of the Trust's membership, and from vocal segments of mainstream media and the political establishment, is evidence of an ongoing and deep-seated discomfort in the direction that this public conversation will necessarily take us—towards a discussion of restitution, repatriation, and redress.<sup>21</sup> This sets us far behind other former colonizing countries, for instance, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, where debates about national accountability and repatriation of museum collections are being prominently led and supported by the state.<sup>22</sup>

Audre Lorde famously noted that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house".<sup>23</sup> Yet, here I want to push back on Hicks' assertion that the analytic toolkit of the object biography, as it has emerged across a number of academic disciplines, is rendered useless by its use as a tool in the cover-up by museums of their difficult histories. The notion of the object biography, and of the social life of things, has been an important heuristic that has entered museums from social research fields, and crucially from stakeholder communities as well as academics, enabling the surfacing of alternative narratives, counter-histories, and histories from below. Take for example the project *100 histories of 100 worlds in One Object*, launched in 2019 by Mirjam Brusius and colleagues at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, in direct response to the master narratives assumed by the British Museum's *A History of the World in 100 Objects*.<sup>24</sup> Making explicit use of the notion of the object biography, projects like *100 Histories* enable a proliferation of perspectives as a necessary corrective to the curatorial and institutional authority of national museums (and the property relations that this authority bolsters) made explicit by former British Museum director Neil MacGregor's rendition of the "encyclopaedic museum" as "the whole world in our hands".

<sup>25</sup> Object biographies, as material narratives, exemplified in visual form perhaps by the image illustrating my words—*The African Library* by Yinka Shonibare—provide opportunities to present the complexity and multiplicity of experience that surrounds the singular stories often presented by short labels in museums; they enable objects to be linked to different voices and to tell expanded histories (Fig. 5). The methodology emerged in relation to understanding the complex global values of objects as they moved from place to place; and has been used with great effect to delegitimize narratives of national superiority and imperial conquest in museums. Object biographies can empower and create space for voices from outside of the institution, and can become a crucial part of the citational refresh that is so dearly needed within the scholarship on these questions—moving us away from the voices of (in the main) white men, in positions of institutional authority.



**Figure 5.**

Yinka Shonibare, *The African Library*, part of the *Trade Winds* exhibition, Norval Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa, 2018, installation. Digital image courtesy of Yinka Shonibare CBE / DACS / Photo: Lois GoBe / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

By so stringently throwing away concepts and tools such as object biography and replacing them with necrology/necrography, Hicks replaces the possibility of a polyphonous, grass-roots or bottom-up approach with yet another top-down perspective. If we must, as he writes, “dismantle and... reimagine concepts as well as physical displays” in order “to effect any meaningful change to disciplines or institutions”, surely we must start with

an approach that gives much more space to voices that have been so violently displaced and suppressed? Alongside the broader theorization and recognition of violence and yes, base criminality that Hicks explicates, we also need to include voices that, for example, are working through discourses of healing and redress. There is no space within the theorization of necrology for the voices of survival, or in the words of Gerald Vizenor “survivance”: a concept that was used to underpin the building and curation of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC. <sup>26</sup> In several large museum projects, Indigenous curators have rejected the model of memorialization enshrined so well by Holocaust museums (there can be no better instantiation of Hicks' formulation of necrography or necrology). Curators at NMAI, and at other Indigenized national museums, have insisted that their narratives transcend the conceptual as well as literal colonization of genocide and cultural annihilation as the dominant framework used to represent Native peoples. Rather than the anthropomorphism that Hicks derides, the object biography is a conduit through which diverse narratives can be made visible, and material, solidifying alternative epistemologies in the museum. Dismantling the house is as much about crafting new futures as it is about learning from the past. The notion of the object biography should not be discarded as an important tool in this enterprise.

Response by

**Marlene Kadar**, Professor, School of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies, York University

## Reading the Trapper Point Blanket: Coded Conquest

*Of all the European goods made for the “Indian Fur Trade” probably none is more emblematic of that era of commerce than the point blanket.<sup>27</sup>*

Artefacts of deemed significance belong to museums and thus have institutional status. Undervalued artefacts occupy an ambiguous in-between zone—between the political and global history of taking, and the privatised history of domestic space and giving.

The Trapper Point wool blanket is one such ambiguously situated object, a beautiful textile whose legacy is shrouded in Canada’s colonial settler history and the fur trade. The blanket operates as a signifier of everyday domestic life, and simultaneously of how anti-Indigenous racism is enabled by empire-building and its markets.<sup>28</sup> Although in this case not the direct product of violent imperialist extraction, the blanket has cruelty written into its weft.

If we allow ourselves to take life-writing and the personal archive as links between a Trader Point blanket and the necropolitical, we can address the unfinished work in this conversation—wrapping domestic objects into the sphere of Hicks’ provocation.<sup>29</sup> In the case of the blanket, the trauma done by stealing skews and delays a full understanding of its history. Due to this belatedness, its past owners could not have grasped the blanket's contentious history as either a straightforward chronology or an insight about the traumatic stories out of which it evolved.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the blanket represents both lost subjects and contested objects.<sup>31</sup>

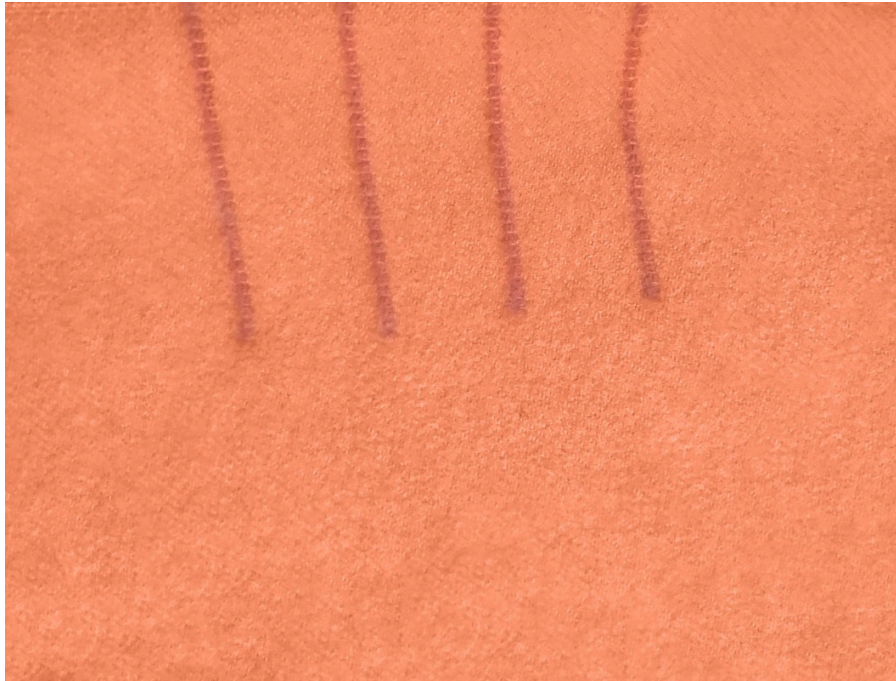
Dan Hicks’ “Euro-pessimistic” view of museums is poignant in considering such troubled and traumatic histories. The blanket whose details are seen here is a wedding gift stored in a domestic archival space, my mother’s closet (Figs 6 and 7). As a white immigrant woman married in 1948, her ownership is also troubled, a kind of breach. The blanket celebrated new love and a hopeful future in the new land. The land, however, had been stolen, and the First Nations dismantled to make room for white settlers and future waves of migrants—a complicated story of the long arm of wealth and consequent poverty.





**Figure 6.**

Trapper Point Blanket, detail showing the original brand label stitched into the corner of the blanket, circa 1948. The label authenticates the “genuine” Trapper Point blanket by marketing the blanket with a racist stereotype of the “Indian Chief”. The label also indicates that in spite of a market in the colonies, the blanket is “Made in England”. Collection of Marlene Kadar. Digital image courtesy of Marlene Kadar (all rights reserved).



**Figure 7.**

Trapper Point blanket, detail showing four points, the code for a double size bed, circa 1948. The blanket was sold to Canadian shoppers by the T. Eaton Company, Ltd. Collection of Marlene Kadar. Digital image courtesy of Marlene Kadar (all rights reserved).

Hicks invokes the phrase, death-writing, in two guises: first, as a practice that chronicles the past, but does so in the present; and second, as a “forensic” activity in the present that also stretches into the political future of a just restitution, an unfinished event. In other words, as the responsible, ethical act of the anthropologist who acknowledges necrography but also intends to address it by “writing histories of theft” and dispossession.

I suggest that life-writing studies can intervene to amplify that story without adhering fully to the constraints of an artefact biography. For me, the subject of a biography is heroic and their life story, coherent. The life-writing subject is more varied.<sup>32</sup> Leigh Gilmore explores life-writing genres that dodge the boundaries of telling regimes in order to authorize the “silenced life-histories of stolen culture”.<sup>33</sup> These genres are limit cases, which can broaden the literary and archival field, making a just outcome more likely. The Trapper Point blanket, for example, can be seen as a limit case genre, which encodes domesticated suffering and loss without our knowing it at the time. Against the grain of official histories, it archives a story that can be read in future.<sup>34</sup>

The eponymous points served as glyphs that indicate the size of the blanket or, some say, the exchange value in “made-beaver”—the number of adult pelts for which the blanket might be traded.<sup>35</sup> The label in Figure 6

authenticates the blanket with a racist image of a Chief in headdress, thereby proving the blanket is not an imitation, but the real thing, “Made in England” and registered (“REG’d”). *Empointer* encodes a story of dimensions and value, while the label chronicles multiple cruelties: decimation of the beaver, killing off of the buffalo, the racialisation of Indigenous peoples, and genocidal intent as the Crown’s Commander-in-Chief suggested using point blankets to carry smallpox and “extirpate this execrable race”.<sup>36</sup> All this was accomplished in the name of the Crown, in aid of, as it turns out, the dispossession of traditional First Nations’ lands.

In this context, a form of limit-case “writing” is sewn into the Trapper Point blanket as death-writing. Both the points and the label cannot avoid coding the conquest of Canada’s First Nations, no matter where—like the museum’s booty—the blanket is stored, preserved, or displayed. The relationship between life-writing and death-writing is imprecise, but perhaps the latter is subsumed in the former and may be its most virulent disguise. Here is how the blanket performs limit-case qualities and calls on us to uncover its disguise in the present tense. Writing the life of this object—underpinned by reading it closely—merges with chronicling associated deaths. The encounter that difficult knowledge imparts—even in a domestic space—underscores the “urgent, overdue task of *necrography*” that Hicks proposes.

Response by

**Emeka Ogboh**, Artist

## ***Vermisst in Benin: An Artistic Intervention***

*Vermisst in Benin* (*Missing in Benin*) is an artistic intervention that seeks to accelerate and actualize the narrative around the repatriation of the Kingdom of Benin artefacts currently in possession of the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden (Figs 8–12). The reparation dialogue to date has been ineffective in returning the artefacts to their original home of Benin City, Nigeria. I created the *Vermisst in Benin* artistic intervention out of a sense of impatience and necessity, aiming to frame the stagnant and abstract discourse surrounding colonial reparations with the urgency and gravity of a public service announcement.



**Figure 8.**

Emeka Ogboh, *Vermisst in Benin*, poster, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).



**Figure 9.**

Emeka Ogboh, Vermisst in Benin, poster, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).



**Figure 10.**  
Emeka Ogboh, Vermisst in Benin, poster, 2020. Digital  
image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).





**Figure 11.**  
Emeka Ogboh, Vermisst in Benin, poster, 2020. Digital  
image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).





**Figure 12.**

Emeka Ogboh, Vermisst in Benin, poster, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).

Taking to the streets of Dresden with posters declaring that these bronzes are “Missing in Benin”, I hope to demystify what has become an elitist dialogue confined to the museum and arts sector. In moving into the public domain with the instantly recognizable format of a missing poster, I hope to reclaim this issue as a post-colonial and societal responsibility. No one is exempt from the repercussions of colonialism and as long as issues of agency, ownership, and freedom continue to exist. Society must act as a whole to repatriate artefacts that are simply not theirs.

These posters are a call to action, a transparent and clear message that can be understood and digested by all. Missing posters rely upon an absent variable: the missing object itself or the location an object should be returned to. In many ways, this intervention highlights the absurdity of why these artefacts still remain in the museum, when their origin and current location are both public knowledge. In their cooperation with the project, the

Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden opens dialogue for a new way forward, which does not hide or shy away from the clear and damning facts. *Vermisst in Benin* is a profound approach to a conversation that has simply gone on too long and which belongs firmly in the public consciousness.

Response by

**Fernando Domínguez Rubio**, University of California San Diego and author of *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (2020)

## Storage as a Form of Violence

Dan Hicks calls on us to rethink the museum by shifting our focus to neglected “histories of loss and death”. In this short reply, I want to argue that any such shift must involve buildings like the one pictured below.

Located in an unsuspecting corner of Long Island, this remarkably unremarkable building is one of the most important in the art world ([Fig. 13](#)). Inside its walls, you will find most of MoMA’s 200,000-object collection. There are many other buildings like this hiding in plain sight in nondescript urban and rural areas. Together, they make up a vast, and yet largely uncharted, geography that exists as an inverted image of the museums and galleries that populate modern narratives about art and culture. Interestingly, this geography is rarely part of the conversations around museums and their politics, even if it is where the vast majority of collected objects *actually* live.



**Figure 13.**

QNS, the Museum of Modern Art’s main storage facility, 2019, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Fernando Domínguez Rubio (all rights reserved).

I concur with Hicks when he argues that we should require museums to inform us about “what’s in the storerooms”. But I also think that our engagement with museum storages should go beyond that demand because

museum storages are not simply informative as fossilized records of past forms of colonial violence. They are powerful machines actively organizing the contemporary logics of extraction and dispossession through which colonial violence is perpetuated *and extended* today.

Contemporary storages do not rely on the “good old” forms of plundering and killing that generated them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, they operate through a more subtle, but equally pervasive and no less effective, form of infrastructural violence—one that sits at the heart of the promise of care that these storages offer.

To understand what this promise of care entails, we first need to move beyond the traditional image of the storage as an inert, cobweb-filled repository where artworks sit idly until they are retrieved. Contemporary storages are powerful and sophisticated machines designed to artificially extend the life of the objects they contain by slowing down the chemical and mechanical processes through which death itself unfolds. Slowing down death does not come easily, or cheaply. It requires a complex infrastructural apparatus involving, among other things, massive energy-intensive air-conditioning systems, costly logistics, and high-end security.<sup>37</sup>

It should not come as a surprise that only the largest and wealthiest museums can afford these machines, which also means that only they can afford to uphold the promise of care. It makes perfect sense, then, that when artists, private collectors, and artists’ estates sell or donate their collections, they choose those museums that, like MoMA, have storages that can care for them. This is especially the case for those artists and collections from the south. For most of these objects, entering these storages entails a devil’s bargain: they are promised care and life, but in exchange they must accept invisibility, as most of them will be confined forever to the silence of the storage. Only a few will briefly leave their confinement when their difference serves curators seeking to “extend”, “disrupt”, “compensate”, or “punctuate” the hegemonic narratives that they endlessly weave and re-weave.

My call to attend to storages and their histories is not simply a call to complement or extend narratives about the museum with stories about what sits in their backstage. If we need to pay attention to storages, it is because they force us to fundamentally reconceptualize the museum and its role. They do so by showing us that it is not possible to separate how objects are narrated, represented, and imagined from how they are stored and cared for. Storages remind us that any form of keeping entails a form of loss as its necessary and unavoidable shadow. And, in so doing, they remind us that in a museum, forgetting is not the other of keeping, much in the same way that necrography is not the other biography. Understanding this, understanding how loss is created in the name of care in the silence of storages, is key to

revealing the uneven geographies of power and dispossession that define whose memories are being narrated today, where they are narrated, and, more importantly, by whom.

Response by

**Clémentine Deliss**, Associate Curator, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin and Director, Metabolic Museum-University, Berlin and Lagos

## **MANIFESTO FOR THE RIGHT OF ACCESS TO COLONIAL COLLECTIONS SEQUESTERED IN WESTERN EUROPEAN MUSEUMS**

February 2021

Where are we now in 2021?

125 years since the first Venice Biennale,  
with its colonialist infrastructure and  
anachronistic golden lion,  
adopted and adapted,  
to reach today over 200 iterations worldwide.

29 years since the first edition of Dak'Art, the Biennale of visual arts in Senegal.

29 years since Alpha Oumar Konaré, former president of Mali,  
and president of ICOM, stated:

"that it's about time that we questioned  
the fundamental basis of the situation and killed  
—I repeat killed—  
the Western model of the museum in Africa in order  
for new methods for the conservation and promotion  
of our heritage to flourish."

Let's think back to these colonial museums:

1863: Saint-Louis, Senegal:  
the Museum of Tropical Africa, created by Louis Faidherbe  
in the service of the French republic;

1907: Windhoek, Namibia:  
the museological structure set up by colonial Germany;

1910: Nairobi, Kenya and Lagos, Nigeria:  
the museums founded by British imperialism;  
British museums!

And one century later,  
in the throes of post-independence:  
1966: the Musée Dynamique—  
the *dynamythical* museum of  
Léopold Sédar Senghor opens in Dakar  
(Rest in peace!)

All that desire for internationalism,  
for festivals, gatherings, and workshops,  
those manifestations in Dakar  
at the Village des Arts,  
the collectives of *Tenq* and *Huit Facettes*,  
and the *Laboratoire Agit'Art*!  
(Rest in peace!)

And slowly, but far too slowly,  
the issue is raised of collections in Europe,  
engendered through imperialism and the market,  
and noxious colonialism with its sinister discourse  
and serial kleptomania.  
Vast collections locked up still today  
in the ethnocolonial museums of Western Europe.  
*Damnatio memoriae!*

Intellectual and governmental plantations,  
built on notions of imperialist progress,  
the monoculture of ethnology and its  
disciplinary and discursive closure.  
Taxonomies and scientific racism!  
Metabolisms covered in blood!  
"Colomentalities!"  
(Rest in peace!)

What to do today?  
With the mass of what are called "objects"?  
Objects in collections that are named "ethnographic",  
"object-witnesses", as Marcel Griaule once said,  
"objects" from the market in so-called "tribal art"?  
These millions of objects,  
an inordinate quantity in Europe alone.

All!  
Without name,  
without author,  
without intellectual rights,  
incarcerated by ethnology and its genealogies,  
which originate, more often than not,  
outside the countries of origin,  
identified by collecting, re-sales,  
and swapping between European museums.  
A provenance at home in the salons  
and "secret gardens" of "patrons",  
from Nelson Rockefeller



to Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière.

All these objects in inaccessible depots  
under the Seine in Paris,  
where sleep, in the holdings  
of ships built for slavery,  
these muted bodies,  
these human remains.  
Or otherwise, secreted in the urban periphery,  
in that fridge-freezer of the soul,  
confined because of their double or triple toxicity,  
as carriers of microbiome,  
capable of unleashing unexpected pandemics,  
or so they tell us...

Necropolitics of sequestered objects!  
Hyper-restrictive access!  
Discursive claustrophobia!  
Exerting control, control!  
Control over future interpretations  
because anything is possible if you omit  
the artist,  
the author,  
the producer,  
the name of the non-documented,  
to replace it with ethnos.

Where are we today?  
Restitution?  
Yes, please!  
Provenance research?  
Yes, please!  
Retrace the biographies of objects acquired or stolen?  
Yes, please!  
Find out what those object hunters and  
organ poachers of the Other excluded?  
Yes, please!  
But where?  
With whom?  
With what?  
Ah okay...

So, reify omission instead,  
return to the source of biographic travesty,  
go back to the original protagonists,  
the priests of ethnological phantasmagoria.

Bring back the handmaidens of colonialism,  
and encourage their hermeneutic labour once more,  
restore the legitimacy of their discipline,  
just as they were about to go into retirement...

Not sure?

No thanks!

That's when the European state magnanimously walks in,  
hand in hand with the universal museum  
of the twenty-first century!

Now, go get a visa to visit your heritage!

In Paris, London, Vienna, or Berlin!

A new building with new displays,  
fashioned by interior design,  
exclusive and expulsive

that only add a sentence or two...

Because that's the point:

They didn't document much on those colonial expeditions, did they?

Instead, it was collect! Collect! Collect!

Ah! The excoriation of the name of the engineer, the artist, the architect!

And the bombs of World War Two that destroyed the archives.

The fires in the reserves...

We know them all too well.

But, what a relief for biographical analysis!

What comfort for the status of the "masterpiece"!

But then, how to heal the colonial wound?

"Kill the museum!" declared Alpha Konaré.

Hold on! We insist upon restitution!

But not blindly, at the pace of a snail!

We won't wait for ethnological resuscitation

for "necrographies" and the organ trade

to restore the ghosts of the past!

We won't wait for the discourse of provenance,

with its polite politics,

step by step,

piece by piece.

We have to act now,

while restitution is underway!

And push for legislation between museums,

for the right of access

to the art histories of the worlds held in

the British Museum in London

the Quai Branly Museum in Paris

the Humboldt Forum in Berlin  
the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam  
the Africa Museum in Brussels  
the Weltmuseum in Vienna  
and so many more.  
Open up those bunkers  
And revise these collections,  
while they are still in Europe.  
Dare to radically rethink the condition of the museum,  
and begin with the deepest of injuries,  
where no redemption exists for the intermediary:  
the curator.

Let's build museum-universities,  
with an architecture made for healing.  
Physical and conceptual spaces for remediation  
and reinterpreting these agent-objects.  
Let's face their stubborn materiality,  
which has been so terribly neglected.  
Let's build incongruous and problematic assemblages,  
and yes, integrate digitalization...

But hold on!  
Who will select what is to be digitalized?  
Who will access the heart of this heritage,  
knowingly hidden or forgotten,  
if not the colporteurs of ethnology and the market?  
And, let's not forget the parameters of conservation!  
That ideology of materialist survival,  
which is remarkably impenetrable,  
with its longue durée of a thousand years or more.

No more monocultures!  
No more intellectual plantations!  
No more museum mimicries!  
No more aesthetic hegemonies!  
No more object hierarchies!  
No more museological pyramids!  
That "absent air conditioning",  
those "inadequate conservators",  
etcetera, etcetera...

Let's change the ergonomics of museums,  
these "orgone accumulators" of consumerism,  
and open museum-universities!  
Build spaces for inquiry

in these reservoirs of ingenuity,  
with rooms for conceptual intimacy,  
and disciplinary transgression  
based on these anxious and contested collections.

Museum-universities!  
To welcome the new generation  
of students and researchers  
more diasporic than ever before.  
With their politics of communication  
and decolonial methodologies.  
So that, with patented prototypes,  
based on these occluded historical collections,  
we can rename the excluded authors,  
and return both respect and copyright  
to their ancestors!  
Organs and alliances!

All of you!  
Artists!  
Writers!  
Curators!  
Filmmakers!  
Lawyers!  
Architects!  
Ecologists!  
Anthropologists!  
Brothers and Sisters!

There is no time to lose!

Response by

**Nicholas Mirzoeff**, New York University and Mellon-ACLS Resident Fellow at the Magnum Foundation, New York City, 2020-21

### **The Palestine Skull: The Nakba as Crime Scene in the British Museum**

In his recent book, *The Brutish Museums*, Dan Hicks describes the methodology of his transformative work as “forensic because this is about understanding the truth at the scene of a crime”—a forensic archaeology of the present.<sup>38</sup> Hicks evokes Benjamin’s famous comment about Atget’s photographs but with a difference: it is states not individuals committing the crimes. In Palestine, for example.

Consider the so-called Jericho Skull in the British Museum, a portrait skull dating from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period (8500 BCE–6000 BCE), excavated with great fanfare by the British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon in her 1952–1958 dig at Tell es-Sultan (Fig. 14). Before Kenyon’s work had even begun, a restoration drawing of her site by Alan Sorrell was shown in the Dome of Discovery at the Festival of Britain in 1951, a few years after Britain had given up its Mandate in Palestine to Israel.<sup>39</sup> This object was about post-imperial Britain before it was even dug out of the ground.



**Figure 14.**

The "Jericho skull": human skeletal remains, religious/ritual equipment, 8200–7500 BC (Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B), human bone, plaster, and shell, 17 × 14.60 cm. Collection of The British Museum (127414). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Her dig became possible because of the Nakba, the expulsion of Palestinians from the state of Israel in 1948. To the north of the archaeological site was a Palestinian refugee camp, known as 'Ein as-Sultan, where 19,000 refugees had settled after 1948. Lacking services of any kind, the Palestinians dug into the slope of the tell to make bricks and uncovered intact Middle Bronze Age tombs. Approaching Kenyon, they were hired to dig for about half what a British servant would have been paid at the time. She even excavated in the camp, where she claimed people were "complaisant to the complete blocking of their streets".<sup>40</sup> In fact, her own photographs show Palestinians actively involved, physically and intellectually. In one striking shot, a man stands contemplating a Bronze Age skeleton at his feet.

By contrast, the photograph in the British Museum display casts the camp into dark shade, while the archaeological site was in bright sunshine. Leo Boer took detailed photographs of the camp while Kenyon was excavating, so it was not a question of availability.<sup>41</sup> The skull was itself in a form of shade, as it was for many years displayed in a room leading into the Egyptian collections. Thousands rushed past one of the oldest existing portraits without a second glance. According to the British Museum website, the skull is no longer on display.

Even the object's name should be questioned. The refugee camp site is situated outside the Palestinian city of Jericho in Area A of the West Bank, meaning it is under Palestinian Authority (PA) control. The archaeological site is in Area B where Israel controls security and the PA notionally has control of civil matters. Before the pandemic, Jericho was permanently besieged by international tourists attending what they took to be a Biblical site, although Kenyon had shown by carbon dating that there was no settlement during the time of the Biblical account of the fall of Jericho. The "Jericho" in "Jericho skull" is the non-place of Judeo-Christianity, because to call it Palestine would be unthinkable.

Kenyon defined the site as Pre-Pottery Neolithic. Just as her trenches obscured how people lived, so does this name. She called the area of her work Palestine. Is the skull not, then, Palestinian, even if it is not the same Palestine as today? Were the first urban civilization to be called Palestinian, then Palestine might start to have a different set of values and meanings than as a crime scene.



Response by

**Bonita Bennett**, Research Associate, District Six Museum

## **A Partial Necrography of Cape Town**

A luxury apartment block resplendent with a seventh-floor penthouse conceals a burial ground. Its publicity brochures draw attention to the views from above: Table Mountain, Signal Hill, and a view of Cape Town's Victoria & Alfred Waterfront. Keeping the gaze turned upwards directs attention away from what lies beneath: an exhumed burial ground where thousands of human bodies and their human life stories are elided from mind as well as from sight.

Less than a kilometre away, a coffee shop is emblazoned with the name "Truth". Some coffee connoisseurs describe it as the place to get the best artisanal coffee in the city. Its brand is large, proud, and self-celebratory. There is no apparent connection between these two locations and yet they are both implicated in hiding parts of Cape Town's shame-filled history embedded in its colonial past.<sup>42</sup>

In 2003, human remains were uncovered when excavations took place in preparation for the apartment block—The Rockwell—to be built at the west end of the city. Archival records indicate that it had been a burial ground for "slaves and paupers" dating back to the eighteenth century. They were the wretched of this part of the earth: the violently enslaved, the displaced until death, the Indigenous labouring poor—all those governed by this colonial city's necropolitical system, which literally worked them to the bone.<sup>43</sup> It was a burial ground that had fallen off the city's maps—part of a longer neglected Cape Town story.

By 2008, as part of a compromise between activists and city authorities about the future of these remains, they were exhumed and placed in a purpose-built ossuary (Fig. 15). It was intended to be a site of remembrance, education, and pilgrimage. A local government dilemma emerged: its operational costs had not been budgeted for! In order to recover the costs that these city ancestors would incur by being housed in the facility, the rent-paying "Truth" coffee shop was installed alongside the remains. A bizarre outcome has been that they have again been made invisible, out-branded by the trendy coffee shop, with the boxed remains pushed into what has ostensibly become a storage room. They had become a liability on a balance sheet rather than an asset to the city's memory.



**Figure 15.**

The Prestwich Memorial and Visitors' Centre, De Waterkant, Capetown.  
Digital image courtesy of Bonita Bennett (all rights reserved).

Restitution in this context has a somewhat different meaning from what Dan Hicks intends in writing about the return of looted objects from the colonisers. Addressing the legacies left in the colonies is as urgent as what was taken. Achille Mbembe reminds us that colonisation was a planetary project; decolonisation therefore needs to be a planetary project as well.<sup>44</sup> It requires engagements which are conducted on a coeval basis, not in a framework where “the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture”.<sup>45</sup> As Hicks points out in his provocation, colonialism took “knowledge, ideas, beliefs as well as physical things”. In examining what was left behind, it is evident in the colonial museum model that still lingers in the national museums of our country; it is evident in the treatment of colonised bodies as objects, of human remains stored in cardboard boxes in this ossuary—objects rather than ancestors.

Arjun Appadurai (1986) speaks of the “social life of things”.<sup>46</sup> Even though they have been treated as such, the human remains are not “things” but I would like to call attention to his reference to the significance of journeys. The journey that these human remains have travelled—from their exhumation to where they are being stored—is crucial to understanding their life stories. What led them to cross the road from one place to another almost three centuries after their burial? Why has any evidence of their long life in the earth beneath the surface of the Rockwell been erased? The text in the ossuary/coffee shop provides a detailed history of the area, and makes

no mention of the struggle to keep them interred where they had been buried, or what brought about their dislocation. Appadurai reminds us that journeys are integral not peripheral to stories.

This is an unfinished event, made uncomfortable because part of it took place in the rights-based new South Africa. <sup>47</sup> There are many chapters to be enacted in this particular necrography before a conclusion can even be written.

Response by

**Ciraj Rassool**, Professor of History, University of the Western Cape

## **Restitution as a Forensic Museology**

I choose to participate in African museum settings and networks as a means of advancing social mobilisation and critical citizenship, as well as in European museum locations and gatherings, as a means of contributing to the dismantling and repurposing of the imperial edifice of the modern museum as a technology of subjugation (Fig. 16). Dan Hicks' ideas about death writing and necrography read like a breath of fresh air as a critique of the sterile, neo-colonial field of reforming the ethnographic museum through co-curatorship, dialogue, and entangled collections, and the perpetuation of its self-styled ideology of humanism and care that it has built.



**Figure 16.**

A ceremony of restitution, 2012, in which the skeletons of Klaas and Trooi Pienaar were returned by the Austrian Academy of Sciences to the Northern Cape in South Africa. They were reburied at Kuruman that same year. In this photograph, the Khoesan community leader and healer, Petrus Vaalbooi, explains to Klaas and Trooi Pienaar, whose remains lie in museum boxes in front of an artwork depicting the Academy, how they would be placed in coffins for their journey back home. Their corpses had been disinterred illegally by assistant of the anthropologist Rudolf Pöch and exported to Vienna in 1909. Digital image courtesy of Ciraj Rassool (all rights reserved).

Hicks' call for provenance research on collections that focuses on colonialism's originary and enduring violence is also a demand for the museum to be reconfigured through a forensic methodology of truth-telling into the deaths and disruptions that accompanied collecting. This is the work of dismantling the museum as part of white infrastructure through the efforts of anti-colonialism, and not merely decolonisation. This confrontation with violence can only effectively occur through the embrace of restitution, not just as a new museum ethics but also as a new method of making museums themselves.

While supporting these expressions of "dissent in the ranks" in Europe (as the disruptions of the white ruling bloc were referred to in the anti-apartheid struggle) are important, we also need to understand what the challenges are for museum work on the African continent. If the ethnographic museum has failed in Europe, then its existence in African cities represents a continued colonial assault on the self-image of African people, and a relic of the colonial administration of Africans as members of races and tribes. And these physical and material expressions of a colonial image cannot be reformed through being renamed as "world" museums (itself an imperial repositioning), nor through co-curatorship and temporary loans.

Restitution is emerging as monumental projects in Benin City, Dakar, and Algiers, with grand museums and architectures intended to receive and conserve returned artworks. It will require political work and diplomacy towards enabling African states and regional and continental multilateral formations to embrace restitution as part of transforming the cultural politics of African sovereignty. It is likely that an agency will be needed to work with these state and multilateral formations to build claims-making processes. While restitution must be driven by African claims (and not European gift-making), we need to build a theory of restitution that transcends monumental, preservationist, and events management frames.

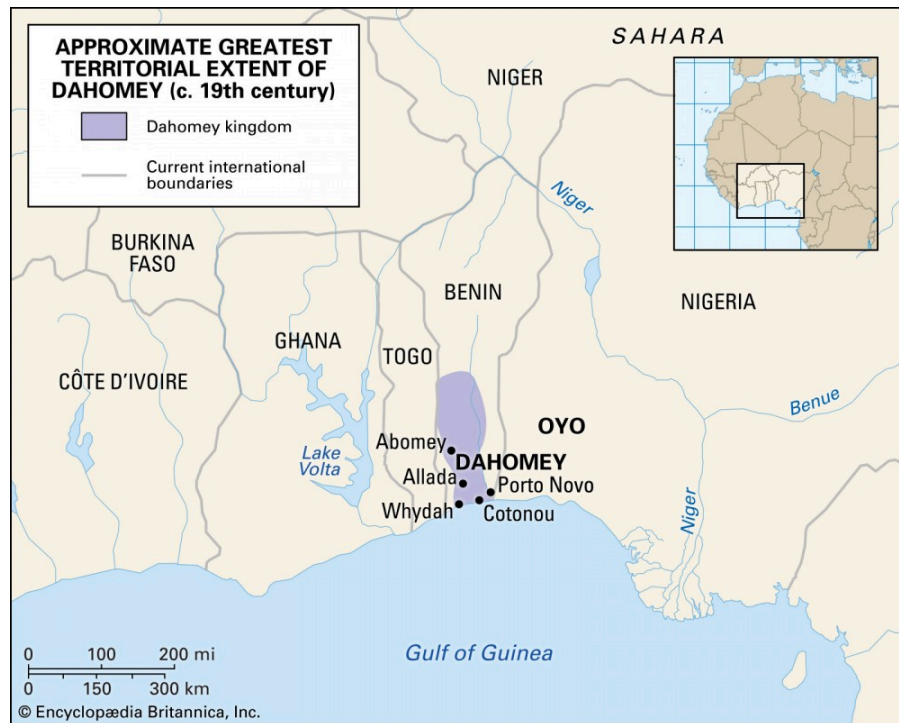
Restitution has to be nurtured as an African social movement of artists, activists, and curators, who are able to work with communities as much as they are able to engage with state officials and cultural managers. The forensic methodology advocated by Dan Hicks should be more than mere truth-telling. It should take on board the origins of the forensic in the forum, and incorporate a museology of annunciation, contestation, and social criticism.

Response by

**Ana Lucia Araujo**, Professor, Department of History, Howard University

## Afterlives of a Dahomean Throne

On 24 December 2020, France promulgated a law that will allow the repatriation of twenty-six of the many hundreds of artefacts and artworks looted from Abomey, the capital of the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey, during the Franco-Dahomean War (1892–1894), which transformed the powerful ancient West African state into a French colony (Fig. 17).<sup>48</sup> Today housed at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, the throne of King Gezo, who ruled Dahomey from 1818 to 1858, is among these objects (Fig. 18).



**Figure 17.**

Historic kingdom of Dahomey, Western Africa in Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopædia. "Dahomey". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 30 May 2019. Digital image courtesy of Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.





**Figure 18.**

Throne of King Gezo of Dahomey, Benin, nineteenth century. Collection of Quai Branly Museum, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Ana Lucia Araujo (all rights reserved).

In the early eighteenth century, the rulers of Dahomey waged wars against neighbouring polities. They sold most war prisoners into slavery to European and American slave merchants, who transported them to the Americas.<sup>49</sup> As the Atlantic slave trade intensified, Dahomean kings increasingly appreciated foreign luxury objects obtained through the trade in enslaved Africans.<sup>50</sup> Gezo's throne is part of a rich Dahomean material culture embodying these complex exchanges.<sup>51</sup> It also symbolizes a king who waged war, killed, enslaved, and looted his defeated rivals.

Hicks reminds us that objects are not opposed to human beings, but rather are extensions of living and dead bodies. Gezo's throne is one of these sacred objects. The throne outlived the king. During the *Hwetanu* annual ceremonies, the king displayed his throne and the thrones of deceased rulers



that continued evoking their presence. European observers documented these festivities during which Dahomean agents sacrificed war captives to honour their *voduns* (deities). Their lavish parades also displayed the wealthy royal collections of luxury artefacts, performances designed to impress the king's subjects.

Representing his importance, Gezo's imposing wooden throne was particularly high, measuring nearly 38 inches. Like other thrones produced in Dahomey between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, its formal elements combine different cultural traditions. This kind of throne draws from the interactions with Akan-speaking groups established west of Dahomey, in the region of present-day Ghana. The curved seat embodies the divine powers of the king, evoking the *Dan Aido Hwedo*, the serpent deity symbolizing the kingdom.<sup>52</sup> The throne's central column features a sophisticated lattice wood work comprising not only carved lozenges and squares signifying the cardinal points, but also a rich combination of geometrical forms such as circles, demi-circles, rectangles, and triangles.

The Atlantic trade is also evidenced on the throne's two lateral sections. Its formal elements are influenced by the presence of a Luso-African-Brazilian community established in the region since the end of the eighteenth century, who nurtured commercial and cultural exchanges with Brazil and Portugal. These reciprocal influences may have inspired local artisans to create a throne following a baroque-inspired style that mixes motifs derived from natural forms, such as shapes of scallop shells, cowries, and palm trees, a tree found both in Brazil and the Bight of Benin.

In 1895, French General Alfred Amédée Dodds gave part of the artefacts stolen from Abomey to the then Museum of Ethnography of Trocadero, including Gezo's throne, which remained on view after the museum was transformed into the Musée de l'Homme in 1937. In 2006, the throne was transferred to the newly created the Quai Branly Museum, where it remained displayed to this day.

Another similar throne, although more modest, is also associated with Gezo. Featured in nineteenth-century French postcards, the throne is mounted on four human skulls, very probably the remains of rulers of neighbouring kingdoms against whom Dahomey waged war. Although French agents left this throne behind, they took the human skulls to France, where they were displayed at the Nantes Museum of Natural History.

Gezo's throne complicates Hicks' proposal of a "necrography" of looted objects. Once repatriated, the government of the Republic of Benin plans to give Gezo's throne a central place in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Épopée of the Amazons and the Kings of Dahomey expected to open in Abomey in 2023.<sup>53</sup>

Gezo was proud to display the skulls of his enemies in his palace, including the ones that literally supported one of his thrones. While exposed for more than one century in Paris, the throne represented French supremacy over African men, women, and children. Back in Abomey, the throne will acquire a new life. To the king's descendants, the throne represents their rich heritage. To the descendants of the victims of Gezo's crimes, the throne may contribute to open old scars, and perhaps to generate a new "necrography".

## Footnotes

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- 3 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 26.
- 4 Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process", in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 65.
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- 14 Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40; and Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, translated by Steven Corcoran. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 15 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14, DOI:10.1215/12-2-1.
- 16 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 11.
- 17 James E. Young, "Memory and Counter-Memory", *Harvard Design Magazine* 9: Constructions of Memory: On Monuments Old and New (Fall 1999), [www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/memory-and-counter-memory](http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/memory-and-counter-memory).
- 18 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 4.
- 19 Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).
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- 21 See "The Times View on Returning Artefacts: Spoils of History", *The Times*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-times-view-on-returning-artefacts-spoils-of-history-pb9stpkcs>; and "Letter from Culture Secretary on HM Government Position on Contested Heritage", UK Government, 28 September 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-culture-secretary-on-hm-government-position-on-contested-heritage>.
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- 23 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House", in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017).
- 24 "Project History", *100 Histories of 100 Worlds in One Object*, <https://100histories100worlds.org/project-history/>.
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- 26 Gerald R. Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).
- 27 Harold Tichenor, *The Collector's Guide to Point Blankets of the Hudson's Bay Company And Other Companies Trading in North America* (Bowen Island, BC: Cinetel Film Productions, 2002), 4. The passage continues: "...they were the product of the industrializing textile manufacturing villages in England and they were a practical 'tool' ... for many of North America's First Nations cultures".
- 28 This notion is explored imaginatively in Marlene Kadar, "History, or a Blanket Marriage", in *Broken Fiction*. (Unpublished manuscript, Toronto, 2021). Typescript. Just a note: the Trapper Point blanket is not a Hudson's Bay blanket, but a later relative.
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- 30 Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 115.
- 31 See Britzman's title above. See also Deborah P. Britzman, "If the Story Cannot End: Deferred Action, Ambivalence, and Difficult Knowledge", in Roger Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert (eds), *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 27-57.
- 32 See Eva C. Karpinski and Ricia A. Chansky (eds), *Life Writing Outside the Lines: Gender and Genre in the Americas* (London: Routledge, 2020), especially Linda Warley, "Mar and Me: Following the Traces", 34-41.
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- 35 See Harold Tichenor on pricing, who writes: "In 1800 the traditional one point to one Made-beaver was a workable convention", 46. The term Point Blanket stemmed from the French *empointer*. The Hudson's Bay Company attests: a "full point measured 4-5.5 in.; a half point measured half that length. ... Points ranged from 1 to 6, increasing by halves depending upon the size and weight of the blanket"; see "Hudson's Bay Point Blanket", Hudson's Bay Company, <http://www.hbcheritage.ca/things/fashion-pop/hbc-point-blanket>. The double-bed sized blanket in Figure 7 has four dark pink equal sized points, each one is four and half inches long. For a definition of *Empointer*, see [www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/empointer#littre](http://www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/empointer#littre) *Retenir les plis d'une pièce d'étoffe par quelques points d'aiguille* (1872-1877). I understand this to mean that weavers made threaded stitches on top of the wool. These stitches formed thin lines or bars.
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- 38 Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 33.
- 39 Sacha Llewellyn and Richard Sorrell, *Alan Sorrell: A Life Reconsidered* (Bristol: Sansom, 2004).
- 40 Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1957), 47-48.

- 41 Maura Sala, "The Archaeological Expeditions to Tell es-Sultan (1868–2012)", in Bart Wagemakers (ed.), *Archaeology in the "Land of Tells and Ruins": A History of Excavations in the Holy Land Inspired by the Photographs and Accounts of Leo Boer* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 117–130.
- 42 Cape Town was colonised by the Dutch in 1652, occupied by the British in 1795, relinquished to the Dutch in 1802, and re-annexed by the British in 1806. South Africa became a republic in 1961. Slave labour was central to the making of urban and rural Cape Town, with slavery being legally abolished in 1834 while under British rule.
- 43 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 44 "Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization", a webinar with Achille Mbembe, hosted by Theory from the Margins and CoFutures, 22 October 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=376151030094483&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=376151030094483&ref=watch_permalink).
- 45 Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom", *Theory, Culture and Society* 26, nos 7–8 (2009), 160.
- 46 Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 47 The first democratic elections took place on 27 April 1994—the date from which the "new" South Africa is measured.
- 48 "Loi du 24 décembre 2020 relative à la restitution de biens culturels à la République du Bénin et à la République du Sénégal", *Vie Publique*, 28 December 2020, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/275500-loi-sur-la-restitution-de-biens-culturels-au-benin-et-du-senegal>.
- 49 See Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port, 1727–1892* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004).
- 50 Gaëlle Beaujean, *L'art de la cour d'Abomey: Le sens des objets* (Paris: Presses du Réel, 2019).
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- 53 Musée de l'épopée des amazones et des rois du Danhomè et les arènes d'expression des vodun non-masqués d'Abomey, Les Crayons, <https://www.lescrayons.com/musee-de-l-epopee-des-amazones-et-des-rois-du-danhome.html>.

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# Royal Religion Series

Victor Ehikhamenor

## **Authors**

## **Cite as**

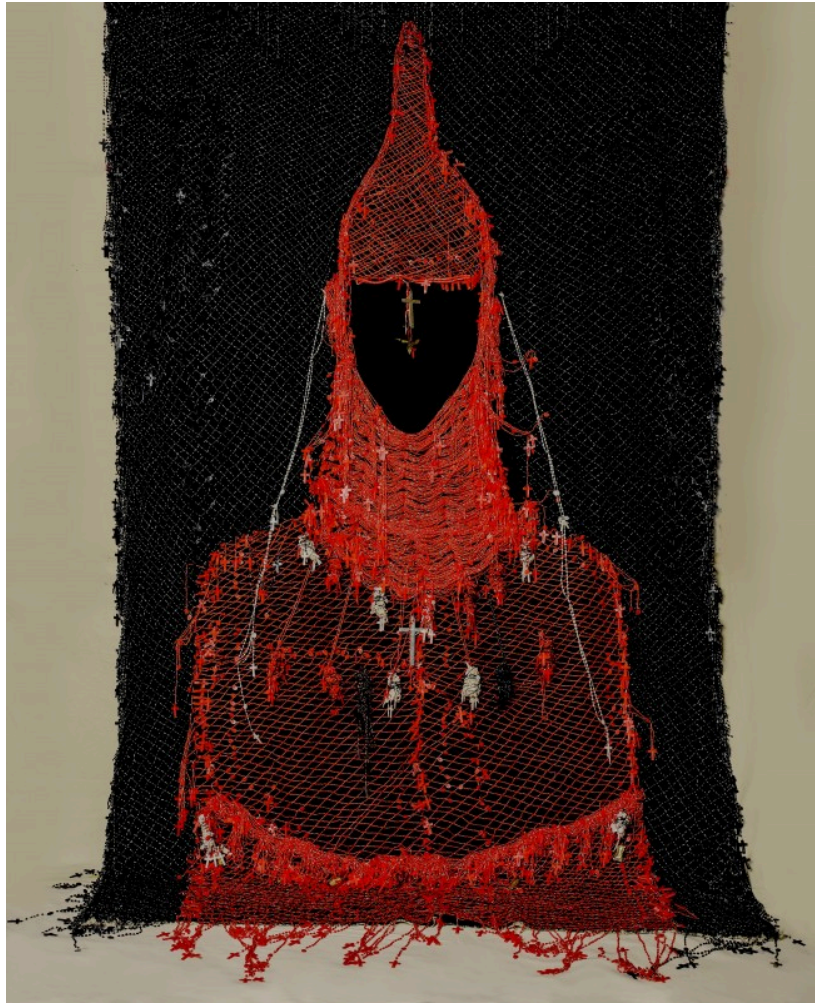
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In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese brought Christianity to the Benin Empire, an ancient kingdom in today's Edo State, Nigeria. Missionaries were sent from Portugal to establish churches in the kingdom. Circa 1485, a red-roofed, white-painted church was erected not too far from the king's palace, and was named Holy Aruosa Cathedral, which still stands today. According to records, the church is one of the oldest in West Africa and the only place generations of Obas (kings) have worshipped beside ancestral shrines, which were among those raided and looted by British soldiers in 1897, an event central to Dan Hicks' Conversation Piece provocation in this issue.

In this church, there is a juxtaposition of the Christian ways of worship and the ancient traditional Benin ways of worship, a hybrid of two disparate religions. There is no clash of doctrines and instead one is enamoured by the coalescence of cosmologies. Subsequent Obas and their chiefs dressed in "traditional" Catholic priests' fashion. The mixture of what is local and what is colonial resulted in an outfit that is a complete ersatz version of the cassock worn by Catholic priests.

To this day, the Benin monarch, his chiefs, and other traditional title-holders still dress like Catholic priests. The garment now represents royalty and one of the main codes of dressing of the Benin people, of which I am a part. This is my point of departure for this body of works that fuses Catholic rosaries, coral beads, and bronze statuettes (Figs 1-5).





**Figure 1.**

Victor Ehikhamenor, *The King Returning from Holy Aruosa Cathedral*, 2018, rosary beads, bronze statuettes, and thread on canvas, 116 × 71 in. Digital image courtesy of Victor Ehikhamenor (all rights reserved).



**Figure 2.**

Victor Ehikhamenor, *The Day Oba Esigie was Baptised*, 2019, rosary beads, bronze statuettes, and diamante fabric on lace, 89 x 68 in. Digital image courtesy of Victor Ehikhamenor (all rights reserved).



**Figure 3.**

Victor Ehikhamenor, *I Am Ogiso, The King from Heaven*, 2017, rosary beads and thread on lace textile, 103 × 69 in. Digital image courtesy of Victor Ehikhamenor (all rights reserved).





**Figure 4.**

Victor Ehikhamenor, *My Last Dance as King Before Sir Harry Lawson's Army Arrive*, 2017, rosary beads and thread on lace fabric, 126 x 75 in. Digital image courtesy of Victor Ehikhamenor (all rights reserved).



**Figure 5.**

Victor Ehikhamenor, *Holy, Holy, Holy King*, 2018, rosary beads and bronze statuettes on canvas, 116 × 71 in. Digital image courtesy of Victor Ehikhamenor (all rights reserved).

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