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Redefining the British Decorative Arts

Edited by Iris Moon



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Unhomely: Redefining the British Decorative Arts

Iris Moon

Authors

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Figure 1.

Film still, *Get Out*, USA, 2017, directed by Jordan Peele. Digital image courtesy of Universal Pictures (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

Film still, *Get Out*, USA, 2017, directed by Jordan Peele. Digital image courtesy of Universal Pictures (all rights reserved).

A Black man sits immobilized in a chair, the look of fear and helplessness sweeping across his face. Tears stream down his eyes, as his hands grip the plush arms of a leather chair in agony (fig. 1). Across from him, a woman wears a polite smile as she gently stirs a blue and white teacup with a spoon (fig. 2). The sonorous ring of utensil against porcelain, we soon realize, is being used to hypnotize and entrap Chris, the protagonist of the 2017 horror film, *Get Out* (directed by Jordan Peele; USA, 2017), so that his body can be harvested to supply a new set of eyes for an old, white blind man.¹ The encounter that takes place between Chris, played by the British actor Daniel Kaluuya, and Missy Armitage, the mother of his white girlfriend, is one of the most memorable scenes of the movie (fig. 3). Through the genre of horror, *Get Out* dramatizes the everyday dread of racism. It also throws into stark relief the ways in which seemingly innocuous objects can be repurposed into instruments of subtle psychological torture, the quiet means by which an individual can be told that he does not belong and needs to “get out”. The teacup, as a long-standing symbol of politeness and civility, is weaponized into a means of exerting psychological control and bodily possession. Though

the setting is a suburban American home, the aura of civility promised by the array of domestic furnishings—from the polished mahogany dinner table and the blue willow pattern teacup to the tiered tea tray that sits next to the bed—have their roots in an eighteenth-century British culture of superiority shaped by an “empire of goods”.²

The teacup scene stayed with me as I walked through the spaces of the British Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Completed in 2020 to the tune of around \$22 million, the refurbished galleries promised to display 400 years of “British history and ornamentation from one of the largest empires of all time”.³ Though I’ve visited the gallery several times now, as a curator who contributed to its redesign and a visitor, I found myself struck by the uncanny materialities of the space. I had never before noticed how the glass shelves and luxurious display cases created strange, displaced reflections that contaminated spaces in which they did not belong, defying a sense of containment or order ([fig. 4](#)). Instead of marveling at the variety of teapots made by proud Staffordshire potters and domestic porcelain factories in England, stacked like a tower of British civility in the center of one gallery, I saw the eerie reflections of the Indian ivory objects contained in the pocket galleries, hovering like ghosts in the glass shelves, the periphery haunting the center ([figs. 5](#) and [6](#)). I found myself repeatedly mapping the charged encounter with the teacup in *Get Out* onto these symbols of entrepreneurial ambitions and creativity, each object of useful beauty shadowed by a phantasmagoria of colonial violence and its long aftermath ([fig. 7](#)).⁴



[Watch Video](#)

Figure 3.

Film clip, *Get Out*, USA, 2017, directed by Jordan Peele. Digital image courtesy of Universal Pictures (all rights reserved).



Figure 4.

The teapot case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).



Figure 5.

The teapot case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).



Figure 6.

The teapot case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

The teapot case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

Decorative arts place pressure upon the hierarchies inherent in British aesthetics, and by extension British culture, from the enlightenment to the present day. The specters of history and the possibilities of the future haunt

in equal measure this special issue of *British Art Studies*, which challenges readers to rethink the British decorative arts. Through a series of thought-provoking articles by artists, curators, scholars, and a scientist, the issue asks readers to question their assumptions about the decorative arts, and by extension, the notions of belonging, possession, and home that such arts have helped to shape in British culture. Issues of race and identity, empire and nation, and collective and subjective desires, far from being alien aspects of the decorative arts, have long gestated within the discourses of taste and aesthetics that emerged in tandem with Britain's rise as a center of capitalism. Many of the articles have as their touchstone the eighteenth century, when London became the finance capital of the world, initiating what economic historian Giovanni Arrighi described as a late stage of capitalism. With the transfer of Dutch power to Britain, a tripartite system of industry, empire, and the "endless" accumulation of capital set the stage for what he described as the origins of our present conditions.⁵ Individuals felt this seismic economic shift in more palpable ways, through the explosion of commodities and luxury goods made available through the triangle trade. What is of particular interest in the context of this special issue is how the ruses of capitalism came to roost in the home itself, in the form of objects that initially appeared to be commodious or useful, but quickly germinated a wealth of other contraptions that seemingly accumulated overnight. No less than Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, described the unsettling qualities of finding small conveniences flooding all of the nooks and crannies of the British Isles. Even as he insisted in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) that only lofty moral ideals, such as usefulness and sympathy for others, would prevent self-interest from destroying society, he continually contemplated the lesser luxuries, and how they managed to spoil so many people and turn them into coxcombs. He ruminates, for example, on the utility of tweezer cases, ostensibly items of utility but really just one of the many "numberless artificial and elegant contrivances", that become useless "in the languor of disease, and the weariness of old age" (fig. 8).⁶



Figure 8.

Nécessaire, circa 1760-1800, enameled copper, 8.3 × 3.6 × 2.1 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.1086a-f). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Do such trinkets deserve a space entirely of their own? One aim of the issue is to argue for the importance of museum collections and displays as porous and open conceptual sites for thinking openly and broadly about the British decorative arts and their relationship to the past, present, and future. Several of the features in this issue were prompted by temporary exhibitions and permanent installations, which raised questions of temporality, display, and audience in ways different from an academic context. The present issue emerged from an earlier “Conversation Piece” feature in *BAS* that prompted a community of thinkers to ponder the question of luxury and crisis, and how one might inform the other.⁷ These two terms, it turns out, were less alien to each other than at first appeared. In retrospect, I realized that two major reinstallations of British Galleries had coincided with two historical crises that have come to define our own times. The Victoria and Albert Museum’s refurbished British Galleries opened at the end of 2001, the year of 9/11, while the Met’s version opened in 2020, the year that the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd brought a sudden halt to the prior rhythms of everyday life. Taking place over several years, the timing of redesigned museum spaces never aligns perfectly with events taking place in the outside world. Nonetheless, current events shape the meanings of seemingly atemporal museum spaces in untold ways. I think it is fair to say

that the viewpoint that museum institutions are neutral spaces is untenable. Crises actively defy institutional attempts to control the meaning or main themes of a space planned years in advance. They can also offer opportunities for rethinking things outside of a normal and normative context. While much has been made of attempting to make museums “topical”, “relevant”, and “timely”, what needs to be acknowledged is the temporal disjuncture between the institutional spaces dictated by a false sense of permanence and timelessness, and the accelerating pace of the world outside. It’s not about catching up to the times, but providing a nexus where the past can meet the present in flexible and dynamic ways. As the articles gathered in this collection make clear, the decorative arts are inherently political, bringing to the fore the way in which issues of scale, material, and color become of political importance when dealing in the realm of the ancillary or superfluous. Instead of attempting to categorize, classify, and discipline the decorative arts by offering a precise definition of what this term means, the issue places it in a more expansive field of material and representation, from vessels and no-longer extant sculptures to dress and the practices of dressing-up. The political dimension of the decorative arts becomes even more evident when they are not seen as part of a fixed heritage, but rather as part of a radically open field of production, in considering the paradoxical power of the small and portable format of the Wedgwood medallion, which circulated across the globe to reach abolitionist audiences, or the outsized reactions about taste, when Thomas Longmore and John Hénk’s giant majolica elephant was displayed at the 2015 *Sculpture Victorious* exhibition at the Tate ([fig. 9](#)).⁸ The decorative arts demand that one expand, alter, or bend the parameters of taste.



Figure 9.

Thomas Longmore and John Hénk for Minton & Co.,
Elephant, 1889, lead and tin-glazed earthenware.
Collection of Thomas Goode & Co. Installed in
Sculpture Victorious, Tate Britain, London, 25
February-25 May 2015. Digital image courtesy of Guy
Bell (All rights reserved).

This issue proposes a double move to readers. First, it foregrounds the fact that slavery, colonialism, and empire were integral historical components in the production, consumption, and reception of the British decorative arts. Second, it suggests that readers unhinge the “heritage” aspect that has long been associated with the British decorative arts, proposing instead a move of defamiliarization and making strange the routines of domesticity that seem self-evident and simply “the way things always have been”. The power of a film like *Get Out* precisely resides in making the seemingly everyday practices of American suburbia strange and unhomey. It also shows us the deep racial, political, social, and historical schisms that have always already existed in the collective mythologies of “home”. The idea of the home as a protective space of domestic virtues, a space of retreat away from the real

world, is of course a myth that has been shattered long ago.⁹ The persistent belief in the home as last refuge from outside change has been adopted as an ideology of sorts, leaving the back door open to reactionary forms of colonial nostalgia. This is evident in the strong reaction to the important study published by the National Trust exploring the links between its properties and slavery. Those who saw the stately homes as *belonging* to the nation no longer felt “at home” in history, when the facts of the past drew a clear link between the elegant and stately residences and “the global slave trades, goods and products of enslaved labour, abolition and protest, and the East India Company”.¹⁰ As it is clear from the historical record, the country house was never isolated from the racist sinews of imperial power and violence.

Confronting the past can often be a daunting experience, but it can also provide the way for new narratives to be written. As David Scott reminds us, new futures depend upon retellings of the past.¹¹ The uncanny picturing of the domestic setting also speaks to how the British decorative arts are capable of channeling certain unseen and unspoken rules in ways that are quite different from painting or sculpture, auratic works meant to be viewed from a protective distance. Though handled and touched, the decorative arts enter slyly and cunningly through the peripheral field of vision. Caught in a quick glance rather than being the central object of concentrated focus, decorative objects nonetheless unsettle and startle at a different visual register, when they shatter loudly and break into a million pieces. But their power, as this special issue insists, lies precisely in the ability to disrupt grand narratives and the visual and material field from the colorful periphery and the superfluous margins.

Footnotes

- 1 For one of the many reviews of Peele’s insightful film and the subject of race and the horror genre, see Brandon Harris, “The Giant Leap Forward of Jordan Peele’s ‘Get Out’”, *The New Yorker*, 4 March 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/review-the-giant-leap-forward-of-jordan-peeles-get-out>.
- 2 See John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds., *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700–1830* (New Haven, CT: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2007).
- 3 The Met, “There’s a Revolution in Your Teapot”, British Galleries, <https://www.metmuseum.org/primer/british-galleries#poster-intro>.
- 4 On horror as a useful tool for rethinking a traditional subject of art history, see Maria Loh’s insightful commentary on the special issue of Early Modern Horror in *Oxford Art Journal*. She writes, the aim in thinking about horror through Early Modern art history and art history through the lens of horror is to open “up a larger conversation about how images move us, change us, transform us, infect us, haunt us, and push us to think and to feel beyond ourselves...as a means to look awry, to look anew, and to look differently at the visual cultures of the distant *past* in ways productive for students and art historians in the *present*”; Maria H. Loh, “Introduction: Early Modern Horror”, *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 3 (October 2011): 326, DOI:[10.1093/oxartj/kcr040](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcr040).
- 5 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); see especially Part 3: “Industry, Empire, and the ‘Endless’ Accumulation of Capital”.
- 6 Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: A. Millar, 1761), 270.
- 7 Iris Moon, “Luxury and Crisis: Redefining the British Decorative Arts”, *British Art Studies* 16, June 2020, DOI:[10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-16/coverstation](https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-16/coverstation).

- 8 Richard Dorment, "Victorian Sculpture Deserves Far Better", *Daily Telegraph*, 27 February 2015.
- 9 See, for example, Walter Benjamin's work on Louis-Philippe, or the Interior, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 32-49.
- 10 The National Trust, "Addressing Our Histories of Colonialism and Historic Slavery", September 2020. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust#Introducing%20the%20report>.
- 11 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

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England Am I? Elizabethan Clothing, Gender, and Crisis in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

Sarah Bochicchio

Abstract

In her final novel, *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf placed the self within a national, historical narrative. The novel is rich with the anti-fascist agenda of *Three Guineas*, told through the lens of women's stories and, significantly, their historical clothing. Specifically, Woolf used Elizabethan costume to reflect on the role of dress in women's lives. This article considers *why* Virginia Woolf selected the Elizabethan era as a sartorial and psychological alternative to her present. In a study of both sixteenth- and twentieth-century dress, this article explores how the Renaissance may have posed a more malleable, self-assertive antidote to the pressures of modern fashion—and the systems it upheld.

Authors

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When Virginia Woolf began her final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), she saw it as a diversion.¹ She had just finished her anti-fascist polemic, *Three Guineas* (1938) and, in this new text, as she wrote in a diary entry from April 1938, “all” literature would be “discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour”.² However, as Woolf worked on *Between the Acts*, the war raged around her: concentrated air raids, invasions, incendiary bombs, constant, pulsating worry.³ In her diaries, letters, and conversations, she expressed a pointlessness to her work, “but what does it matter, writing too many pages”.⁴ She tried to coax herself out from a deepening depression; “This trough of despair shall not, I swear, engulf me”, and a few sentences later wrote, “I was thinking: we live without a future.”⁵ If writing *Between the Acts* was a distraction, it was not apolitical; the novel is rich with the anti-fascist agenda of *Three Guineas*, told through the lens of women’s stories and, significantly, their historical clothing. The question is: at a time of personal and national crisis, why did Woolf deploy a time-sensitive cultural object, such as fashion, to counter martial, masculine, narratives?

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf placed clothing (and the self) within a national, historical narrative, offering opportunities to reflect on the role of dress in women’s lives. Specifically, Woolf used Elizabethan costume to explore womanhood, restriction, and individuality. By the time she finished *Between the Acts*, the text was no longer “to amuse [herself]” but was “almost entirely the Elizabethan play”.⁶ As she was working on the novel, she conducted historical research on the early modern period, which she located as the time when “the individual emerges”.⁷ In both the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, clothing alternately curtailed or advanced women’s identities and agency. Contrasting her own sense of sartorial repression with the apparent choices available to her predecessors, Woolf represented the Elizabethan period as less restrictive, allowing for more malleable and occasionally flamboyant expressions of women’s selves. Woolf took up this notion of sartorial fluidity, not just in critique of her own time, but also to precipitate a shift in broader societal narratives and trends—if only her contemporaries might reflect on the past.

Written and published when Virginia Woolf was feeling “rattled & distracted” by the onset of the Second World War, *Between the Acts* focuses on the configuration of society and the individual through historical layering.⁸ In the text, Woolf set personal and local narratives against national history, looking at the way that history is misconstrued and expressed in daily life, movements, language, and visual culture. Scholars have traditionally read the text as a novel conveying pacifist and matriarchal aims, a rebuttal to “fascism, patriarchy, and the coming of the Second World War”.⁹ More

recently, R.S. Koppen has examined the novel's sartorial aims, observing how *Between the Acts* engages fashion to argue for "Benjaminian modes of cultural memory".¹⁰ Although Renaissance literary influence has been well documented in Woolf's work, it is less understood how Woolf's inclusion of and insistence upon Elizabethan dress offers a social critique of nineteenth- and twentieth-century gender norms, recalling her early modern focus in *Orlando* (1928) and her personal interest in the period.¹¹ Her exploration of Benjaminian cultural memory here serves as a counterpoint to the "grand narratives" and offers a moment of reflection on how history is formed—how life happens not during the grand events, but in the in-between moments.¹² As Benjamin might have phrased it, Woolf "[regarded] it as [her] task to brush history against the grain".¹³

In a time of Tudor fancy-dress parties, historical pageants, and the repurposing of English Renaissance style in contemporary fashions, Woolf used Elizabethan dress to question a woman's place in the contemporary world and, by extension, challenge how history had been written. How do Woolf's observations in *Between the Acts* constrain and liberate the meanings that accrued to what a woman's body was supposed to signify? What is not only lost, but also preserved or gained, in historical revival? In order to understand the significance of these costumes, I also explore the sixteenth-century garments and arguments with which Woolf was engaging: how and why these garments were seen as transgressive; what they were understood to do to the body; and what it meant when the distinctions between men's and women's dress blurred. Woolf's selection of Elizabethan dress relied on her nuanced understanding of Elizabethan individualism and what existed behind the cultural memory of the sixteenth century. Set within the context of Woolf's layered histories, this article considers the long, active lives of clothing and how—and why—Woolf refashioned Elizabethan dress at a moment of profound, collective crisis.

Act I: Tudor Revivalism

In Between the Acts

"What connection is there between the sartorial splendours of the educated man and the photograph of ruined horses and dead bodies?" asked Woolf in *Three Guineas*.¹⁴ In this incisive passage, Woolf asserted that the clothing of contemporary male dominance—for those in military office and among the intellectual elite—encouraged a "disposition towards war", citing how masculine splendor led to distinctions and superiorities that rendered men "barbarous" and "[roused] competition and jealousy".¹⁵ *Three Guineas* links such patriarchal conventions with military force, arguing that the internalized norms and external expectations that come with donning a uniform create

systemic structures that ultimately lead to violence. *Three Guineas* acts as a springboard for the themes in *Between the Acts*, showing how clothing can be not just political, but also downright militant. *Between the Acts* simultaneously suggests a matriarchal alternative to masculine splendor and outlines why such an alternative had become impossible.

Between the Acts takes place over the course of a single day—during the staging of a historical English pageant at the middle-sized, impressive-yet-slightly-upstart Pointz Hall (a house owned by the Oliver family patriarch, Bartholomew).¹⁶ The historical pageant developed in the Edwardian period as a kind of “living history” that was “primarily concerned with the past and its representation in the present”.¹⁷ The pageants usually showed scenes from local or community history—and, frequently, they featured Queen Elizabeth I (fig. 1).¹⁸ In the interwar period, women’s groups used pageants to appeal to women’s historical contributions, with the added benefit that the pageants would “disrupt class hierarchies and escape rigid gender roles ... and provide opportunities for women to contribute imaginatively to community life and to explore more fully experiences and histories of others” (fig. 2).¹⁹ Woolf had observed these aspirations—and their realities—when she was involved in the staging of the Women’s Institute pageants in Rodmell, Sussex and, perhaps unsurprisingly, felt ambivalent toward their agendas.²⁰



Figure 1.

St. Albans Pageant, 1907: Queen Elizabeth at Gorhambury, photograph. Collection of St. Albans Museum (2008.5530). Digital image courtesy of St. Albans Museum (all rights reserved).

TUDOR LADIES WITH MODERN IDEAS.



An amusing photograph taken at the pageant. "Time's Daughters," given at Radford College.

Figure 2.

"Tudor Ladies with Modern Ideas", The Sheffield Daily Independent, 19 May 1930 (Sheffield: Johnston Press, 1930), 7. Digital image courtesy of British Library / British Newspaper Archive (all rights reserved).

In *Between the Acts*, the pageant is performed and attended by the village community, family, and friends. The optimistic reasons for its staging, like breaking down class hierarchies and community-building, also seem to cause its internal tensions. Both the pageant's cast and audience comprise characters whose relations are "strained" due to family dynamics, class frictions, and the mixing of social groups. Misery abounds, politely tucked away in sighs and downward glances.

Before embarking on the pageant's retelling of English history, Woolf reminds readers that the climax of all English history is the contemporary moment (i.e., the war). Early on, Mrs. Giles Oliver, known familiarly as Isa, interrupts Bartholomew in the library where they have different "readings" of the morning newspaper (Isa is married to Bartholomew's son, Giles, an impatient man whom she no longer loves). Bartholomew, who has retired from the Indian Civil Service, unemotionally combs the paper ("he had read his paper") and crumples it into a beak that he then places over his nose to spook his grandson. ²¹

The newspaper's presence, on its own, commands both the present's historic nature and history's continued presence. Woolf writes that Isa's generation understood that "the newspaper was a book", a comment that settles and unsettles the mutual layering between past and present.²² In contrast to Bartholomew, for Isa, the newspaper's contents are troubling; she glances at *The Times* and reads a passage describing a woman raped by troops.²³ Her skimming of the text offers a glimpse at how the worst of the patriarchy is made visible through war, manipulation, and violence against women. The moment also serves to establish that even for those who absorb violence secondhand, the experience is one of first-person awareness and fear. Isa viscerally feels the article come to life, imagining "that was real ... on the bed the girl was screaming", and she forgets her present surroundings.²⁴ In fact, the intrusive observation from Isa mirrors Woolf's own writing process in which air raids would frequently punctuate her concentration ("And I'm writing *P.H.* [*Pointz Hall*, later *Between the Acts*], which leaves a spare hour. Many air raids. One as I walked.").²⁵

The pageant arrives about midway through the text, introduced by the assembling audience and their search for chairs, as Woolf mocks the shoddiness of recreating this "island history" and probes at the nationalistic impulse that underscores it.²⁶ The audience, somewhat unsure if the play is even starting, watches a small girl "like a rosebud in pink" give the prologue.²⁷ This image of the English rose (not to mention, the Tudor rose) evokes a multitude of gendered, nationalistic dialogues, even before a historic figure graces the stage—she is the symbolic embodiment of England as a virgin isle, stripped of any actual power. But as she declares, "England am I", she forgets her lines.²⁸ As she keeps going, the music finally starts up, and the little girl is overtaken by the masculine energy of the gramophone ("see the warriors—here they come").²⁹

As the pageant continues, Woolf makes clear that although each audience member and participant is a product of this history, they are comically uninterested in learning about, or understanding, it. More people filter into the audience, interrupting dialogue one by one, looking for cushions, and trying to explain the premise to each other. They muse about chronology and talk over the pageant; they already wonder how it might end: "It would take till midnight unless they skipped. Early Briton; Plantagenets; Tudors; Stuarts—she ticked them off, but probably she had forgotten a reign or two."³⁰ The audience dawdles thus, prompted but not inspired by the pageant, until someone exclaims, "Look at her!" and Queen Elizabeth I emerges:

Everyone was clapping and laughing. From behind the bushes issued Queen Elizabeth—Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco. Could she be Mrs. Clark of the village shop? She was splendidly made up. Her head, pearl-hung, rose from a vast ruff. Shiny satins draped her. Sixpenny brooches glared like cats' eyes and tigers' eyes; pearls looked down; her cape was made of cloth of silver—in fact swabs used to scour saucepans. She looked the age in person. And when she mounted the soap box in the centre, representing perhaps a rock in the ocean, her size made her appear gigantic. She could reach a flitch of bacon or haul a tub of oil with one sweep of her arm in the shop. For a moment she stood there, eminent, dominant, on the soap box with the blue and sailing clouds behind her. The breeze had risen.

The Queen of this great land ...

—those were the first words that could be heard above the roar of laughter and applause. ³¹

The first official character in Miss La Trobe's historic recreation, Elizabeth I materializes unceremoniously from the shrubbery. Eliza Clark manages to "appear gigantic", though her semi-divine status fizzles with tension regarding her class. She is bound in the mundane materials of her trade: the sixpenny brooches, the scouring pads. Who can play the role of queen? The audience's response—laughter and applause—seems to be one of enthusiastic recognition, that history has arrived and the shopkeeper has been transformed. In one 1934 image of a tobacconist, the woman appears to almost fade into the shop; her clothes drape without taking up space. ³² One can imagine that the shimmer and magnitude of the Elizabethan costuming would have challenged Eliza Clark's usual movements, how she felt in her clothes and in herself.

Even though Eliza Clark's costume is inauthentic, she manages to look "the age in person". In her description, Woolf's uses the phrase "made up" with double meaning—that this Elizabeth had been not just dressed and "made up" with make-up, but "made up", as in "invented", by the English. Woolf appeals to history's visualization, that the ruff and makeshift cloth-of-silver are enough to provide access to the past. Or, as Koppen writes: "It is the actors' costumes which make historicity available to reflection." ³³ Unlike in other art forms, in drama, Anne Hollander noted, "the costumes *are* the drama, the characters are known by what they wear". ³⁴ Hollander even used the Elizabethan period as an example, pointing out that in drama: "So long as Queen Elizabeth's courtiers wear ruffs, it doesn't matter what else

they wear.”³⁵ The costume conjures the past because it kicks up a fabricated aura from the period, an instant recognition that has been “made up” by taught histories.

Eliza/Elizabeth’s appearance instigates a monologue about the great Elizabethan age—“*Hawkins, Frobisher, Drake*”—that is intermittently interrupted by the present (a mooing cow, a twittering bird, Eliza Clark’s swarthy arm). Soon, the costume too is unseated. During the great speech, “the wind gave a tug at her head dress. Loops of pearls made it top-heavy. She had to steady the ruffle which threatened to blow away.”³⁶ The windy headdress ignites an almost drunken merriment, and the crowd descends into vulgar song and laughter. They continue to laugh as Albert, “the village idiot”, begins “picking and plucking at Great Eliza’s skirts”.³⁷ As the scene winds down, the gramophone blares and a procession dances around the “majestic figure of the Elizabethan age personified by Mrs. Clark, licensed to sell tobacco, on her soap box”. Woolf weaves Eliza and Elizabeth together, and they are so fully intertwined by the time that “Great Eliza descended”, the two Elizabeths seem to have fused, and the “Elizabethan age”, represented and embodied by the tobacco-seller, can pass from the scene.

Woolf’s inclusion of Elizabethan dress in this scene involves chaos, glorification, and escapism—yet also truth. While this is happening, Isa, in the audience, wonders if the “plot” even matters, “The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot.”³⁸ Woolf questions here if the content of history even holds relevance, highlighting the importance of visual and cultural memory to provoke an emotional reaction. Although the costume is shoddy and inauthentic, Miss La Trobe and Eliza Clark have captured how the magnificence and *presence* of the past can provoke an immediate imagining—if not reality—of national memory. For Eliza Clark, the scouring-pad cloth-of-silver is enough for her to embody someone other than the person who is licensed to sell tobacco. She is liberated, seen, and magnified by the costume she wears. The dress is a totem, a symbol that stretches across time and is “read” in the same way across many centuries. As Vita Sackville-West wrote in *Heritage* (1919), “it all comes down to art in the end; the legend is greater than the fact”.³⁹

Although it might be tempting to think the past intrudes on the present in this scene, really it is the present that interrupts and complicates the past. In the present, Woolf proposes rereading the past in a Benjaminian act of “[seizing] hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger”.⁴⁰ If, for instance, one could argue for a different past (a matriarchal one), the present could change in response. The Elizabethan dress in this scene probes how a reconstructed historical memory—developed by finding unexpected

glimmers of truth—might provide an avenue for change, an alternative to the perennial entrapment in the cycle of martial behavior in which Woolf's characters find themselves. It is, however, unclear if the audience has experienced any profound shift; they are enthused by the costuming, but are they changed? If the audience does not reflect, there is little chance of changing history or what appears in the daily newspapers. This moment might be one of contingency, if only the audience would seize it.

Tudor Revival at Large

In the text, the pageant appears just as integral to the structure of the estate as its architecture or the grand paintings atop the staircase. Despite its pressing importance, the year feels almost irrelevant, humming constantly is a “This year, last year, next year, never ...”.⁴¹ The theatrical process is aggressively familiar, and the pageant itself is taken as a given. Its characters, many of whom are middle-aged in the middle of this unprecedented age, would have been raised amidst the pageant just as it was coming into existence and gaining popularity.⁴²

In this sense, one might observe that there is little to be gained from examining the Tudor fashions proposed by Miss La Trobe in her amateur production; however, Woolf's attention to Elizabethan dress demands serious attention. Fundamentally, Woolf suggests a matriarchal history through her primary focus on the ages of Queens Elizabeth, Anne, and Victoria (did history not begin with women?), but within the context of Woolf's time, Elizabeth's memory—and the revival of her costume—had a specific set of connotations that she evokes. On a contemporary, political level, Tudor fashions made a near-constant appearance in the world in which Woolf lived. Tudor revivalism has long played an outsized role in the English cultural imagination, beginning the year that the final Tudor monarch, Elizabeth I, died.⁴³ On the personal level, the choice reflects Woolf's own preoccupations with the early modern period and how the individual came to be.

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Tudor styles reappeared within both fantasy and everyday contexts. Woolf's Victorian childhood, coming of age, and adulthood coincided with the rising popularity of fancy dress, which, as noted by Celia Marshik, was visible at social gatherings, as well as represented in films, fiction, and a multitude of print media (fig. 3).⁴⁴ In the many editions of Arden Holt's *Fancy Dresses Described; or, What to Wear at Fancy Balls*, Holt offered detailed descriptions for any aspirational Tudor replication—for Elizabeth (“The bodice is stiff, with deep pointed stomacher”), Mary Stuart, Anne Boleyn, among others, as well as how to dress as England herself (“Skirt of cream bunting”).⁴⁵ Notably, he did not make any claims of historical accuracy; he merely sought to relay “the

favourite and most effective".⁴⁶ One realization of these descriptions can be seen in Herbert Norris's 1910s and 1920s costume sketches (fig. 4), which are clearly based on Tudor portraits from the Henrician court and vary in their attention to accuracy (fig. 5).⁴⁷



Figure 3.
Bette Davis in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, 1939,
photograph. Digital image courtesy of Warner Bros/First National/
Kobal/Shutterstock (all rights reserved).



Figure 4.

Herbert Norris, Costume Design, circa 1927, pencil, pen and ink, and watercolour. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (S.305-1988). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 5.

Attributed to Master John,, Katherine Parr, circa 1545, oil on panel, 180.3 x 94 cm. Collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 4451). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

These costumes possessed clear class restrictions, but also muddled them. Owning such costumes would have only been possible for a certain subset of modern clientele. In 1938, a *Punch* cartoon featured two working-class gentlemen asking their local costume-maker, “Ave you any Elizabethan fancy gent’s suitings?”⁴⁸ The punchline is that these men, their condition betrayed by their accents and clothing, would be unable to pull off the costume they seek.⁴⁹ Their faith in costume’s transformative power (and perhaps their social ambitions) was, as Mashik notes, “simply laughable”.⁵⁰ Due to the cost of production and the rarefied context in which it would have been worn, fancy dress could become an elite pastime but, at the same time, costume allowed for class transgression.⁵¹ Eliza Clarke’s shape-shifting

between social ranks symbolizes the potential disruption of fancy dress, though her eventual removal of the costume would restore normalcy. In order for Eliza Clarke to transform, she needs to inhabit an Elizabethan mindset in which clothing can, in fact, shape the wearer (as will be discussed in Act II: Stubbes's Monstrous Bodies).

The elite nature of such neo-Elizabethan attire was also apparent in everyday fashion, tailored to the needs of upper-class women that Woolf often described in her work. In the early twentieth century, Elizabeth Handley-Seymour, a New Bond Street court dressmaker, produced sketches of Tudor-inspired clothing that, while clearly fancy dress, were updated to reflect contemporary preferences for slimmer silhouettes and more generous necklines (fig. 6).⁵² Although it is unclear if the sketch was ever produced into an actual garment, she would have created it to show to prospective clients.⁵³ At this point, couturiers designed both fashion and costume, whereas later in the century a clear hierarchy would develop (with costume considered the subordinate genre).⁵⁴



Figure 6.

Madame Elizabeth Handley-Seymour, Tudor Lady Fancy Dress Costume, 1912-1914, pencil, pen and ink, and watercolour, 33.5 x 26 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E.4831-1958). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

The interest in Tudor allusions also applied to elite dress for everyday settings and special occasions, as seen in examples by American, French, and English designers. Hard-to-place Renaissance-esque textiles resonated with the art nouveau style, resulting in scrolling patterns on rich red velvets (fig. 7).⁵⁵ Ruff-like collars and royal ermine also reappeared in evening and day attire for the most fashionable sets (figs. 8 and 9).⁵⁶ Most significant among these examples is a circa 1900 evening coat designed by the House of Worth under the tenure of Jean-Philippe Worth (fig. 10).⁵⁷ Inspired by sixteenth-century iconography, the silk coat features an alternating Tudor rose pattern, standing collar, smaller ruffs at the wrist, and an alternating black and white pattern that resembles the effect of Renaissance blackwork

([fig. 11](#)). A dress Virginia Woolf wore in 1926 bears some resemblance to these styles; it features enlarged, stylized flowers and slightly billowing sleeves ([fig. 12](#)).



Figure 7.

probably French, Evening Robe, 1890s, silk, fur. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Miss Cornelia Van Aukin Chapin, 1953 (C.I.53.60.8). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 8.

C.G. Gunther's Sons, Accessory Set, 1890-1899, fur, silk.
Collection of the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum,
2009; Gift of Eleanor F. Peck, 1969 (2009.300.478a, b). Digital
image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
(public domain).



Figure 9.

Attributed to Nicholas Hilliard, Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I (The Ermine Portrait), 1585, oil on panel, 106 × 89 cm. Collection of Hatfield House, Hertfordshire. Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 10.

Jean-Philippe Worth for House of Worth, Evening Coat, circa 1900, silk. Collection of the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; Gift of Mrs. William E. S. Griswold, 1941 (2009.300.94). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 11.

British, Fragment of Blackwork, circa 1590, silk and gilt-metal-wrapped thread on woven plain weave linen foundation, 21.6 × 36.2 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, The James Parker Charitable Foundation Gift, 2013 (2013.598). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 12.

Lady Ottoline Morrell, Virginia Woolf, June 1926, vintage snapshot print, 11.8 × 6.7 cm. Collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG Ax142597). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

These examples reveal that Elizabethan dress had relevance beyond the pageant stage—Woolf was conscious of an ongoing appropriation of sixteenth-century forms that saturated her world. When she explored these styles in *Between the Acts*, it was with the intention of critiquing the limitations and binaries of twentieth-century dress. The fashion system—and its relationship to gender—has the potential to present people in ways that do not reflect how they live or what they want.⁵⁸ Of course, fashion offers potential for the opposite too, that one can express and liberate the self.⁵⁹ Elizabeth Wilson wrote that dress “which is an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, not only links that body to the social world, but also more clearly separates the two”.⁶⁰ In *Between the Acts*, Woolf explored this

relationship between the dressed body as a social object and as a separate, self-conscious entity. She asked that we think more closely about its ramifications—good or bad—and how bodies, especially women’s bodies, become keepers of time and history, layered upon, interpreted, and revealed. That the pageant audience in *Between the Acts* may have worn and participated in the fancy-dress trends adds a further reflexive element to the costuming.

Beyond the potent early twentieth-century meanings that had accrued to Elizabethan dress, Woolf had a scholarly interest in Elizabethan fashion that she reinterpreted and explored in *Between the Acts*. During this period, Woolf was also working on a critical historical work with a focus on the Elizabethan period.⁶¹ In 1941, Woolf complained, “I am stuck in Elizabethan plays. I can’t move back or forwards. I’ve read too much, but not enough.”⁶² Woolf was similarly engrossed in reading about early modern lives—Vita Sackville-West (a writer, as well as Woolf’s friend and lover) who was the descendant of Elizabethan aristocrats, commented: “She made me bring as many books as I could on Elizabethan lives, and was full of plans.”⁶³ The two discussed writing a biography of the ambitious Bess of Hardwick, one of the most monumental and wealthy Elizabethan women.

Woolf spent the time that she was writing *Between the Acts* thinking about how each period bled beyond its temporal confines, about the relations between people, about stately homes, about how an audience—and the reception of culture—defines an era. And, yes, she was thinking about Elizabethan clothing and art, what it did to both men and women’s bodies. She wondered what it might feel like to use their furniture (“stiff, ornate, angular and uncushioned”) while sitting in those clothes. She thought about how the clothes were perceived: the farthingales “that raised the preachers wrath”.⁶⁴ Indeed, she thought intently about their psychological impact:

Elizabethan clothes have had too much attention from the historical novelist, and too little from the psychologist. What desire was it that prompted this extraordinary display? There must have been some protest, some desire to affirm something behind the slashed cloaks; the stiff ruffs; the wrought chains and the loops of pearls. The cost was great; the discomfort appalling; yet the fashion prevailed. Was it perhaps, the mark of an anonymous, unrecorded age to enforce the individual; to make ones physical body as bright, as definite, as marked as possible? Fame must be concentrated on the body; since the other kind of

fame, the publicity of the paper, of the photograph, was denied them. Did the eloquence of dress speak, when the art of verbal speech was still unformed? ⁶⁵

Woolf wondered if Elizabethan clothes proclaimed the person. What were their personal aims in wearing this display? Were their clothes a record of the personal or were they meant as a display in protest of their situation? For Woolf, the Elizabethans were whole people, not vestiges of the past, who were at once knowable and unknowable through the clothes.

In this passage, Woolf seemed particularly set on drawing out the self of the Elizabethans—and how the dressed body could represent a kind of individuality. To make their bodies known was to make their multiple selves known. There is an element of “protest”, of “prevailing”, of “enforcing” that she locates as emerging from the very bodies afflicted by the clothing’s physical discomfort. In order to understand Woolf’s line of questioning, it is essential to look at what Woolf herself was understanding and reading: slashed cloaks, the preacher’s wrath, the eloquence of dress. Her selection of Elizabethan dress relied on her nuanced understanding and interpretation of Elizabethan individualism within the context of its own time. ⁶⁶

Act II: Stubbes’s Monstrous Bodies

“The age was the Elizabethan”, writes Woolf in *Orlando*, “their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climates; nor their vegetables even”. Satirical *Orlando* cannot be taken at face value, but, in the Elizabethan age, perceptions of clothing—and what it was understood to do to the body—were different. ⁶⁷ As Anna Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have asserted, in the early modern period, it was believed that clothing constituted a person and could “visibly imprint” upon the wearer. ⁶⁸ This imprinting had implications for the notion of “the self”, which, as Stephen Greenblatt argues, was not a stable concept, but more akin to “self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process”. ⁶⁹ Because the self was malleable, polemicists, pamphleteers, and preachers were anxious about people who wore the wrong clothes and, by extension, the wrong genders. ⁷⁰ Instead, they hoped each person would cling to the clothing that designated their respective social class, gender, profession, and religion. ⁷¹

Phillip Stubbes famously captured the anxieties around this concept in his 1583 text, *The Anatomie of Abuses*. The text, which laments and lambasts contemporary vices, upholds the excessive interest in fine clothes as “more

pernicious and damnable than the others”, because it “sheweth itself to the world”.⁷² Worse than adultery, prostitution, or gluttony, “Pride of Apparel” corrupted because, in being so outwardly visible, it had the potential to alter the very constitution of the wearer—and influence formerly convention-abiding subjects to transgress. In particular, he railed against the adoption of men’s clothing by women, which he believed degenerated both genders, muddled manhood, and corrupted the lower classes. Stubbes’s anxiety was situated in a rapidly shifting society, not unlike the mid-twentieth century, in which moralists hoped the social order might organize itself on English bodies.

Blurring genders was considered an affront in which both men and women across the entire social spectrum could participate, an idea that reveals, above all, that clothing was not neutral, and its use had implications for the self. In an anonymous booklet about the vestments controversy, the writer discussed both sides of the debate. In one passage, he argued that retaining the prescribed apparel was a way for ministers to “recouer the dignitie of their forfathers”.⁷³ In a play written the same year, it was declared that “apparell is a great abusion” that could reveal frailness, pride, and instability, as a “wanton foolysh pleasure”, if not used with discretion.⁷⁴ The texts, which requested people shape themselves according to their circumstances, prescribed clothing as a regulatory device. In a 1570 sermon, Thomas Drant, for example, used clothing to direct women to obey their spouse, claiming that there was no finer way to dress than offering yourself to your husband: “Put vnder your neckes to your husbands, and ye shalbe well apparelled. Haue alwayes what to do in your handes, and fasten your feete at home, and ye shall be better liked of, then if ye were in golde.”⁷⁵ For men, it was “good behavior” to be measured in one’s approach to apparel, because “that the Attire may not be of one sorte, and the person of another”, lest he be mistaken for a “harlot” that “sets her selfe to the sale”.⁷⁶ Here, sartorial transgression also meant gender transgression—a man could degenerate into a woman, a “harlot”, if he did not heed the limits of self-ornamentation.

In a moment of particular distress for moralists, in the 1570s, women began wearing doublets, which were an essential element of a man’s wardrobe. The doublet, even as its silhouette changed throughout the century, was a sleeved, close-fitting, padded garment, worn over a shirt. Women traditionally wore a bodice or a “pair of bodies” over their smock, paired with a skirt or “kirtle”. But, in the 1570s, women appropriated doublets as an alternative to the bodice. Around the same time, they began imitating men’s long jackets (jupes or gaskin coats) for riding, blurring the sartorial delineations of gender.⁷⁷ As per usual, Stubbes had something to say about it:

The Women also there have doublets & Jerkins, as men have heer, buttoned up at the brest, and made with wings, welts, and pinions on the shoulder points, as mans apparel is for al the world; & though this be a kinde of attire appropriate onely to man, yet they blush not to wear it; and if they could as wel change their sex, & put on the kinde of man, as they can weare apparel assigned onely to man, I think they would as verely become men indeed, as now they degenerate from godly, sober women, in wearing this wanton lewd kinde of attire, proper only to man.⁷⁸

To Stubbes, apparel “was given us as a signe distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex”, so to adopt men’s apparel was to contradict God’s gift and to “adulterate” one’s gender. Wanton and lewd, the doublet-wearing women became “Monsters of bothe kindes, half women, half men”, readily degenerating both genders and, possibly, staging a coup of manhood.⁷⁹ His dialectic hinged on the idea of the outward reflecting and shaping the inward, complaining that if women were “faire” enough already, they would not need to “deforme” themselves.⁸⁰ For Stubbes, the doublet itself was a monstrous body that could expand into a life beyond its own.

And we know these styles were actually being worn—at least by upper-class women—as Queen Elizabeth I participated in and promoted the adoption of the doublet, in line with her rhetorical wavering between genders.⁸¹ The inventories record that the queen owned at least eighty-five doublets, dozens of which were gifts, some extremely elaborate. In 1575, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, gave her a white satin doublet, garnished with goldsmith’s work, diamonds, rubies, and lace.⁸² Other courtiers gave the queen doublets in more fanciful styles: a black taffeta and silk doublet embroidered with gold and silver flowers and lace, a white satin doublet embroidered with clouds, flowers, and fruits, and another white satin doublet richly wrought with snakes and ears of wheat.⁸³ In the *Darnley Portrait*, Elizabeth sports a bright, braid-stitched doublet with frogging; and, in a 1575 portrait, she wears a slashed white satin doublet that was clearly inspired by contemporary men’s fashions (figs. 13 and 14).⁸⁴ Both doublets match their respective skirts and foreparts, showing the thoughtful integration of the style into the queen’s wardrobe.⁸⁵



Figure 13.

Fencing Doublet, circa 1580, leather, silk, linen, cotton, 76.2 cm x 60.3 cm x 36.2 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, Funds from various donors, 1929 (29.158.175). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 14.

Unknown artist, Elizabeth I, circa 1575, oil on panel, 98 cm × 133 cm. Collection of Reading Museum (REDMG : 1980.168.1). Digital image courtesy of Reading Borough Council (all rights reserved).

Of course, while men and women may both have muddled gender roles through clothing and were both discouraged from doing so, the stakes for men and women were different. As Margaret Jane Kidnie has observed, “where men risk degenerating into women (the inferior sex), woman risk degenerating into hermaphrodites (the monstrous sex)”.⁸⁶ Stubbes feared that men would become womanish and that women would not become men but totally perverted—not least because, by way of whoredom or excessive expenditure, they would “willfully assert their independence from male control”.⁸⁷

Stubbes thus echoed other writers who feared transgression—they coded conservative, normative behaviors as etiquette in order to prevent or reduce deviations from that norm. A particular concern was the fear of spending,

which was a euphemistic way of demanding men and women not to dress beyond their class—a form of social pressure that stood in for sumptuary legislation. In *The Book of the Courtier* (published in multiple editions in the sixteenth century), Baldassare Castiglione advised women to “have the good sense to discern what those garments are that enhance her grace and are most appropriate to the exercises wherein she proposes to engage at the time”.⁸⁸ Thomas Beacon asked that women wear apparel “as becommeth a sober Christian woman”, and another writer suggested men “labour and studie” without becoming accustomed to “superfluous apparel”.⁸⁹ In *The Dial of Princes*, the Spanish bishop Antonio de Guevara chastised any spendthrift that would dress beyond their means, for “is it not a goodly sight in ye court, to see a foolish courtier weare a demie cappe ... beesides hee is deepe in the marchaunts booke for all those things hee hath taken vp of credit of him”.⁹⁰

Early modern writers warned against transgression, forbidding and avoiding travesty brought on by clothes, and, as they did so, they asserted both the power of the objects and the possible agency (however latent) of those at risk. Woolf’s interest in the Elizabethan period stems from this sixteenth-century preoccupation with dress and identity. When she was trying to “conjure up” the “atmosphere” of the Elizabethan period, she was examining the confluence of personality, power, and presence that seemed to emerge and was made visible through clothing.⁹¹ Woolf would not have claimed that there was true liberty—not even in dress—in the Elizabethan period. She was instead concerned with the malleable self, the potential of blurring genders, the protest and flamboyant dress that demanded these kinds of regulations, and the thwarted expectations of politeness. And she was interested in those women who presumably continued to wear their transgressive clothes, paying little heed to such critiques. Within this notion is the idea that the self was pliable, that perception could be drawn and controlled in a way that was self-motivated rather than thrust on the wearer by society. Although language might be gendered and women might be lesser, clothing was a preoccupation in all minds.

Act III: Fashion in the Time of Woolf

For Virginia Woolf, “Society—upper middle class Victorian society—came into being” when, at around seven-thirty, she and her family slipped off their “day clothes”.⁹² Clothing was a transformative presence that not only marked but *made* the transition from day to night. In a passage written in her memoir, “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf wrote of the vulnerability of these occasions:

However cold or foggy, we slipped off our day clothes and stood shivering in front of washing basins. Each basin had its can of hot water. Neck and arms had to be scrubbed, for we had to enter the drawing room at eight with bare arms, low neck, in evening dress.

At seven thirty dress and hair overcame paint and Greek grammar. I would stand in front of George's Chippendale mirror trying to make myself not only tidy, but presentable. On an allowance of fifty pounds it was difficult, even for the skillful, and I had no skill to be well dressed of an evening. ⁹³

The physical discomfort for Woolf was not only in the shivering, the scrubbing, and the bare arms, but in the sense of inadequacy predetermined by her situation. Her experience dressing for the evening was a rote procedure in which her comfort and ambitions were irrelevant—in fact, they made visible her circumstances, that she “had no skill to be well dressed” according to these standards and that her allowance was inadequate. One evening, Woolf stepped downstairs in a “cheaply but eccentrically” constructed home dress made from furnishing fabric. She recalled that despite her apprehension, “a new dress excites even the unskilled”. However, when the lights went up, her half-brother George took in the ensemble:

By the blazing fire George sat, in dinner jacket and black tie, cuddling the dachshund, Schuster, on his knee. He at once fixed on me that extraordinary observant scrutiny with which he always inspected our clothes. He looked me up and down for a moment as if I were a horse brought into the show ring. Then the sullen look came into his eyes; the look which expressed not simply aesthetic disapproval; but something that went deeper. It was the look of moral, of social, disapproval, as if he scented some kind of insurrection, of defiance of his accepted standards. I knew myself condemned from more points of view than I could then analyse. As I stood there I was conscious of fear; of shame; of something like anguish—a feeling, like so many, out of all proportion to its surface cause. He said at last: “Go and tear it up.” He spoke in a curiously tart, rasping, peevish voice; the voice of the enraged male; the voice which expressed his serious displeasure at this infringement of a code that meant more to him than he could admit. ⁹⁴

To dress eccentrically was more than an aesthetic faux pas; it was an insurrection against moral and social codes, driven by fear on both sides. It also put into play the tension between standing out in a refined social context versus standing out at a fancy-dress ball, which *was* appropriate. In Woolf's description, this experience is based on her age, gender, and status as a dependent—her young body being scrutinized and pierced, up and down, by the gaze of the “enraged male” that ultimately determined her fitness and presentability. It ties directly into the Victorian belief perpetuated by those closest to her that “women must be pure and men manly”.⁹⁵ In Woolf's anecdote, George's gaze suppresses her selfhood and her flexibility as to what a woman could be (i.e., *not* creative, independent, eccentric) (fig. 15). Much like Stubbes centuries earlier, George was a guardian of twentieth-century mores, constantly regulating, intruding, and discomforting the women around him. In adulthood, Woolf would dress with a more independent spirit, though would never lose her “clothes complex”; her sister, Vanessa Bell, helmed the Omega workshop, transforming this “eccentric”, artistic identity into the fashions that would become associated with the Bloomsbury group.⁹⁶



Figure 15.

Maurice Beck and Helen Macgregor, Virginia Woolf Photographed in Her Mother's Victorian Dress, *Vogue*, early May 1926. Digital image courtesy of Condé Nast Publications Ltd. (all rights reserved).

Woolf's perception of modern society was one of policed bodies. If the Elizabethan period threw moralists into fits about corrupted bodies, Woolf was aware that women did not even have the opportunity to *be in public* without first meeting their guardian's approval. If Woolf saw the Elizabethan period as sartorially superior, it was not because she saw anyone as genuinely free but as having the ability to experiment, falter, and protest.⁹⁷ As Celia Marshik has demonstrated, representations of objects like evening gowns often figured the objects as "a participant in events and actions that endangered individual women, rendering them vulnerable to murder, rape, and social stigma, as well as ... moments of public awkwardness and shame".⁹⁸ Woolf echoed other writers, like Elizabeth von Arnim, who wrote in *The Enchanted April* (1922) that the well-dressed, beautiful Lady Caroline "was having a violent reaction against beautiful clothes and the slavery they impose on one, her experience being that the instance one had got them

they took one in hand and gave one no peace till they had been everywhere and been seen by everybody".⁹⁹ Von Arnim went on to explain how "it was the clothes that wore out the woman—dragging her about at all hours of the day and night", whereas for men, not even the newest trousers "behaved like that".¹⁰⁰

Likewise, in *Between the Acts*, it is the uncostumed women, those who wear everyday attire, who are most constrained—or even policed—by their clothes. Everyday attire materialized the associations that presumably belonged to each woman, and each woman experiences restrictions according to her position. For Mrs. Oliver:

"Abortive", was the word that expressed her. She never came out of a shop, for example, with the clothes she admired; nor did her figure, seen against the dark roll of trousering in a shop window, please her. Thick of waist, large of limb, and, save for her hair, fashionable in the tight modern way, she never looked like Sappho, or one of the beautiful young men whose photographs adorned the weekly papers. She looked what she was: Sir Richard's daughter; and niece of the two old ladies at Wimbledon who were so proud, being O'Neils, of their descent from the Kings of Ireland.¹⁰¹

Although Mrs. Oliver would like to try on the identity of an androgynous *homme-femme*, her ancestry blunts her ambitions. Woolf highlights how pedigree, the descent of title but also body, becomes a barrier to happiness. Mrs. Oliver feels her body is unruly—although her description is non-judgmental ("thick" and "large" should not be loaded words), it is clear that her figure does not conform, and it is beyond her control to squeeze herself into the form of "Sappho or one of the beautiful young men". Clothing does the work of performing gender and sexuality, and the work they do is seemingly opposite to what Mrs. Oliver wants.¹⁰² It is also worth noting how loaded the term "abortive" is—a medicalization of the perceived failures of her body and, potentially, her perceived failures as a woman. Less concerned with politeness, Mrs. Manresa, one of the few non-Olivers in the cast, finds herself overly feminine, making too much use of the identity that she has been prescribed: "Vulgar she was in her gestures, in her whole person, over-sexed, over-dressed for a picnic."¹⁰³

The pageant prompts each character to consider the relationship between time, clothing, and identity, for as Roman Meinhold described: when the purloined identity that is historical costume has been returned, “it is not restored exactly to its proper place”. ¹⁰⁴ When the pageant settles, the audience separates into murmurs:

“They’re not ready...I hear ‘em laughing” (they were saying.)
“...Dressing up. That’s the great thing, dressing up. And it’s pleasant now, the sun’s not so hot...That’s one good the war brought us—longer days...Where did we leave off? D’you remember? The Elizabethans...Perhaps she’ll reach the present, if she skips...D’you think people change? Their clothes, of course...But I meant ourselves...Clearing out a cupboard, I found my father’s old top hat...But ourselves—do we change?” ¹⁰⁵

The question is echoed throughout the remainder of the novel, as Mrs. Swithin queries Isa, “Did you feel ... what he said: we act different parts but are the same?” ¹⁰⁶ The play, considered a vanishing object of sorts, resides as a visual memory, requiring each audience member—each a participant, given the Elizabethan nature of it—to reflect individually on their roles as represented therein. *Between the Acts* can almost be shrunken down into this passage; ellipses reign, it is unclear who is speaking, and the societally imposed roles of each player seem to disintegrate. Do they change? Is it the clothes that have determined who everyone should be or how loud they may be about themselves? Time, nation, and identity can fall apart but the clothes remain.

Woolf thus recalled passages in *Orlando*, in which she considered what clothing—and perception—determined. To what extent can the wearer actively establish any identity? When in the middle of the text, Orlando becomes a woman, after spending centuries as a man, Orlando contemplates how the shift from tightly cut breeches to flowing skirts altered her experience:

Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking. So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which is to be found if the reader will look at the above, even in her face. If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same

person, there are certain changes. The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same. ¹⁰⁷

Orlando's behavior is different because of what was (or was not) accessible to her after her transformation. As Nancy Cervetti has established, this passage "represents conflicting points of view". ¹⁰⁸ It is unclear if the clothes changed Orlando internally or if the treatment of Orlando changed the way she perceived herself. Pamela Caughie called this passage "a resolution of the problem of the self and the conventional self" in which androgyny finds a non-problematic home. ¹⁰⁹

One wonders if this resolved wholeness was, in part, made possible by Orlando's origin story as an Elizabethan lord. As Patricia Fumerton has argued, in the Elizabethan period, in mediums such as sonnets and miniatures, sometimes one could "only achieve the inner through the outer, the private through the public, the sincere self through self-display". ¹¹⁰ In other words, in the sixteenth century, certain identities were only available to confidantes; external layers of the self could be shed with growing intimacy. Orlando here experiences something similar, as the resolution is not the whittling of selves, but their ability to coexist. In any case, Woolf continued, writing, "Of the complications and confusions which thus result everyone has had experience", suggesting that one of her criticisms of twentieth-century dress is that it attempts to persuade its wearers that there *is* an uncomplicated possibility of clothing, the self, and gender, that there is not room enough for the self in all its layers. ¹¹¹ Woolf both rejects artifice, pre-determinism, and the pressure of clothing *and* longs for how assertive clothing could be, that, in the Renaissance, one could slip on and layer identities at will.

Conclusion

In *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf queried how sartorial shifts shaped clothing's wearers, particularly women, whose fashions have changed dramatically from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In this sense, clothing is and was "a way of telling time", as clothes designated the shift in decades and centuries. ¹¹² Woolf observed, in her time, the entrapment of modern fashion, how women were subjected to and policed by the gaze of

their family members, the public, and society at large. In contrast, the Elizabethan era offered not just a sartorial but also a psychological alternative in which women used their bodies as platforms for self-display. Even if that display was not a “true self” or the most intimate self, Woolf saw resolution in choice, whether they were choices of protest or choices of desire. And although clothing was also regulatory, the fact that men and women were flaunting those rules so much as to torment moralists—and potentially degenerate other people—was a kind of liberation.

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf considers the chicken and the egg—is it the clothing or the people who wear it who determine its meaning? She wonders if the audience, likely comfortable wearing Tudor costume at their fancy-dress parties, could envision themselves as Elizabethans and focus on finding and promoting their *selves*, rather than the advertised superiority she described in *Three Guineas*. In turn, through inhabiting their own frock-consciousness, perhaps the audience could reconstruct the history—and internalized beliefs—that caused the martial cycle and reorient their present. Because objects, even without authenticity, can inspire and change, making perhaps “a slight but definite contribution to the problem before us”, through opportunities to embody and reflect on the past.¹¹³ And after all, “there are few greater delights than to go back three or four hundred years and become in fancy at least an Elizabethan”.¹¹⁴

Footnotes

- 1 When Woolf was sketching out what would become *Between the Acts*, she wrote she wanted something “I can blow off a morning, to relieve myself of Roger”, referring to *Roger Fry: A Biography*. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1936–1941*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell, Vol. 5 (Boston, MA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1984), 135 (26 April 1938).
- 2 Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1936–1941*.
- 3 Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 741.
- 4 Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1936–1941*, 743 (1 January 1941); and Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 743.
- 5 Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1936–1941*, 354 (26 January 1941).
- 6 Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1936–1941*, 135 (26 April 1938); and Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 351.
- 7 Brenda R. Silver, “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, nos. 3/4 (1979): 385, doi:[10.2307/441326](https://doi.org/10.2307/441326).
- 8 Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 707; and Patricia Cramer, “Virginia Woolf’s Matriarchal Family of Origins in *Between the Acts*”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 39, no. 2 (1993): 169, doi:[10.2307/441837](https://doi.org/10.2307/441837).
- 9 Ayako Yoshino, “‘Between the Acts’ and Louis Napoleon Parker—the Creator of the Modern English Pageant”, *Critical Survey* 15, no. 2 (2003): 49, doi:[10.3167/001115703782351790](https://doi.org/10.3167/001115703782351790). See also Karen Schneider, “Of Two Minds: Woolf, the War and ‘Between the Acts.’” *Journal of Modern Literature* 16, no. 1 (1989): 93.
- 10 R.S. Koppen, *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 78.
- 11 Woolf’s interest in the Elizabethan period was not restricted to its fashion—her literary interests have been studied by Alice Fox, who noted: “Every single one of [Woolf’s] nine novels treats the English Renaissance in some way.” See Alice Fox, *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 2. Reginald Abbott explored jewels, specifically in relation to appearances of Elizabeth in “Rough with Rubies: Virginia Woolf and the Virgin Queen”, in *Reading the Renaissance*, ed. Sally Greene (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999), 65–88.

- 12 Walter Benjamin assessed the limitations of cultural history and studying objects. He wrote, "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror." In this sense, cultural material, as determined by the victors, is a product of "barbarism". It is also worth noting that Benjamin was a contemporary of Woolf's, and he died one year before her, in 1940. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2019), 199-200. For the connections between Woolf and Benjamin, see Angeliki Spiropoulou, *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- 13 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", 199-200.
- 14 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1966), 21.
- 15 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 21.
- 16 Pointz Hall is "too homely" for the guidebooks. Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.
- 17 Angela Bartie et al., *Restaging the Past Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain* (London: UCL Press, 2020), 1 and 2.
- 18 Bartie et al., *Restaging the Past Historical Pageants*, 2.
- 19 Zoë Thomas, "Historical Pageants, Citizenship and the Performance of Women's History before Second-Wave Feminism", in *Restaging the Past Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain*, ed. Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Alexander Hutton, and Paul Readman (London: UCL Press, 2020), 112.
- 20 Thomas, "Historical Pageants, Citizenship and the Performance of Women's History", 128, see n. 21.
- 21 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 16 and 17.
- 22 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 18.
- 23 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 18.
- 24 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 18-19.
- 25 Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 329 (16 August 1940).
- 26 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 69-71.
- 27 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 70.
- 28 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 70.
- 29 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 72.
- 30 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 75.
- 31 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 76.
- 32 This image is accessible from Alamy (Image ID: [2BW3EDT](#)).
- 33 Koppen, *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity*, 83.
- 34 Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 238.
- 35 Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 300.
- 36 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 77.
- 37 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 79.
- 38 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 82.
- 39 Vita Sackville-West, *Heritage* (London: Penguin Random House, 1975 [1919]), 102.
- 40 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", 198.
- 41 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 193.
- 42 The community pageant began later than one might imagine, in 1905, when dramatist Louis Napoleon Parker established the highly political, nationalistic form. Parker's civic entertainments became nationwide phenomena, engaging thousands of participants and hundreds of thousands of spectators. See Yoshino, "'Between the Acts' and Louis Napoleon Parker", 49. In *A Shrinking Island*, Jed Esty reduced the medium to its costumes, calling the form "amnesia in fancy dress". See Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 56.
- 43 See Elizabeth H. Hageman and Katherine Conway, *Resurrecting Elizabeth I in Seventeenth-Century England* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); and Nadine Akkerman, "Semper Eadem: Elizabeth Stuart and the Legacy of Elizabeth I", in *The Palatine Wedding of 1613: Protestant Alliance and Court Festival*, ed. Sara Smart and Mara Wade (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz in Kommission, 2013).

- 44 Celia Marshik, "Aspiration to the Extraordinary: Materializing the Subject Through Fancy Dress", *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 103. Fancy dress and masquerades had also been eighteenth-century phenomena, see Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986).
- 45 Arden Holt, *Fancy Dresses Described: Or, What to Wear at Fancy Balls*, 5th ed. (London: Benham & Freebody, 1887), 80 and 81.
- 46 Holt, *Fancy Dresses Described*, 1.
- 47 See S.305-1988; S.1044-1983; S.1047-1983; S.309-1988; S.312-1988 at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.
- 48 See Marshik, "Aspiration to the Extraordinary", 118.
- 49 Marshik, "Aspiration to the Extraordinary", 118.
- 50 Marshik, "Aspiration to the Extraordinary", 118.
- 51 Fancy dress balls were, for example, a popular pastime among the Vanderbilts and Astors. Guests and performers would commission gowns from important couturiers, like the House of Worth. See Elizabeth Block, "Gowns and Mansions: French Fashion in New York Homes during the Late Nineteenth Century", *The Journal of Dress History* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 41-42, https://dresshistorians.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Spring_2021_issue.pdf. See also Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization*.
- 52 See E.4831-1958 at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.
- 53 Handley-Seymour was not the only important designer to consider fancy dress. In the 1890s, the House of Worth created a Tudor-inspired ensemble—incorporating Italian Renaissance designs, as well—that is now at the Museo del Traje.
- 54 Block, "Gowns and Mansions", 31.
- 55 See C.I.53.60.8 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. For additional examples, see later designs by Fortuny, who recreated the effect of Italian Renaissance velvets through detailed gold stenciling; for example, 2009.300.508 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 56 See C.I.55.1.14a-e; 2009.300.478a, b at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 57 See 2009.300.94 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 58 Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry, *Crossing Gender Boundaries: Fashion to Create, Disrupt and Transcend* (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), 11.
- 59 Reilly and Barry, *Crossing Gender Boundaries*, 15.
- 60 Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 3.
- 61 Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader'", which explores not only the text but also notes Woolf's extensive marking up of Elizabethan sources (see n. 14 in the text). Regarding other Elizabethan influences on Woolf's work, see also n. 11 in this document.
- 62 Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader'", 359.
- 63 Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader'", 358.
- 64 Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader'", 388. See, for example, Amanda Wunder, "Women's Fashions and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Spain: The Rise and Fall of the Guardainfante", *Renaissance Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2015): 133-186, doi:[10.1086/681310](https://doi.org/10.1086/681310).
- 65 Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader'", 388.
- 66 Woolf was an avid reader of sixteenth-century literature and primary sources. In the following section, I have not focused singularly on sources that Woolf mentioned, but instead wanted to highlight the general attitude and atmosphere to which she referred.
- 67 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, 3rd ed. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1928), 27.
- 68 Anna Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.
- 69 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.
- 70 Laura Levine, "Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642", *Criticism* 28, no. 2 (1986): 121-143.
- 71 See Timothy McCall, "Materials for Renaissance Fashion", *Renaissance Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2017): 1449-1464, doi:[10.1086/695346](https://doi.org/10.1086/695346); and Richard Thompson Ford, *Dress Codes: How the Laws of Fashion Made History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), especially Chapter 1, "Encoding Status".
- 72 Phillip Stubbes, *Phillip Stubbes's Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakspeare's Youth*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, Vol. 2 (London, 1877), 84.
- 73 *An Ansvvere for the Tyme, to the Examination Put in Print, Vvith out the Authours Name, Pretending to Mayntayne the Apparell Prescribed against the Declaration of the Mynisters of London* (Rouen: printed by Abel Clémence, 1566), 19-20.

- 74 *A Mery Playe Bothe Pytthy and Pleasaunt of Albyon Knyghte* (London: printed by Thomas Colwell, 1566), B.i.
- 75 Thomas Drant, *Two Sermons Preached the One at S. Maries Spittle on Tuesday in Easter Weeke. 1570. and the Other at the Court at Windsor the Sondag after Twelfth Day, Being the Vij. of Ianuary, before in the Yeare. 1569.* by Thomas Drant Bachelor in Diuinitie (London: by John Daye, 1570).
- 76 Robert Crowley, *A Briefe Discourse against the Outvvarde Apparell and Ministring Garmentes of the Popishe Church* (1578).
- 77 Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd: The Inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes Prepared in July 1600, Edited from Stowe MS 557 in the British Library, MS LR 2/121 in the Public Record Office, London, and MS V.b.72 in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC* (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons, 1988),142.
- 78 Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses*, 73.
- 79 Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses*, 73.
- 80 Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses*, 83.
- 81 See, for example, Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
- 82 Jane A. Lawson, ed., *The Elizabethan New Year's Gift Exchanges: 1559-1603* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, British Academy, 2013), 170 (no. 75.5).
- 83 Lawson, *The Elizabethan New Year's Gift Exchanges*, 189 (no. 76.111), 392 (no. 89.115), and 482 (no. 00.13).
- 84 See, for example, a man's fencing doublet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (29.158.175).
- 85 For the Darnley portrait, see NPG 2082 at the National Portrait Gallery, London. For the 1575 portrait, see REDMG: 1980.168.1 at the Reading Museum, Reading.
- 86 Phillip Stubbes, *Phillip Stubbes, The Anatomie of Abuses*, ed. Margaret Jane Kidnie (Tempe, AZ: Renaissance English Text Society, 2002), 33.
- 87 Stubbes, *Phillip Stubbes, The Anatomie of Abuses*, 31.
- 88 Baldassarre Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1903), 180.
- 89 Thomas Becon, *The Principles of Christian Religion Necessary to Be Knowen of All the Faythful: Set Forth to the Great Profite in Trayning vp of All Youth, by Tho. Becon* (London: by John Daye, dwelling ouer Aldersgate, 1569), L.ii; and Edward Grant, ed., *Teaching the Vertuous Training vp of Children and Holesome Information of Yongmen. / Written in Greke by the Prudent and Wise Phylosopher Chæroneus [sic] Plutarchus* (London: by Henry Bynneman, 1571).
- 90 Antonio de Guevara, *The Dial of Princes, Compiled by the Reuerend Father in God, Don Antony of Gueuara, Byshop of Guadix, Preacher, and Chronicler to Charles the Fifte, Late of That Name Emperour. Englished out of the Frenche by T. North, Sonne of Sir Edvvard North Knight*, trans. T. North (London: by Richarde Tottill and Thomas Marshe, 1568), 129.
- 91 Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 398.
- 92 Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd ed. (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 150.
- 93 Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 150-151.
- 94 Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 150-151.
- 95 Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 151.
- 96 Throughout her life, Woolf expressed deep anxiety about shopping and self-display. In March 1927, for example, she wrote in her diary: "I went to buy clothes today & was struck by my own ugliness." Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell and Andrew McNeillie, Vol. 3 (Boston, MA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1980), 132. For Vanessa Bella and the Omega Workshop, see Wendy Hitchmough, *The Bloomsbury Look* (London: Yale University Press, 2020).
- 97 In *Dress Codes*, Ford explores how this concept affected men, too. A 1931 article posited that if men were not disciplined in their attention to clothes, "society [would] fall to pieces"; see Ford, *Dress Codes*, 139.
- 98 Celia Marshik, "What Do Women Want?" In *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 26.
- 99 Elizabeth von Arnim, *The Enchanted April* (London: Penguin Random House, 2012 [1922]), 55.
- 100 Von Arnim, *The Enchanted April*, 55.
- 101 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 14.
- 102 Woolf's characters feel betrayed by their clothes and bodies in other texts, too. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Miss Kilman remarks: "She could not help being ugly; she could not afford to buy pretty clothes." Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway & A Room of One's Own* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 126.
- 103 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 37.
- 104 Roman Meinhold, *Fashion Myths, A Cultural Critique*, trans. John Irons (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), 31.
- 105 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 108.
- 106 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 108, 193.

- 107 Woolf, *Orlando*, 170.
- 108 Nancy Cervetti, "In the Breeches, Petticoats, and Pleasures of 'Orlando'", *Journal of Modern Literature* 20, no. 2 (1996): 171.
- 109 Pamela Caughie, "Virginia Woolf's Double Discourse", *Discontented Discourses: Feminism/Textual Intervention/Psychoanalysis*, edited by Marleen S. Barr and Richard Feldstein (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 44.
- 110 Patricia Fumerton, "'Secret' Arts: Elizabethan Miniatures and Sonnets", *Representations*, no. 15 (1986): 90, doi:[10.2307/2928392](https://doi.org/10.2307/2928392).
- 111 Woolf, *Orlando*, 172.
- 112 Theodore Martin, "On Time", in *About Time: Fashion & Duration*, ed. Andrew Bolton (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Press, 2020), 27.
- 113 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 21.
- 114 Virginia Woolf, "The Strange Elizabethans", in *The Second Common Reader* (London: Pelican Books, 1944), 7.

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Microorganisms, Microscopes, and Victorian Design Theories



Ariane Varela Braga

Abstract

This article looks at the interface between art, science, and design by considering the role of microscopes, the visualisation of microorganisms and British mid-nineteenth century design theories. In particular, it examines the dialogue between microscopical arranged slides that became popular in the second half of the century and the design theories of Owen Jones, diffused through the seminal *Grammar of Ornament* and the South Kensington system. Whereas the scientific observation of plants and their role in the development of guiding principles of ornament has attracted the attention of scholars, especially in relation to the Department of Science and Art, the intersections between the “microscope mania”, the material culture of microscopy, and design theories have been overlooked. Through the lenses of the microscope, a new world was revealed that potentially exposed general laws of harmony in form and colour. Coinciding with the emergence of microbial biology, the microscope was looked at as a tool for the renewal of the decorative arts. At the crossroads between art and science, the popular production of arranged slides both confirmed and performed the principles of ornament, at a time when both the visualisation of these principles and the transcription of microscopic observation shared common practices.

Authors

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Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century, microscopy became a popular and social activity. In 1857, Reverend Edmund Saul Dixon, an amateur naturalist and friend of Charles Dickens, commented that “it seems probable, from many symptoms, that the microscope is about to become the idol of the day; we appear to be on the eve of a microscope mania”.¹ Technical improvements and the new relative affordability of the instruments were key factors in the popular growth of microscopy from the 1850s to the 1870s. Microscopes were no longer the privilege of scholars and scientists but became objects of common use that were displayed in Victorian parlours. At a time when the lines between amateur and professional scientists were still blurry, and when both still shared a common conceptual and descriptive language, scientific knowledge rapidly circulated to non-specialist readers through manuals and journals.² The use of the microscope was regulated by a series of social events, evening discussions or “conversazioni”, as well as exhibitions, demonstrations, and lectures held in clubs and scientific societies.³ Amateurs rejoiced in the observation and collection of specimens, amassing true miniature cabinets of curiosities composed of *naturalia* and *artificilia* that also reflected contemporary attitudes towards the past and the natural sciences.⁴ By the middle of the century, microscopic preparations had become the object of vivid commerce and entire “museums” could be purchased ready-made.⁵ And as the introduction of balsam and other mounting media transformed the preparation of slides, in the late 1860s mounters started to produce elaborate compositions made out of several microscopic objects, known as exhibition mounts, exhibition slides, Salon-slides, or Artistic groups—names that all point to the social practices involved in their use.⁶

Major producers were in France, Germany, and Britain, but the latter were especially known for their ornamental exhibition slides. The two images opening this article are twenty-first century microphotographs of two exhibition slides dating from the 1880s and commercialised by the firm Watson & Sons. The first, made from the scales and hair of butterflies, was probably realised by Harold Dalton and offers a bucolic floral composition carefully disposed in a wicker basket, around which float butterflies and a dragonfly ([fig. 1](#)). The second shows a rosette motif that would perfectly fit into a Gothic cathedral, and is composed of butterfly scales, spicules, which are structural elements made of silica and found in most sponges, and diatoms, the latter being microalgae that play a key role in the production of oxygen on Earth ([fig. 2](#)). These arrangements testify to the skill acquired by Victorian microscopists but also stand for two opposing visions of ornament and the decorative arts that had confronted each other at mid-century: the *mimesis* of nature versus its abstraction. Tinged with moral and social

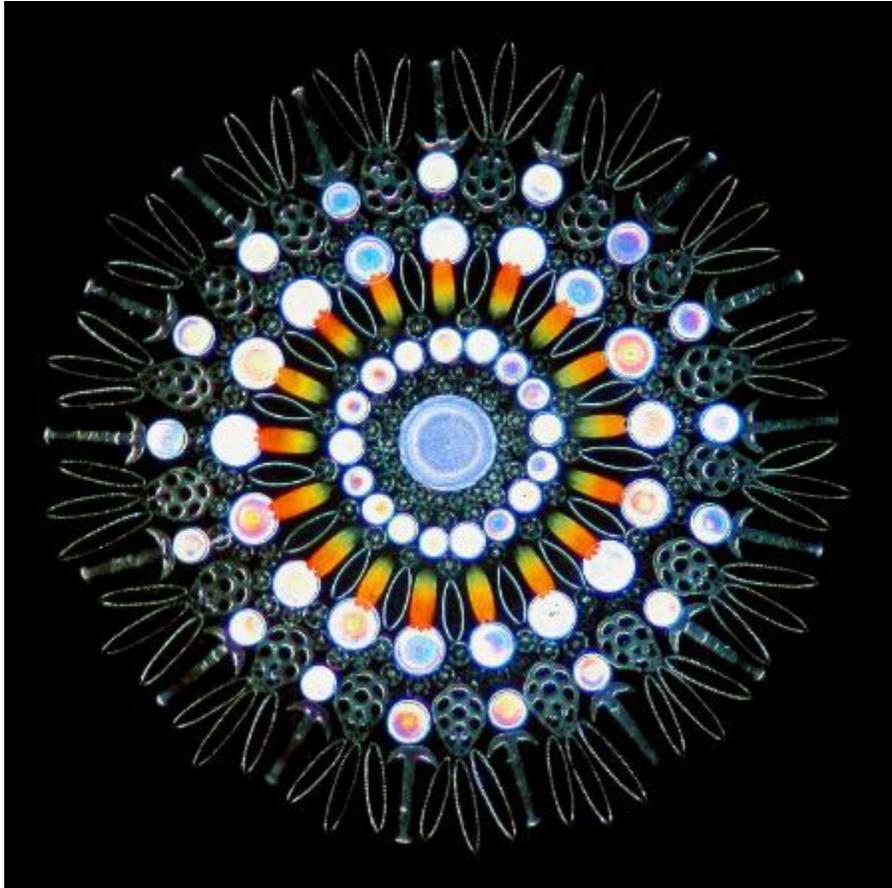
connotations, these two divergent paths had also materialised in the well-known opposition between art critic John Ruskin and the circle of Sir Henry Cole, and the so-called design reformers of the South Kensington system. While Ruskin vehemently defended traditional craftsmanship and natural ornamental forms, the latter, which included figures like the painter and pedagogue Richard Redgrave, and the architect and decorator Owen Jones, advocated instead an alliance between art, industry, and geometric ornamentation, as illustrated in Jones's encyclopaedic *Grammar of Ornament* (1856).⁷



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Figure 1.

H. Dalton (?) for Watsons & Sons, Bouquet with Insects, c.1880s, slide imaged using combinations of darkfield and reflected lighting techniques. Digital image courtesy of Howard Lynk, www.victorianmicroscopeslides.com (all rights reserved).



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Figure 2.

Watson & Sons, Exhibition mount of arranged diatoms, butterfly scales and spicules, c. 1885, slide imaged using combinations of darkfield and reflected lighting techniques. Digital image courtesy of Howard Lynk, www.victorianmicroscopeslides.com (all rights reserved).

In an attempt to face the cultural pluralism of the modern world and renew an aesthetic unity judged to be lost, architects and design theorists from the circle of the South Kensington system followed the example of naturalists and turned to the scientific observation of nature to establish universal foundations for the decorative arts. This search for nature's working processes as a means to break free from historicism was not new. As Barry Bergdoll has pointed out, its roots can be traced back to German philosophical thoughts, Goethe's theory of morphology, and the idea of unity in variety, which would eventually lead to the forms of art nouveau.⁸ In this article, I instead explore the intersections between the visualisation of the microscopic world and theories of design in Great Britain in the 1850s-1870s. I examine how the microscope was employed as a tool for the renewal of ornament and design, by virtue of its perceived capacity to illustrate and confirm the underlying principles of nature. Art historians have studied the role played by popular science publications in mediating scientific knowledge

for artists and architects, and how these illustrations closely informed artistic practices, as demonstrated by the work of the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, author of the highly popular *Kunstformen der Natur* (1899–1904).⁹ However, the material culture of microscopy has so far been overlooked. As I argue in this article, nature's order was not only visualised graphically but also staged in the production and diffusion of arranged slides, which both confirmed and performed contemporary design theories.

The Microscope in Aid of Ornamental Art

In 1844, the British painter William James Müller asked in the pages of the *Art-Journal* why students of the London School of Design, instead of copying arabesques, did not take inspiration directly from nature and make use of the microscope.¹⁰ The Government Schools of Design had been created in 1837 as the first official initiative to support the renewal of British decorative arts in a context of intense international economic competition. Following the example of the German technical institutes, the London School's second director, William Dyce, had promoted a progressive didactic method based on linear and geometrical drawing, known as the "Dyce outlines", claiming that ornamental art had to go "side by side with practical science".¹¹ As a scientist, and contrary to the artist, the ornamentalist must not work according to nature, but *like* nature, that is, learn to apply the general laws of order and harmony as well as the mathematical and geometrical rules that govern natural forms. However, his vision led to few concrete results, as the Government Schools were plagued by internal quarrels and failed to meet its objectives.

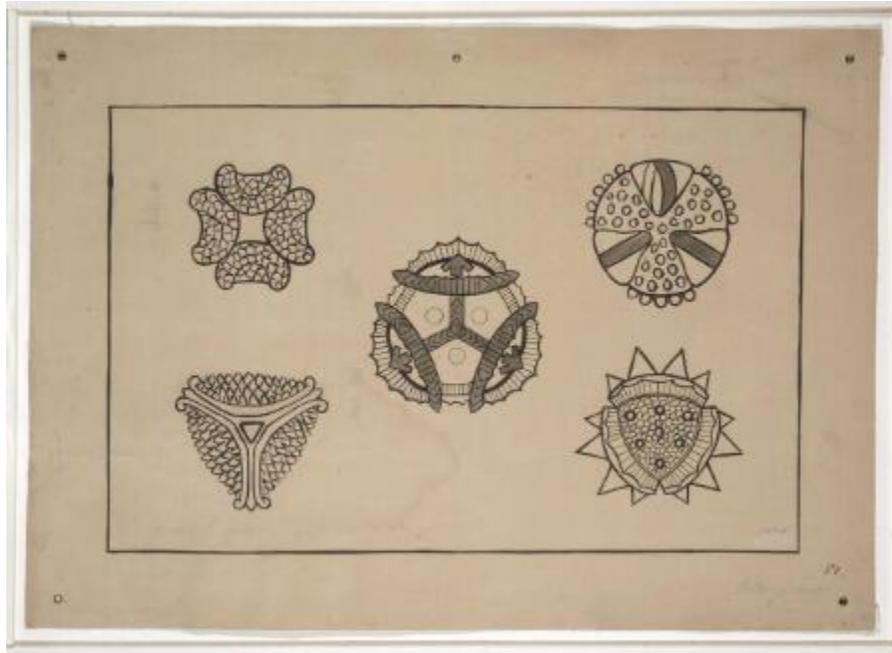
Efforts to connect the arts and sciences became more prominent after the Great Exhibition of 1851. In 1852, the Schools of Design were replaced by the Department of Practical Art in charge of establishing a British national system of art education, renamed Department of Science and Art (DSA) in 1853. In an attempt to unite art and industry, and promote an aesthetics adapted to serial production, the DSA set up a rigorous didactic system based on the demonstration of primordial laws governing the application of forms and colours in art and nature. To illustrate these universal laws of order, scientists were initially invited to lecture to the art students. In 1852, the botanist John Lindley gave a lecture titled "The Symmetry of Vegetation", while zoologist, botanist, and palaeontologist Edward Forbes gave two lessons: "The Variety and Symmetry of Animal Forms" and "The Symmetry of Radiated Animals". According to the DSA, nature's laws of symmetry, repetition, and proportion were to be emulated by the designer who should at all costs avoid direct *mimesis*.

In practice, the aspired reform of design was actually more a reform of bi-dimensional ornament, for attention was mostly placed on the graphical representation of forms, resulting in ornamental patterns well fitted for the production of carpets, wallpapers and textiles. In an attempt to find common principles in the distribution of forms and colours in ornament, figures such as Owen Jones and Christopher Dresser turned to the arts of the past produced in Europe and to the arts of the present from non-Western nations, as well as to nature. Their aim was to create new ornaments fit for the present and to respond to the challenges resulting from new industrial means of production. Hence, the conventional or stylised representations of natural forms, which could easily be adapted to serial production, became their mantra and that of mid-nineteenth century design reformers and the so-called South Kensington system. ¹²

Dialogue between art and science at the DSA was not only promoted through lectures but also through exchanges between scientists and artists. In 1854, the chemist Lyon Playfair, a strong advocate of the promotion of scientific education and first head of science at the DSA, showed the painter Richard Redgrave, superintendent of art at the DSA, photographs of snowflake crystals taken by meteorologist James Glaisher. Redgrave agreed they could usefully illustrate to art students “the importance of minute observation”. ¹³ This had not always been Redgrave’s view on the subject. But whereas five years earlier the painter had dismissed “microscopic productions which are too minute to interest the ornamentist”, things had now changed. ¹⁴ Despite this reference, little is known about the actual use of these drawings or the microscope in the art classes. But even if the DSA’s official reports do not record the use of microscopes by art students, it is nonetheless known that visualisations of plant elements drawn from a microscope were already employed by Christopher Dresser in his lectures on art and botany between 1854 and 1856.

Dresser was a figure of transition. As Stuart Durant has remarked, he had followed an unconventional path: he “approached design as a scientist”, and was both the product and agent of the South Kensington system. ¹⁵ In his youth, he had followed Playfair’s teachings at the Government School of Mines and Science Applied to the Arts, where students were familiar with the use of the microscope. ¹⁶ Initially developing a parallel career in design and botany, Dresser specialised in plant morphology and published three books on the subject: *The Rudiments of Botany* and *Unity in Variety* (both printed in 1859 and addressed to the art student), and the more accessible *Popular Manual of Botany* (1860). He was even awarded a doctorate *in absentia* for his work on plant morphology from the University of Jena in 1859. A diagram by Dresser illustrating five seeds of pollen as seen through the microscope is one of the many still preserved in the collections of the Victoria and Albert

Museum (fig. 3).¹⁷ Dresser emphasises the regularity and geometry of the seeds, insisting on their symmetry to demonstrate the existence of general laws. While plants and flowers had always been used as inspiration for British decorative art, their conventional treatment had been specially promoted through the work and publications of neo-Gothic architect A.W.N. Pugin, such as *Floriated Ornament* (1849). Much inspired by Pugin's ideas, the DSA systematised the scientific study of plants to extract and deduce general rules.¹⁸ From now on, students would look at nature as a repository of geometrical patterns, drawing plants in plans, sections, and elevations, as Dresser had done on plate 98 of Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* (fig. 4). In this seminal publication, which would become a privileged textbook for schools of design around the world, Jones had presented ornament as a formal language based on the laws of nature, regulated by the structuring power of geometry through rules of arrangement, symmetry, and proportion.¹⁹ Direct imitation of natural forms was to be avoided at all costs, an idea theorised in number 13 of his accompanying propositions, which stated that "flowers or other natural objects should not be used as ornament, but conventional representations".²⁰ An example of "conventional" ornament inspired by natural forms may be seen in a Wedgwood vessel designed by Dresser, decorated with his "truth, beauty, power" motif. In a series of patterns that combine Greek, Mesoamerican, and organic elements, he achieves a potent and original design that conveys graphic excellence, strength, and energy, as exemplified in the fluxes of straight lines and curves radially expanding from the centre of the composition (fig. 5).



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Figure 3.

Christopher Dresser, Pollen Grains, 1854-1856, pen and ink on buff paper, 55 x 70.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (3974). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



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Figure 4.

Christopher Dresser, Leaves and Flowers from Nature No.8, Original drawing for the Grammar of Ornament, Plate XCVIII (London: Day, lithographers to the Queen, 1858), 1856–1856, watercolour, bodycolour and pencil on paper with title in pen and ink, 52.8 x 36.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (1671). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



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Figure 5.

Christopher Dresser (designer), Josiah Wedgwood and Sons (maker), Vessel with truth, beauty, power motif, 1867, unglazed earthenware, 25.4 cm, 2.5 kg. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (L.2019.32.1). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (all rights reserved).

Several of Dresser's drawings of microscopic plant structures were included in the *Art-Journal* in his article titled "Botany, as Adapted to the Arts and Art-Manufacture", which was published in eleven parts between 1857 and 1858.²¹ Readers of the *Art-Journal* were used to contributions on various artistic and scientific arguments and would probably not have been surprised by the idea of the microscope as a tool for design. Reviews of publications on microscopy featured regularly in the journal. In March 1857, two months after the first part of Dresser's article appeared, the *Art-Journal* published a paper by meteorologist James Glaisher on the microscopic structure of snow crystals and their utility for "the purpose of design", a subject with a long history that also fascinated architects Gottfried Semper and Jules Bourgoïn.

²² It was followed in January 1858 by geologist Samuel Joseph Mackie's article on "Sea-weeds as Objects of Design", which illustrated magnified sections of several specimens. ²³

Seaweed hunting was a popular Victorian pastime. Fascinated by the natural and marine worlds, amateur naturalists enjoyed observing and collecting marine creatures and shells, which, by the end of the 1850s, following the creation of saltwater aquariums, had even started to enter into the domestic sphere. ²⁴ Through the microscope, educated observers could participate in the search for the mechanisms of life and take part in contemporary debates on its origins raised by Charles Darwin's theories of evolution. The previously invisible world revealed through the microscope suggested that there were yet other mysteries to uncover, in a transforming world where scientific knowledge was undermining religious beliefs. Cell theory had also recently been developed, postulating that all living organisms, both plants and animals, were composed of cells and considered as the most elementary units of life. ²⁵ It is therefore no coincidence that Mackie's interest lay not so much in the decorative characteristics of the entire seaweed but in the "minute structure" of plant cells. Claiming that "the invisible is not the less beautiful that it is unseen", he appealed to the microscope to reveal the geometrical secrets of nature. He pointed to the fact that "by the mere repetition and combination of the circle, the hexagon, or the pentagon" one obtained an unfathomable number of varied and never monotonous forms. Thus, even sea hunting could become the key to the revitalisation of ornament and design, but on condition that the art student would look beyond nature's appearance to its "wonderful generative processes". ²⁶

The idea that the microscope might be a useful ally for the renewal of design expanded well beyond the walls of the DSA or the sphere of art journals. In 1862, the journalist and amateur microscopist Henry James Slack, author of a manual of microscopy titled *The Marvels of Pond-Life* (1860), published his article "On the Application of the Microscope to the Art of Design" in *The Intellectual Observer*, a popular science journal of which he was the editor. Slack posited the microscope as an instrument that "constantly presents us with a rich store of ideas which the decorative artist would do well to study and employ". ²⁷ Paying great attention to colour alongside form, he discussed his observations with reference to Owen Jones's colour theory and concept of visual repose. His comments were based on the architect's Alhambra Court in the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. In this second Crystal Palace, Jones was joint Director of Decoration and designed the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman Courts alongside an Alhambra Court. In 1851, the polychrome decoration of Joseph Paxton's first Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition had established Jones as one of the most important contemporary

colour experts. His theories formed the basis of the DSA's teaching, but the diffusion of good principles of design to the general public was also one of the architect's major concerns.

In 1852, after contributing to the establishment of the Department of Practical Art and its museum, Jones had embarked on the expanded reconstruction of the Crystal Palace in Sydenham as a museum for the people whose important didactic enterprise had been lately recognised anew.²⁸ In the architectural courts, and especially in the Alhambra Court, Jones had implemented for the general public the principles that would later be disseminated to students of art and architecture in his *Grammar of Ornament*.²⁹ Both Jones's architectural courts and Slack's article were meant to popularise knowledge for an eager public. Slack's readership would have been largely familiar with the Crystal Palace and the "laws of decorative art" displayed in Jones's courts.³⁰ These were the same laws that the designer was invited to apply and which the amateur microscopist would see demonstrated in the contemporary practice of microscopic, arranged slides.

Nature as Ornament or The Art of Microscopic Arrangements

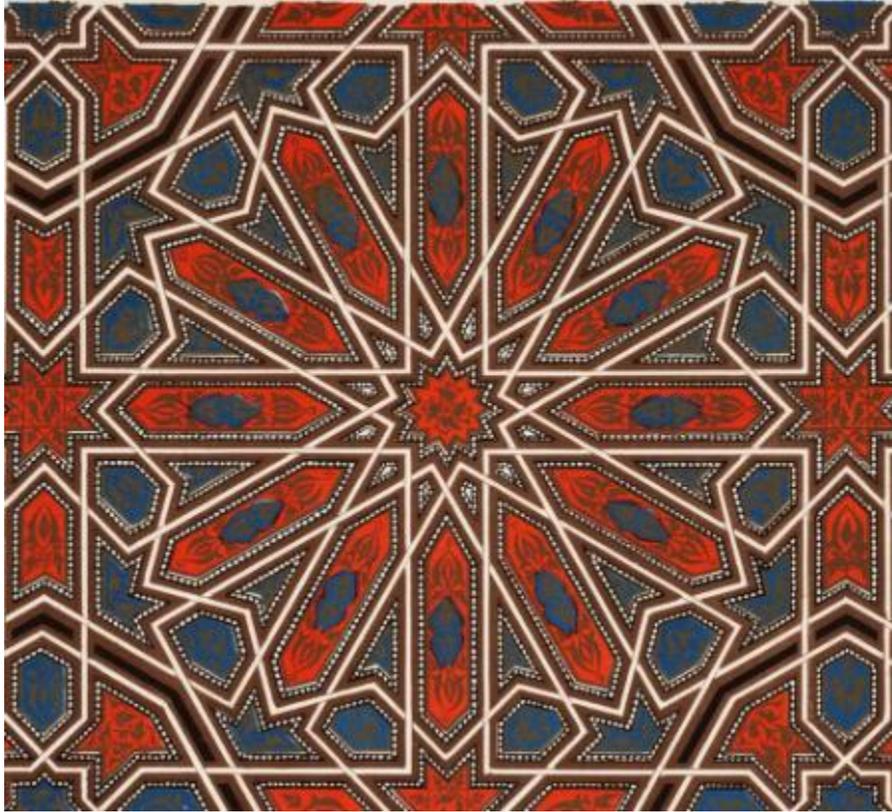
The practice of mounting microscopic objects according to artistic or decorative purposes, also known as "arranging slides", seems to have appeared around 1850, a first mount being referred to by George Shadbolt (1817–1901) in the *Transactions of the Microscopical Society* of London in 1849.³¹ Geometrically arranged specimens apparently developed at the same time, made first by Johann Dietrich Möller in Germany and Arthur C. Cole and Amos Topping in Great Britain. The invention around 1866 of the "mechanical finger" (a device created to ease the manipulation of microscopic objects) in different configurations significantly enhanced the ability to control individual small objects.³² By the late 1860s, arranged slides were mentioned in the catalogues of several preparers and could be found in different countries, although British mounters were especially known for this art. Micrographer Harold Dalton, for example, who created the slide illustrated in figure 1, became internationally known in the last quarter of the century for his microscopic artistic pictures.³³ Their minute representations seem to compete less with painting than the art of micromosaics or Florentine *pietre dure*. However, the most common arranged slides featured abstract compositions, as in Arthur C. Cole's slide using sponge spicules or microscleres (fig. 6). Its composition, like Jones's beloved Moorish ornament, relied on the principle of radial symmetry, and depended not on the "multiplicity of varied forms" but on the "repetition of a few simple elements" arranged to produce a general effect (fig. 7).³⁴



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Figure 6.

A.C. Cole, Arranged mount of Sponge Spicula, end 1860s-1870s, slide imaged using darkfield lighting. Digital image courtesy of Howard Lynk, www.victorianmicroscopeslides.com (all rights reserved).



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Figure 7.

Moorish ornament from the Alhambra, (detail of plate 52), in Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1910), 1856. Collection of The University of Wisconsin Library. Digital image courtesy of The University of Wisconsin Library (CC BY 4.0).

Among the favourites of Victorian mounters were diatoms, unicellular microalgae ranging from five to one thousand microns long, characterised by their hard silica shells, a great variety of geometrical shapes, and almost perfect symmetry (fig. 8). Endowed with movement, their classifications in the animal or plant kingdom had until the mid-nineteenth century divided naturalists. As classification fluctuated, so did terminology. Before the word “microbe” was coined around 1878 by Charles-Emmanuel Sédillot, microorganisms were generally referred to as *animalcules*, according to the term created in the seventeenth century by Dutch naturalist Antonie van Leeuwenhoek. Another general term was *infusoria*, from the fact that these organisms could be found in infusions of decaying animal or vegetable matter.³⁵ In his influential but soon controverted *Die infusionsthierchen als vollkommene organismen* (1838) German naturalist Christian Gottfried Ehrenberg had considered diatoms as animals, a view followed by British microscopist Andrew Pritchard in *The Natural History of Animalcules* (1834), but already outdated by the early 1850s. Soon thereafter, thanks to publications such as William Smith’s *Synopsis of British Diatomaceæ*

(1853–1856) the study and classification of diatoms became more rigorous. At the same time, numerous articles and books provided advice for their microscopic mounting.



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Figure 8.

Watson & Sons, Various diatoms, c.1880s, slide imaged using differential interference contrast. Digital image courtesy of Howard Lynk, www.victorianmicroscopeslides.com (all rights reserved).

Then, as now, diatoms were easily found in freshwater or damp surfaces. Their availability and the symmetry of their patterns turned them not only into research specimens used to test the resolution of microscopes, but also ones privileged for exhibition slides. According to *Hardwicke's Science-gossip*, they were “the most suggestive of all natural objects, for purposes of artificial ornamentation”.³⁶ A contemporary testimony on diatoms as illustrations of ornamental principles is provided by the Anglophile Italian amateur architect and microscopist, the Marquis Ferdinando Panciatichi Ximenes of Aragona. In a manuscript dated ca.1864, he commented on how the microscope had opened new paths for the architect and ornamentalist, noting:

Who would believe that the problem of the ornamentation of the most complicated geometric solids, as well as of the simplest ones, would find infinite solutions, all varied and all beautiful, in some corpuscles wandering around the seaweeds, as would be

the diatoms and the navicules [a boat-shaped diatom], in which are found the strangest forms, and the strangest ornamentations that human mind could ever conceive? ³⁷

In diatoms, Panciatichi found universal laws of proportion “performed, confirmed, and applied” and considered that they put into practice “*ab initio* certain kinds of ornaments that man believed his property”. ³⁸ Diatoms illustrated the same laws that he was striving to apply in the ornamentation of his Villa of Sammezzano, an Orientalising *Gesamtkunstwerk* imbued with British architectural and design theory that he had initiated in the previous decade, whose peculiar use of forms and colours can in part be explained by his use of the microscope. He had found these same universal principles displayed in the architectural courts of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, which he visited in 1864, and in Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament*, a book he acquired shortly afterwards, whose cover pattern he had reproduced in stucco in one of the villa’s rooms. ³⁹

As an amateur scientist and microscopist, Panciatichi had been collecting diatom slides from at least the mid-1850s, including some by the French optician Joseph Bourgogne. Bourgogne was among the most important preparers of the time, and was known to have “had the great advantage of constant communication with the most learned men of Paris, who have aided him in their several departments”. ⁴⁰ In the current state of research, it is unknown if microscopists in Britain and Europe had active exchange with artists and designers as well. What can be observed is that while the first arrangements were rather approximate, technical advancement and the use of mechanical devices rapidly improved the quality of mounts in the 1860s. ⁴¹ Nonetheless, and whereas practical data on the processes of collecting, separating, washing, and mounting diatoms abound in journals and manuals, we have no such information concerning choices about the design of their actual placement on the slides. Future research in designer archives might help to illuminate that question. It would certainly have been easy for mounters to find inspiration for their compositions in the pages of contemporary pattern books or art journals, or to find in them principles of axial or radial symmetry. For example, the simple star-like composition seen in an exhibition slide by Johann Dietrich Möller relies on the use of two triangles, a basic ornamental form discussed in contemporary books such as Dresser’s 1862 *The Art of Decorative Design* (figs. 9 and 10).

character than that afforded by more regular figures, as the forms produced are in themselves valueless,

FIG. 44.



FIG. 45.



and the practice only tends to the education of the mind, while two ends might be answered at once.

FIG. 46.



12. Seeing the value of analysis as applied to ornament, it is well that we give one illustration of the

FIG. 47.

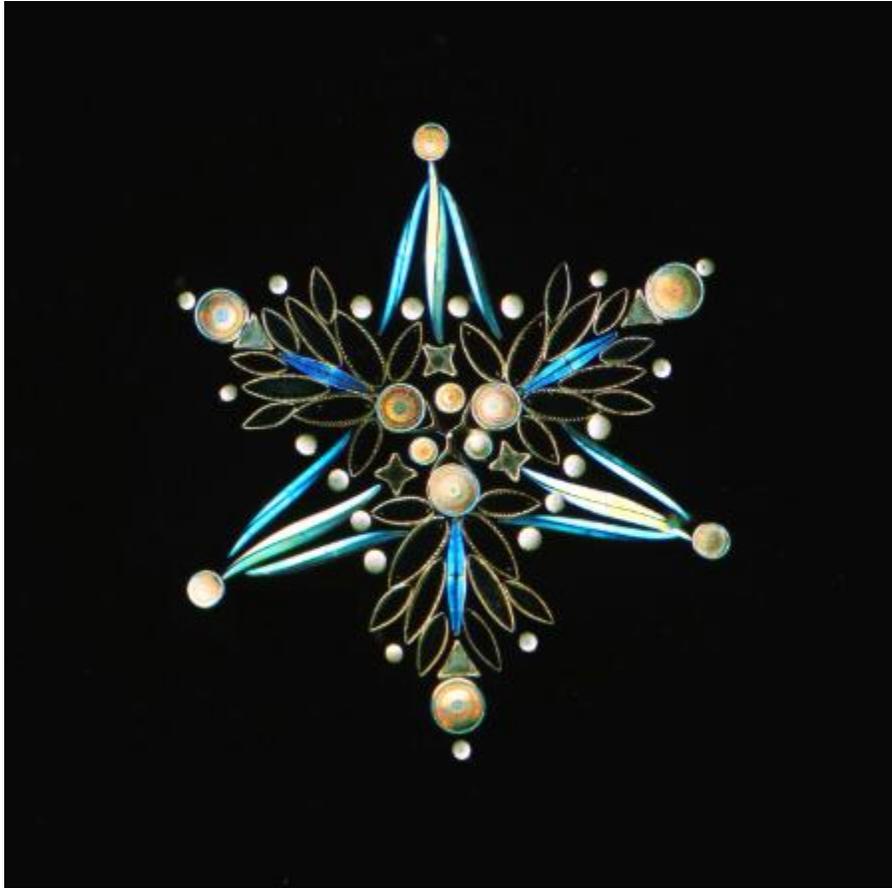


ment, it is well that we give one illustration of the

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Figure 9.

The basis of star-like ornament, in Christopher Dresser, *The Art of Decorative Design* (London: Day and Son, 1862): p. 61. Collection of the Glasgow School of Art Library. Digital image courtesy of Internet Archive (CC BY-SA 3.0).



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Figure 10.

Johann Dietrich Möller, Arranged mount of diatoms, c.1880, slide imaged using darkfield lighting. Digital image courtesy of Howard Lynk, www.victorianmicroscopeslides.com (all rights reserved).

Microorganisms and Ornament: A Shared Visual Culture and Common Practices

Despite the many encouragements to find inspiration in the principles of nature by peering through the lenses of a microscope, it is still hard to evaluate the extent to which designers actually did so. That the microscope became ubiquitous is confirmed by the fact that even John Ruskin, known for his reticence towards the union of art and science, would sometimes recommend its use.⁴² But did Owen Jones, for instance, avail himself of the instrument for work or leisure? After all, Jones was a close friend of the famous science populariser George Henry Lewes, and it is hard to believe that he would have been immune to the “microscope mania” of his time. Lewes was the author of *Studies in Animal Life* (1862) and *Sea-side Studies* (1867), and the companion of the writer George Eliot, who literary production scholars of English literature consider to have been impacted by the

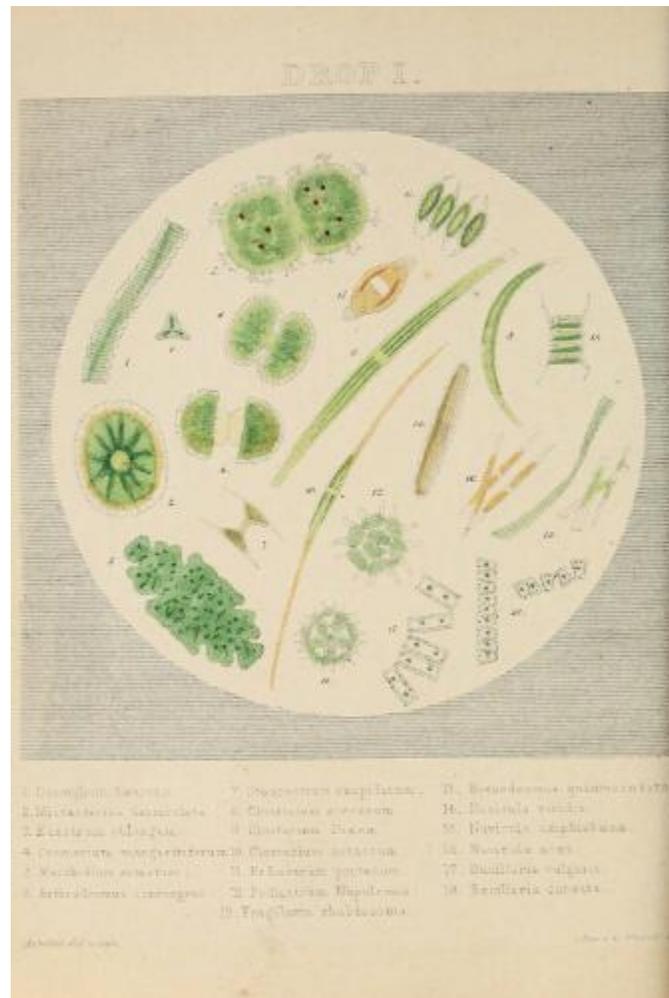
microscopic vision of the world that Lewes described in his books.⁴³ In the current state of research, however, it remains difficult to assess the role of the microscope in the daily practice of most designers. As Mackie remarked in 1858, “it cannot be expected that the designer should carry on the laborious researches of the man of science [and ...] that he should have one eye for the microscope, and the other for his pencil”.⁴⁴ Hence, I argue that the vision of the invisible world and microorganisms was more often mediated by images—graphic representations that were themselves the product of a shared visual culture and common practices.

Although a popular optical instrument, using a microscope demanded a trained eye. Making sense of what was seen through the lenses required a process of visual learning, which was subject to a series of procedures, conventions, and practices that could be ideologically charged. Just as science students were trained in the laboratory to domesticate nature through a series of visual, verbal, and practical “procedural conventions”, the students of the DSA were educated to reduce the natural world to a series of geometrical patterns and stylised or conventional forms.⁴⁵ Thus, in the mid-nineteenth century, the representation of the invisible world and ornament shared common visual practices and codes, which were in close dialogue.

Manuals of microscopy frequently thematised the challenges of microscopic observation, drawing parallels between science and magic, and emphasising the wonders of the invisible world that the instrument could reveal. As Laura Forsberg has shown, Victorian science literature often referred to the language of wonder and to fairies to express the bizarreness of the microscopic world.⁴⁶ In *Evenings at the Microscope* (1859), for example, Philip Henry Gosse announced that the reader was about to discover the “beauty [of the] invisible, which one who has once gazed upon it can never forget, and never cease to admire”.⁴⁷ In *Drops of Water: Their Marvellous and Beautiful Inhabitants Displayed by the Microscope* (1851) by Agnes Catlow, one among many female science educators of the time, this visual experience was transformed into a magical operation. Guided by “a spirit named Science”, she invited her reader to pass with her “through a wonderful brazen tunnel, with crystal doors at the entrance” and behold “a new world bewildered with the variety of new beings and forms”.⁴⁸ Calling into question the usual parameters of vision, the microscope thus transformed the actual process of seeing, as the observer tried to identify the images of this “new world”.

In the representation of a drop of water from Catlow’s book, we can see several microorganisms, including diatoms, harmoniously arranged (fig. 11). In contrast to the taxonomical representations of scientific atlases, the draughtsman intended to simulate the actual circular vision of the

microscope. Still, this image presents an already ordered view of nature, where each group of microorganisms, symmetrically drawn, is separated and numbered, to allow the picture to fulfil its didactic function. Therefore, this image, painted and lithographed by A. Achilles, does not provide documentary information but a fabricated and idealised vision of the invisible world. As discussed by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, the notion of objectivity is a historical construction that emerged in the sciences during the mid-nineteenth century. Before objectivity, “truth-to-nature” had been the common practice: that is to say, a representation based on a process of “selecting, comparing, judging, generalizing”.⁴⁹ In other words, the naturalist was not so much interested in the actual specimen itself, with its particular idiosyncrasies, but in defining its typological characteristics conveyed through an idealised depiction. This is what is at stake in this image, and it resulted from a visual tradition that was also dictated by material constraints.



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Figure 11.

A. Achilles, Drop I, in Agnes Catlow, *Drops of Water: Their Marvellous and Beautiful Inhabitants Displayed by the Microscope* (London: Reeve and Benham, 1851): plate 1, 1851, colour lithograph. Collection of the University of Toronto Library. Digital image courtesy of Internet Archive (CC BY-SA 3.0).

If we consider the microorganisms contained in the drop of water described by Catlow, we have to keep in mind that one of these constraints was movement. As she pointed out, looking at a single drop of water in the microscope means seeing a world teeming with life, where “all [is] gliding and moving about without noise and at perfect ease”. ⁵⁰ This posed a further challenge to the observer and the draughtsman, as we may perceive from a short video in which microorganisms move fast and in all directions, mingling and overlapping (fig. 12). To overcome this inconvenience, Victorian amateur microscopists exchanged advice and information in the pages of scientific journals, discussing the number of anaesthetic substances needed to slow down the mobility of microorganisms without killing them. For the

draughtsmen (who were actually often women), drawing quickly was therefore a necessity. To make the process easier, they represented half of what they saw, only to recompose it later, at leisure, through symmetrical representation. Glaisher and his observation of snowflakes again offers a well-known example, in his work towards the paper “On the Severe Weather at the Beginning of the Year 1855; and on Snow and Snow-crystals”. As snowflakes melted rapidly, he sketched them roughly. They were afterwards redrawn by his wife, Cecilia, who redesigned them through the principles of symmetry.⁵¹ Just as in Catlow’s or Glaisher’s illustrations, the ornamental motifs in Jones’s *Grammar* did not provide documentary or objective information but an idealised version of historical ornamentation. Through the regularisation of the motifs—their visual codification—Jones was able to highlight the principles of ornament and thus extract the characteristic elements of a universal grammar; a grammar that was not limited to paper but was also three-dimensionally expressed in the architectural courts of the Crystal Palace.

[mul]

As we have seen, Jones had endorsed the validity of his principles of ornament through the regulating model of nature, saying that “whenever any style of ornament commands universal admiration, it will always be found to be in accordance with the laws which regulate the distribution of form in nature”.⁵² Good ornament followed the rules of nature. After the publication of his *Grammar*, these principles had acquired major authority among design reformers, and in turn could be taken as a model to explain the principles of nature itself. This paradigmatic shift is visible in Glaisher’s 1857 article in the *Art-Journal*, in which he argued for the usefulness of snow crystals for design, notably for mosaic, tilework, and cotton print (fig. 13). Glaisher referred to Jones’s design theories, even citing propositions 3, 5, 8, 9, and 10 of the *Grammar* and discussed in detail the geometrical qualities of snow crystal in relation to the Byzantine and Moorish Courts in Sydenham, reflecting that Jones’s book and his architectural decoration were given equal theoretical value.

ails, as may be seen in parts of the pavement of the Byzantine Court. Application, far more than in the con- glass mosaic and its imitations, of have been speaking, we are compelled fret in symmetry of design; neces- sarily from imparting the idea of spaces, such be- sistent with the of flooring, to present a face to the eye we are also con- a very limited colour, in order terfere with the is of the walls gs, and the man- of encaustic tiles itself limited to yment of but rs. Thus ex- m the rich and rmonies of co- the relieve of shade, our at- principally di- the design, regard to this n, should com- plicity with uni- outline, and be rable to a purely base. And here id, in regard to s of snow, that, n outline or in hey are equally al. In the one y are simply copies of the fact to the naked he other, they o us structural nly visible by ation of a high- a, or as seen by a microscope.

ual range of application is likewise them in regard to floor-cloth, which attention to the conditions above l, as applying to tile-work, but in a re, inasmuch as its more household etc. conditions allow a somewhat

partment, and whose influence was felt more or less in every home of the kingdom, had no guide but his own ill-educated and distorted will; he threw things together without the least regard to harmony of colour, fitness of proportion, or form of any kind, and called the heterogeneous mass "a design." Of late he

be received into the higher applicator lain. We all know that porcelain ha- joyed a monopoly of the most tastef that Art could suggest, whether flowers, medallions of figures, or ar but we are in hopes that they may few novelties of design to this the mos

medium for th of the natural tiful in Art; of itself sugg question,—how the beauty and of the geomet been acknowle employed hithen designs? To a question woul an inquiry into tory of design to pottery, from crude attempt delineation of objects to th time, when, bot land and abroa attained to a perfection. As inquiry, this i scarcely less i than instructiv as it would, th in design to knowledge of t is beautiful a priate, rather ventional. The Court of the C lace, now ope ranged by Mr late of the est of Messrs. Cog Co., offers a study never thrown open t dent in Ceram and contains which will

form a complete history of pottery earliest up to the present time.

For a brief period of Italian Art enabled to glance cursorily at this design by means of the Soulagés now open at Madraswood House - 1



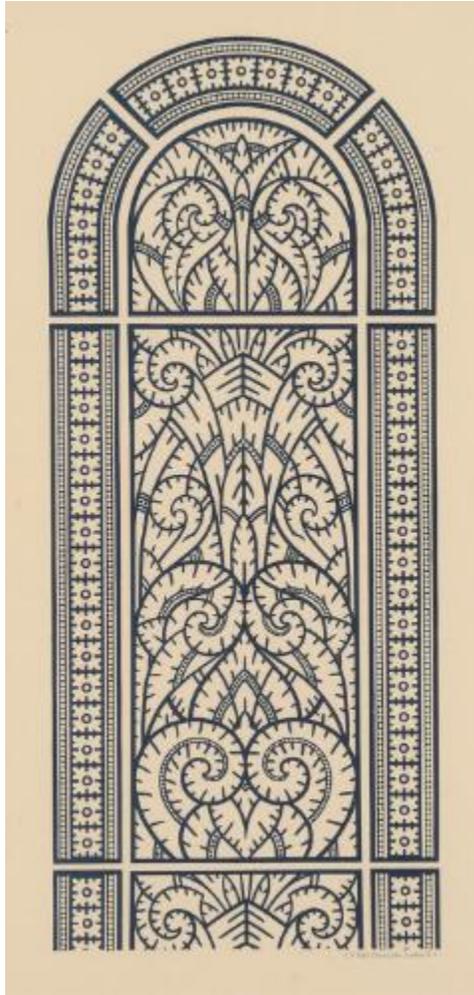
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Figure 12.

James Glaisher, Pattern inspired by a crystal of snow, in *The Art-Journal*, vol. 19, April 1857 (London: Virtue and Co., 1857): p. 126. Collection of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Digital image courtesy of Internet Archive (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Glaisher’s aim was not to show that these historical ornaments followed the laws of nature as exemplified in snow crystals, but just the opposite. Reversing Jones’s relationship between nature and ornament, he stated that a snow crystal could “suggest new forms in the decorative design, as applied to the Industrial Arts”, because crystals were “in accordance with those general principles of arrangement of form, which, in all ages and countries have constituted the truly beautiful in Art”.⁵³ In other words, snow crystals *follow* the principles of historical ornament. In this view, the laws of ornament as illustrated in Jones’s *Grammar* and at Crystal Palace had acquired an exemplary value on a par with, and even superior to, nature.

This porosity between the natural and the ornamental is well illustrated in a design for a window from the late 1860s by Christopher Dresser. The motif was later published in plate 20 of *Modern Ornamentation* (1886), with the indication that it was “in no historic style, but was derived from the frost on a window-pane in winter” (fig. 14). However, the central pattern shows striking similarities with the intricate arabesques and volutes of Islamic ornament, whereas the glass is framed by the repetition of a square pattern whose outlines are marked by small lines, comparable to that of the *bacillaria* illustrated in Catlow’s drops of water. Displaying the same laws of distribution of forms, this pattern illustrates the close boundaries between nature and ornament in the Victorian age.



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Figure 13.

Pattern inspired by frost on a window-pane, in Christopher Dresser, *Modern Ornamentation* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1886): plate 20. Collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Paul F. Walter. Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Paul F. Walter (public domain).

Through the lenses of the microscope and the glass slides, microorganisms—as living beings or arranged as ornaments—were placed in the centre of a visual frame.⁵⁴ This frame dissolved when the ornament was transposed back onto three-dimensional objects. Set “free” again in the physical world, the ornament unfolded on the surface and could spread in all directions, as in Dresser’s “truth, beauty, power” vessel.

Conclusion

The mid-nineteenth century was a time of profound cultural, social, scientific, and material transformation. The advancement of historical and scientific knowledge, together with the new discoveries made in various fields and their increasing dissemination, mediatisation, and commodification through exhibitions, museums, and the popular diffusion of scientific knowledge, all contributed to redefine the perception of humanity in history and nature. New ideas and conceptions of the world were not only circulated and conditioned by text and images, but also through material culture, as witnessed by the vogue for the aquarium and the microscope, and their importance in the domestic and social sphere in Victorian times.

In an attempt to face contemporary challenges by uniting art and industry, designers turned to the study of the past and to nature. In their search for general principles, they made use of all the tools and devices available to them, including the microscope. Like the botanist or the zoologist, the designer could search for natural rules of composition in the view of the invisible world revealed by the instrument. But as this article has demonstrated, dialogue between art and science was not confined to the walls of design schools. Scientific knowledge and practices rapidly circulated between several registers, and boundaries between the amateur and the professional were hard to delineate. The production of exhibition slides testifies to these fruitful entanglements. At a time when both the visualisation of the rules of art and nature and the transcription of microscopic observation shared common practices, arranged slides both confirmed and performed the principles of ornament.

Footnotes

- 1 E.S. Dixon, "Microscopic Preparations", *Household Words* (8 August 1857): 132.
- 2 See G. Beer, *Darwin's Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). On the role of science popularisers, see: B. Lightman, "Marketing Knowledge for the General Reader: Victorian Popularizers of Science", *Endeavour*, 24, no. 3 (2000): 100-106; J.R. Dolan, "From the Popularization of Microscopy in the Victorian Age: A Lesson for Today's 'Outreach'", *Protist*, 170, no. 3 (2019): 319-327. On microscopes in general: S. Bradbury, *The Evolution of the Microscope* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967); G. I'E. Turner, *Essays on the History of the Microscope* (Oxford: Senecio Publishing, 1980); G. I'E. Turner, *The Great Age of the Microscope: The Collection of the Royal Microscopical Society Through 150 years* (Bristol: Adam Hilger, 1989).
- 3 O. Brown, R.H. Nuttall, and S. Butler, *The Social History of the Microscope* (Cambridge: Shipple Museum of the History of Science, 1986); J.A. Bennett, "The Social History of the Microscope", *Journal of Microscopy*, 155, no. 3 (1989): 267-280; S.J.M.M. Alberti, "Conversaciones and the Experience of Science in Victorian England", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 8, no. 2 (2003): 208-230.
- 4 See for instance T. Stammers, *The Purchase of the Past: Collecting Culture in Post-revolutionary Paris c.1790-1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- 5 See for example Dixon, "Microscopic Preparations": 133.
- 6 B. Davidson, "Arranged and Type Slides", *Quekett Journal of Microscopy*, 39 (2001): 4.

- 7 For an introduction to these well-known questions, see: D. Schafer, *The Order of Ornament, The Structure of Style, Theoretical Foundations of Modern Art and Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17–32; A. Burton, “Ruskin and South Kensington: Contrasting Approaches to Art Education”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 20 (2020), <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/burton.pdf>. Accessed 1 March 2021. See also A. Varela Braga, *Une théorie universelle au milieu du XIXe siècle. La Grammar of Ornament d’Owen Jones* (Rome: Campisano Editore, 2017), 201–208.
- 8 See B. Bergdoll, “Nature’s Architecture: The Quest for the Laws of Form and the Critique of Historicism”. In A. Sachs (ed.), *From Inspiration to Innovation, Nature Design* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2007), 46–47 and B. Bergdoll, “Of Crystals, Cells, and Strata: Natural History and Debates on the Form of a New Architecture in the Nineteenth Century”, *Architectural History*, 25 (2007): 1–29.
- 9 See for instance: E. Krausse, “L’influence de Ernst Haeckel sur l’Art Nouveau”. In J. Clair (ed.), *L’âme au corps: arts et sciences, 1793–1993* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1993), 242–251; R. Proctor, “Architecture from the Cell-soul: René Binet and Ernst Haeckel”, *Journal of Architecture*, 11, no. 4 (2006): 407–424; R.M. Brain, “Protoplasmania. Huxley, Haeckel, and the Vibratory Organism in the Late Nineteenth-Century Science and Art”. In B. Larson and F. Brauer (eds.), *The Art of Evolution. Darwin, Darwinism, and Visual Culture* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), 92–123; M. Morton, “From Monera to Man. Ernst Haeckel, Darwinismus, and Nineteenth-Century German Art”. In S. Bergmann and F. Clingerman (eds.), *Arts, Religion, and the Environment. Exploring Nature’s Texture* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 59–91.
- 10 W.J. Müller, “Letters from Xanthus”, *Art-Journal*, 6, 1844: 356.
- 11 W. Dyce, *The Drawing Book of the Government Schools of Design, Published Under the Immediate Superintendence of the Council* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1842–43), I. On the Schools, see the classic studies of Q. Bell, *The Schools of Design* (London: Routledge, 1963) and S. MacDonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education* (New York: American Elsevier, 1970).
- 12 The South Kensington system has been the subject of much scholarship. For recent contributions, see: E. Chestnova, “‘Ornamental Design is ... a Kind of Practical Science’. Theories of Ornament at the London School of Design and Department of Science and Art”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 11 (2014), <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/chestnova.pdf> and R. Dohmen, “Art, Industry and the Laws of Nature: the South Kensington Method Revisited”, *Open Arts Journal*, 9 (2020). DOI:10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2020w03. Accessed 2 March 2021.
- 13 Letter from Playfair to Glaisher, 8 February 1854 (Playfair copybook. Science Museum Archive). Citation taken from: <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/ceciliaglaisher/snow/40.html>
- 14 R. Redgrave, “Importance of the Study of Botany to the Ornamentist”, *Journal of Design and Manufactures*, 1 (1849): 148.
- 15 S. Durant, “Christopher Dresser and the use of Contemporary Science”, *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850—the Present*, 29 (2005): 24; ID, “Dresser’s Education and Writings”. In M. Whiteway (ed.), *Christopher Dresser, A Design Revolution* (London: V&A Publications, 2004), 47–59. On Dresser in general, see also: W. Halén, *Christopher Dresser* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1990) and M. Whiteway (ed.), *Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser’s Design Revolution* (London: V&A Publications, 2004).
- 16 G. Gooday, “‘Nature’ in the Laboratory: Domestication and Discipline with the Microscope in Victorian Life Science”, *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 24 (1991): 307–341.
- 17 The Victoria and Albert Museum preserves seventy-two drawings that Dresser used to illustrate his lectures on botany at Marlborough House (museum numbers 3925 to 3996).
- 18 D. Brett, “Design Reform and the Laws of Nature”, *Design Issues*, 1, no. 3 (1995): 37–49.
- 19 On the idea of grammar, ornament, and the decorative arts see: R. Labrusse, “Face au chaos: grammaires de l’ornement”, *Perspective. La revue de l’INHA*, no. 1 (2010–2011): 97–121; ID., “Grammars of Ornament: Dematerialization and Embodiment from Owen Jones to Paul Klee”. In G. Necipoglu and A. Payne (eds.), *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 320–333; ID., *Face au chaos. Pensées de l’ornement à l’âge de l’industrie* (Paris: les presses du réel, 2018), 85–144, and Varela Braga, *Une théorie universelle*, 105–151.
- 20 Proposition no. 13 in O. Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament, Illustrated by Examples from Various Styles of Ornament* (London: Day & Son, 1856), 4.
- 21 According to David Brett, these are the first instance of the application of “microscopic drawing to design” in Brett, “Design Reform”: 37.
- 22 J. Glaisher, “On the Crystal of Snow, as Applied to the Purposes of Design”, *Art-Journal*, 19 (1857): 73–76, 125–128; see J. Boucard and C. Eckes, “Les sources scientifiques de Jules Bourgoïn: cristaux, polygones et polyèdres”. In M. Bideault, E. Thibault, and M. Volait (eds.), *De l’Orient à la mathématique de l’ornement. Jules Bourgoïn (1838–1908)* (Paris: Picard, 2005), 299–313 and Labrusse, *Face au chaos*, 72–76.
- 23 S.J. Mackie, “Sea-weeds as Objects of Design”, *Art-Journal*, 20 (1858): 5–8.
- 24 S. Granata, “‘At Once Pet, Ornament, and ‘Subject for Dissection’: The Unstable Status of Marine Animals in Victorian Aquaria”, *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 88 (2018), DOI:10.4000/cve.4272. Accessed 26 February 2021. In his book *Unity in Variety* (1859), Dresser had also introduced, on page 20, images of fossilised marine organisms, to defend the idea of the universality of Nature’s principles.
- 25 L. Wolpert, “Evolution of the Cell Theory”, *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, 349, no. 1329 (1995): 229–230.

- 26 Mackie, "Sea-weeds as Objects of Design": 97, 100, 104.
- 27 H.J. Slack, "On the Application of the Microscope to the Art of Design", *The Intellectual Observer: Review of Natural History, Microscopic Research and Recreative Science*, 1 (1862): 111.
- 28 See J.R. Piggott, *Palace of the People, The Crystal Palace at Sydenham 1854-1936* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2004); S. Moser, *Designing Antiquity: Owen Jones, Ancient Egypt and the Crystal Palace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); K. Nichols and S.V. Turner (eds.), *After 1851: The Material and Visual Cultures of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
- 29 On the Fine Art Courts and the *Grammar of Ornament*, see Varela Braga, *Une théorie universelle*, 33-49.
- 30 Slack, "On the Application of the Microscope to the Art of Design": 114.
- 31 B. Bracegirdle, *Microscopical Mounts and Mounters* (London: Quekett Microscopical Club, 1998), 4.
- 32 H.L. Smith, "On a Mechanical Finger for Use with the Microscope", *American Journal and Science and Art*, 41 (1866): 331-337.
- 33 See the entry by B. Stevenson, "Henry 'Harold' Dalton, 1836-1912", <http://microscopist.net/DaltonH.html>. Accessed 1 February 2021.
- 34 Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, 15.
- 35 R. Mazzolini, "Infusoria". In *The Oxford Companion to the History of Modern Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195112290.001.0001/acref-9780195112290-e-0360>. Accessed 24 February 2021. J. Cresswell, "Microbe". In *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199547920.001.0001/acref-9780199547920-e-3200>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- 36 An., "New Books", *Hardwicke's Science-gossip. An Illustrated Medium of Interchange and Gossip for Students and Lovers of Nature*, 10, no. 109 (1874): 27.
- 37 "Chi crederebbe che il problema dell'ornamentazione de' più complicati solidi geometrici, come de' più semplici, trovasse infinite soluzioni tutte varie e tutte belle in alcuni corpuscoli vaganti intorno all'alghe marine, come sarebbero le diatomee e i navicoli, ove si trovano le più strane forme, e le più strane ornamentazioni, che mente umana potesse mai concepire?" F. Panciantichi Ximenes d'Aragona, "Pensieri sull'architettura", *Architettura & arte*, 11/12 [1864] (2000): 85.
- 38 "eseguite confermate ed applicate [...] in questo mondo novello si trovano praticate *ab initio* certi generi di ornamenti che l'uomo credeva sua proprietà". Panciantichi Ximenes d'Aragona, "Pensieri sull'architettura": 85.
- 39 A. Varela Braga, "Building a Dream: the Alhambra in the Villa of Sammezzano". In F. Giese and A. Varela Braga (eds.), *The Power of Symbols. The Alhambra in a Global Perspective* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018), 300-303. I develop this topic further in an upcoming publication.
- 40 Letter from G.B. Amici to J. Bourgogne, 3 December 1855 (Modena: Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, Archivio Giovanni Battista Amici, folder 1126, letter 8617). Dixon, "Microscopic Preparations", 137. On Bourgogne, see B. Stevenson, "Joseph Bourgogne, ca.1805-ca.1885". <http://microscopist.net/BourgogneJoseph.html>. Accessed 20 February 2021.
- 41 Davidson, "Arranged and Type Slides", 3. By 1868, the German Johann Diedrich Möller had developed taxonomic type slides with hundreds of different species.
- 42 J. Ruskin, *The Laws of Fésole. A Familiar Treatise on the Elementary Principles and Practice of Drawing and Painting as Determined by the Tuscan Masters* [1877-79]. In E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Complete Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1904), 405.
- 43 See for instance Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 139-168 and Y. Xiao, "Lost in Magnification: Nineteenth-Century Microscopy and the Lifted Veil", *George Eliot—George Henry Lewes Studies*, 69, no. 1 (2017): 68-88.
- 44 Mackie, "Sea-weeds as Objects of Design": 107.
- 45 Gooday, "'Nature' in the Laboratory" and Xiao, "Lost in Magnification": 72-76. For an ideological interpretation of the DSA see: J.G. Rhodes, "Ornament and Ideology: a Study in Mid-Nineteenth-Century British Design Theory" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1983).
- 46 L. Forsberg, "Nature's Invisibilia: The Victorian Microscope and the Miniature Fairy", *Victorian Studies*, 57, no. 4 (2015): 638-666.
- 47 P.H. Gosse, *Evenings at the Microscope; Or Researchers Among the Minuter Organs and Forms of Animal Life* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1859), iii.
- 48 A. Catlow, *Drops of Water: Their Marvellous and Beautiful Inhabitants Displayed by the Microscope* (London: Leave and Benham, 1851), x-xi.
- 49 L. Daston and P. Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 55-113, here 59.
- 50 Catlow, *Drops of Water*, xi.

- 51 Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 150. J. Glaisher, "On the Severe Weather at the Beginning of the Year 1855; and on Snow and Snow-crystals", *British Meteorological Society 5th Annual Report* (London: British Meteorological Society, 1855), 17. See the online exhibition about the work of Cecilia Glaisher, *Snow Leaves Ferns*, by the Fitzwilliam Museum, put online in March 2016 <https://web.archive.org/web/20161117063419/https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/ceciliaglaisher/>. But these practices were not limited to the observation of the natural world—they were common to designers and architects as well, whose sketchbooks are filled with ornamental patterns only half sketched to save time during their travels. This process was also employed in making plates for ornamental publications, as shown in the preparatory drawings for the *Grammar of Ornament* preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, where several motifs are left half-drawn to be completed by the lithographer. Varella Braga, *Une théorie universelle*, 158–163.
- 52 Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, 2.
- 53 Glaisher, "On the Crystal of Snow": 75.
- 54 Historically and culturally constructed, this ordered vision of the world which privileged centralised and symmetrical dispositions was challenged when Dresser was confronted with the asymmetry of Japanese art. See: K.T. Oshima, "The Evolution of Christopher Dresser's 'Art Botanical' Depiction of Nature", *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850—the Present*, 29 (2005): 53–65.

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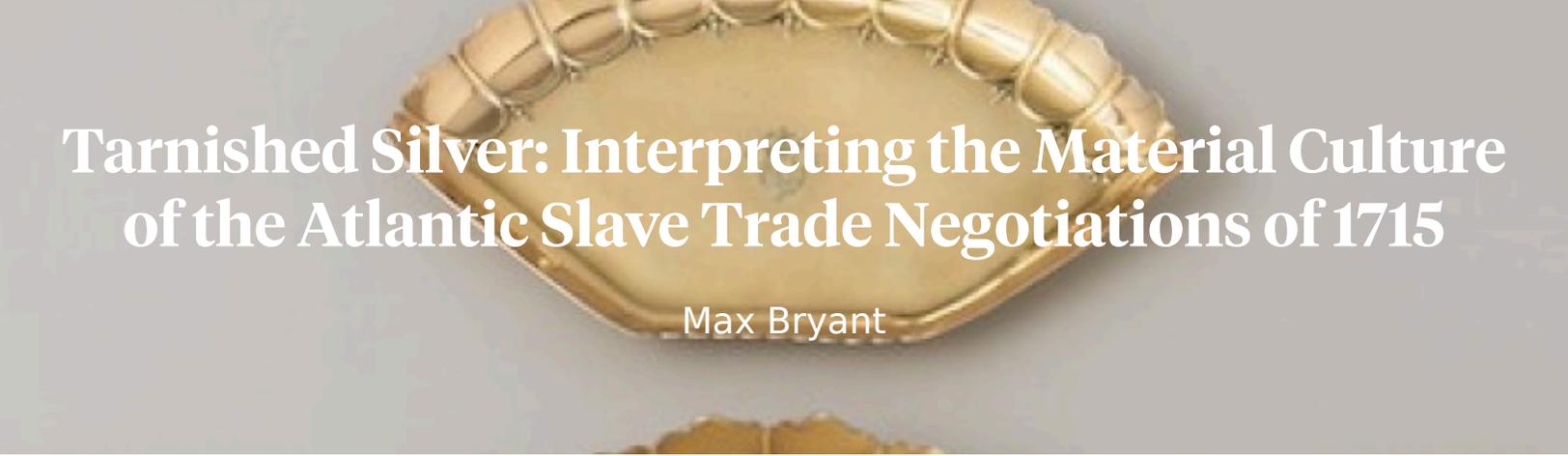
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Tarnished Silver: Interpreting the Material Culture of the Atlantic Slave Trade Negotiations of 1715

Max Bryant

Abstract

This article describes the approach taken to interpreting, in a gallery setting, a set of silver with a troubling history: it had been made for use during negotiations of a major eighteenth-century contract for the transportation of enslaved Africans. Two further avenues for interpretation are presented, both of which relate to the Atlantic slave trade. The first follows the way that the “plain” surfaces of British silver of this period have been understood, while the second follows the physical transformation of the gilding. Both follow the “social life” of particular material properties of the silver, in an alternative approach to the well-established concept of the “social life of things”.

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Introduction

When the new British Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) in New York were being arranged, in part with a goal of addressing contexts of slavery and colonialism, a set of early eighteenth-century silver presented a particularly acute challenge for members of the curatorial team. The set has been a highlight of the collection of the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Art since its donation to the Met in 1968. But new research revealed a troubling chapter of what has become known, in material culture studies, as its “biography”.¹ Issued in 1714 by the Royal Jewel House to the ambassador to Spain, the complete surviving set, now spread across international collections, comprises work by Phillip Rollos (circa 1660–after 1715), a Lutheran silversmith from Berlin, and Lewis Mettayer (d. 1740), a Huguenot who had grown up in London (figs. 1-4).² The troubling chapter was the context for its first use: the negotiations by which the new nation of Great Britain obtained the monopoly to transport enslaved Africans to the Spanish empire.



Figure 1.

Phillip Rollos, The Bingley Cup (Phillip Rollos produced an identical pair for Methuen, without the salver, in 1714), circa 1714, silver-gilt, 38 × 35.5 × 20.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (M.30:1-2008). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

Lewis Mettayer, Wine coolers made for Paul Methuen, 1714, silver. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Sotheby's (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

Lewis Mettayer, Casters made for Paul Methuen (this design was used by Lewis Mettayer as early as 1712), 1714, silver, 16.9 × 5.7 × 5.7 cm, 349 g. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.71). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 4.

Lewis Mettayer, Dessert or salad plates (set of 5) made for Paul Methuen, 1714, silver, variable. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.288-292). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).

Mettayer's casters and dessert plates in the British Galleries may be taken to demonstrate the formal originality and technical virtuosity that justify his work's prominent position in a global art museum. Both developed designs first identified in examples produced by his master David Willaume (1658-1741), a Huguenot from Metz, which, in turn, were probably based on lost French prototypes. With the casters, however, Mettayer reconceived the era's classic piriform, or pear-shaped, silhouette by inverting the lower half, so that the taper was moved to the bottom, and each edge of the octagonal base became a sinuous ogee ([fig. 5](#)). With the salvers, he reversed the typical form now known as a "strawberry dish" where folds around the edge produce a centripetal visual effect ([fig. 6](#)). Instead, Mettayer created an internal border, and disguised each fold with a cross of six round indentations that further emphasised the internal border's lateral movement ([fig. 7](#)). The result left the gilded centre as an uninterrupted disc, and allowed a unified set of dishes to be executed in a variety of shapes.



Figure 5.

David Willaume, Casters (David Willaume produced versions of this design as early as 1710), 1736, silver. Collection of the National Trust, Nostell Priory. Digital image courtesy of National Trust, Nostell Priory / Photo: Robert Thrift (all rights reserved).



Figure 6.

Lewis Mettayer, Silver serving dishes (set of 6) engraved with the Royal Arms of Queen Anne, 1713, engraved silver, diameter 21.60 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1969,0705.29). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

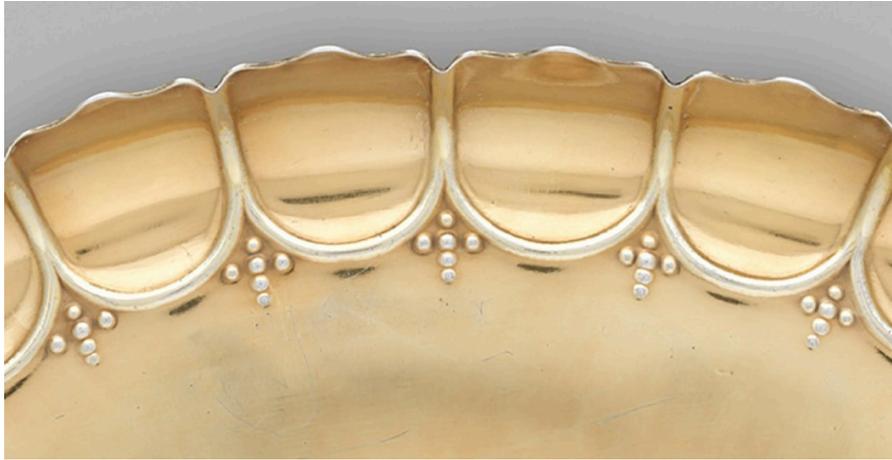


Figure 7.

Lewis Mettayer, Dessert or salad plates (set of 5) made for Paul Methuen (detail), 1714, silver, variable. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.291). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).

In the case of the casters and the salvers, then, Mettayer produced a design that was distinctively original compared to silver being made at that time. The ideal setting for the appreciation of these qualities was provided by the Galleries of English Decorative Arts, which opened at the Met in 1995 and were de-installed in 2016.³ There Mettayer's work was shown alongside contemporary works in silver, in a wood-panelled side gallery devoted to the history of the medium from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth (fig. 8). But the formalist analysis embodied in the display in the Galleries of English Decorative Arts neglected to address the context of its use.



Figure 8.

Methuen asiento silver shown in the “Galleries of English Decorative Arts” installed in 1995, *photographed before deinstallation in 2016*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York / Photo: Peter Zeray (all rights reserved).

As I found by researching the first owner, the ambassador Paul Methuen (1672–1757), the silver objects had been manufactured for use in entertaining Spanish officials during negotiations by which the new nation of Great Britain obtained the *asiento* contract, the monopoly to transport enslaved Africans to the Spanish empire. The *asiento* itself had been granted to Britain from France in 1713, and the negotiations in Madrid in 1715 were for the new Whig government to establish the details of the arrangement on their own terms. The intended function of the silver was never fulfilled: owing to illness, Methuen returned prematurely from his embassy, leaving an assistant to successfully negotiate the agreements through bribery rather than magnificent hospitality. Nevertheless, the casters and dishes are

intimately connected to the fate of the 63,206 enslaved people that British ships transported across the Atlantic in the subsequent two decades according to the agreement.⁴

The Met had not mentioned slavery in previous installations of the silver, and it was imperative to ask what interpretation of the work that meaningfully engaged this context would be possible. The first answer was to foreground the *asiento* in the label text, so that the aesthetic qualities could not be regarded in isolation. In gallery tours and discussions with docents, I also developed an interpretation that took advantage of the placement at a pivot point of the whole British Galleries. This interpretation focused on a change in status that happened immediately after the silver came back from Madrid, a change that dramatised more broadly the importance of the Atlantic slave trade for the shape of British society.

The *Asiento* Silver as a Pivot in the British Galleries

Diplomatic silver was ordered from the Royal Jewel House according to a very specific total weight of silver and silver-gilt. The careful monitoring of weight was intended to compel the ambassador to return it exactly as they had received it at the end of their mission. In the case of the Met's silver, Paul Methuen was able to get official dispensation in January 1716 to keep it as his personal property, as the result of his ascent into the inner circle of the Whig oligarchy.⁵ At this point, according to the medieval law of entail, the silver could only be sold to the owner's own heir, except in cases of bankruptcy, preserving it in perpetuity from what might be termed "commodity" status. In its transformation into part of a personal estate, the silver manifested the social change by which Methuen, from a family of merchants descending from Scotland, recreated his own identity into that of a new member of the quasi-feudal British aristocracy. He would later acquire a country mansion, an heir and a baronetcy.

The Methuen *asiento* silver was placed alongside another set of gilded dishes, in this case made of porcelain, which told a parallel story (figs. 9 and 10). They were marked with the arms of the businessman Robert French (1705–1758). Like Methuen's, French's family originated in Scotland, but unlike Methuen's, his was aristocratic: the Lairds of Frenchland, Berwickshire. French's father had gone bankrupt, the family estates were sold, and Robert was forced to move to London, arriving in the 1730s when the economy was finally booming, thanks in considerable part to the ability to trade with Spain through the transportation of enslaved Africans to its empire. Robert French rebuilt the family fortune through commerce, and could celebrate his wealth through the uniquely global commodity of Chinese export porcelain.



Figure 9. Methuen asiento silver and Chinese export porcelain of Robert French, installed in the British Galleries, February 2020, case design by Roman and Williams, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Digital image courtesy of Max Bryant (all rights reserved).



Figure 10.

After engravings by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer, Chinese export porcelain plate (set of 2), enamelled on the reverse for Robert French, circa 1735–1740, hard-paste porcelain with gilding, 4.8 × 38.7 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (62.187.1). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York / Photo: Peter Zeray (all rights reserved).

The connection between French's porcelain and Methuen's silver was visually embodied by their gilding, the latter having been achieved through the hazardous process of applying and heating an amalgam of mercury and gold. This substance probably contains some African gold, which was brought to the Mint by the Royal African Company and thereby to the Mint's neighbour at the Tower of London, the Royal Jewel House.⁶ The fact that both families were Scottish in origin was a coincidence, but one that reinforced the significance of the change from "English" to "British" in the gallery's representation. Methuen and French can be read as emblematic "British" figures through which to conceptualise the union of England, Wales, and Scotland on a foundation of global trade, with the trade in enslaved people a central element.

Most importantly the parallel highlighted the difference between the changing identities of the objects. French's porcelain had been manufactured as an anonymous commodity in about 1735–1740, and only enamelled with the French family arms in about 1750. The enamelling was discreet, hidden on the back of the plate. While the addition of the crest asserted continuity, the personalised porcelain would have been a totally alien object to French's aristocratic ancestors. By contrast, the Methuen crest on the wine coolers (see [fig. 2](#)) is a prominent part of the design, and Mettayer's design for the casters also served to foreground the engraved Royal crest of George I more than the previous piriform shape had allowed. Silver, unlike porcelain, had played a prominent part in aristocratic dining for generations, and Methuen's silver established him within that milieu, along with the equally new Hanoverian dynasty.

The case containing Methuen's silver and French's porcelain was located at a threshold point in the galleries, between the larger rooms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The objects in the display leading up to this point, which began its chronology in 1500, mostly represented the property of royalty or the landed aristocracy like the Lairds of Frenchland. In the later galleries, most of the objects had been owned initially by patrons whose fortunes derived from commerce and trade, like the Methuens, and who had used their wealth to assume a new aristocracy modelled on the old. This economic transformation affected the whole country, and a central condition was the direct involvement in the Atlantic slave trade embodied by the acquisition of the *asiento*.

By bringing these objects together, the Met's British Galleries were able to tell a story about the transformation of the British ruling class that was premised on the Atlantic slave trade, and to connect to that trade every object that came after this pivot in the galleries. The other story is told from the point of view of the 63,206 people from West Africa whose enslaved labour made possible this restructuring of British wealth and power. That story is a glaring omission in the case, and only objects made or used by these people could offer a sense of their history in relation to that told here. How such museum acquisitions could be made without participating in dispossession is an urgent question.

Using the *asiento* silver's changing commodity status to tell the story of broader social change is an application of one of the most ubiquitous ideas in the study of the decorative arts: the "social life of things"—Arjun Appadurai's theory that objects manifest social culture across time.⁷ Objects previously only of interest to historians of design were, within this paradigm, revealed to be the most effective tool to illuminate a particular historical mode of life, or to use the vocabulary of Appadurai's source Werner Sombart, "*lebensgestaltung*".⁸ An early and influential elaboration from 1982, titled

“Mind in Matter”, had already defined “material culture” as the “study through artefacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time”.⁹ Much of the most important recent work on the British decorative arts in museums is conducted within this framework. One example is *Treasured Possessions*, an exhibition held in 2015 at the Fitzwilliam Museum. As the introduction states, objects are invested with emotional content by their patrons and consumers, and so we can treat “things as clues to a whole culture”, in this case, the culture of early modern Europe.¹⁰ One way to read these “clues” is to look, as in the example discussed here, at transformations in commodity status.

The ubiquity and the age of the “social life of things” might suggest a state of irrelevance, but it is in fact still generating debate and controversy. In 2015 Rosemary Joyce and Susan Gillespie proposed replacing the idea of an object’s “biography” with its “itinerary”.¹¹ The similar concept admits of the potential for change in what constitutes the identity of an object, incorporating digital reproduction, for example, or groups of multiple objects. In the February 2021 issue of *British Art Studies*, as well as in *The British Museums* (2020), Dan Hicks of the Pitt Rivers Museum took aim at the “social life of things” altogether, making the idea representative of a broader approach to history that he sought to dismantle, describing it, pejoratively, as “contemplative”.¹² More recently, Ann-Sophie Lehmann has mounted a defence of the concept against both of the above camps, arguing that its own life has been much longer and more complex than has been recognized.

In the next two sections of this article, I offer my own alteration of the concept in order to find further connections between the Met’s silver and the Atlantic slave trade. The treatment of the objects so far discussed regarded them as unified totalities, defined by their transformations in commodity status. By contrast, the following approach treats them as collections of material properties that can be isolated and considered individually. Material properties all change across time in different ways, whether physically or through the changing perspectives of those by whom they are experienced. Two particular material properties are chosen here that both illuminate aspects of the Atlantic slave trade: first the silver’s “plainness”, and second its gilding.

I. Reflections on “Plain” Style

The innovations in Mettayer’s casters and dessert plates discussed in the introduction all served to emphasise areas of sheer surface, unembellished with chasing or engraving. Unlike in contemporary French silver, for example, it is possible in these works to experience the effect of the material in an

apparently neutral way, presented unadorned across a wide area, whether a surface of silver or of silver-gilt. In the nineteenth century these qualities began to be understood as an aspect of the style of the “plain, perhaps too plain, plate of William and Queen Anne”, in the words of the founder of English silver studies, Wilfred Joseph Cripps.¹³ But material properties of an object transform through acts of reinterpretation, acts which are particularly revealing when they attempt to project aspects of the original context of production that have become obscure.

It is difficult to make an account of the social context for the silver trade from the evidence that has survived, but it appears to have comprised figures from a variety of backgrounds. Masters came from a range of countries: many were first-generation Huguenot immigrants from provincial France, but there were also Berliners like Rollos, and the children of immigrants like Mettayer, who had been raised in London and whose family had no background in the French silver trade. Beyond the named masters there would have been a further society of apprentices and assistants. Recent scholarship has shown that Huguenot masters trained roughly equal numbers of English apprentices alongside fellow Huguenots, and between 1709 and 1725, Mettayer trained five of the former and two of the latter.¹⁴

The backgrounds of the non-Huguenots who were trained as apprentices and employed as workshop assistants were probably even more diverse than those of the masters. A major transformation followed this period: the first known example of racist employment legislation in Britain, which was passed by the Lord Mayor of London in 1731. According to the proclamation, no Freeman could train “Negroes or other Blacks”.¹⁵ Such a proclamation would have been unnecessary if there had not been leading up to that date a number of such apprentices, presumably creating competition with white applicants for the same roles. The British acquisition of the *asiento* had made the dehumanising treatment of Africans the official policy of an elected government, setting the precedent for further discrimination.

In the two decades leading up to 1731, London represented a particularly diverse city due to its involvement in global trade, and while there is no evidence of people from Africa involved in silver manufacture, we can say at least that until 1731 there was the possibility for such training. In his print *Noon* (1738) Hogarth showed rich Huguenots living in the St Giles area alongside a Londoner of African heritage. In 1710 the German bibliophile Zacharias von Uffenbach visited, and wrote that “there are ... such a quantity of Moors of both sexes in England that I have never seen before”.¹⁶ But we know hardly any of their names, with rare exceptions like George Turner, a fencing-master in Southwark in 1710.¹⁷

As silver scholarship developed, a narrative of this era began to solidify. In particular, the community of London crafts began to be portrayed as a binary of Huguenots against local craftsmen. Hugh Tait, for example, presented Huguenot silversmiths as a closed community, producing a self-contained genre of “Huguenot silver”, based on the incorrect assertion that those silversmiths never trained non-Huguenot apprentices.¹⁸ Protestants like Rollos from places other than France were misidentified as Huguenot.¹⁹ One distinctive form of this era, the two-handled cup represented by the works by Rollos in the Methuen set, became misidentified as a Huguenot import.²⁰ A craft community that was made up of a number of identities became treated as a site of conflict between a closed community of Huguenots and a closed community of native Londoners.

This binary treatment of identity influenced the interpretation of the material properties of their productions. Huguenot culture produced work that was “functional” and emphasised “practical use”.²¹ The plain surfaces, therefore, were expressions of a Calvinist ethic specific to this culture. However, this was not the only way to interpret this material property: another might be as a response by a diverse community to shared material conditions. Such an approach would not foreclose the possibility of participation in the field by the kinds of people who would later be explicitly excluded by the racist employment legislation of 1731.

There is also historical justification to believe that the “plainness” of work like the *asiento* silver was not an expression of a specifically Huguenot aesthetic. A major change that affected everyone involved in the silver trade, whatever their cultural or ethnic background, was the legal minimum millesimal fineness. The government regulated the very material that silversmiths worked with by making them bring their work to the Assay Office at the Goldsmiths’ Hall for testing and stamping. Until 1697, silversmiths were trained in and practised with sterling silver, the silver alloy used in coins that comprised 92.5 per cent pure silver, and 7.5 per cent copper or other metal. However, in March that year Parliament abolished the sterling standard for silverware in England, and replaced it with the French standard of 95.8 per cent silver, now known as “Britannia”.

The key problem this introduced was the increase in the cost of the material, as the Act had been introduced in order to prevent the silver in coins being used to make silver plate. A key line of business for silversmiths was the replacement of elements within sets, and a craftsman might be asked to recreate a design made before the passing of the Act of 1697. It seems that what happened was that the silversmith kept the same amount of silver, and removed an additional quantity of alloy, to the point that while there was less material overall, the ratio of silver to alloy had been increased. A

replacement would have to be created by subtly changing the design, removing material from invisible areas so it would appear identical, though it would be about 10 per cent lighter than the original. ²²

A corollary to this challenge was that designs native to the new standard had to convey the same magnificent impression to which clients were accustomed, but with less overall silver alloy. But there was a property of the new 95.8 per cent standard that offered a solution: its greater facility for creating surfaces of sheer silver. ²³ The copper in the sterling alloy had a tendency to come to the surface of the mixture during the cooling process to produce what is called “fire staining”. This was a routine fact of manufacture that was removed in the finishing process. After polishing it left a patch of whiter-looking colour, and the surface itself was not perfectly smooth, which was not an issue when the surface was embellished with applied ornament. The new standard of silver, because of the lower copper content in the alloy, was much less likely to produce fire staining. This material condition made possible the large unornamented surfaces that characterise the works by Mettayer in the Methuen *asiento* silver.

The interpretation of the plain style of silver formulated by Tait and others presented these unornamented surfaces as a cultural expression of a specifically Huguenot identity. Another interpretation, presented here, is one that does not preclude the possibility of its emergence from a diverse craft community in response to a shared material circumstance, in this case the new silver standard. A material property can be seen to have a “social life” of its own, its interpretation changing according to differing attempts to accommodate a lack of historical evidence about its production.

This lack of historical evidence, however, is important in itself. Legislation like the proclamation of 1731 targeted particular ethnicities, and erased their prior, as well as their future, participation in crafts. Historical evidence that could have been used to understand the community of silversmiths in the early eighteenth century was thereby lost, and the interpretation of their productions has had to accommodate that erasure. Furthermore, a culturally monolithic craft community has been projected from a perspective postdating the establishment of racist employment legislation. We therefore have to deliberately perform acts of reinterpretation in order to stop projecting that perspective onto our perception of the material properties of these objects. It may be said that the British acquisition of the *asiento*, by indirectly impacting the ethnic composition of craft communities, also established a principle that continues to shape the reinterpretation of their productions.

II. The Physical Transformation of Silver-Gilt

A material property of an object transforms across time, and also through the physical change it undergoes according to its various uses. The faded vermeil of the *asiento* silver may be taken as a particularly rich example, and one that makes a connection with the Atlantic slave trade. We know also that none of the silver gilt was melted down, and that despite much handling it was never regilt: the Royal cyphers are still engraved into the gold. This suggests two stages in the life of the gilding: the first where it was handled, and a second where it was preserved. Both may be read as reflecting a specific social context in the early eighteenth century: that of Methuen's Whig allies who profited by the British acquisition of the *asiento*.

Of the recipients for official plate, ambassadors were granted the largest allocation, totalling 195 kg.²⁴ They were also the only recipients of gilt plate, which comprised 30 kg of this total. It was up to the ambassadors themselves to determine which pieces would be made in silver and which in silver-gilt. These quantities of relative weight had been established in 1668, during the reign of Charles II, and had remained unchanged despite the increase in cost that resulted from the new silver standard in 1697. Charles II established a company with a monopoly on trade with West Africa as soon as he returned to assume the crown after the dissolution of the Commonwealth, making his younger brother, the Duke of York, its governor. The direct provision for silver-gilt reflected the confidence that the new monopoly would facilitate Royal access to gold, and indeed the gilding on the ambassadorial silver may have comprised gold provided by the Royal African Company to the Mint from 1670.

We know almost all of the items that Methuen chose to have made in silver-gilt because they have survived: the dishes weigh 12.7 kg, the casters 1.3 kg, the pair of covered cups 15.5 kg, coming to a total weight close to 30 kg, which is the maximum that could have been ordered.²⁵ Therefore it is possible to interpret what Methuen considered to be the silver-gilt objects worth acquiring for his mission. For example, he cannot have had any chapel accoutrements made, the original purpose of the provision for silver-gilt. Methuen was still issued with the standard perquisites to equip an Anglican chapel in Madrid, including an altar cloth, surplices, prayer books, and a Bible. But he must have completely forgone any gilt chalices or monstrances. Instead, he ordered gilt casters and dessert plates, and the faded state of the original gilding in the Met examples reflects this different context for use.

The largest objects ordered in silver-gilt were the covered cups, the centrepieces of the sideboard buffet. These were an obvious choice of object to have made in silver-gilt, particularly as Methuen's Tory predecessor had ordered the same designs; a Whig sideboard could not be allowed to suffer in

comparison. However, the rest of the buffet must have been in ungilt silver, including the standard pieces like a cistern and fountain, ewers, basins, vases, and large decorative drinking vessels. Methuen also chose not to have salvers made en suite with the cups as his predecessor had done, saving that weight of silver-gilt for other items.

Instead of gilding objects that would have been on static display in the embassy chapel or on the sideboard, Methuen's provision for silver-gilt was used for objects that would have been handled by diners: casters and dessert plates. As soon as they were held, the difference from silver would also have been obvious from their weight. Even if silver-gilt was much less heavy than solid gold, it was considerably heavier than ungilt silver, thanks to the thick layer of gold applied during fire-gilding, which is greater than that added by other techniques.

This material property of the casters and dessert plates reflected their changing social context. Gold had increasingly been in the hands of the same British consumers who would have dined with Methuen, in the form of the relatively new currency of "guineas". The coin's name, and the elephant stamped on its reverse, indelibly associated gold with Africa, even if only a fraction of the gold coming into the Mint was provided by the Royal African Company.²⁶ Rather than being an object of distanced admiration, as it was in the chapel and on the sideboard, gold was becoming an object that was handled and exchanged. A stamp on all the casters and dessert plates would have reinforced this association between wrought plate and currency. This was the figure of Britannia, which from 1697 denoted wrought plate that met the new legal standard of silver ([fig. 11](#)). The stamp used by the Assay Office was tiny, but the image would have been familiar from the low denomination farthing, a coin in daily use, which had featured the figure on its reverse since 1672.



Figure 11.

Lewis Mettayer, Casters made for Paul Methuen (this design was used by Lewis Mettayer as early as 1712) (detail), 1714, silver, 16.9 × 5.7 × 5.7 cm, 349 g. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.71). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).

However, the association of gold with currency was undergoing a transformation at the time of Methuen's acquisition. At first the value of guineas floated independently of the silver unit of account, the shilling. Because of the practice of shillings being clipped, which peaked in the 1690s, the guinea came to be adopted as the preferred currency for the businessmen who were a core contingent of the Whigs. The Mint could not obtain silver to produce enough shillings to redress the balance, and in 1717, after various attempts by governments to defend silver coins from undervaluation, the guinea effectively became itself the unit of account. ²⁷ In the 1690s there had been less than half as much gold as silver in the total

currency; by the recoinage of 1774, gold completely dominated the ratio.²⁸ The words “gold” and “money” began to be used interchangeably by writers on economics like David Hume.²⁹

The second change was in the concept of precious metals as sources of value. To increase the purchasing power of silver coins, the government could have done what all others did in this period: mint coins with less silver in them. Fiat currency was standard practice internationally, as well as in Britain.³⁰ However, this policy was broken during the coinage crisis of 1695, a historical change of policy that would have a global impact. Breaking with the classic Aristotelian view of money as purely conventional, John Locke argued that in fact the gold and silver within it possessed what he called “intrinsic value”, a value instilled in it by social convention that dated back to an era before the emergence of civil society, but after the transition from the state of nature.³¹ Money therefore had to be depoliticised, that is, removed from the control of the government, in order to support the bonds of civil society itself.³² Most immediately this meant clipped coins were reminted at the old Elizabethan standard. The merit of Locke’s recoinage plan was challenged by its own economic consequences: almost immediately the economy suffered, with the London cloth market shrinking by nearly a fifth in the following year. Britain’s prosecution of the Nine Years War was definitively undermined, and William III was forced to accept a treaty with few gains in 1697. The government created the South Sea Company as a shell to produce credit notes; this shell company in turn created the immediate motivation for the acquisition of the *asiento*.

What is remarkable about the following two decades is that with all the tangible demonstration of the limitations of Locke’s monetary policy, it should have been not only continued but entrenched by successive Whig governments. Tying silver and gold together in 1717 only confirmed that both possessed an intrinsic value that was in direct relation, ending the Mint’s interventions with the value of the guinea. These policies established an association between economic prosperity and the intrinsic value of precious metals, and the conception of “sound money” is something for which economists continue to credit Locke.³³

We may understand the faded gilding on the Met’s *asiento* silver as expressive of this transformation. This ambassadorial silver-gilt was handled and touched, rather than ceremonially used in an Anglican chapel, in part because gold was taking on new meaning at the time. The life of the gilding also includes the fact that it was neither melted down nor regilt, but allowed to fade in its original form. This life can be interpreted to materialise a transformation in gold’s significance to the objects’ users, from a new and powerful form of currency to a representation of value itself. The British

acquisition of the *asiento* was likewise a direct condition of the Whig project to depoliticise the currency at any cost, in which the preservation of the intrinsic value of gold and silver was prioritised over that of human lives.

Conclusion

Through an alternative application of the “social life of things”, changes in the material properties of objects can be seen to offer their own form of historical evidence. In the first example given, the reinterpretations of the silver’s plainness register the consequences of the *asiento*, in particular the losses in knowledge that it produced and the historical projections onto the past that it influenced. In the second example, the physical transformation of a material property records a social usage that manifests the emergence of a new perspective on gold and silver intimately tied to the circumstances of the *asiento* contract.

Decorative arts collections abound with objects whose biographies entirely preclude neutral formalist appreciation, and the question of whether these objects can endure any form of public display is one that curators have to work to answer through the interpretations they present. Most at stake is whether any meaningful historical understanding can be derived from an encounter with them in person. In short, we have to ask whether what the objects have to tell us about our shared history is something expressed in the material qualities that influenced their accession by museums of art.

Footnotes

- 1 Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process”, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–94. See also Serena Dyer, “State of the Field: Material Culture”, *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 106, no. 370 (2021). DOI:10.1111/1468-229X.13104.
- 2 The former provided a pair of covered cups (fig. 1); the latter, two wine coolers, three casters, and seventeen dessert plates (figs. 2, 3 and 4). Mettayer’s wine coolers repeated a design first produced by his master, but the casters and dessert plates seem to have been his own invention. See Anon., *Fine Old English Silver Plate: The Property of Field-Marshal The Rt. Hon. Lord Methuen* (London: Christie, Manson & Woods, 1920). The covered cups and wine coolers are in private collections, the casters are at the Met, and the dessert plates are split between the Met and the Royal Collection.
- 3 M. Bryant, “A History of the British Galleries”, in “The New British Galleries”, special issue, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 31–39.
- 4 V.G. Sorsby, “British Trade with Spanish America under the Asiento” (PhD thesis, University College, London, 1975), 277.
- 5 Treasury Warrants: January 1716, 16–20. *Calendar of Treasury Books*, vol. 30, 1716 (originally published by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1958).
- 6 K.G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London: Longmans, 1970), 181.
- 7 Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Appadurai, 3–63.
- 8 Werner Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1912), 171.
- 9 Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method”, *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1.
- 10 Peter Burke, “The Meaning of Things in the Early Modern World”, in *Treasured Possessions: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Victoria Avery, Melissa Calaresu, and Mary Laven (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2015), 3.

- 11 Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie, eds., *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice* (Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2015).
- 12 Dan Hicks, "Negrography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum", *British Art Studies* 19 (February 2021). DOI:[10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-19/conversation](https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-19/conversation); Dan Hicks, *The British Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 41.
- 13 Wilfred Joseph Cripps, *Old French Plate* (London: John Murray, 1880), 30.
- 14 Lien Bich Luu, *Immigrants and the Industries of London 1500-1700* (London: Ashgate, 2005), 247.
- 15 Quoted in P. Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 77.
- 16 Fryer, *Staying Power*, 77-78.
- 17 Fryer, *Staying Power*, 77-78.
- 18 See, for example, Hugh Tait, "London Huguenot Silver", in *Huguenots in Britain and Their French Background, 1550-1800*, ed. Irene Scouloudi (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987).
- 19 The identification was corrected in John Culme, *British Silver Boxes 1640-1840: The Lion Collection* (Woodbridge: ACC Art Books, 2014).
- 20 Hugh Tait, "The Advent of the Two-Handled Cup", *Society of Silver Collectors: The Proceedings 1976-1979* 2, nos. 11/13 (Spring 1982): 202-210.
- 21 Tessa Murdoch, "Huguenot Artists Designers and Craftsmen in Great Britain and Ireland. 1680-1760" (PhD thesis, Westfield College University of London, 1982), 8.
- 22 See for example MMA 68.141.309a, b and 68.141.310a, b.
- 23 Personal correspondence with silversmith Christopher Bowen, March 2021.
- 24 Helen Jacobsen, *Luxury and Power: The Material World of the Stuart Diplomat 1660-1714* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14.
- 25 Jacobsen, *Luxury and Power*, 14.
- 26 Davies, *The Royal African Company*, 181.
- 27 Christine Desan, *Making Money: Coin, Currency, and the Coming of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 384.
- 28 Desan, *Making Money*, 385.
- 29 Desan, *Making Money*, 409.
- 30 William Lowndes, *A Report Containing An Essay for the Amendment of the Silver Coins* (London, 1695), 56.
- 31 John Locke, *Further Considerations concerning Raising the Value of Money* (London, 1695).
- 32 Stefan Eich, "John Locke and the Politics of Monetary Depoliticization", *Modern Intellectual History* 17, no. 1 (2020): 1-28 (17).
- 33 Eich, "John Locke and the Politics of Monetary Depoliticization", 17.

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Cherokee Unaker, British Ceramics, and Productions of Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Worlds

R. Ruthie Dibble and Joseph Mizhakii Zordan

Abstract

This article examines the uses and meanings of unaker, or “Cherokee clay”, among Cherokee and British potters, and between their respective political and cultural worlds, in the eighteenth century. By the time the British arrived in southeastern North America in the late sixteenth century, Cherokee peoples had been producing complex ceramics made with the fine white material rooted in the Cherokee value of kinship with the material world since time immemorial. Recognizing the potential value of this white clay, British colonists made efforts to possess unaker as part of the larger colonial project of dispossessing the Cherokee Nation of its land. In the colonies and in England, potters including John Bartlam and Josiah Wedgwood used unaker strategically within the intertwined projects of fashioning a distinctly British ceramics tradition and a racialized national identity rooted in mercantilism. This article uses evidence of Cherokee ontologies alongside the correspondence of British potters, eighteenth-century patents, and the analysis of specific wares to describe the contradictions in establishing a British imperial identity through the appropriation of an inherently Indigenous material. In illuminating unaker’s inalienable kinship with its Cherokee family even after its extraction from the ground, and into our present moment, this article suggests new approaches to the study of British and colonial decorative arts made with materials gained from the expansion of empire.

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Introduction

In October 1767 Cherokee leaders gathered at Keowee, a Cherokee Mother Town in the far northwestern corner of the British Province of South Carolina, to determine a pathway to peace with the Mohawk and other northern Indigenous nations. Their negotiations, however, were interrupted by a foreign visitor, the English merchant Thomas Griffiths.¹ Griffiths had been hired by the potter and inventor Josiah Wedgwood to negotiate the purchase of five tons of unaker, a bright white mineral used by the Cherokee for millennia to make white ceramics and architecture (fig. 1).² Known in the British Atlantic as “china clay” and in Mandarin as *Gāolǐngtǔ*, unaker was of great interest to Wedgwood and other English potters because of its potential to serve as an essential ingredient in the production of porcelain.³ Having gained an audience with the leaders at Keowee, Griffiths wasted no time in “request[ing] leave to travill through their Nation” to mine the white clay near the Cherokee town of lotla, in present-day Macon County, North Carolina. His inquiry was met with resistance, as Griffiths later recounted to Wedgwood:

This they granted, after a long hesitation, and severall debates among themselves; the Young Warier & one more seem,d to consent with Some Reluctance; saying they had been Trubled with some young Men before, who made great holes in their Land, took away their fine White Clay, gave ,em only Promises for it.⁴

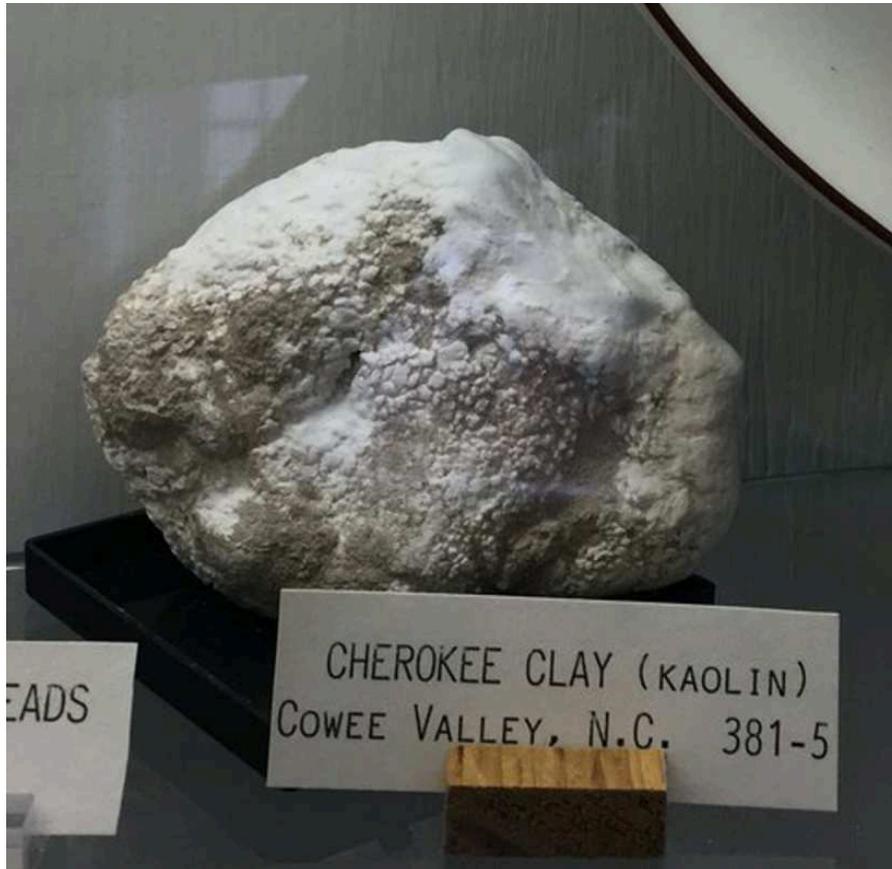


Figure 1.

Elizabeth Phelps Meyer, Unaker on display at the Gem & Mineral Museum in Franklin, North Carolina, 2017, white clay. Digital image courtesy of Elizabeth Phelps Meyer (all rights reserved).

The Cherokee leaders went on to caution Griffiths that if he “should want more for the future, they must have some satisfaction for they did not know what use that Mountain might be to them, or their Children”.⁵ Mediated through Griffiths’s fundamental lack of understanding of Cherokee culture, this recounting nonetheless underscores the importance of unaker in Cherokee and British political and cultural entanglement in the early Atlantic world. Far from being a material of significance solely to British potters, unaker was first and foremost understood by the Cherokee as kin, indivisible from their land, imbued with aesthetic and spiritual significance even after its extraction from the earth, and as much a part of their future as of their past. As J. T. Garrett, an expert on Cherokee medicine, has recorded in his oral histories of modern elders from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI), “Everything in this creation is kin to us”, and Cherokee people honor their relationships not only with plants and animals but also with the land itself.⁶ Particularly because neither of the authors is of Cherokee descent, we

are indebted to conversations with Cherokee people, and to Cherokee scholarship, for guiding our decisions in how to handle information about Cherokee cosmology and ceremony with care and respect.⁷

The Cherokee leaders' message to Griffiths also contextualizes unaker's use by British potters within the larger history of British land seizure and the appropriation of Cherokee resources in eighteenth-century North and South Carolina. It is likely that the "young Men" they referred to—who had come before Griffiths and given the Cherokee "only Promises" for their unaker—were a party led by Andrew Duché, a Quaker potter and trader who seems to have become aware of the mineral's significance around 1737. In scholarship on British ceramics, Duché's theft from the Cherokee and subsequent journey to England with samples of unaker is often given as the catalyst for a series of ceramic innovations involving unaker in the British Atlantic world: the first British patent for hard-paste porcelain, submitted in 1744 by Edward Heylyn and Thomas Frye; the first soft-paste porcelain made in the Americas by John Bartlam in South Carolina in the early 1760s; and Josiah Wedgwood's invention of encaustic enamel and jasper in 1769 and 1774.⁸ However, there is a longer history, often overlooked, dating back to the arrival of the British in the southeast of the present-day United States, of devastating illness, territory loss, and purposefully destructive trade conditions for the Cherokee Nation instituted by the British, that also chronicles catalysts for these innovations. Because unaker was a symbolic material, crucial in Cherokee diplomacy, it was visible to the British in their earliest entanglements with Cherokee peoples, and British potters consumed the mineral within the same colonizing framework within which the British Empire expropriated Cherokee land.

These potters' experiments produced a series of ceramic innovations that, in their materiality, aesthetics, and subject matter, all articulated British Whiteness—that is, a specifically British construction of White racial identity.⁹ By enfolding unaker within material processes of refining the goods of empire, English potters participated in the mercantilism central to British identity in the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Producing clay bodies praised for their whiteness, and for decoration featuring narratives of empire, these ceramics evidenced British claims to exemplary Whiteness. Writers within the British Empire often linked this perceived White superiority to the rapidity with which British colonialists converted Indigenous lands into mercantilist resources.¹¹

In the past decade, settler colonialism and racial identity have been thoughtfully explored as motive forces behind the twinned production of British luxury goods and British imperial hegemony in the eighteenth century. Colonial commodities that shaped British decorative arts, including

cotton and mahogany, have been analyzed for their human cost and role within the mercantilist economic system of the first British Empire.¹² More recently, scholarship has argued persuasively for the centrality of Chinese porcelain and aesthetics to the construction of racialized British identity in the eighteenth century and beyond.¹³ Unaker, a material with transnational significance sourced from the appropriative project of British colonialism, remains an underexplored part of these histories. The mineral's status as indigenous to another place and culture shaped both potters' fascination with and use of the clay. Ceramics made with it—and the attendant travel, diplomacy, explorations, and innovations embodied in each object—were executed and designed to produce British dominance in art, culture, commerce, and ultimately systems of racialization through the profound exploitation of their colonies. The historical entanglements of British ceramic innovations with the project of colonizing the American southeast can be read, we argue, by triangulating Cherokee deployments of unaker, British ceramics made with unaker, and primary sources produced by settlers.

Contemporary and historic scholars alike have often passed over unaker's kinship with its Cherokee family, prioritizing instead the analysis of its refinement and use in ceramic production. However, in contending with unaker's origins as a Cherokee material, whose relationship to its people should be sustained for generations to come, decorative arts historians and the broader public must consider unaker as inalienably Cherokee in itself. This relational way of viewing unaker disrupts the notion that British people "discovered" unaker as an inert and untouched mineral buried in the ground, making clear how it is neither epistemologically nor historically accurate to define the mineral solely as a raw and unacculturated resource in the colonial southeast prior to—or after—its being touched by White hands. Even when it is disappeared into a clay background on which colonial visions of Edenic paradise and heroic pasts are printed, unaker remains non-human kin to its Cherokee relations and the land. This concept of continual relationship, even when unaker has been removed beyond the physical bounds of Cherokee land, has the potential to trouble readings that seek to erase Indigeneity in more arenas than just materiality. A modern intervention led by Indigenous women in the history of Wedgwood's engagements with unaker demonstrates the crucial need to reassess unaker from contemporary Indigenous perspectives.

Consuming Whiteness in Cherokee Nation

The appropriation of unaker in the eighteenth century followed a sustained investigation of southeastern Indigenous ceramics and white materials by English colonists dating back to their first settlement in the Americas, Roanoke Colony. In June 1585 an expedition of English colonists that included the artist John White and the mathematician Thomas Hariot arrived at

Roanoke Island off the coast of present-day North Carolina. The expedition's financial backer, Sir Walter Raleigh, had received a charter from Queen Elizabeth I granting him the prerogative to "discover, search, find out, and view such remote heathen and barbarous Lands, Countries, and territories".¹⁴ Harriot and White were charged by Raleigh with representing the types of commodities—land, people, and goods—available in the Virginia colony. Many of their observations concerned the Secotan Nation, whose land they were occupying and who lived in the nearby village of Dasemunkepeuc.¹⁵ When some colonists returned to England, Harriot delivered the manuscript for *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* and White's watercolors were translated into engravings for the book by Theodor de Bry. Described by the literary historian Timothy Sweet as "a compendium of political, economic, and environmental information", this publication played a crucial role in encouraging English investors to continue their colonizing endeavors in the Americas.¹⁶

Harriot and White recorded numerous observations about Secotan ceramics technology in detailed descriptions and watercolors, versions of which were disseminated in the subsequent engravings made by de Bry. The Secotan Nation included skilled potters who made coiled and pit-fired earthenware ceramics.¹⁷ In his report, Thomas Harriot recorded that the Secotan "woemen know how to make earthen vessells with special Cunnige and that so large and fine, that our potters with lhye wheles can make noe better".¹⁸ His comparison with the capabilities of English potters suggests that the men encountered Secotan ceramics as potential technologies whose size and clay bodies were of particular interest. In the engraving accompanying this passage, de Bry also depicts a vessel: a large pot is center stage alongside a fabricated depiction of an Indigenous woman and man ([fig. 2](#)).¹⁹ In contrast, White's watercolor—de Bry's source material—depicts the pot isolated from its Secotan makers and users, a decision that reiterates Harriot's characterization of Algonquin ceramics as commodities rather than cultural objects ([fig. 3](#)). White's watercolor also signals the "special Cunnige" of Secotan potters in several ways: we see the pot's thin walls (especially remarkable given its size), its ability to withstand direct heat, and, given the stew seemingly boiling within, non-porous walls. A small and thick-walled pipkin reconstructed from the Jamestown archaeological site, which belongs to the same genre of Surrey-Hampshire Borderware recently found in a site associated with the Roanoke colonists, suggests how remarkable this Secotan pot must have seemed to the British, as well as how unrefined English ceramics may, in turn, have seemed to the Secotan ([fig. 4](#)).²⁰



Figure 2.

Theodor de Bry after John White, Their Seetheyng of their meate in earthen pottes, 1590, engraving on paper with watercolor, 14 x 21 cm. Collection of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (FVCC970.1 H28w). Digital image courtesy of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (public domain).



Figure 3.

John White, The Seething of their meate in Potts of earth, 1585, watercolor on paper, 15 x 19.5 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1906,0509.1.11.a). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 4.

Pipkin, 16th century, earthenware, diameter 9.5 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1896,0201.36). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Hariot also described the white materials he observed around Roanoke, an island whose name derived from the Algonquin word *rawrenoke*, meaning “white beads made from seashell” that were used as a form of currency. One passage describes a Secotan village on the banks of the Pamlico River, where Hariot observed a sacred statue adorned with white rawrenoke beads, whose “brest” was painted “white” with a material he does not identify.²¹ His description of this statue, which was possibly viewed as a living Being by its community, isolates the raw materials that adorn it from the kinship structures that linked the land to human and non-human beings in Secotan and other Indigenous communities who valued and traded sources of white pigment.²²

Hariot’s observations were made at a time when the ingredients and process of making porcelain was a captivating mystery in Europe and the British Isles, and philosophers looked to many natural sources of whiteness, particularly shells, as the potential secret to replicating the vitreous, white clay bodies of porcelain arriving from China.²³ In 1585, the year in which he acted upon Queen Elizabeth’s charter to explore and colonize territories unclaimed by Christian kingdoms in Roanoke, Sir Walter Raleigh is thought to

have acquired and had silver-gilt mounts made for three pieces of Wanli porcelain: a bowl, a dish, and an ewer (fig. 5).²⁴ The gilt mounts, both literally and figuratively, serve as containers themselves, perhaps most obviously with the ewer, with its elaborate mounts ornamented with wreaths of foliage, cherub heads, and Tudor rose pattern compartmentalizing the cobalt underglaze decoration. Such mounts serve, as Anna Grasskamp has argued, as “intercultural inbetweens, mediating the foreign artifact and the European context through a Europeanization of the foreign vessel’s silhouette and the haptic experience of porcelain”.²⁵ The Tudor rose patterns delineate the national bounds such mounts were meant to replicate. Against this backdrop of Chinese porcelain entering the English court, Harriot and White’s conveyance of Secotan ceramics and white materials to their investors suggests that interest in the commercial potentials of the Americas included the search for secrets to a more refined ceramic technology.



Figure 5.

Unknown, Ewer from Burghley House, Lincolnshire, Chinese porcelain, British mounts, circa 1573–1585, hard-paste porcelain, gilded silver, height 34.6 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (44.14.2). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1944 (public domain).

Over the 150 years between White and Hariot's *Report* and Duché's delivery of unaker into the hands of potential investors in 1744, the pattern established at Roanoke—of searching for resources to enrich England—would be repeated and intensified under the socioeconomic doctrine of mercantilism, which promotes the accumulation of national wealth through government regulations ensuring that exports exceed imports. Mercantilist policies dictated that colonial possessions and the British, Indigenous, and people of African descent who lived within them should serve as suppliers of raw materials to the mother country and as markets for exports. Manufacturing was forbidden in the colonies, and regulations were set to ensure that all commerce between the colony and the mother country was the latter's monopoly.²⁶ Unaker's value to the British lay in its potential to

serve as one such “raw material” for the burgeoning ceramics industry in England, particularly in Staffordshire. Colonists and traders in the Americas would seek out materials with commercial potential, whose extraction and use would be mediated through the cultural production and expertise of Indigenous peoples. However, as Timothy Silver has observed, these encounters were consistently based on a fundamental misunderstanding: “What Europeans perceived as commerce could take place only within the native context of friendship, gift giving, and reciprocity”.²⁷

British explorers and traders encroaching further inland in the seventeenth century encountered the large and sophisticated network of the Cherokee Nation—numbering over 30,000 in the 1600s—whose home encompassed 40,000 square miles of the Appalachian Mountains and foothills from present-day West Virginia to eastern Alabama. These lands were divided into three distinct regions—the Middle and Lower Towns to the east and the Overhill to the west, in the latter of which a distinct dialect was spoken—which were, nevertheless, connected by a shared Iroquoian language and a dense network of trails, rugged forested ridges, and valleys formed by rapidly flowing rivers and creeks. Cherokee settlements and towns varied in size from a dozen houses to several hundred people.²⁸

Even so, these communities were much more than the human kin they contained within their homes. Human and non-human kin relations were and continue to be essential to Cherokee engagements with the land.²⁹ In this landscape defined by relationships, the universe is composed of three distinct but connected worlds: the Upper World and the Under World, which are the domains of spirits, and this World, where humans live. Within this spiritual landscape, the ground is full of meaning. As Garrett remembers, “The elder taught me that every green plant ... reaches into the depths of Mother Earth for nutrient life, and every mineral or rock has energy too ... Mother Earth was alive, and that she gave us life”.³⁰ The Cherokee were especially known for their close association with Appalachian geology. *Mañterañ*, the Catawba name for the Cherokee, means “the people who come out of the ground”.³¹

Cherokee homelands encompass the densest distribution of unaker clay beds in North America, stretching from western North Carolina, through the Upcountry of South Carolina, and across Georgia.³² Unaker, which belongs to the kaolin group of clay minerals, is a hydrated aluminum silicate crystalline mineral formed over many millions of years by the hydrothermal decomposition of granite rocks (fig. 6). Although kaolin is one of the most common minerals in the world, unaker—unlike Chinese *Gāolǐngtǔ*—is a

distinctive combination of 90 percent halloysite and 10 percent kaolinite, which makes its whiteness, plasticity, and fine particle structure exceptional.

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Figure 6.

Elizabeth Phelps Meyer, Unaker in situ near the Cherokee settlement of Nikwasa, close up showing unaker with black mica, 2017, white clay and black mica. Digital image courtesy of Elizabeth Phelps Meyer (all rights reserved).

Two examples of Cherokee ceramics made with unaker during the Middle Qualla Phase (1450–1700) begin to show the material’s indivisibly aesthetic, spiritual, and relational values among the Cherokee. First, a now discolored ceremonial pipe for smoking tobacco dating to circa 1400–1600, was made from a clay body that included unaker (fig. 7).³⁴ Pipe bowls of this type were traditionally carved by men out of blocks of clay and then dried until they were leather-hard. The pipe’s form and nubbed surface repeats in miniature a Cherokee fire pot, a ceramic vessel used to carry and share embers for practical and ceremonial purposes. Similarly, this pipe bowl is thought to

have been shared in ceremonies that established or strengthened relationships between communities and individuals. Second, several small white pottery disks found at the Townson archaeological site in present-day Cherokee County, North Carolina, are fragments of coiled pots that feature a complicated stamped decorative technique made using a *gastoli'*, or a wooden paddle carved with a pattern (fig. 8).³⁵ In Cherokee communities, coiled vessels were typically made by women, who oversaw the gathering of clay, the construction of pots, and the firing. These pieces, however, were repurposed, chipped, ground, and burnished around the edges into smooth disks and used as dice in Cherokee games of chance known as *taludza gunti* (basket play).³⁶ Traditionally played by men against women, the basket game was and remains integrated into several major rituals in the Cherokee Nation's calendar. For example, it serves as the prelude to, or as the first episode of, the ceremony in the Midwinter Eagle ritual. Other versions of the game are more for entertainment than of ritual significance.³⁷ Such white ceramics are described in the writings of the British soldier Henry Timberlake, who recorded in 1761 that the Cherokee "have two sorts of clay, red and white, with both of which they make excellent vessels, some of which will stand the greatest heat".³⁸ His observations, however, leave out the way in which unaker objects engendered diplomatic and personal relationships within Cherokee culture.



Figure 7.

Carved clay pipe from the Peachtree site in Cherokee County, North Carolina, 1400-1600, unaker and other clays. Collection of UNC Archeology Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Digital image courtesy of UNC Archeology Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (all rights reserved).

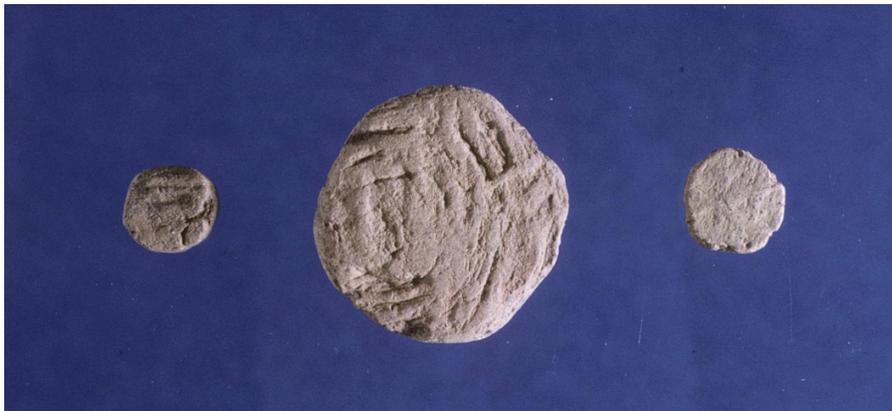


Figure 8.

Qualla complicated stamped pottery disks from the Townson site in Cherokee County, North Carolina, 1650-1800, earthenware, . Collection of UNC Archeology Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Digital image courtesy of UNC Archeology Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (all rights reserved).

British colonists would not understand the cultural significance of unaker until they became allies of the Cherokee during the Yamasee War, the bloody conflict fought from 1715 to 1717 by the Yamasee and allied Indigenous nations against British settlers of the Province of South Carolina.³⁹ This volatile situation threatened the continued expansion of British colonial interests and raised the possibility that French control of Indigenous territories would expand eastward. As a result, it became advantageous for British colonists to secure an alliance with the Cherokee Nation, who had initially sided with the opposing Yamasee-Creek forces. In 1716 the Cherokee allied with the Province of South Carolina and played a major role in the British victory of the Yamasee War. Trade and diplomatic interactions between the two new allies in turn increased significantly.⁴⁰

Cherokee access to, and relationships with, their lands were profoundly affected by the escalating encroachment of British settlers in the years immediately following their alliance, a shift that may be seen in vivid detail in William Hammerton's *Map of the Southeastern Part of North America, 1721* (fig. 9). Inscribed and drawn in pen and ink, this is thought to be the earliest surviving detailed English map of the southeastern part of North America.⁴¹ Its cartouche on the right, typical of British maps of colonial territories at the time, distills the ideological purpose of the map. On the right, a Poseidon-like figure holds a triton in one hand and an unfurling map in the other. His aquatic and cartographic accessories represent the British advancement of empire along waterways, its thalassocracy stretching from the Atlantic coastline into each river branching upward into Cherokee country and beyond. On the left side of the cartouche, an allegorical Native American figure leans against a stubby palmetto tree, his sketchily rendered crown of feathers echoing with the branches of the palm.⁴² Although reclining, he looks outward warily, with quivers slung over his back and bow in hand. The outline of his body defines the curvature of the ground as much as it defines him—a slippage that echoes the mutually constitutive relationality that defines the Cherokee worldview and cosmology.



Figure 9.

William Hammerton after John Barnwell, Map of the southeastern part of North America, 1721, pen and brown ink, with red, yellow, and blue-gray wash on paper, 78 × 132 cm. Collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Gift of the Acorn Foundation, Inc., Alexander O. Vietor, Yale BA 1936, President, in honor of Paul Mellon (Call Number: Quarto Room \ South Wall \ Hammerton). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art (public domain).

The map's inscriptions, however, are at odds with the Cherokee being *with* the land. The peripheries of Cherokee country appear as “very hilly” but “very good land”, well suited for “English factor[ies]”, documenting an anticipation of colonization. Further inscriptions list resources key to the success of mercantilism, such as lumber, ports, and fertile land. However, knowledge of everything on the continent evidently still eluded the British: near the center of the map, the heart of Cherokee land, the Appalachian Mountains, remains unknown. The map tells the viewer, “all these Mountainous Parts were never well discovered”. This region encompassed the Cherokee Middle Town of Iotla, present-day Macon County, which was the closest settlement to the vein of unaker that was to be mined by Duché and Griffiths. The map reaches north and west far beyond this opaque region, suggesting that the British hoped to alter this state of unknowing in their near future.

Unaker was an essential part of the Cherokee's visual and material languages of diplomacy, as it was for other southeastern Indigenous peoples, making it highly visible to British colonists once they had allied with the Cherokee. Cherokee peoples value the colors red and white as representing moieties of war and peace respectively, a worldview epitomized by the shared authority of the *asgayagusta* (head warrior) and the *uku* (the civil leader of a town).⁴³ The *asgayagusta* was historically “painted blood-red”, with clay slip, on their face and body, which, by the eighteenth century had

been replaced by vermilion gained through trade with the British.⁴⁴ The *uku* was “painted milk white” with a slurry made of unaker. Indeed, along with eagle and swan feathers, unaker was the main source of the color white for the Cherokee.⁴⁵ The Irish trader James Adair, who witnessed British-Cherokee diplomacy in the 1730s, observed that the Cherokee also made a slurry of unaker to paint the interior and exterior of important structures, “their supposed holiest, with white clay; for it is a sacred, peaceable place, and white is its emblem”.⁴⁶ The EBCI Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Russell Townsend, has said that mica mixed with the unaker made the buildings sparkle like diamonds in the sun.⁴⁷

Cherokee diplomacy also made unaker in its unaltered state more visible to the British. In the spring of 1730, the Scottish aristocrat Sir Alexander Cuming voyaged to South Carolina, traveled into Cherokee country, and established diplomatic relations as an unofficial representative of the British crown at the National Council of Cherokee at Nikwasi and Keowee. Cuming misinterpreted the ceremonies he witnessed as a submission to British authority, but his travels still provided him with close observation of Cherokee minerals and resources and resulted in the Cherokee Nation recognizing Great Britain as their sole trading partner.⁴⁸ On 25 March, he visited the clay pits near Estatoway in the Lower Cherokee settlement, and on 6 April 1730, as Cuming recounted in the third person, a Cherokee “King” visited him at Keowee and repeated a ceremonial exchange first carried out at Nikwasi: “Here again he received all kinds of Herbs and Roots that were kept as Secrets, [and] look’d after Mines and Minerals”.⁴⁹ Cumings’s language is ambiguous—did the Cherokee give him the “Herbs and Roots” but only allow him to look at the minerals? Did he comprehend the significance of these materials to British potters and to the mercantilist system at large, or did he simply want an eyewitness description taken back to British Charles Town (which was to be renamed Charleston in 1783)? Rife with misreadings as it was, Cumings’s visit highlights how the British experienced unaker through their relations with the Cherokee peoples.

In 1737, as British diplomacy and trade with the Cherokee deepened, the Philadelphia-born potter Andrew Duché moved from Charles Town to New Windsor, Georgia, a settlement by the border with South Carolina that was at the center of a lucrative trading route with the Cherokee. During his work as a trader, Duché recognized that unaker was very much like kaolin, one of two key ingredients of Chinese porcelain.⁵⁰ In 1738, seeking funds for porcelain manufacturing from the governing board of Georgia Colony, Duché alerted Georgia’s then commander General James Oglethorpe, who wrote to the trustees in Britain that “clay had been found here that a Potter has bak’d into China Ware”.⁵¹ Duché then traveled to England in 1744, bringing raw unaker and experimental samples of porcelain that he had fired using it.

Leaving out the theft of unaker and the broken promises described by the Cherokee leaders to Griffiths in 1767, Duché seems instead to have promulgated a narrative of “discovery” in the Americas. One of the founders of Georgia Colony, John Perceval, first Earl of Egmont, wrote with enthusiasm that Duché was “the first Man in Europe, Africa or America, that ever found the true material and manner of making porcelain or China ware”, ⁵² and the English Quaker William Cookworthy wrote that he had been visited by “the person who hath discovered the china-earth” in the North American colonies. ⁵³ Duché would never successfully manufacture porcelain on a commercial scale, but his exploitation of the Cherokee Nation’s tenuous control over their lands and shipment of unaker to England produced the first hard-paste porcelain made in the British Isles.

In South Carolina, advancements in manufacturing porcelain with unaker followed further British appropriation of Cherokee lands. Whereas James Adair had counted sixty-four Cherokee towns and villages as part of “a very numerous and potent nation” that still controlled the southeastern Appalachians in the 1730s, the Cherokee population had been reduced to 2,300 by 1761. ⁵⁴ The Anglo-Cherokee War of 1759–61, in which the British conducted a scorched earth campaign, concluded when a treaty was signed in December 1761 that forced the Cherokee to cede most of their territory in South Carolina. ⁵⁵ Around a year later, John Bartlam, a master potter from Staffordshire, decided to migrate to the colony to establish his own ceramic manufactory. ⁵⁶ Using unaker, which he called “Cherokee clay”, Bartlam became the first person to successfully manufacture soft-paste porcelain in the British colonies and one of the many colonial artisans to disrupt the mercantilist economic model.

Bartlam’s pottery was first located at Cainhoy, on the Wando River outside Charles Town, and later in Charles Town itself. After 1773, he relocated to Camden, South Carolina, an interior settlement closer to the best unaker and clay sources. News of his success reached his home country of Staffordshire where, in 1765, Josiah Wedgwood wrote to Sir William Meredith of a “new Pottworks in South Carolina where they had every material there equal if not superior to our own”, expressing concern that Bartlam would cut into their profitable colonial market. ⁵⁷

Several of Bartlam’s ten known transfer-printed soft-paste porcelain wares, including a teapot found in England in 2018, bear an original composition that combines chinoiserie decorative elements with direct references to South Carolina ([fig. 10](#)). This inclusion of local references within the placelessness of chinoiserie, by way of geographically specific elements from the colonies, is distinctive to Bartlam’s *oeuvre*. ⁵⁸ Against the warm white of the teapot, the cobalt scene depicts a chinoiserie seascape on the right and,

in the foreground, a bank of land with birds, thought to be sandhill cranes, and a sabal palmetto, both of which species were native to southeastern North America.⁵⁹ The inclusion of these specific non-human kin, printed on an unaker surface, reiterates their relationship to the land while also sublimating their Indigeneity within the larger lexicon of chinoiserie.



Figure 10.

John Bartlam, Teapot featuring the Palmetto motif, circa 1765-1769, soft-paste porcelain with underglaze blue decoration, 9 × 17.5 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Ronald S. Kane Bequest, Louis V. Bell, Harris Brisbane Dick, Fletcher, and Rogers Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and Richard L. Chilton and Anthony W. and Lulu C. Wang Gifts, 2018 (2018.156). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

With its combination of colonial land and fantastical maritime imagery, the transferware pattern shares some of the compositional logic of the cartouche William Hammerton drew on his *Map of the Southeastern Part of North America* in 1721. But there is a key difference: in contrast to the map, Indigenous human life on land is omitted. However, three small figures can be discerned within the scene, two on what appears to be a sampan and another on a proa. In producing this discontinuity between the flora and fauna of place and the seafaring technology used, Bartlam's ware produces a scene that occurs, paradoxically, both within the Americas and within an imagined and placeless "Orient". Unmediated by Indigenous presence and unmoored in fantasy, this colonial landscape printed onto a clay body made from appropriated Cherokee land belongs to the colonial viewer. The image's untroubled flora and fauna offer a land devoid of the brutal and costly history

of colonization, dispossession vanished into the pale background of the porcelain. Bartlam's iconography, and the teapot itself as a work of "British" decorative art, invents *naturalized* rather than Indigenous resources. It implies the fiction of discovering "materials" rather than the reality of consuming Indigenous kin, a narrative already promulgated by Duché and taken up by England's pottery industry. In these two objects, Indigenous bodies, clay or otherwise, become the substrate on which colonial fantasies are projected.

Refining Whiteness in the British Empire

Unaker entered eighteenth-century Great Britain within a web of transnational exchanges between the Cherokee and the British Empire that encompassed people, land, and goods. While British traders and soldiers journeyed into Cherokee lands, Cherokee delegations traveled to England to secure diplomatic and trade agreements in 1730 and 1762.⁶⁰ Cherokee trade with the British likewise sent Indigenous goods from southeastern North America to England. Refined objects made by Cherokee artisans constituted a small portion of this trade, including river cane baskets and pipes.⁶¹ The vast majority were "raw" materials like deerskins, which were shipped to Britain to be refined into manufactured goods.⁶² Learning of unaker and grasping its ceramic potential in the 1730s, potters in Staffordshire hoped that the mineral could become another "raw" material shipped across the Atlantic and refined into manufactured goods.

Since the earliest decades of English mercantilist policy, the consumption of Chinese porcelain had disrupted this system by leaking capital out of the British Empire as consumers spent money on foreign imports rather than domestic luxuries.⁶³ In the early 1740s, before "China clay" was discovered in England, mining and shipping unaker from the southeastern colonies offered a potential solution. Potters sifted, washed, and mixed unaker into new British ceramic inventions, demonstrating that this Indigenous "raw material" could be isolated from Indigenous culture and assimilated into clay bodies made and consumed by British subjects. In their decorations and the wording of their patents, they framed unaker within narratives of refinement and empire. More than simply offering white clay bodies, British ceramics made with unaker in the eighteenth century contributed to the production of distinctly British Whiteness engendered and legitimized by the process of empire building and the violence it does to the people and societies encountered.

The mercantile ambitions driving British potters' earliest experiments with unaker in England are clearly seen in the letters patent granted by George II in 1744 to the merchant and entrepreneur Edward Heylyn and artist Thomas

Frye for the domestic production of porcelain.⁶⁴ In eighteenth-century Great Britain, letters patent were public documents written by the prospective patent holders that signaled not only a right, monopoly, or title but also the monarch's approval.⁶⁵ As such, they typically detailed not only materials and technique but also arguments for aesthetic and economic significance, designed to curry favor with the crown and to spark the interest of investors. The Heylyn and Frye patent identifies its key material: "an earth, the produce of the Cherokee nation in America, called by the natives UNAKER", as well as its extraordinary qualities: "very fixed, strongly resisting fire and menstrua (dissolution) ... extremely white, tenacious, and glittering with mica".⁶⁶ Then, the patent announces

A new method of manufacturing a certain material, whereby a ware might be made of the same nature or kind, and equal to, if not exceeding in goodness and beauty, china or porcelain ware imported from abroad.⁶⁷

Describing a process of washing the unaker to remove "impurities", including the glittering mica that was of value to the Cherokee peoples, the patent makes an indivisible aesthetic, political, and economic argument. Just as it proposes to blend unaker with other materials to make British porcelain, it also promises to incorporate unaker into the system of British mercantilism.

Relocating British porcelain consumption into a mercantilist economy, as the patent declares, "would not only save large sums of money that were yearly paid to the Chinese and Saxons, but also employ large numbers of men, women, and children" to create an industry akin to "the woolen or iron manufactories" then growing rich from colonial demand.⁶⁸ By the mid-eighteenth century, English potters were sending approximately half of their wares to the colonies, but the market for porcelain had thus far eluded them.⁶⁹ With unaker, the men hoped to reduce dependence on Chinese goods and to consolidate capital within the British Empire.

Between 1744 and 1746, the patentees produced a group of thirty-six porcelain wares with unaker. Now known as the "A-Marked" group, their shared mark is thought to stand for the venture's financial backer, Alderman George Arnold, a wealthy dry goods merchant.⁷⁰ These works have been categorized by modern scholars into two groups: stock pattern, which feature chinoiserie enameling similar to that found on *blanc de chine* porcelain; and high style, many of which are painted by an unknown artist with figure subjects copied from prints by the French illustrator and designer Hubert-François Gravelot, who immigrated to London in 1732.⁷¹

One high style “A-Marked” porcelain object is a footed bowl following a form common among Chinese imports ([fig. 11](#)). Dark specks and pits appear across the porcelain, registering the remnants of other materials in the unaker. The bowl is enameled with two scenes from fables published by John Gay in 1727 and 1738 and dedicated to Prince William, the youngest son of George II. Like the patent that enabled the production of its clay body, the enameling remakes porcelain in the image of Britain’s empire. Both stories offer moral lessons about wealth. On one side is a scene from the fable of Cupid, Hymen, and Plutus, while the other is enameled with the Miser and Plutus, a fable which teaches that a miserly attitude toward gold, rather than gold itself, is what corrupts virtue. This message, that it is morally superior to expend capital than hoard it, was a fitting lesson for the rulers of a mercantilist empire. ⁷² Gay describes the Miser opening his lockbox in a room, and the engraved illustration, designed by William Kent, which accompanied the fable on its first publication depicts that scene in an architectural environment ([fig. 12](#)). ⁷³ On the bowl, though, the Miser leans over a chest opened at the mouth of a cave. Verdant plants surround its maw, while roots may be seen dangling from inside. This noticeable alteration from the constructed to the natural seems to gesture toward the wealth of the earth, an image and lesson that is infused with rococo aesthetics but perhaps also, on a bowl made from the grounds of empire, valorizes the work of Heylyn and Frye to realize unaker’s “full” potential.



Figure 11.

Unknown, Bowl painted with the fable of the Miser and Plutus, Cupid, Hymen and Plutus, circa 1745, soft-paste porcelain painted with enamels, 15.4 cm diameter. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (C.39-1970). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



FABLE VI.

The MISER and PLUTUS.

THE wind was high; the window shakes,
 With sudden start the Miser wakes,
 Along the silent room he stalks,
 Looks back and trembles as he walks,

Each

Figure 12.

William Kent (designer) and Paul Fourdrinier (engraver), *The Miser and Plutus*, in *John Gay, Fables* (London: Tonson and Watts, 1727), 1727, engraving. Digital image courtesy of Archive.org (public domain).

The collapse between European and Asiatic visual and material culture in objects like this bowl, as scholar Anne Anlin Cheng has argued, played a major role in how Whiteness as a subject position itself was, and continues to be, constituted. This process of taking—which, as Cheng argues is essential to the development of Whiteness—had less to do with an epidermal schema and more to do with the relationship between peoples.⁷⁴ In acts of appropriation, or “borrowing”, as Cheng states—such as in the “A-Marked” porcelain applying a “British” scene to a Chinese form and clay body made with Cherokee clay—Whiteness not only consumes the racialized Other, but also constitutes itself against that which it can and does take *and* against what it *makes* from this loot.⁷⁵ This process was encapsulated by one of the main organizing principles of Enlightenment thought: eclecticism—what

Peter Gay has described as “a school that denied being a school”.⁷⁶ Taking from scattered locations across the globe to produce hybrid forms, Whiteness in the early modern era began to be defined by this ability to take from where it pleased.

When Heylyn and Frye produced porcelain with unaker, the material existed within mercantilism as a type of colonial good described by Adam Smith as “the peculiar produce of America” with no comparable resource available within Great Britain.⁷⁷ Its status would shift by 1746, when the Quaker minister William Cookworthy discovered china clay in Cornwall. Cookworthy, however, was to be granted exclusive right to its use in 1768 by George III. A year earlier, in July 1767, Josiah Wedgwood had dispatched Thomas Griffiths to South Carolina in search of unaker, the timing suggesting that Wedgwood was seeking out the material for reasons beyond the practical limitation of Cookworthy’s patent. Indeed, he had begun searching for samples in England in 1766, at the same time as he became concerned about Bartlam’s “pottworks” in South Carolina. Unable to acquire samples of Cherokee clay and growing increasingly concerned, he decided to take action and hired Griffiths.

A teenager in Staffordshire during the years when unaker first arrived in England, Josiah Wedgwood had, by 1763, become known for his fine, richly glazed earthenware, a distinctively British creamware to rival porcelain. It was so popular that, with the consent of his most prominent satisfied customer, Queen Charlotte, the name “Queensware” was adopted and Wedgwood became the Queen’s potter. His decision to invest in the Cherokee mineral was a spectacular embrace of mercantilism befitting his royal patronage. Griffiths returned to Liverpool not only with five tons of unaker packed in casks on the wharfs of Charles Town but also a richly detailed journal—and extensive bill—for his employers. Describing the Cherokee peoples and places, the frigid cold of his winter travel into the Cherokee Nation, and his own fumbling attempts to navigate Cherokee diplomacy and mine the unaker, this journal offered its new owner, Josiah Wedgwood, a narrative and context for his novel “raw material”.⁷⁸

Although Wedgwood never produced porcelain, unaker was crucial to his technological and marketing innovations.⁷⁹ It appears in his glaze and clay trials under the number 23, “Cherokee clay” (fig. 13). These experiments seem to indicate a broad interest in seeing exactly what unaker could be capable of. Eschewing chinoiserie, he and his business partner in the enameling and sale of ornamental wares, the Liverpool merchant Thomas Bentley, used unaker to create novel neoclassical ceramics: encaustic enamel in 1769 and, if his own claims are to be believed, jasper in 1777.⁸⁰ Together, Wedgwood and Bentley sold neoclassical ceramics made from

materials extracted in the colonies to consumers whose burgeoning wealth derived from the British Empire and its growing trade in material and human capital, chief among them the partners' royal patrons.



Figure 13.

Josiah Wedgwood, Trial pieces, undated, one of 72 mixed body and glaze trial pieces, in a wooden tray, variable. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Wedgwood Collection (WE.7405:70-2014). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Wedgwood Collection (all rights reserved).

In a “great variety of experiments” from 1768 to 1769, Wedgwood perfected a decorating technique that could be applied to his black basalt clay body to mimic ancient vase painting.⁸¹ This “Set of *encaustic Colours*”, as Wedgwood and Bentley declared in promotional materials, was

invented, not only sufficient completely to imitate the Paintings upon the Etruscan Vases; but *to do much more*; to give to the Beauty of Design, the Advantages of Light and Shade in various Colours; and to render Paintings durable without the Defect of a varnished or glassy Surface.⁸²

For Heylyn and Frye, unaker's value had resided in its ability to produce glassy surfaces, but Wedgwood repurposed it in a matte decorative technique that offered an alternative to the reflective quality of enamel ornament. This rejection of unaker's potential to fabricate porcelain produced a distinctly British mode of luxury ceramics that no longer appropriated from China or Saxony.

Wedgwood would debut his first invention with unaker through the letters patent he had obtained for encaustic enamel from George III in November 1769.⁸³ After a brief description of the final results of his experiments, Wedgwood lists the ingredients. The first, "No. 1", "A white Earth from Ayoree, in North America" is the only one for which he identifies its source, emphasizing his key ingredient's novel origins. Wedgwood's geographic terminology is not accurate but was based on his examination of a map of North America by John Mitchell that he had purchased in 1767 to "search for the town where the Steatites grow".⁸⁴ The patent goes on to describe how each of the ten substances may be combined to make eight encaustic colors.
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Wedgwood's advertised combination of neoclassicism and Cherokee resources existed in a British intellectual milieu that prized eclecticism and regularly juxtaposed Indigenous peoples and classical cultures. As James Bunn has observed of the era, "Amazing hybrids emerged from the ludicrous indifference to racial and geographical facts", a tendency perhaps borne out in specimen collections amassed in the eighteenth century.⁸⁶ According to one guide's description, a single room at the British Museum in the late eighteenth century contained Etruscan pottery and "American Idols".⁸⁷ Many such pairings imagined the Indigenous peoples of North America as a less advanced civilization that was closer to the ancient Greeks and Romans than to modern Britons.⁸⁸ The American-born painter Benjamin West was one of many in Wedgwood and Bentley's circle who promoted this worldview. Famously, on first seeing the Apollo Belvedere in Rome in the summer of 1760, West exclaimed, "My God, how like it is to a young Mohawk warrior".⁸⁹ While West's remarks sensationalized his own eyewitness knowledge of Indigenous peoples brought into the center of empire, he was far from the first or only non-Indigenous person to apply such a comparison. In 1762, the same year that Cherokee diplomats journeyed to London, one British newspaper claimed, "those who they call warriors or hunters are like the *antient gentleman* of Europe, whose single possession were arms and chance".⁹⁰

In Wedgwood's marketing schemes, classicism and unaker came together in a dual strategy he described, with an emphatic underscore, as "age & scarcity". In his longest rumination on the mineral, written to Bentley in November 1777, while they prepared to market jasper, he wrote:

I have often thought of mentioning to you that it may not be a bad idea to give out, that our jaspers are made of the Cherokee clay which I sent an agent into that country on purpose to procure for me, & when the present parcel is out we have no hope of obtaining more, and it was with the utmost difficult the natives were prevail'd upon to part with what we now have, though recommended to them by their father Stuart, Intendant of Indian Affairs ... This idea will give limits, a boundary to the quantity which your customers will be ready to conceive may be made of these fine bass reliefs, which otherwise would be gems indeed. They want nothing but age & scarcity to make them worth any price you could ask for them. ⁹¹

The absence of any documented mention of unaker in Wedgwood advertising (beyond the high-profile enamels patent) has led Robin Reilly to conjecture that Bentley's good sense led him to quash Wedgwood's proposed strategy. ⁹² However, this argument misses the larger significance articulated in Wedgwood's letter, that for him classical precedent and Cherokee materials were mutually constitutive elements that could be made to drive desire for his wares.

The First Day's Vases, ceremonially thrown at the opening of Etruria factory in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, on 13 June 1769, debuted the use of unaker-based encaustic enamel, and their decoration seems to have been designed to stoke consumer interest by referring to mythological narratives of exotic materials. Etruria was a cutting-edge factory with specialized artisans and a highly regulated system of production, but for its opening day, as well as their chosen name "Etruria", Wedgwood and Bentley centered the classical world. ⁹³ Wedgwood threw six basalt vases in the *lebes gamikos* form while Bentley provided motive power for the wheel. At the decorating studio overseen by Bentley in Chelsea, the six vases were enameled by William Hopkins Craft. The four vases that survived their second firing bear commemorative inscriptions as well as scenes from Plate 129—*Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides*—from volume one of what would become Wedgwood and Bentley's frequent source for visual imagery, Sir William Hamilton's *Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman Antiquities*, published in 1766–7 with illustrations by Pierre François Hugues d'Hancarville (fig. 14). ⁹⁴ Titled *Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides*, Plate 129 was thought by

Hamilton and his contemporaries to depict figures in the fabled garden because it appears contiguous with a Hesperides scene on Hamilton's renowned Meidias Hydria. Modern scholars have established that the passage depicted in Plate 129 actually shows Athenian heroes, a confusion that may still be seen on one First Day's Vase recently sold at Christie's (fig. 15). Depicting two Athenian heroes from Plate 129—Demophon and Oineus armed with spears, and Chrysis seated on high ground and holding up her right arm as if beckoning to Oineus—this vase also features a historical label on the bottom identifying the scene as *Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides*, as was thought in Wedgwood's lifetime.



Figure 14.

Pierre François Hugues D'Hancarville, Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides, in D'Hancarville, *Antiquités Étrusques Grecques, et Romaines Tirées du Cabinet de M. Hamilton* (Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman Antiquities from the Cabinet of the Honble. Wm. Hamilton), Vol. I, plate 127 (Naples: François Morelli, 1766), 1766, hand coloured engraving. Digital image courtesy of Archive.org (public domain).



Figure 15.

Wedgwood & Bentley, First Day's Vase, 1769, black basalt and encaustic enamel, 25.4 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Christie's, London (all rights reserved).

Why, of all the colorful illustrations offered up in Hamilton's first volume, did Wedgwood and Bentley select what they thought to be images of the eleventh labor of Hercules for the decorative scheme of the First Day's Vases? In this labor, Hercules is commanded by Eurystheus to travel to a mountainous region at the far western edge of the earth and steal precious golden apples belonging to Zeus that had been given to Hera at her wedding and entrusted to the care of the Hesperides (the daughters of Atlas) in their garden. In the eighteenth century, scholars speculated that Hercules had sailed to the Canary Islands, but the West Indies were also compared to the Hesperides.⁹⁵ On obtaining the golden apples, Hercules must return them to Zeus.

This narrative of the desire for rare commodities at the far ends of the Western world and the extraordinary lengths to which men go to transport them from wondrous peripheries to the seat of power contains remarkable parallels with Wedgwood's acquisition of unaker. With the First Day's Vases, Wedgwood apparently sought to tell a story about scarcity with a scarce material. In his 1777 letter to Bentley about unaker, the imbrication of scarcity and desirability spilled over into a marketing insight. Wedgwood concluded with instructions about the showroom on Greek Street: "I think you should make as little display of quantity in the rooms, of these fine jaspers as possible"; the suggestion to spark customer demand recreated the conditions under which he had first expended significant resources on unaker.⁹⁶ Here, the real rarity of an Indigenous North American material generates a strategic illusion of the scarcity of British manufactured goods in general. The showroom is imagined as a rarefied atmosphere consciously concealing the partners' true scale of production.⁹⁷

Wedgwood's plan to appeal to British consumers by combining Cherokee culture and classical antiquity was, by this time, a tried-and-true form of publicity in London. In 1762 a delegation of three Cherokee leaders, Ostenaco, Cunne Shote, and Woyi, accompanied by Lieutenant Henry Timberlake, arrived in England to secure a treaty to end the Anglo-Cherokee War. With this unstable and new alliance at stake, the Cherokee delegation was politically important and garnered significant public attention. The men had an audience with George III and toured London, when crowds were said to have followed them in great numbers.⁹⁸ One of the great spectacles of their visit took place in the studio of the painter Francis Parsons in Queen Square, where Cunne Shote sat for a portrait (fig. 16).⁹⁹ A crowd gathered, and there was "a throng of ladies coming out of Mr. Parsons' Room from seeing the pictures of the Cherokee Chief". The events of the day inspired a bawdy song that was still sung in London in the 1770s, "A New Humorous Song, on the Cherokee Chiefs. Inscribed to the Ladies of Great Britain".¹⁰⁰



Figure 16.

Francis Parsons, Cunne Shote, Cherokee Chief, 1762, oil on canvas, 118.4 x 99.2 x 5.6 cm. Collection of the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK, Gift of the Thomas Gilcrease Foundation, 1955 (0176.1015). Digital image courtesy of Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK (all rights reserved).

In the portrait painted by Parsons during this so-called spectacle of female desire, also known in a mezzotint by James MacArdell, Cunne Shote stands in a hybrid space of exoticism and classicism. The Cherokee leader is presented in a half-length pose. His plucked scalp, tinted skin, hair decoration, and stretched and lacerated earlobe signal his distance from the customs of London, but his personal accoutrements signal a diplomatic joining of these distant worlds. At the center of the composition, Cunne Shote's bodily adornment bespeaks his fluency in the diplomatic exchanges of both nations: a silver and gold peace medal at his throat and a large plate gorget with the initials "G.R.III" around his neck reflect English design and manufacture, while a string of small black beads and a brooch are both possibly Indigenous American in origin. In his right hand he grips a deadly knife with a forceful gesture, while his left arm is covered with a cloak in the grand manner of

classical European portraiture, referencing the one-shouldered himation, a garment most associated with ancient philosophers. The red cloak creates a strong contrast with the white lace-trimmed shirt—a color combination with diplomatic significance for the Cherokee Nation. Parsons furthers the juxtaposition of elements from classical and Indigenous North American cultural lexicons by placing a tropical tree on the “American” side, while a tree that looks more typical of northern Europe appears on the “English” side of the canvas. ¹⁰¹

Stephanie Pratt has argued that this portrait “encod[es] a cultural clash”, but its eclectic logic, like that of the British Museum galleries and the First Day’s Vases, also reflects the consolidating power of British mercantilism. Cunne Shote’s clothes had been supplied in England but were sewn from cloth made of cotton and wool, raw goods that Britain relied on the colonies to provide. Like Cunne Shote’s likeness, these materials had been refined into a British good. This portrait, and the publicity surrounding it, transformed Cunne Shote from a “raw” good of the colonies into a “subject” of empire. This is the spectacle Wedgwood imagined for his showroom, a space where unaker would become a medium for disseminating the taste and mythologies of British neoclassicism and colonial legitimacy. Wedgwood’s most important client was certainly fascinated: Wedgwood would write in the same 1777 letter to Bentley that “his Majesty ... has repeatedly enquir’d what I have done with the Cherokee clay”. ¹⁰²

Jasper, Wedgwood’s second and final invention that incorporated unaker, would turn his catalog and showroom into a pantheon of the British Empire. Wedgwood strategically chose not to secure a patent for this new variety of stoneware to conceal his process from would-be competitors, a decision that continues to obscure unaker’s part in the recipe. Two letters Wedgwood sent to Bentley in 1776 identify a recipe for jasper that does not include unaker at all. ¹⁰³ Yet, in the 1777 letter quoted above, Wedgwood clearly indicates that the recipe did in fact contain unaker. Robin Reilly has proposed that Wedgwood perhaps used a small quantity, “added since February 1776 when he revealed the recipe to his partner: such a quantity, for example, as might be required in a thin slip coating applied to the face of tablets—a technique introduced only about a month or so before” Wedgwood wrote to Bentley about his marketing idea. ¹⁰⁴

In the following years, Wedgwood and Bentley’s jasper subjects would include dozens of portrait medallions including “Antients” and “Modern Subjects”. Among this latter group were notable men from and living in the colonies, including Benjamin West, Benjamin Franklin, William Penn, Lord Jeffery Amherst, and George Washington, the latter of whom is seen in an oval medallion modeled in 1777 and cast and fired between 1777 and 1780

(fig. 17). ¹⁰⁵ Encircled with a beaded gilt medal frame, the medallion features what was to become the classic blue jasper background, while cracks around Washington's shoulders reveal a formula and materials that could still have unpredictable outcomes. At this time the commander in chief of the Continental Army, who was known in the Haudenosaunee language as *Conotocaurius* (Town Destroyer), any sign of Washington's colonial identity has been replaced by classicizing elements based on a medal of Voltaire struck in Paris in 1777.



Figure 17.

Wedgwood & Bentley, George Washington Portrait Medallion, circa 1777-80, jasper ware, height 3.40 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1909,1201.147). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The whiteness of jasper portraiture created a common ground for collecting British “greats” across time, at the same period that an emerging sense of nationality in America ended the first phase of the British Empire. Indeed, Wedgwood hoped that jasper would be a successful export to the British

colonies in North America. Consumed by prominent American men including Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, jasper abstracted its subjects—and consumers—from the specificities of time and place through the commonality of neoclassical whiteness.¹⁰⁶ This in turn materialized the construction of racialized Whiteness reified in this period to justify both the kidnapping and enslavement of African peoples and governmental policies against Indigenous nations. “Whiteness”, as Richard Dyer writes, “has been enormously, often terrifyingly effective in unifying coalitions of disparate groups of people”.¹⁰⁷

Much has been made of the pastel colors of jasper, but its white relief-molded subjects represent Wedgwood’s most sustained and successful search for a purely white clay body. Wedgwood wrote to Bentley in 1773, on a day when jasper experiments were working, “I believe I shall make an excellent white body”, and he was to call jasper “my porcelain” in 1790—a phrase that conveys his ambitions for creating a ceramic body equal to, rather than imitative of, Chinese ceramics.¹⁰⁸ Wedgwood’s friend and fellow Lunar Society member Erasmus Darwin also focused on jasper’s whiteness in his ekphrastic poetry about portrait medallions, praising the potter’s processing of minerals that pass “Through finer sieves, and fall in white showers”.¹⁰⁹ Viewed in this context, jasper offers an inverse of porcelain: white clay is no longer the ground on which subjects are added but the subject matter itself. It sets off whiteness to full effect by surrounding it with color, a design that visualizes the construction of Whiteness through cultural appropriation in the eighteenth century. The focus on unaker’s precise role within the jasper recipe perhaps obscures the larger significance of unaker at Etruria. Wedgwood would remark, over a decade later in 1789, that clay from the Cherokee Nation “exceeds in whiteness all others I had ever met with”.¹¹⁰ It may be difficult to trace unaker in jasper, but the ideal of Whiteness it represented at Etruria remains.

Unaker’s fate within British mercantilism is especially striking when it is placed in dialogue with the circulation of other materials within North America whose connections to the construction of race are more established—most notably cotton. Anna Arabindan-Kesson’s recent work has positioned the visual and material cultures of cotton as a “speculative vision” of Blackness which asserts the value of cotton, fields, and Black people on their predicted future value, labor, and/or reproduction.¹¹¹ Unaker’s value, however, was tied to its scarcity, which produced a speculative vision of Indigeneity predicated on the promise of disappearance.¹¹² Within the storied emblems and figures represented, unaker is meant to disappear into Wedgwood’s obfuscation of jasper’s material origins.

Wedgwood could imagine that his elite customers would relish the rarity of Cherokee clay, but his potters desired Cherokee and, more broadly, Indigenous land itself. In 1783, when Great Britain and the nascent United States signed the Treaty of Paris, Staffordshire potteries faced a troubling reduction of their workforce as potters emigrated to the newly independent United States in search of economic opportunity. In response, Wedgwood delivered “An address to the workmen in the pottery, on the subject of entering into the service of foreign manufacturers”. The speech exhorted skilled potters not to leave England for better compensation and livelihoods in foreign countries. At its heart was Wedgwood’s vituperation of the South Carolina potter John Bartlam, waxing against the unmitigated horrors of life in America and Bartlam’s porcelain experiment in the colony: “I might here call upon you to reflect on the face of those, who could not content themselves with the good things of their own land, a land truly *flowing with milk and honey*”. ¹¹³ One wonders whether the potters observed the irony in this advice from Wedgwood, whose success was based on his embrace of materials and visual traditions from far beyond Albion. Indeed, Wedgwood had once humorously suggested to Bentley that, “if we must all be driven to America, you & I will do very well amongst the Cherokees”. ¹¹⁴ Had Wedgwood actually sought the Cherokee himself, he would have found a nation under siege. By 1783, in the fallout of the American Revolution and the rapid exit of their British allies, the Cherokee were embroiled in the Cherokee–American wars, as farmers encroached on their land more rapidly than ever before. Unaker had seemed like a contained and discrete material, but fantasies of Indigenous resources at the peripheries of empire had permeated Etruria and the entire settler-colonial endeavor in ways beyond Wedgwood’s control.

Conclusion

This history of Wedgwood and other potters’ engagements with unaker had been reduced to a curious chapter in the innovation of ceramic bodies in England until a recent project reactivated the Indigenous relationality between nations and ancestors in the history of unaker. In 1985 Betty Mangum, a Lumbee woman and a dedicated advocate for Indigenous American children, histories, and causes in North Carolina, who was then serving as director of the Indian Board of Education in that state, produced Wedgwood ceramics that addressed the historic British consumption of Indigenous culture, and Wedgwood’s own imbrication within it, for the first time in over 200 years. She convinced the Roanoke Anniversary Committee at Wedgwood Company and the president of Ivey’s Department Store in Charlotte that the anniversary of Roanoke Colony should be marked by the production of Wedgwood ceramics with unaker, and created a Queensware commemorative bowl and plate to be sold to raise funds for the state’s Year

of the Native American in 1986 (figs. 18 and 19).¹¹⁵ Reaching out to colleagues in the Qualla Boundary, the land held in federal trust for the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation, Mangum found the local knowledge and means to acquire some of the material for her vision. With shovel in hand, on a sunny day in April 1985, Edna Chekelelee, an EBCI elder and storyteller, led two schoolchildren, David Smoker and Terry Rattler, into the hills of the Snowbird Cherokee land to find what many before them had looked for—unaker (fig. 20). Soon afterward, Mangum mailed to the Wedgwood company the five pounds of clay gathered by Chekalelee, Smoker, and Rattler, the airmail receipt from which she has saved to this day.
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Figure 18.

A Heritage Cast in Cherokee Clay, *The Fayetteville Observer*, 26 January 1986, newspaper article. Collection of the North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina (Object File 86.66.1-2). Digital image courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina (all rights reserved).



Figure 19.

Wedgwood of Etruria & Barlaston, 400th Anniversary of America's Founding Bowl (composite image), 1985, queens ware ceramic, diameter 22.86 cm x height 10.2 cm. Collection of the North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina (H.2006.23.200). Digital image courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina / Photo: Eric Blevins (all rights reserved).



Figure 20.

Edna Chekelee Supervises the Digging of Clay, *The One Feather*, June 1985, newspaper article. Collection of the North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina (Object File 86.66.1-2). Digital image courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina (all rights reserved).

Mangum also chose the transferware imagery. Over lunch with three friends, two of whom were also Lumbee, she selected six images from John White's watercolors of Roanoke Colony that they felt represented the "daily life" and "respectable" family values of her ancestors. Five images by White and de Bry were chosen from the *Indian Village of Pomeiooc* series. The rendered circular stockade sits perfectly within the circular interior of the bowl. For the exterior, four vignettes were chosen by the women: *Their Seetheynge of Their Meate in Earthen Pottes*, *The Manner of Makinge Their Boates*, *Their Manner of fishynge in Virginia*, and *Their Sitting at Meate*. Printed in a rusty red slip, they stand out starkly against the bowl's ceramic body. An inscription under each base explains that these bowls curated by Mangum are "composed in part of Cherokee clay from western North Carolina", and that these works are "in celebration of our Indian heritage" (fig. 21). The ambiguity of this "our" written by Mangum can be read as a memorialization of the now gone Indigenous heritage and peoples of North Carolina, but, knowing that it was inscribed by her hand, this "our" gestures toward a commemoration of ancestors and kin. Mangum, ironically, had to sacrifice her own presence, acceding to the condition that Ivey's receive full credit in the marketing of these wares. ¹¹⁷



Figure 21.

Wedgwood of Etruria & Barlaston, 400th Anniversary of America's Founding Bowl (bottom), 1985, queens ware ceramic, diameter 22.86 cm x height 10.2 cm. Collection of the North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina (H.2006.23.200). Digital image courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina / Photo: Eric Blevins (all rights reserved).

Despite the efforts by British potters to sublimate unaker into a narrative of British hegemony, Mangum remembered. She found and remembered the stories of unaker and its displacement and transformations. This was done with scant resources: neither the state of North Carolina, nor Wedgwood, nor Ivey's, had much of a plan for the project or much funding set aside. As Mangum said, "You can do a lot of things with nothing". ¹¹⁸ She remembered the history of North Carolina beginning not with Roanoke but with her ancestors, who are inaccessible in nearly all sources save oral history and the peculiar drawings made by an English man 400 years earlier. In *Their Sitting at Meate*, one of the watercolors Mangum and her friends chose from the John White catalog, an Algonquian woman looks out from the scene, as if at the viewer, one of her hands reaching toward the food in front of her, and the other covering her chest. Perhaps she remembers the strange Englishman who visited and depicted her—and perhaps the four women gathered around the catalog locked eyes with her and her knowing smirk met theirs. They remembered, and the land likely never forgot, and how lovely it is for us now to glimpse what it means to remember kin in all their entanglements and pain—not as transformed strangers but instead as family wholly deserving of our care, time, and intellect.

Footnotes

- 1 This gathering included Kittagusta, Kenoteta of Hiwassee, Yanegwa, Yonagusta, Estitoe, and Attakullakulla, who had visited London in 1762 as a Cherokee diplomat to the court of George III. William L. Anderson, "Cherokee Clay, from Duché to Wedgwood: The Journal of Thomas Griffiths, 1767-1768", *North Carolina Historical Review* 63, no. 4 (October 1986): 477-510. For a more recent analysis of this encounter, see Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 84-87.
- 2 "Unaker" is an anglicization of *unega*???, meaning "white" in Cherokee. Cherokee Nation, "Word List", Cherokee Language / ??? ?????, <https://language.cherokee.org/word-list>; "400th Celebration Commission Indian Bowl, Plate", *The One Feather*, clipping from Object File, North Carolina Museum of History, 86.66.1-2.
- 3 English potters first learned the ingredients of Chinese porcelain in the 1730s. "A series of letters written by Jesuit missionary Père d'Entrecolles, who had surreptitiously observed porcelain works in China from 1710 to 1722, was published by the Jesuit historian Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, first in a French edition in 1735 and a year later in English. Of crucial importance, d'Entrecolles identified the two key ingredients of the Chinese true porcelain: 'Petuntse' and 'Kaulin'". Robert Hunter and Juliette Gerhardt, "An Eighteenth-Century American True-Porcelain Punch Bowl", *Ceramics in America*, 2016, 182.
- 4 W. L. Anderson, "Cherokee Clay", 503.
- 5 W. L. Anderson, "Cherokee Clay", 504. Perhaps the men's hesitation was due in part to their status as interlocutors; women were often the stewards of clay among the Cherokees. M. Anna Fariello, *Cherokee Pottery: From the Hands of Our Elders* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia, 2011), 7.
- 6 J. T. Garrett, EdD, and his son, Michael Garrett, PhD, are members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee from North Carolina. As students and teachers of Cherokee medicine, they draw on the ancient wisdom and teachings of their medicine elders on the Cherokee Reservation in the Great Smoky Mountains. J. T. Garrett, *The Cherokee Herbal: Native Plant Medicine from Four Directions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 30.
- 7 In addition to the Garretts' scholarship, see also the teachings recorded in James Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (Asheville, NC: Historical Images, 1992). We are also indebted to Phyllis Thompson (Cherokee) who shared her knowledge regarding the terminology used in this article and her Cherokee conceptions of respect in conversations with Joseph Mizhakii Zordan.
- 8 An excellent overview of Duché's, Heylyn and Frye's, and Bartlam's contributions may be found in W. Ross Ramsay, Judith A. Hansen, and E. Gael Ramsay, "An 'A-Marked' Porcelain Covered Bowl, Cherokee Clay, and Colonial America's Contribution to the English Porcelain Industry", *Ceramics in America*, 2004: 60-77. For Wedgwood's part, see Brian Dolan, *Wedgwood: The First Tycoon* (New York: Viking, 2004), 233-239; Christopher Benfey, *Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay: Reflections on Art, Family, and Survival* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 187-190; Eliza Meteyard, "Materials and Mechanical Aids", in *The Life of Josiah Wedgwood: From His Private Correspondence and Family Papers ... with an Introductory Sketch of the Art of Pottery in England* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1866), 2: 1-52; Robin Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), 89-90; Edmund de Waal, *The White Road: A Pilgrimage of Sorts* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2015), 269-277.
- 9 Throughout this article, terms such as "Britishness", "Indigeneity", "nationality", and "Whiteness" are used to describe specific social relationships between humans, as well as between humans and non-humans, unaker in particular. Such terms, and the phenomena they describe, were nascent in the eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic world. We believe that the incorporation—one could say assimilation—of unaker into the clay body of British ceramics played a role in the development of such terms and identities, through the British consumption of Indigenous land and non-human kin (known as "natural resources" to Europeans and Americans today) and colonization. Elaine Freedgood's work has influenced our understanding of the instability of these terms prior to the nineteenth century, including "Britishness" specifically. Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 45. For further reading, see Robert Colls and Phillip Dodd (ed.), *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1986). The terms "Indigeneity" and "Indigenous", in particular, have become increasingly important in contemporary parlance for describing the political and social experiences of displaced and colonized nations and the peoples comprising such nations, within occupied and formerly occupied territories. On the importance of capitalizing "Indigenous", see Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood, 2008), 15. On capitalizing "White", see Nell Irvin Painter, "Opinion: Why 'White' Should Be Capitalized, Too", *Washington Post*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/22/why-white-should-be-capitalized>.
- 10 James H. Bunn, "The Aesthetics of British Mercantilism", *New Literary History* 11, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 303-321.
- 11 See, for example, Benjamin Franklin, "Observations concerning the Increase of Mankind, 1751", in *July 1, 1750, through June 30, 1753*, Vol. 4 of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 234, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-04-02-0080>: "The Saxons only excepted, who with the English, make the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, *Scouring* our Planet, by clearing America of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light".
- 12 Jennifer Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Anna Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 20; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).
- 13 Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, Ning Din, and Lidy Jane Chu, *Qing Encounters: Artistic Exchanges between China and the West* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015).

- 14 "Charter to Sir Walter Raleigh: 1584", The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/16th_century/raleigh.asp.
- 15 Malinda Maynor Lowery, "We Have Always Been a Free People: Encountering Europeans", in *The Lumbee Indians: An American Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 16–39; Michael Leroy Oberg and David Moore, "Voyages to Carolina: Europeans in the Indians' Old World", in *New Voyages to Carolina: Reinterpreting North Carolina History*, ed. Larry E. Tise and Jeffrey J. Crow (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 41–59.
- 16 Timothy Sweet, "Filling the Field: The Roanoke Images of John White and Theodor de Bry", in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art*, edited by Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 25. For further recent analysis of these images, see Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Ed Simon, "The Construction of America, in the Eyes of the English", *JSTOR Daily*, 4 December 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-construction-of-america-in-the-eyes-of-the-english>.
- 17 Joseph M. Herbert and Mark A. Mathis, "An Appraisal and Re-evaluation of the Prehistoric Pottery Sequence of Southern Coastal North Carolina", in *Indian Pottery of the Carolinas*, edited by David G. Anderson (Columbia: Council of South Carolina Professional Archaeologists, 1996), 136–189.
- 18 Thomas Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (New York: J. Sabin & Sons, 1871), 54.
- 19 Sweet observes that de Bry's use of doubling figures was a means of showing off and of placing the more data-oriented depictions of White into an aesthetic convention and landscape that was more comprehensible to Europeans. Sweet, "Filling the Field", 26.
- 20 Phillip Evans, Eric Klingelhofer, and Nicholas Lucchetti, *An Archaeological Brief for Site X: A Summary of Investigations of Site 31BR246* (Durham, NC: First Colony Foundations, 2015), 2.
- 21 David Beers Quinn, *The Roanoke Voyages, 1584–1590* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 103.
- 22 Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report*, 63. We have chosen not to reproduce the name of the statue given our lack of familiarity with Secotan belief systems and not knowing if naming the mentioned possible Being would be appropriate in this context. This approach is informed by the perspective of one of the authors as an Anishinaabe, where the cultural understanding is that the names of certain spirits or non-human beings should not be said, repeated, or written outside certain contexts.
- 23 Glenn Adamson, "The American Arcanum: Porcelain and the Alchemical Tradition", *Ceramics in America*, 2007: 94–119.
- 24 This trio of Chinese porcelain objects is associated with the family of Elizabeth I's adviser William Cecil, Lord Burghley. The pieces may have been a bequest from the colonizer of Virginia, Sir Walter Raleigh, to Lord Burghley's son Robert. Christina H. Nelson and Oliver R. Impey, *The Cecil Family Collects: Four Centuries of Decorative Arts from Burghley House* (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 1998), 60.
- 25 Anna Grasskamp, "Frames of Appropriation: Foreign Artifacts on Display in Early Modern Europe and China", in *Qing Encounters: Artistic Exchanges between China and the West*, ed. Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu and Ning Ding (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015), 32. See also Stacey Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History", *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 9–39; Japan Society, *The Burghley Porcelains: An Exhibition from the Burghley House Collection and Based on the 1688 Inventory and 1690 Devonshire Schedule* (New York: Japan Society, 1986).
- 26 Eli F. Heckscher, *Mercantilism*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 2: 25–26.
- 27 Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside*, 86.
- 28 On Cherokee communities and culture in the eighteenth century, see Robin Beck, *Chiefdoms, Collapse, and Coalescence in the Early American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Tyler Boulware, *Deconstructing the Cherokee Nation: Town, Region, and Nation among Eighteenth-Century Cherokees* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011); David H. Corkran, *The Cherokee Frontier: Conflict and Survival, 1740–62* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Christopher B. Rodning, *Center Places and Cherokee Towns: Archaeological Perspectives on Native American Architecture and Landscape in the Southern Appalachians* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015); Daniel J. Tortora, *Carolina in Crisis: Cherokees, Colonists and Slaves in the American Southeast, 1756–1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Greg Urban, "The Social Organizations of the Southeast", in *North American Indian Anthropology: Essays on Society and Culture*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie and Alfonso Ortiz (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 172–193.
- 29 See also Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*. Theda Perdue has also observed that "The Cherokee did not separate spiritual and physical realms but regarded them as one". Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 27.
- 30 Garrett, *The Cherokee Herbal*, 30.
- 31 Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*, 16, 183.
- 32 While the Piedmont plateau contains blanket deposits, the highest-quality vein-like deposits run in a thin line along the fall line. H. Ries, W. S. Bayley, et al., *High-Grade Clays of the Eastern United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1922), 18–19.
- 33 "Mineralogical analysis of this clay from the most likely source mine (Iotla mine) in the Little Tennessee River catchment north of Franklin in Macon County, North Carolina, demonstrates that the clay comprises 90 percent halloysite and 10 percent kaolinite". William R. H. Ramsay, Anton Gabszewicz, and E. G. Ramsay, "The Chemistry of 'A'-Marked Porcelain and Its Relation to the Heylyn and Frye Patent of 1744", *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle* 18, pt. 2 (2003): 264–283.

- 34 Brett H. Riggs, Sequoyah Professor of Cherokee Studies, in discussion with the authors, September 2021. When the British trader John Lawson travelled through the Carolinas in 1700, he recorded that Cherokee were known for their white clay pipes: "Where they find a Vein of white Clay, fit for their purpose, make Tobacco-pipes, all which are often transported to other Indians, that perhaps have greater Plenty of Deer and other Game". John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina* (London, 1709), 208.
- 35 "Cherokee Domestic Crafts—Pottery", The People's Paths, 27 August 2007, <http://www.thepeoplespaths.net/Cherokee/WendellCochran/CCNotes-DomesticCrafts.htm>; Barbara Duncan, Brett H. Riggs, Christopher B. Rodning, and Mickel Yantz, *Cherokee Pottery: People of One Fire* (Tahlequah, OK: Cherokee Heritage Press, 2007), 9.
- 36 Bonita Freeman-Witthoft, "Formal Games in the Cherokee Ritual Cycle", *Expedition* 30, no. 2 (1988): 53-60.
- 37 Freeman-Witthoft, "Formal Games".
- 38 Duane H. King, ed., *The Memoirs of Lieutenant Henry Timberlake: The Story of a Soldier, Adventurer, and Emissary to the Cherokees, 1756-1765* (Chapel Hill, NC: Museum of the Cherokee Indian Press, 2007), 33.
- 39 In 1712 North Carolina and South Carolina became two different colonies.
- 40 William L. Ramsey, *The Yamasee War: A Study in Culture, Economy, and Conflict in the Colonial South* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 153.
- 41 The Hammerton map is the earlier of two known copies of a famous, now lost, map drawn by Colonel John Barnwell, an "Indian fighter and frontier settler" known for his involvement in the Tuscarora War of 1711. For a detailed reading of the Hammerton map, see Alejandra Dubcovsky, "A Colonial Snapshot: Reading William Hammerton's 'Map of the Southeastern Part of North America, 1721'", *Common Place: The Journal of Early American Life*, July 2012, <https://commonplace.online/article/a-colonial-snapshot>.
- 42 On the eighteenth-century history of Native American allegorical figures in British visual culture, see Stephanie Pratt, *American Indians in British Art, 1700-1840* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 12-30.
- 43 Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131-132.
- 44 Lawson remarks: "when they go to War, ... they buy Vermillion of the Indian Traders, wherewith they paint their Faces all over red, and commonly make a Circle of Black about one Eye, and another Circle of White about the other, whilst others bedawb their Faces with Tobacco-Pipe Clay". Lawson, *A New Voyage*, 192.
- 45 Cited in Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness*, 172 nn. 34-35. See also James Adair, *Adair's History of the American Indians*, edited by Samuel Cole Williams (New York: Promontory Press, 1973), 167.
- 46 Adair, *History*, 100.
- 47 Gordon Mercer and Marcia Mercer, "Wedgwood Pottery: Early Cherokee Unaker Mining in Franklin, NC", *Global Digital Post*, 27 April 2012, <http://www.releasewire.com/press-releases/wedgwood-pottery-early-chokeee-unaker-mining-in-franklin-nc-139324.htm>. Archaeological excavations documented in the work of Christopher Rodning have shown the traces of kaolin encircling the foundations of Cherokee townhouses and paving ceremonial streets at Nikwasi. Rodning, *Center Places and Cherokee Towns*, 21. Adair described that "most of the Indians have clean, neat, dwelling houses, white-washed within and without, either with decayed oyster-shells, coarse-chalk, or white marly clay; one or other of which, each of our Indian nations abounds with, be they ever so far distant from the sea-shore; the Indians, as well as the traders, usually decorative their summer-houses with this favourite white wash". Adair, *History*, 413.
- 48 Ian Chambers, "The Empire Visits the Metropolis: The Red Atlantic, Spatial Habitus and the Cherokee", *Atlantic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015), 75.
- 49 Alexander Cuming, "Account of the Cherokee Indians and of Sir Alexander Cumings's Journey amongst Them", *Historical Register* 16, no. 61 (1731), 12.
- 50 Hunter and Gerhardt, "An Eighteenth-Century American True-Porcelain Punch Bowl".
- 51 Hunter and Gerhardt, "An Eighteenth-Century American True-Porcelain Punch Bowl", 183.
- 52 Bradford L. Rauschenberg, "Andrew Duche: A Potter 'a Little Too Much Addicted to Politicks'", *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* 17, no. 1 (May 1991), 47. Clearly this statement was factually incorrect since Meissen was making porcelain in 1710.
- 53 Hunter and Gerhardt, "An Eighteenth-Century American True-Porcelain Punch Bowl", 185.
- 54 Stan Hoig, *The Cherokees and Their Chiefs in the Wake of Empire* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 44.
- 55 Hoig, *The Cherokees*.
- 56 Robert Hunter, "John Bartlam: America's First Porcelain Manufacturer", *Ceramics in America*, 2007: 193-195. The journal *Ceramics in America*, edited by Robert Hunter, has produced the largest body of research on Bartlam's life and work since 2007: Lisa R. Hudgins, "John Bartlam's Porcelain at Cain Hoy: A Closer Look", *Ceramics in America*, 2007: 203-208; J. Victor Owen, Joe Petrus, and Xiang Yang, "Bonnin and Morris Revisited: The Geochemistry of a True-Porcelain Punch Bowl Excavated in Philadelphia", *Ceramics in America*, 2016: 200-219; J. Victor Owen, John D. Greenough, and Nick Panes, "Statistical Evaluation of Analytical Data for Eighteenth-Century American and British Sulphurous Phosphatic Porcelains", *Ceramics in America*, 2016: 162-178; Stanley South, "John Bartlam's Porcelain at Cain Hoy, 1765-1770", *Ceramics in America*, 2007: 196-202.
- 57 Quoted in W. L. Anderson, "Cherokee Clay", 485.
- 58 Hudgins, "John Bartlam's Porcelain", 206.

- 59 Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters: American Indians in Britain, 1500-1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 139-150, 165-174.
- 60 Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters: American Indians in Britain, 1500-1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 139-150, 165-174.
- 61 Susan C. Power, *Art of the Cherokee: Prehistory to the Present* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 50.
- 62 Tortora, *Carolina in Crisis*, 173-180.
- 63 Heckscher, *Mercantilism*, 2: 25-26; Bunn, "The Aesthetics of British Mercantilism", 313.
- 64 The importance of the 1744 Bow patent diminished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but recent scholarship has argued "that far from being unworkable, experimental, or hesitant, the 1744 patent of Heylyn and Frye is one of the major documents in English ceramic history". William R. H. Ramsay, Frank A. Davenport, and Elizabeth G. Ramsay, "The 1744 Ceramic Patent of Heylyn and Frye: 'Unworkable Unaker Formula' or Landmark Document in the History of English Ceramics?", *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* 118, no. 1 (2006), 12; see also William R. H. Ramsay, Anton Gabszewicz, and E. G. Ramsay, "'Unaker' or Cherokee Clay and Its Relationship to the 'Bow' Porcelain Manufactory", *English Ceramic Circle Transactions* 17, pt. 3 (2001): 473-499.
- 65 Sean Bottomley, "The British Patent Series during the Industrial Revolution, 1700-1851", University of Cambridge, http://www.lem.sssup.it/WPLem/documents/bottomley_lemseminar.pdf.
- 66 Ramsay, Davenport, and Ramsay, "The 1744 Ceramic Patent of Heylyn and Frye", 14.
- 67 Ramsay, Davenport, and Ramsay, "The 1744 Ceramic Patent of Heylyn and Frye", 14.
- 68 Ramsay, Davenport, and Ramsay, "The 1744 Ceramic Patent of Heylyn and Frye", 13.
- 69 Dolan, *Wedgwood*, 75-76.
- 70 Ramsay, Hansen, and Ramsay, "An 'A-Marked' Porcelain Covered Bowl", 70.
- 71 Ramsay, Hansen, and Ramsay, "An 'A-Marked' Porcelain Covered Bowl", 70.
- 72 Kevin J. Gardner, "John Gay, Court Patronage, and the Fables", *Reinardus* 27, no. 1 (2015): 98-111.
- 73 John Gay, *Fables* (London: J. Tonson & J. Watts, 1728), 21-22.
- 74 Anne Anlin Cheng, "Conversation between Danielle Wu and Anne Anlin Cheng", Tiger Strikes Asteroid, New York, premiered on 22 June 2019, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DWAcSldsmA_35:35-37:00. This idea is also echoed by Elaine Freedgood as "'normative identity' is often constructed on the run, after the need for it is realized because of the presence of something alien or something that needs to be *made alien*". Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 45.
- 75 Cheng, "Conversation between Daniella Wu and Anne Anlin Cheng".
- 76 Quoted in Bunn, "The Aesthetics of British Mercantilism", 311.
- 77 Smith further divides the "peculiar produce of America into three categories: "some for conveniency and use, some for pleasure, and some for ornament". Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1778), 2: 192.
- 78 W. L. Anderson, "Cherokee Clay", 499-509.
- 79 He conducted experiments with porcelain in 1773, recorded a Chinese recipe for porcelain in his commonplace book in 1775, but never manufactured porcelain. Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 71.
- 80 Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 89-90, 99. Research conducted by George L. Miller and Robert Hunter has "not recorded a single vessel produced by Wedgwood painted in a chinoiserie style with a blue tinted glaze". George L. Miller and Robert Hunter, "How Creamware Got the Blues: The Origins of China Glaze and Pearlware", *Ceramics in America*, 2001, 150.
- 81 Thomas Bentley and Josiah Wedgwood, *Wedgwood's Catalogue of Cameos, Intaglios, Medals, Bas-Reliefs, Busts, and Small Statues* (London: Cadel, 1773), 57.
- 82 Bentley and Wedgwood, *Catalogue*, 58.
- 83 Eliza Meteyard, *The Life of Josiah Wedgwood from His Private Correspondence and Family Papers in the Possession of Joseph Mayer* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1866), 80.
- 84 W. L. Anderson, "Cherokee Clay", 488-9.
- 85 Unaker is listed in every colour except two blacks and a yellow. Meteyard, *Life*, 80.
- 86 Bunn, "The Aesthetics of British Mercantilism", 312.
- 87 This gallery presented Thomas Hollis's collection, which he gave to the British Museum in 1756/7. It contained "Roman gods, heroes, etc and some more Etruscan vessels. Some large earthen jars, which the antients use for the filtration of liquids. American Idols. They are made of earth, and either burnt or hardened in the sun". *A Companion to All the Principal Places of Curiosity and Entertainment in and about London and Westminster* (London: J. Drew, 1800), 175-176.
- 88 Simon, "The Construction of America".
- 89 Quoted in Pratt, *American Indians in British Art*, 23.

- 90 Tobias George Smollett, "An Account of the CHEROKEE Nation", *British Magazine, or, Monthly Repository for Gentlemen & Ladies* 3 (July 1762): 377-378.
- 91 Josiah Wedgwood to Thomas Bentley, 15 December 1777, V&A Wedgwood Collection, E25-18802. This letter has been the subject of much debate with regards to the use of unaker within jasper. See Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 89-90.
- 92 Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 89-90.
- 93 Neil McKendrick, "Josiah Wedgwood and Factory Discipline", *Historical Journal* 4, no. 1 (1961): 30-55. See also Nancy Hirschland Ramage, "The English Etruria: Wedgwood and the Etruscans", *Etruscan Studies* 14 (2011): 187-199.
- 94 William Hamilton, *Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman Antiquities from the Cabinet of the Honourable William Hamilton* (London, 1766), 1: Plates 127-129.
- 95 John Oldmixon, *The British Empire in America, Containing the History of the Discovery, Settlement, Progress and Present State of All the British Colonies, on the Continent and Islands of America* (London: John Nicholson, 1708), 92.
- 96 Oldmixon, *The British Empire in America*, 92.
- 97 On Wedgwood's showroom practices in the 1770s, see Malcolm Baker, "A Rage for Exhibitions: The Display and Viewing of Wedgwood's Frog Service", in *The Genius of Wedgwood*, edited by Hilary Young (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1995), 118-127.
- 98 Adair, *History*, 2-15.
- 99 The men knew each other through James Brindley, who sat for a portrait by Parson and who was a member of the Lunar Society. Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: Five Friends whose Curiosity Changed the World* (London: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2003), 262.
- 100 Pratt, *American Indians in British Art*, 54; Adair, *History*, 76.
- 101 Pratt, *American Indians in British Art*, 53.
- 102 Josiah Wedgwood to Thomas Bentley, 15 December 1777, V&A Wedgwood Collection, E25-18802.
- 103 Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 69-71.
- 104 It is thought that Wedgwood had run out of unaker by the early 1780s and was using a domestic substitute, but a note by Francis Wedgwood mentions that "two arfuls" of Cherokee clay remained in the round house some forty-eight years later, hinting at Wedgwood's struggle to control this material. Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 89-90.
- 105 Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 327.
- 106 Susan Gray Detweiler and Christine Meadows, *George Washington's Chinaware* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 54, 57; Susan R. Stein, *The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello* (New York: Abrams, 1993), 86.
- 107 Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), 19.
- 108 Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 71.
- 109 Reilly, *Wedgwood Jasper*, 75.
- 110 *Letters of Josiah Wedgwood*, edited by Katherine Euphemia Farrer (London: E. J. Morten, 1973), 3: 104.
- 111 Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies, White Gold*, 20.
- 112 The ideology of Indigenous disappearance would produce the discipline of salvage anthropology two hundred years later. Margaret Bruchac, *Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018), xii.
- 113 Josiah Wedgwood, *An Address to the Workmen in the Pottery, on the Subject of Entering into the Service of Foreign Manufacturers. By Josiah Wedgwood, F.R.S. Potter to Her Majesty* (Newcastle, Staffordshire: J. Smith, 1883), 9. See also Onni Gust, *Unhomely Empire: Whiteness and Belonging, c.1760-1830* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 95.
- 114 *Letters of Josiah Wedgwood*, 3: 146.
- 115 An article in Mangum's hometown newspaper is the only public record of her involvement in the project. Sally Smith, "A Heritage Cast in Cherokee Clay", *Fayetteville Observer*, 26 January 1986, 1.
- 116 Betty Mangum, oral history interview with R. Ruthie Dibble, Joseph Mizhakii Zordan, and Michael Ausbon, 15 December 2021.
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New Femininity? Josiah Wedgwood's Portrait Medallions of Sarah Siddons “Femmes Célèbres”

Patricia F. Ferguson

Abstract

In 1788, the potter Josiah Wedgwood introduced a radical new sub-section under the banner of his popular *Heads of Illustrious Moderns, from Chaucer to the Present Time* focused on historical and contemporary women, rather than men, and entitled “Femmes Célèbres”. In its creation, Wedgwood celebrated the lives and achievements of twenty-eight elite, white women of immense privilege and beauty, but also objectified and commodified them for his financial gain. Within this group of aristocrats, mistresses, poets, queens, and educationalists were several female worthies, inspirational women, who possessed qualities he clearly admired—independence, intelligence, and industry. The outsider was the actress and first modern female celebrity, Sarah Siddons, whose struggles to gain acceptance by overcoming gendered obstacles paralleled those of elite, educated, literary women in their desire for recognition. Wedgwood’s gallery of female heads may have served as a visual conduct book or manual, presenting a modern vision of female agency, a new femininity that circumvented and navigated conventions of politeness and the status quo. When accompanied by enlightened conversations, even gossip, among women around the tea-table or while shopping with friends, the life choices of the sitters depicted in these portrait medallions served to educate and promote what it meant to be a woman in the late eighteenth century. This article redefines the reception of this group of ornamental portrait medallions in Wedgwood’s new stoneware bodies as decorative art objects inspired by fine art representations and made accessible through mass production.

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Introduction

The stage actress Sarah Siddons (née Kemble, 1755–1831) was the subject of almost four hundred portraits produced in her lifetime, from paintings by aspiring society artists to anonymous satirical broadsides, and from plaster busts to printed fabric (figs. 1 and 2).¹ A performer critically aware of her self-image, she built her audience on a reputation that brought an unprecedented dignity and decorum to what was then considered a morally suspect profession. Such was her fame that the potter Josiah Wedgwood produced two different bas-relief ceramic portrait medallions of the actress, one in her public role as the “Tragedy Queen” and another capturing her private persona as a lady of fashion. One of these was included among Wedgwood’s novel assemblage of seven portrait medallions of contemporary British women, listed under *Illustrious Moderns* in his 1787 ornamental catalogue as a new category, “Ladies”, later expanded in the French-language edition in 1788 as “Femmes Célèbres”, with an additional five female portraits. This article examines these two portrait medallions of “Mrs. Siddons”, available in black basaltes and jasper ware (figs. 3 and 4). It will investigate the sources for their designs and possible authorship, while situating the actress, often identified as being at the forefront of modern celebrity culture, alongside more privileged sitters that included royalty, aristocrats, poets, and educationalists, in order to understand how Wedgwood’s new category assisted in amplifying the increasingly public roles and contributions to British society of women in the late eighteenth century. This narrowly focused methodology, which considers Wedgwood’s portrait medallions both collectively and individually, redefines their intention and reception, building on the traditional histories associated with taste, style, and patronage.²



Figure 1.
William Hamilton, Mrs. Siddons as Euphrasia in *The Grecian Daughter*, 1784, oil on canvas, 270 × 155 cm.
Collection of Stratford-upon-Avon Town Hall (TH14).
Digital image courtesy of Stratford-upon-Avon Town Hall (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

After John Keyse Sherwin, Mrs. Siddons in *The Grecian Daughter*, 15 December 1782, etching and engraving with stipple, 25 × 21.1 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1931,0509.169). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 3.

Attributed to John Flaxman Jnr, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait Medallion of Sarah Siddons as Euphrosia, circa 1795, stoneware (black basalt) impressed legend 'Mrs. Siddons' and verso 'Wedgwood' , 15.2 cm. Collection of the Art Fund, Incirca at the Birmingham Museum of Art, The Buten Wedgwood Collection, gift through the Wedgwood Society of New York (AFI.796.2012). Digital image courtesy of Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama (all rights reserved).



Figure 4.

Attributed to John Flaxman Jnr, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait Medallion of Sarah Siddons as Euphrasia, circa 1785-1800, stoneware (jasper ware), white on solid blue-coloured ground with brass frame, verso impressed 'Wedgwood', 13.33 cm. Collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC., Craven Collection (C206, Art 241064). Digital image courtesy of Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The Materiality of Celebrity

Over seventeen hundred portrait cameos and medallions were published by Wedgwood and his business partner, Thomas Bentley (1731-1780), in the final eighteenth-century edition of *Catalogue of cameos, intaglios, medals, bas-reliefs, busts and small statues, ... The whole formed in different kinds of Porcelain and Terra Cotta, chiefly after the antique, and the finest models of modern artists* (1788).³ The majority of these portraits were after antique gems, with subjects from classical mythology and Greco-Roman personalities. Portraits of celebrated modern personalities represented only a

small minority: 268 sitters were recorded by 1788. The earliest of these were made in monochrome black stoneware, known as Basaltes, with a lustrous bronze-like finish to imitate medals, or a “white waxen biscuit”, painted in enamels with a contrasting background to resemble hardstone cameos.⁴ From 1776, the latter was replaced with a revolutionary new material, jasper ware, also a stoneware, tinted with different coloured oxides to produce blue, green, yellow, grey, and lilac.⁵ Bas-relief heads in white stoneware were applied to a coloured medallion and fired, creating crisply edged, two-colour portraits. A final improvement, from 23 November 1777, involved washing or dipping the white medallion backgrounds in a fine slip coloured with cobalt or another pigment. As cobalt was expensive this reduced production costs substantially.

The design process for these mass-produced portrait medallions began with Wedgwood identifying a sitter and having a modeller submit a drawing taken from life, a painted miniature, an engraving, or another source. The drawing was used to prepare a wax model, either by an independent modeller or one employed at the manufactory, such as William Hackwood (circa 1757–1839). The wax model was used to make a plaster mould in intaglio from which a bas-relief or cameo master or block mould was made and used to produce working intaglio moulds for the final products. Independent wax modellers, such as John Charles Lochée (circa 1751–1791), often retained the wax original to sell to clients, sending only a plaster intaglio mould. The finished ceramic portrait medallions or “heads” were made in various sizes, from less than one inch to about six inches. They were usually single sided, with plain backs for flat storage in drawers, or with self-frames designed for suspending on a wall; they were also framed in traditional metal or wooden frames, and smaller portrait medallions could be mounted in jewellery. The manufactory encouraged private commissions, priced at a dozen or more examples, which the patron could give away to a small circle of friends and family. Many of the modern women depicted in Wedgwood portrait medallions were private orders.

Illustrious Moderns: The Patriarchy

Wedgwood and Bentley’s medallions capitalised on the fashion among British aristocrats and educated elites for forming large cabinets of antique engraved gemstones, cameos, and intaglios, as well as Renaissance and later cast or struck bronze portrait medals inspired by ancient Roman coinage.⁶ In the eighteenth century, collecting engraved and sculpted “heads” or busts in profile to commemorate or celebrate human achievements, as an *exemplum virtutis* (persons who serve as models of virtue and worthy of imitation), was a male-dominated activity, although there were rare exceptions.⁷ This masculine sociability centred on cabinets

housed in libraries that created sites where ideas and opinions were exchanged about the authenticity of the likeness, the quality of the carving or cast, and the achievements of the sitter, and, more broadly, on gendered norms of masculinity. Historic cameos and medals were an educational tool of the wealthy, learned, and powerful, and almost exclusively male.

Wedgwood's modern imitations and "instant" collections offered a similar experience to aspirational members of lower ranks of society. One of the sections of the catalogue of which Wedgwood was most proud was *Class X, Heads of Illustrious Moderns, from Chaucer to the present Time*, a miscellany of portraits copied from a variety of sources beyond the glyptic and medallic arts, such as ivory, engravings, and wax portraiture. While some other classes, such as "Kings of England" after Dassier and "Heads of the Popes", were sold as complete sets of uniform size and material as "Cabinets of Heads" for display in narrow drawers in wooden cabinets (to "make a pretty drawer in the Cabinet"), the *Illustrious Moderns* were not considered a set but more of a gallery, and were sold individually.⁸ Wedgwood's chief competitor in the field of affordable, cameo-style contemporary portraiture, from whom he purchased casts or intaglio moulds for ceramic production, was the Scotsman James Tassie (1735–1799). A wax modeller and gem engraver, Tassie specialised in portraits produced in a vitreous paste he called "enamel"—a very fusible glass, of essentially lead potash—and sulphurs, mixed with red ochre. Tassie published his own catalogues in 1775 and 1791, which also included Worthies of the modern period; however, no non-royal, contemporary women were listed in the earlier volume.

Wedgwood's selection for his *Illustrious Moderns* was clearly based on military achievements, literary or scientific advances, and the political importance of the sitters, ennobled in clay for posterity; the vast majority were depictions of men. Women were all but absent from the forty-six *Illustrious Moderns* listed in the first catalogue, published in 1773: the one exception was "Mrs. Dacier", a French classical scholar renowned for her translation of Homer's *Iliad* (1711) and *Odyssey* (1716), as well as the poems of Sappho (1681).⁹ Anne Dacier (née Lefèvre, 1647–1720) was taught Ancient Greek and Latin—an educational privilege generally restricted to men—by her father, a professor of classics, and achieved scholarly attention before her marriage in 1684; Dacier was an exemplar of the empowerment of the educated woman. Yet, in *Biographium Faemineum. The female worthies: or, memoirs of the most illustrious ladies of all ages and nations* (1766), it is her virtuous modesty that was praised above her intellect.¹⁰

A New Femininity

Wedgwood's decision to include Dacier, a celebrated translator of ancient texts, among his *Illustrious Moderns* pointed to the growing recognition of women as public figures, no longer bound to the domestic sphere alone. The position of educated and elite women in society was evolving in the eighteenth century. The economy had improved the quality of life for women of the gentry class, who had more leisure time for shopping, writing, and reading. Improvements in postal services—two to three letters could be exchanged per day—encouraged literary skills, and the publication of novels catered to the market for middle-class women readers. Biographies of historical and public personalities and their private lives thrived through the rapid distribution of books, broadsides, and pamphlets—for example, William Alexander's *History of Women, from the earliest antiquity to the present time* (1779)—and many were illustrated with portraits. The study of these historical women encouraged the transformative potential of literacy and strengthened the need for female education.

A campaigner for social reform, Wedgwood, with several daughters of his own and a clever wife, Sarah (née Wedgwood, 1734–1815), was conscious of the absence of formal female education. Following in the tradition of upper-class fathers teaching their daughters the classics and sciences, Wedgwood home-schooled his daughters; but he sent his sons away to school and later employed them in the family business to learn the trade. As a member of the Lunar Society Birmingham, an all-male dining club where industrialists and intellectuals met, the entrepreneur would have been aware of other members who encouraged the education of women, especially in the sciences: his partner, Bentley, even wrote a pamphlet entitled “The Improvement of Female Education”, promoting intellectual equality, though it was never published.¹¹ Many who supported women's intellectual aspirations and activities often did so, as a way of promoting equitable access to education for everyone. Bentley was not the only one thinking of moral reforms for women.

Both Bentley and Wedgwood were interested in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or on Education* (1762).¹² Rousseau's writings encouraged Wedgwood in his struggle against the slave trade; however, on female education the Frenchman thought young women should be educated only to serve men better in their limited roles as wives and mothers. In her conduct book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct in the more important duties of life* (1787), the advocate for woman's rights Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) argues against this passive female ideal, advocating that women could contribute more to society if they were brought up to display sound morals, character, and intellect, rather than superficial social graces. In light of these contemporary dialogues, Wedgwood's

“Femmes Célèbres” may have acted as an alternative visual conduct book or manual, presenting a new vision of female agency that navigated appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. When their portraits were studied alongside enlightened conversations, even gossip, these illustrious women presented alternative life choices through their characters and accomplishments.

Several of the sitters were associated with the Blue Stockings Society, an informal women’s social and educational movement active in the second half of the eighteenth century that invited men to participate in their conversations about science, art, and literature.¹³ Including aristocratic and middle-class women, the more outspoken Bluestockings challenged gender stereotypes and subjection to men in marriage, redefining and widening women’s social role. Their cultural and literary output promoted female accomplishments and emphasised the need for equality of the sexes, issues ultimately associated with modern feminism. Female supporters of these new ideas would have appreciated the merchandise associated with their idols; painted portrait miniatures on ivory or vellum were costly and typically only shared with close friends and family, while prints lacked the tactility and mobility of the sculptural ceramic portraits, which were easily slipped into a pocket or purse. Wedgwood’s portrait medallions were affordable, sometimes even cheaper than engraved portraits, and available to anyone with sufficient means or willing to make financial sacrifices.

The following study of the women Wedgwood included in his “Femmes Célèbres” asks, somewhat provocatively, if the potter had a “feminist” agenda. According to Jane Rendall, in the late eighteenth century “modern feminism” was not about equality in labour, nor was it an outright challenge to male power: it was about recognition of “moral and rational worth”.¹⁴ Many of the women in Wedgwood’s gallery of female Worthies claimed for themselves the right to define their own place in society as individuals. With the average middle-class woman having few virtuous female role models, Wedgwood offered an inspirational group of women—dedicated, hard-working, and self-educated—who had either virtuous characters or supported virtuous causes, and who had developed personas independent of their families, but at the same time were fiercely loyal to their friends and family. The majority were associated with the same elite and fashionable social circles, with the exception of the actress Sarah Siddons, who despite her considerable fame as a celebrity in Georgian England was an outsider because of her craft.

The Sisterhood of Celebrity

A gallery of women, past and present, who had participated in intellectual, cultural, and political spheres, was a timely idea when, in 1787, Wedgwood introduced a new sub-section entitled “Ladies”, under *Heads of Illustrious Moderns*, in his revised ornamental catalogue. The narrow term described only women of high social class or with positions of authority over domestic spheres, typically realised through marriage or inheritance. It evidently proved inadequate to introduce women celebrated for their achievements as writers, poets, and educators, as the following year, in the 1788 French-language edition, “Ladies” was replaced by the more inclusive “Femmes Célèbres”, under *Têtes des Grands Hommes Modernes*. Just twenty-three sitters were listed in 1787, with a further five added to the 1788 French supplement—women brought together because of their sex in a new type of enlightened discourse.

The year 1787 was pivotal for Wedgwood. He became heavily involved in the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, developing the antislavery medallion for the cause, and his decision to expand his *Illustrious Moderns* to include a women’s section may have equally been politically motivated. Women were great supporters of the abolitionist movement, and any novel merchandise that would encourage them to visit his showrooms where they might receive pamphlets or hear discussions would have advanced the cause. Wedgwood always catered to the demands of his elite, cosmopolitan female consumers, soliciting their opinions on taste and design, and perhaps they had requested portraits of contemporary women alongside those of his *Illustrious Modern* men, to showcase their contributions to Georgian society and in the process redefine and widen women’s roles. Ever perceptive, Wedgwood must have sensed the mood of the day.

More than many merchants, Wedgwood led the commercialisation of leisure in the later eighteenth century. The rise of shopping as entertainment offered alternatives to the traditional female-dominated sites, such as the tea-table in the privacy of the home, where gossip networks played an essential role in the exchange of practical knowledge in unsupervised female conversations.

¹⁵ Through the dissemination of publications of members of the Bluestockings, acceptable topics such as running a household, marriage, economic dependence, and charity must have gradually included subjects covering female education, employment, exploitation, civil liberties, and legal rights, laying the groundwork for future female empowerment. Wedgwood’s London showroom, initially on Greek Street (1774–1797) in fashionable Soho, also offered a public place for women to congregate and network, catch a glimpse of a famous personality, overhear scandalous exchanges or engage in “feminist” dialogues.

No images survive of the Greek Street showroom or warehouse, but we are fortunate in having an aquatint of the later showroom on York Street, near St. James's Square, dated 1809 (fig. 5). The interior, with its large glazed cabinets filled with vases rather than books and purpose-built centre tables piled with tablewares instead of drawings and needlework, and furnished with window seats, resembled a private library, designed to make Wedgwood's customers feel relaxed, intellectually stimulated, and at home. His *Illustrious Moderns* may have been displayed in drawers in specimen cabinets or inside vitrine-topped tables, as depicted at the extreme right-hand side of figure 5, where several framed examples appear to be suspended on the wall. Wedgwood explained to Bentley his need for a large showroom: "And beside room for my Ware, I must have more room for my Ladys for they sometimes come in very large shoals together, & one party are often obliged to wait till another have done their business".¹⁶ These waves of consumers, glamorous members of the nobility and gentry and perhaps even the odd heroine, contributed to the spectatorship of commercialisation and the economies of desire.



Figure 5.

Rudolf Ackermann, Inside view of the showrooms of Wedgwood & Byerley, York Street, St. James's Square, published in *Ackermann's Repository of Arts*, February 1809, 1809, hand-coloured aquatint, 24.4 × 29.5 cm. Collection of the British Library (Maps.K.Top.27.24). Digital image courtesy of British Library Board / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

Women were clearly the primary audience for these ceramic portraits of "Femmes Célèbres", but of course men may also have purchased examples, perhaps as sexualised icons or as paragons of the new femininity. According to the 1787 catalogue, the basic price for an *Illustrious Modern* head, if unframed and single colour (i.e. black basaltes), was one shilling, but, depending on size and material, a ceramic head could increase to as much

as a guinea (twenty-one shillings). Portrait medallions were in reach of ordinary women and men. The literate middle classes with sufficient purchasing power could acquire a single heroine or a pair; but a domestic servant earning two or three pounds in a year would have been more challenged. Unfortunately, there is little documentary evidence of who exactly were the consumers of these female heads.

The “Femmes Célèbres”

The final twenty-eight heads that comprised the “Femmes Célèbres” subsection under *Illustrious Moderns* were assembled in three phases identifiable in the 1779, 1787, and 1788 catalogues. The phases are characterised by very different histories. While they were marketed as a gallery or cabinet, aesthetically they never formed a uniform set, and they were acquired by customers individually on the basis of the sitter.



Figure 6.

Josiah Wedgwood and Thomas Bentley manufacturers, Portrait Medallion of Madame d'Estrée, circa 1779-80, stoneware (jasper), white on solid blue-coloured ground with gilt metal frame, verso impressed 'Wedgwood & Bentley', 5.6 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1909,1201.133). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London (all rights reserved).

The first sixteen heads in the list, recorded in 1787 and 1788, made their appearance in the 1779 catalogue as *et cætera* under section IV of *Illustrious Moderns*, "Divines, Artists, Antiquaries, Poets, Etc." and included the following: "Marchioness Pompadour"; "March. du Chatelet"; "March. de Savigny"; "Countess Grignan"; "Countess de la Sage"; "Countess de Barré"; "Madame Dacier"; "Mad. Clairon"; "Mad. de Scuderi"; "Mad. d'Estrées"; "Mad. des Houlières"; "Mad. de Montespan"; "Mad. du Boccage"; "Agnes Soreau"; "Ninon l'Enclos"; and "Laura" de Noves. They were primarily elite French women whose historical significance was either beauty, marriage to a European sovereign, or scandalous notoriety as the mistress of a famous man. For example, Gabrielle d'Estrées, Duchesse de Beaufort and Verneuil (1573-1599), was the fiercely loyal mistress, confidante, and adviser of

Henry IV of France, best known today for the provocative depiction, by an unidentified artist, of her in a bath with one of her sisters, who is pinching her nipple ¹⁷ Wedgwood's head is considerably more respectable, with the sitter wearing the costume, ruff, and jewellery identifiable in an engraving of about 1596 by Thomas de Leu (1560-1612) (fig. 6). ¹⁸

With this selection of historical characters Wedgwood was apparently appealing to an audience familiar with the following biographies: *Biographium Fæmineum* (1766); Pons Augustin Alletz (1703-1785), *L'Esprit Des Femmes Célèbres: Du Siecle de Louis XIV, Et de celui de Louis XV, jusqu'à present* (Paris, 1768); and perhaps Antoine Léonard Thomas's (1732-1785) *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les différens siècles* (Paris, 1772), translated by William Russell as *Essay on the character, manners and genius of Women in different ages* (1773). Thomas's tome considered the qualities that defined women across centuries: "whose genius had a character, who serve to illustrate the ideas or the manners of their age". He asked profoundly, if noted women were really noteworthy, and what makes a woman a woman. ¹⁹ As an enlightened thinker, Wedgwood may have been asking such questions with his choice to advance both his "feminist" and his commercial agenda.

In fact, these sixteen heads were after a group of bronze portrait medals purchased by Bentley in Paris, discussed in a letter from Wedgwood to Bentley on 7 September 1776: "I have just looked over the Heads & Bass-reliefs ... they may be usefull on various occasions, & the Heads will make a very valuable addition to our suite of modern Illustrious Personages. I observe *Pesez*, the Artist to whom we owe most of these Heads is a strong mannerist". ²⁰ An analysis of the dates of the 120 male and 23 female sitters by the unknown sculptor *Pesez*—perhaps a pseudonym—suggests a production date of circa 1750-1773, presumably made in France. ²¹ Their round, uniform size, struck on one side, with legends identifying the sitters, suggests that they were intended by *Pesez* to be sold as complete cabinets for amateur collectors. Very few Wedgwood portrait medallions from this early group survive, suggesting that they were not commercially successful. Was Wedgwood's "Femmes Célèbres" series initiated to reposition these slow sellers?

The second section includes portraits of contemporary British women: six educated members of elite society and one actress, each commissioned several years earlier by Wedgwood as individual portraits, but brought together as a subsection of female heads in 1787. Introduced here chronologically, the oldest portrait was of "Lady Charlotte Finch", Governess in Ordinary to the children of George III; she was fifty years old in 1774, when her portrait medallion was created by the independent wax sculptor Joachim

Smith (1758–1803).²² Sharing an interest in education with Wedgwood, the governess introduced many new trends in the royal nursery, especially in the use of educational toys.²³



Figure 7.

Josiah Wedgwood and Sons manufacturers, Small Portrait Medallion of Elizabeth Montagu, 1775, stoneware (jasper ware), white on lilac-coloured ground, impressed 'Wedgwood', 4.1 × 3.3 × 1 cm. Collection of Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop (1943.1609). Digital image courtesy of Harvard Art Museums (all rights reserved).

Next was the dissenting poet, reformist, and abolitionist Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825), whose portrait, also possibly by Smith, was created in early 1775, just two years after she had published *Poems* (1773), with four editions in its first year.²⁴ Her jasper ware portrait and that of her mentor, the leader of the Bluestockings, Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu (née Robinson, 1718–1800), a social reformer and champion of literary women, were reproduced in the *Westminster Magazine* in June 1776, in a volume entitled

“Observations on Female Literature in General”.²⁵ Montagu’s portrait as a stoic Herculaneum matron, by an unidentified sculptor, was also created around 1775 and was one of the first in blue jasper (fig. 7).²⁶ Significantly, the portraits were never intended as a pair: on 3 July 1775, Wedgwood wrote to Bentley: “Mrs. Montague & Mrs. Barbault are not model’d for a pair neither in size nor Character [*sic*]”.²⁷

The highest-profile sitter in this second group was Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (née Spencer, 1757–1806), celebrated for her female empowerment, political influence, and intellectualism. Her portrait medallion—attributed to the sculptor John Flaxman Junior (1755–1826), who worked for Wedgwood between 1775 and 1787—was first recorded on 10 August 1782. Despite being pilloried in the press for her public campaigning for the Whig politician James Fox, her sometime lover, as well as for her heavy drinking and gambling, she remained a fashionable figure.²⁸ Less well known was Lady Dorothea Banks (née Hugessen, 1758–1828), wife of the distinguished explorer and botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), whose portrait appeared by 20 March 1782.²⁹ Little known today, Ann Kennicott (née Chamberlayne, 1748–1830) was married to the Hebrew scholar the Reverend Dr. Benjamin Kennicott (1718–1783), librarian of the Radcliffe Library, Oxford, and studied Hebrew to assist her husband; her portrait is unidentified, and its existence only known by the reference in the 1787 and 1788 catalogues.³⁰ She was associated with Montagu’s Bluestockings and the abolition of the slave trade, and was friends with actress Eva Maria Garrick (née Veigel, 1724–1822) and the religious author Hannah More (1745–1833).³¹ The portraits of the actress Sarah Siddons will be discussed in the next section.

These portraits documented Britain’s female literati, contemporary, learned, articulate, and influential, captured in inspired images that enjoyed a timeless aura of antiquity. However, these “Ladies” were dated in costume and coiffure. Ardent fans inspired by the writings and causes of their heroines no doubt overlooked such flaws, but for the third phase of the “Femmes Célèbre”, added to the 1788 catalogue for the French and European markets, Wedgwood may have responded to negative sartorial discourse among his fashion-conscious consumers in the selection and presentation of his sitters. The entrepreneur was more than aware that fashion and style drove the commercial side of the decorative arts, with consumers hungry for novelty and the latest designs. Consequently, it was fashion, rather than virtue or erudition, that formed the main subject in the third group of portraits, which included an international roster of the glitterati, dressed in the latest fashions, so by design forming an almost uniform gallery of female heads.

The grandest of these five heads was Her Royal Highness Princess Charlotte Augusta Matilda (1766–1828), later Queen Charlotte of Württemberg, the eldest daughter of King George III and Queen Caroline. Her portrait is attributed to the sculptor John Charles Lochée, who was at the time “Portrait Modeller to his Royal Highness Prince William Henry”, the sitter’s brother; in 1787, Lochée was paid for wax portraits of George III’s four sons, so may have had the opportunity to create one of the Princess Royal.³² European royalty is represented by Maria I, Queen of Portugal (1734–1816), who was depicted in two Wedgwood portrait medallions. The earlier, after a wax portrait by Flaxman, was invoiced on 1 June 1787, as “A model of the Queen of Portugal, £3.3.0”.³³ Logically, it should have been the Flaxman portrait offered in the 1788 catalogue; however, a second portrait, stylistically similar to the “Princess Royal”—and by association attributed to Lochée—also survives. If this second portrait was not that offered in 1788, it may suggest that Wedgwood was working towards a set of uniform portrait medallions.³⁴



Figure 8.

John Charles Lochée, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait of the Princesse de Lamballe, 1787/88, stoneware (jasper ware), white on black-coloured ground, verso impressed 'Wedgwood', 9.6 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (C.19-1916). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

The sitters in both these commissions are depicted with their hair in a fashionable, naturalistic style, known as *coiffure à l'enfant*, cut just beneath the ears at the sides of the face, powdered, teased, and curled for volume, with long wavy ringlets at the back. The fashion was introduced in the early 1780s by Marie-Antoinette, Queen of France, who was suffering from hair loss, and quickly adopted by her loyal courtiers.³⁵ Among these was the wealthy Princess Marie Thérèse Louise of Savoy, Princesse de Lamballe (1749-1792), Surintendante de la Maison de la Reine from 1775, the highest rank possible for a lady-in-waiting at Versailles. While the trend was disseminated through French fashion plates, it may have been popularised in England when the princess visited in the summer of 1787 to take the waters

in Bath for her health. Wedgwood's portrait medallion of "La Princesse de Lamballe" adopting this influential hairstyle, introduced in the 1788 catalogue, was created by Lochée in 1787 (fig. 8).³⁶

Lochéé, whose "over-flamboyant" manner brilliantly suited this new voluminous coiffure, enjoyed an impressive client list that included royalty and the aristocracy. He also provided commercial work to James Tassie, who listed eight "enamel" or vitreous paste portraits after Lochée in his 1791 catalogue, including one of the Princesse de Lamballe.³⁷ With Flaxman leaving for Italy in September 1787, Wedgwood increasingly turned to Lochée, until the latter declared bankruptcy in 1791. Lochée's customers may have influenced the development of this third phase of the "Femmes Célèbres": for example he worked for the husband of the Anglo-Irish Catholic convert and heiress, Mary Elizabeth Grenville, Marchioness of Buckingham (née Nugent, 1759–1812), part of an aristocratic power couple, both of whom appeared in 1788.³⁸ The fifth sitter was Anne, Lady de la Pole (née Templer, 1758–1832), best known for her full-length portrait painted in 1786 by George Romney (1734–1802), who though unknown today may have been admired at the time for her wealth, beauty, or taste.³⁹

Beyond Celebrated, a Celebrity: "Mrs. Siddons"

Situated among these celebrated elite, privileged women is Sarah Siddons, an actress who challenged conventional notions of femininity, and perhaps more than any of the others elevated the status of women. Siddons was born into an unusually moral and religious theatrical dynasty, which coloured her adult life.⁴⁰ Her personal struggles—marriage to a fellow thespian jealous of her celebrity—brought her domestic loneliness; from them she derived depths of emotion that she drew on for her public performances. Siddons made tragedy her triumph, transforming distressed wives and mistresses, with their traditionally passive roles, into heroines, imbuing each character with an unprecedented dignity.⁴¹ While the reputations of other actresses were tarnished by a persistent association with prostitution and scandal, Siddons's renowned virtue and professionalism were reinforced by her choice of parts that de-emphasised her sexuality: models of female worship, such as the pious daughter, affectionate wife, and tender mother.

The extent of her fame was enormous, and even today, primarily based on the countless images of her that survive. The statuesque actress had or acquired a noble bearing, and it was said that "she looks, walks, and moves like a woman of a superior rank", which widened her appeal.⁴² Siddons embraced public celebrity to a degree considered unseemly in a lady of gentility, and her ambition to succeed was driven by the need to support her

children. She was able to reject compromise, never lowering her standards of decorum, thanks to her financial success on the stage. Siddons's performances gave her audience, especially women, permission to break with the expected conventions of politeness and restraint, and they famously responded with public expressions of grief and emotion in the form of fits of fainting and hysterics ("box-faintings and pit-faintings"), known at the time as "Siddons-mania".⁴³ The adulation and curiosity of her fans continued after the performances. Siddons once attended a party of the Bluestockings and recalled: "the people absolutely stood on the chairs round the walls, that they might look over their neighbour's heads to stare at me".⁴⁴

Wedgwood may have known many of his sitters, but how well did he know Siddons when he commissioned her portraits? He had clearly met or seen a performance by Siddons, as documented in a letter from his eight-year-old daughter Sarah (1776–1856), who had written to him from Etruria on 5 May 1784: "Have you seen Mrs. Siddons again? If you have, did you cry?"⁴⁵ The letter reminds us of the actress's ability to evoke powerful emotional reactions in men as well as in women. Other actresses, such as Emma Hamilton, famously the muse of George Romney, were as well-known at the time but were not included. So why, then, was Siddons? Was Wedgwood also suffering from "Siddons-mania", or was he a friend and admirer? Was he attracted by her commercial appeal as an actor and her "celebrification", or did she possess qualities similar to those of the celebrated women that constituted his ideal of femininity and might serve as a role model for his daughters and female customers?

Crafting Celebrity

There are at least two different ceramic portraits of Sarah Siddons, created sometime between 1782 and 1802, after which time few new heads were invented raising the question as to which one was available in 1787 and/or 1788—perhaps both?⁴⁶ The better-known model captures the actress in her breakout role, first performed on 30 October 1782, as the dagger-wielding Amazonian Euphrasia in the tragedy by Arthur Murphy (1727–1805), *The Grecian Daughter*, published and first staged in 1772 (figs. 3 and 4). The classical story, also known as 'Roman Charity', provided a strong female role model of heroic filial piety. It showcased the importance of father-daughter relationships that nurtured equality through emotional and intellectual ties as well as the conflicting allegiances owed after marriage to fathers and husbands. The role marked Siddons's triumphant return to the London stage at the Drury Lane Theatre, having failed in an earlier attempt in 1775–1776, when she suffered from aponia (loss of speech) and anxiety. She had chosen her best performance in a role she returned to in 1790, and the audience responded with characteristic "sobs and shrieks" during its eleven

performances: King George III, who was moved to tears by her roles, and Queen Charlotte attended a performance in January 1783.⁴⁷ It was Siddons's second production at Drury Lane, and ignited her celebrity, inspiring a wealth of painted and printed portraits, upon which Wedgwood capitalised.⁴⁸

Siddons's portrait medallion is highly unusual among the potter's body of work, firstly in the inclusion of an arm that hides her dagger-wielding arm in order to establish the scene, the violent climax of Act V.⁴⁹ In that moment she is about to stab Dionysus, the tyrant who has usurped her father's throne, before shouting "Now one glorious effort! ... A daughter's arm, fell monster, strikes the blow". The prominent "daughter's arm" decorously also conceals her breasts--which in an earlier scene suckled Evander, her starving father. Secondly, Siddons's head, although seen in profile with its straight nose, sits awkwardly above her unflattering, muscular, twisted neck, which is out of proportion with her narrow, twisted shoulders and foreshortened arm, creating rare tension and dynamism in the bas-relief that captures her unconventional, exuberant physicality on stage. Such atypical features as the arm, the muscular masculinity, and the challenging *controposto* suggest that Siddons had a hand in its design, striking one of her "attitudes" to convey the powerful emotions of filial protection while avoiding any tones of sexual indiscretion in this story of erotic maternity.⁵⁰

If the portrait medallion, usually impressed below the legend "Mrs. Siddons", was made less than a year after her first performance in 1782, the sculptor probably created the image from life, perhaps with Siddons posing in her costume, or after he attended a production. Only a few images of her role as Euphrasia were in circulation in 1782. The earliest, a canvas portrait of "Mrs. Siddons in the character of the Grecian Daughter", painted by William Hamilton (1750/51-1801) ([fig. 1](#)), was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1780, where the portrait inflamed "Siddons-mania".⁵¹ The stiff, off-balanced pose, captures a less dramatic scene in Act II: "And dost thou then, inhuman that thou art, Advise a wretch like me to know repose?" Hamilton's early painting promoted Siddons even before she returned to London, fuelling a demand for her image, though the painting was not engraved until 1789, by which time there were many other images in circulation.⁵²

Also in oval format, a more traditional, almost romantic, half-portrait of Siddons as Euphrasia, seated as if waiting in the Green Room at Drury Lane, was painted in 1782 by John Keyse Sherwin (1751-1790), who engraved and published it on 15 December 1782 ([fig. 2](#)).⁵³ Siddons appears in a similar print, standing and clutching the handle of a dagger hidden in her skirt, with the legend recording that it was after a pastel drawing executed in 1782 by a thirteen-year-old fan, the painter Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830), who became a lifelong friend; it was engraved by Thomas Trotter

(circa 1750–1803) and published on 8 September 1783.⁵⁴ A more dramatic interpretation of the scene depicted on the medallion appeared in the *Town and Country Magazine*, vol. XVII, January 1785: “Mrs. Siddons in the Grecian Daughter / Euphra: Now One Glorious Effort”, which was after an engraving by John Barlow (circa 1759–1810), published in October 1784.⁵⁵

In the absence of comprehensive factory documents recording details of dates of creation and sculptors for Wedgwood’s portrait medallions, by tradition and by association this Siddons model as Euphrasia has been attributed to Flaxman on the strength of a receipt for a Flaxman bill that includes “Moulding a Bust of Mr. & Mrs. Siddons, £1. 11s. 6d.” and is dated between 28 April 1782 and 6 September 1783.⁵⁶ The invoice description, suggesting a double portrait, either a sculpture in the round or a bas-relief, is perhaps inaccurate, neither having been identified; Flaxman’s usual fee for creating a single portrait head was two guineas, so presumably the price of a mould of the bust or cast was much less.⁵⁷ No Wedgwood portrait medallion survives of Siddons’s husband, William Siddons (1744–1808), an unsuccessful actor, whom she had married in 1773; at the time of the bust, Siddons was about twenty-seven years old and had given birth to five of her seven children. In addition, a reference to “Siddons” was apparently recorded in the Oven Books in 1782, either for the aforementioned bust or the portrait medallion.⁵⁸ For Wedgwood to produce a model of a newly fashionable actress within months of her first stage success would have been a highly speculative enterprise, with a risk of damaging his reputation if she became embroiled in inappropriate circumstances.

A later reference to a bust of Mrs. Siddons appears in a Flaxman letter to Wedgwood, dated 5 February 1784:

Since I repaired [improved or altered] the bust of Mrs. Siddons after moulding, a friend of mine, J. B. Burgess, Esq., of Bedford Square, has been very desirous to purchase it, to set it with the model of Mercury and several other models he has of mine. As you have the mould of the model, I think it cannot be of much use. To let Mr. Burgess have it will oblige him, and be of some advantage to me. You may depend on this, no other use will be made of it than being placed in his study, and if I have your permission to sell it to him, I shall take off half of my charge for it in your bill.⁵⁹

The passage, which alludes to the threat of piracy on the part of Burgess as well as Flaxman’s commercial concerns, strongly suggests that there was indeed a bust of Mrs. Siddons, but perhaps in character, and thus no longer

identifiable. The model of Mercury may be the Wedgwood bust, attributed to Flaxman, who referred to his plaster cast of the bust when offered to Wedgwood for his study in a letter dated 28 August 1782.⁶⁰

Another frequently cited link between Flaxman and Siddons are the figures created for a jasper ware chess set that he designed for Wedgwood between 30 October 1783 and 1 December 1784.⁶¹ These figures are based on the attitudes of various Shakespearean characters, and their design influenced by Flaxman's fascination with the medieval revival style. There are three different models of kings and queens, all of which are depicted in an original drawing by Flaxman, invoiced on 8 March 1785 for £6 6s. 6d.⁶² The *trompe l'oeil* drawing includes the seventeen chess figures produced by the manufactory and may have been intended to be shown to London customers to solicit orders. Since at least 1864, with convincing evidence, the kings and queens have been identified as Siddons and her brother, John Philip Kemble (1757–1823), also an actor, whom Flaxman portrayed elsewhere.⁶³ While often catalogued as being after their principal roles in *Macbeth*, one of the Queens with a crown and plaited hair closely resembles Flaxman's drawings of Siddons as Constance in Shakespeare's *King John*, circa 1783.⁶⁴ A third queen has a bent arm that disguises a dagger in her other hand, a pose that the portrait medallion closely references, strengthening its attribution to Flaxman (fig. 9).⁶⁵ Siddons and her brother presumably had some input into their portraits for the chess set, suggesting the attitudes and roles, but nothing is recorded.



Figure 9.

John Flaxman Jnr, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Chess-piece of a Queen with a Portrait of Sarah Siddons as Euphrasia, circa 1783-1785, jasper ware, base impressed 'Wedgwood', 8.89 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1890,0512.2). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London (all rights reserved).

As Heather McPherson has argued, Siddons was very much an agent in the control and distribution of her image, and there is every indication that she would have participated in the design process of some of these images, suggesting the pose, scene, or costume. ⁶⁶ Siddons is known to have voiced strong opinions on artistic interpretations of her carefully crafted brand. In 1789, when in Birmingham, Siddons purchased a plaster bust of herself in a shop “where busts of distinguished personages were sold”, with the idea that she could make a better likeness of herself than “this wretched production”. ⁶⁷ Having studied ancient statuary and casts for melodramatic attitudes and costume inspiration, it was no surprise that the actress took up sculpture as a hobby, modelling in clay from 1789, and becoming a “pupil” of her friend

Anne Seymour Damer (née Conway, 1748–1828), Britain’s first professional female sculptor and a member of the Bluestockings.⁶⁸ An example of Siddons’s work, a plaster self-portrait bust in the guise of a classical figure, wearing a headdress with a chin strap, circa 1790–1795, is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁶⁹

Between 1793 and 1795, Siddons is recorded as a customer of Bartholomew Papera (circa 1749–1815), head of a family of plaster figure makers, and her self-portrait plaster bust may have been moulded by them for distribution to friends and family.⁷⁰ More significantly, Siddons produced a Wedgwood-style self-portrait medallion as a virtuous Greco-Roman matron, an image of which, engraved by William Ridley (1764–1838) ([fig. 10](#)), was published in the *Monthly Mirror*, a literary periodical, on 1 August 1796.⁷¹ McPherson has identified her role as Ariadne in Murphy’s *The Rival Sisters*, in which Siddons performed in the 1792–1793 season.⁷² The medallion, which has not apparently survived, suggests that Siddons was more than capable of producing a design for Wedgwood to copy, so is it possible that she designed the original model of herself as Euphrasia, improved by William Hackwood or another sculptor employed by the manufactory, perhaps around 1790, when the role was revived? Alternatively, Siddons may have based her image on the Wedgwood portrait, which has a similar profile with a long straight nose. A third Wedgwood medallion identified as “Mrs. Siddons”, circa 1795, only known from its intaglio working mould, and now in the The Victoria and Albert Museum Wedgwood Collection, resembles both her sculpted bust and engraving, evidence of a continued relationship between Siddons and Wedgwood ([fig. 11](#)).

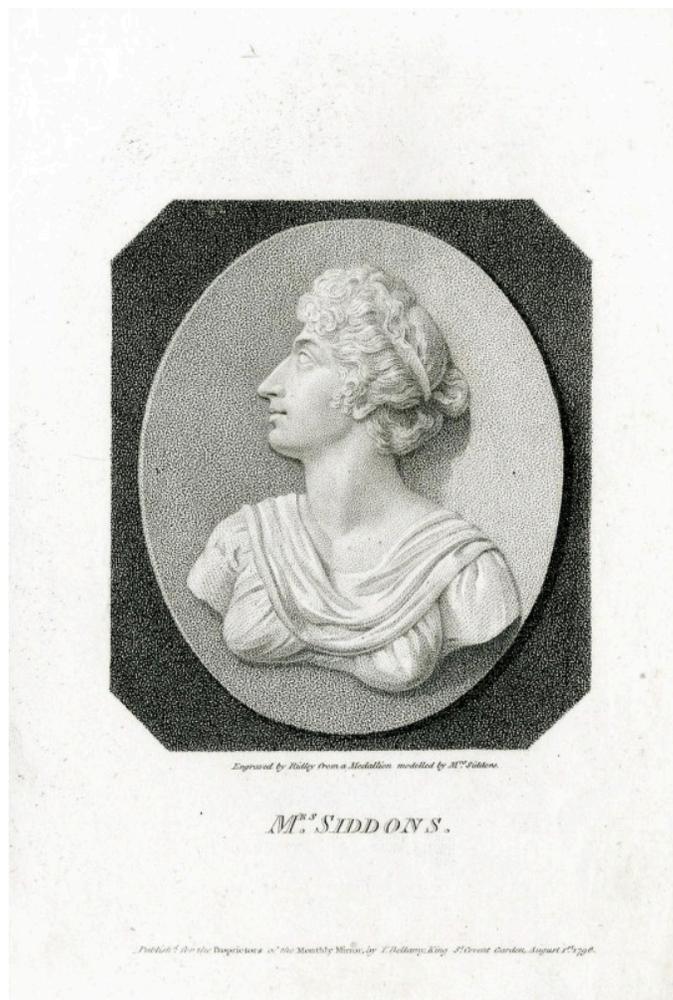


Figure 10.

William Ridley, Portrait of Mrs Siddons, inscribed "Engraved by Ridley from a Medallion modelled by Mrs Siddons / Publish'd for the Proprietors of the Monthly Mirror, by T. Bellamy, King St, Covent Garden, August 1st 1796", 1796, stipple engraving, 16.2 x 11.3 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1931,0509.171). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 11.

Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait of Mrs. Siddons, circa 1795, intaglio working mould, stoneware, 4.7 × 4.3 × 1.9 cm. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, Wedgwood Collection (WE.7343-2014). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 12.

Attributed to John Charles Lochée, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait Medallion of Sarah Siddons, 1787/91, (jasper ware), white on blue-coloured ground verso impressed 'Wedgwood', 11.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, Wedgwood Collection (WE.5583-2104). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Though Siddons projected a strong persona on the stage, the public and the private often blurred in her image as a celebrity. In contrast to the well-known model of “Mrs. Siddons” in her public role as the “Tragedy Queen” discussed earlier, the second model appears to depict her private persona, her “real” self as a lady of fashion, and may be dated to circa 1787–1788, stylistically attributable to Lochée (fig. 12). A Lochée portrait of Siddons is recorded in Tassie’s 1791 catalogue as model 14426, “Mrs. Siddons, the celebrated actress in London. Modelled by Lochée”. Though extremely scarce, this second portrait is more conventional in format, with the actor

portrayed wearing a veil or a simple, oversized mobcap (or bonnet), unusually flattened, and a modest, classically inspired gauze gown, which chastely covers any cleavage.

While the tone is more aligned with Thomas Gainsborough's *Mrs. Siddons*, 1785, a striking, aristocratic portrait of a lady of quality, it is still ambiguous.⁷³ It may depict Siddons in character as Isabella, in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, pleading on behalf of her brother sentenced to death for adultery, or the title role in *Isabella, or the Fatal Marriage*, first performed in 1694, by Thomas Southerne (1660–1746), about a devoted mother and faithful widow who remarried only to discover her husband was still alive.⁷⁴ Demonstrating the ways that the boundaries between the personal and the private blurred, Siddons was joined by her eight-year-old son in the role that established her reputation. The jasper ware portrait resembles various print sources; however, it may have been based on an unfinished sketch by Sir Joshua Reynolds, circa 1784, which was lent out to other artists to copy.⁷⁵ In the absence of direct sources, Wedgwood's second portrait medallion of Siddons appears to be an original work, perhaps taken from life. Its rarity suggests it may not have been successful. Perhaps Siddons was displeased with it, prompting her to design, or even commission, a new portrait for her own portrait medallion.

Siddons's thoughts on her Wedgwood portraits—available in black basaltes or the more costly two-colour jasper ware—if indeed she ever saw them or sat for them, have not been chronicled, but she frequently voiced opinions on her representations. In her most famous portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Sarah (Kemble) Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1783–1784), the actress apparently requested that the artist not heighten the colouring of her face but keep its natural pallor, “so deeply accordant with the concentrated musings of her pale melancholy”, hence tragedy.⁷⁶ To have added rose colour to her cheeks would have cheapened and distracted from her ghostly, corpse-like character, captured in the lustrous black basaltes. However, the pure white, porcelain-like bas-reliefs on the jasper ware suggests the artifice of cosmetics in the form of white, lead-based makeup that signified the seductive appearance of prostitutes, an association that Siddons spent her entire career avoiding.⁷⁷ As Heather McPherson has argued, Siddons's public tragic pallor was a signifier of the emotional depth and authenticity of her acting, distinguishing her from other actresses and identifying her image or brand, which was impossible to capture in Wedgwood's monochrome studies.⁷⁸

Commodifying Celebrity

Celebrity feeds on a public gaze and Siddons, as a public figure by choice, whose image circulated as part of a publicity machine, not only accepted the commodification of her image, but understood that her fame depended upon the currency of her image remaining in circulation for as long as possible. By contrast, some of Wedgwood's "Femmes Célèbres" may have begun as private commissions, limited to a dozen or more examples and shared only with friends and family. This raises the question of who owned the "copyright" for these ceramic images: Wedgwood, the sculptor, or the sitter. How did elite women feel about their objectification and uneasy commercialisation, resituating them from private to public, on display for all to see in Wedgwood's showrooms and subject to the critique or scorn of their peers or "inferiors"? Were they excited to see themselves mass produced in a technologically new material? Was it a marker of status to be depicted by Wedgwood and included among his "Ladies"?

The commodification of modern celebrity in the eighteenth century was primarily disseminated through printed images, mass produced on a prodigious scale. Mezzotints in particular had levelled the public field for duchesses and courtesans, blurring "the socially marginal and the socially central", so that "women of pleasure and women of quality became visually interchangeable".⁷⁹ Kevin Bourque has argued that another actor, Catherine "Kitty" Fisher (1741-1767), a socially disenfranchised woman associated with the world of prostitution, was elevated through the circulation of mezzotints of her portrait by Joshua Reynolds, achieving a status similar to that of elite, socially prominent and aristocratic women, many of whom began to imitate her pose and fashion sense.⁸⁰ This levelling was not new, as Sir Peter Lely's seventeenth-century "Windsor Beauties" included mistresses alongside noblewomen. Only in visual and material culture could an actress like Siddons be considered an equal of royals and aristocrats.

Consuming Celebrity

Wedgwood's cabinet of female portraits appealed to an elite, erudite market, mimicking masculine-gendered patterns of collecting in a slightly patronising manner. Women could purchase examples piecemeal as novelties admired individually, rather than as complete sets. Similarly, Wedgwood's stoneware sits slightly outside the usual trope associating ceramics, especially porcelain, with female consumers, as black basaltes and jasper wares were often large, expensive, academic objects more associated with masculinity than femininity. Wedgwood's "Femmes Célèbres" encouraged women to

partake in male collecting cultures, enjoyed privately or shared among a group of like-minded friends and stimulating conversations, intellectual, gossipy or captious.

Wedgwood's female heads played easily into gift culture and exchange, exploiting the collective fascination with fame and desire. Such portraits offered an intimacy with the sitter, not imaginable in reality, which fed the flames of fantasy and admiration, strengthening and encouraging their emotional attachments.⁸¹ In contrast to graphic, two-dimensional portraits hung behind glass on a wall or glued into an album, small-scale, bas-relief sculptures offered a completely different experience. To hold in the palm of the hand a representation of an absent loved one or an admired poet, known only through their writings, provided a physical intimacy through touch: the familiar to be examined for accurate likenesses, and the unfamiliar to be studied for insight into their character.⁸² These miniature bas-relief sculptures could be stroked and caressed, even kissed, easily slid into a pocket or worn as pendants and carried throughout the day as talismans. The sensation of touch, which has its own memory, has been explored by Rebecca Howard, who describes how bronze portrait medals convey the impression of a sitter's soul through material sensitivities: weight, textures, and even temperature changes, features that could be applied to ceramic bodies which warm through being held and manually played with.⁸³ Small, easily portable things offer intimate experiences not possible with large furnishing or functional objects more typically associated with the decorative arts.

Conclusion

The 1788 catalogue was the last eighteenth-century catalogue produced by the manufactory. A few contemporary female heads in the manner of Loché appear to have been produced after 1788, perhaps intended as additions to develop the "Femmes Célèbres" series; but with the sculptor's disappearance in 1791, its development apparently ceases. As an agent of social change, Wedgwood consistently negotiated the public and private, commercial and benevolent. His "feminist" agenda in the creation of a gallery of female worthies, a selection of inspirational women, many of whom possessed qualities he admired—independence, intelligence, and industry—came to a close in the final decade of the eighteenth century. This group of twenty-eight women, primarily educated, elite, white women of immense privilege and beauty, were, on the one hand, objectified and commodified for his financial gain under the banner of *Illustrious Moderns*; but on the other, their lives and achievements were celebrated for the improvement of society.

A sympathetic liberal dissenter with a natural disinterest in celebrity and the aristocracy, except for commercial purposes for their ability as influencers and customers, Wedgwood's passion for the education of women and respect for their contributions to daily life competed with other obsessions, especially his very public interest in the abolition of the slave trade, and his personal triumph, the manufacture of a perfect copy of the Portland vase in 1789. The impact of the French Revolution on trade and commerce must have thwarted many projects. Seen through a twenty-first-century lens, Wedgwood had an opportunity, albeit costly, to commission an outstanding gallery of contemporary British women involved in the education and promotion of women's causes, including controversial figures such as the historian Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, and Elizabeth Carter. More daringly, he could have commissioned portraits of women of African descent.

Wedgwood's contemporary women sitters were admired and judged "by the way that they invented and promoted carefully crafted versions of themselves".⁸⁴ While the entrepreneur was not driving an overt agenda of female empowerment, the message to his daughters and his customers was that women's public roles and contributions to society needed to be acknowledged. Two centuries and more later, the most powerful voice from his "*Femmes Célèbres*" still comes from the least privileged, the actor Sarah Siddons, balancing the demands of career and family. Though from humble roots, Siddons paralleled the challenges of elite, educated, literary women in achieving public recognition, yet faced greater gendered obstacles, because of her craft.⁸⁵ For the average women of the "middling" classes, Siddons broke the greatest ground in questioning the conventional notions of what it meant to be a woman in Georgian Britain, while presenting a public role model for a virtuous life grounded in domesticity, motherhood, and respectability, and defining for future generations a new femininity. Her two ceramic portraits demonstrate the complexities of eighteenth-century feminism, a self-fashioned public face and a surrendered private representation. As Siddons herself wrote in around 1817, "perhaps in the next world women will be more valued than they are in this".⁸⁶ Which twenty-first-century women would Wedgwood ennoble in stoneware today?

Footnotes

- ¹ For a satirical print see the British Museum, London inv.-no. 1868,0808.4548, and for a printed curtain fabric see The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY inv.-no.17.13.2.
- ² The standard work on Wedgwood's portrait medallions is Robin Reilly and George Savage, *Wedgwood: The Portrait Medallions* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), which presented almost 400 sitters alphabetically.
- ³ There were seven eighteenth-century editions, the first published in 1773.
- ⁴ See British Museum, London, inv.-no. 1887,0307,I.96.
- ⁵ For a discussion and history of the invention of jasper ware, see Robin Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1989), 2:517-539.

- 6 John Boardman, *The Marlborough Gems: Formerly at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 7 Catherine II of Russia amassed a huge collection of antique gems, as well as glass paste imitations by James Tassie, as did the Princesse de Lamballe. See Mikhail B. Piotrovski, *Treasures of Catherine the Great* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 125; Sarah Grant, *Female Portraiture and Patronage in Marie Antoinette's Court: The Princesse de Lamballe* (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 8 Jean Dassier (1676–1763) was a member of a family of prolific Swiss medallists; and see Wedgwood to Bentley, 24 February 1776, in Katherine Euphemia, Lady Farrer, ed., *Letters of Josiah Wedgwood*, 3 vols. (Manchester: E. J. Morten [for] the Trustees of the Wedgwood Museum, 1903, reprinted in 1973), 2:160–161, citing E.18657-25.
- 9 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 117–118.
- 10 Anonymous, *Biographium Faemineum. The female worthies: or, memoirs of the most illustrious ladies of all ages and nations* (London: Printed for S. Crowder and J. Payne, 1766), 163.
- 11 Arianne Chernock, “Cultivating Woman: Men’s Pursuit of Intellectual Equality in the Late British Enlightenment”, *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 3 (July 2006): 520n42.
- 12 Farrer, *Letters*, 1:9, 26 October 1762.
- 13 See Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 14 Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), 1.
- 15 Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 30.
- 16 Farrer, *Letters*, 1:150–152, 31 May 1767, citing E.18149-25.
- 17 *Gabrielle d’Estrées et une de ses soeurs* (circa 1594), Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv.-no. RF1937-1.
- 18 For the engraving, British Museum, inv.-no. 2AA+, a.71.53.
- 19 Natasha Lee, “Sex in Translation: Antoine Léonard Thomas’s ‘Essai sur les femmes’ and the Enlightenment Debate on Women”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 4 (2014): 389–405.
- 20 Farrer, *Letters*, 2:305, citing E.18688-25.
- 21 Jean Tremblot de La Croix, “Le médailleur Pesez et sa série d’hommes et de femmes célèbres”, *Revue de la Numismatique française*, Paris, 5th ser., vol. 6 (1942): 123–131. A collection is in the Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
- 22 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 137.
- 23 Jill Shefrin, *Such Constant Affectionate Care: Lady Charlotte Finch—Royal Governess & the Children of George III* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Occasional Press, 2003).
- 24 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 57.
- 25 National Portrait Gallery, inv.-no. D4458, Reference Collection; Eger and Peltz, *Brilliant Women*, 67.
- 26 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 246.
- 27 Farrer, *Letters*, 2:230, citing E.18605-25.
- 28 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 122; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv.-no. C.120-1956.
- 29 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 57; Arlene Leis, “‘A Little Old-China Mad’: Lady Dorothea Banks (1758–1828) and Her Dairy at Spring Grove”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 2 (June 2017): 199–221.
- 30 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 205.
- 31 Nigel Aston, “Kennicott, Benjamin (1718–1783)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, DOI:10.1093/ref:odnb/1540.
- 32 Royal Collections Trust, Windsor Castle, RCIN inv.-no. 45784; Terrence Hodgkinson, “John Lochée, Portrait Sculptor”, *Victoria and Albert Museum Yearbook* (London: Phaidon, 1969), 152–160, 152; Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 569–570.
- 33 Llewellynn Frederick William Jewitt, *The Wedgwoods: being a life of Josiah Wedgwood* (London: Virtue, 1865), 278; Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 228–229.
- 34 For the Flaxman medallion see British Museum, inv.-no. 1853,1104.4, and for the rare Lochée-type medallion see V&A Wedgwood Collection, Barlaston, inv.-no. WE.6064-2014.
- 35 For a portrait medallion of Marie-Antoinette in the manner of Lochée, see Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 231b.
- 36 A portrait medal of Lamballe, cited as a possible prototype, in Grant, *Female Portraiture*, 91–93, is actually posthumous, circa 1792, see Christie’s, Paris, 3 November 2015, lot 60.
- 37 R.E. Raspe, *Tassie*, 1791, no. 14256.
- 38 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 75.
- 39 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 278.

- 40 Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 73.
- 41 Richards, *Rise of the English Actress*, 76.
- 42 Robyn Asleson, ed., *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and her Portraitists* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999), 79.
- 43 The term "Siddons-mania" appears in broadsides in 1783, for example on 12 June 1783, *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, issue 17005, 3.
- 44 Asleson, *Passion for Performance*, 79.
- 45 Farrer, *Letters*, 3:15, no citation.
- 46 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 306.
- 47 Philip H. Highfill Jr., Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, vol. 14, *S. Siddons to Thynne* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 8, 10; Caroline Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 84; Heather McPherson, *Art and Celebrity in the Age of Reynolds and Siddons* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2017), 105; Lindal Buchanan, "Sarah Siddons and Her Place in Rhetorical History", *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 2007): 425.
- 48 Asleson, *Passion for Performance*, 20; and see a satirical print of a bare-breasted Siddons in the anonymous *The Rival Queens of Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres at a Gymnastic Rehearsal!*, London, 1782, British Museum, inv.-no. 1868,0808.4548.
- 49 A close parallel is Wedgwood's portrait medallion of a half-bust, dagger-wielding Marc Antony, circa 1778-1780, Law Library Special Collections, Florida International University, Miami, Spak Collection, inv.-no. 424.
- 50 Asleson, *Passion for Performance*, 9-10.
- 51 Exhibited as no. 339.
- 52 For the engraving by James Caldwell (1739-1822), after Hamilton, see National Portrait Gallery, inv.-no. D10715.
- 53 For the painting in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see inv.-no. Dyce.77; for the engraving, also in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see inv.-no. S.3017-2009.
- 54 Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.-no. S.3018-2009.
- 55 Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.-no. S.2371-2013; Highfill et al., *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors*, 14:55, no. 225; from the same scene, after Thomas Stothard, engraved by William Sharp, London, dated 10 April 1783, British Museum, inv.-no. 1841,1211.219.
- 56 Jewitt, *The Wedgwoods*, 274.
- 57 Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, *Wedgwood in London: a 225th Anniversary Exhibition, 18th May to 31st August 1984, to illustrate the company's trading activities and its close involvement with artistic, scientific, social and other aspects of London life* (Barlaston, Stoke-on-Trent: Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, 1984), 39, K16.
- 58 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 306. Owing to Covid-19 restrictions it has not been possible to search the Oven Books, which survive for the periods 1778-1787 and 1790-1802. I thank Lucy Lead, archivist at World of Wedgwood, Barlaston, Staffordshire, for her assistance.
- 59 Samuel Smiles, *Josiah Wedgwood, F.R.S.: his personal history* (London: J. Murray, 1894), 214.
- 60 Smiles, *Josiah Wedgwood*, 226-228; Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 461, figs. 662 and 663.
- 61 Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 1:636-637.
- 62 V&A Wedgwood Collection at Barlaston, Stoke-on-Trent, inv.- no. E2-1339, illustrated in Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 1: fig. 962.
- 63 James D. Holmes and Howard Herschel Cotterell, "The Wedgwood Chessmen, Parts I-IV", *Antique Collector* 4, no. 2 (February 1933): 72-476; 4, no. 5 (May 1933): 537-538; 4, no. 8 (August 1933): 587-588; 5, no. 1 (January 1934): 12-13. For a suggestion that it must be Euphrasia, as her role as Lady Macbeth was not performed until 1785, see Heather McPherson, "Sculpting Her Image: Sarah Siddons and the Art of Self-Fashioning", in *Women and Portraits in Early Modern Europe: Gender, Agency, Identity* ed. Andrea Pearson (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 183-202; Robert J. Reichner, "Wedgwood Chessmen", *Ars Ceramica* 7 (1990): 24-28.
- 64 For the drawings see Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven, CT, inv.-no. B1977.1.4.1897-1913; others are in the British Museum, inv.-no. 1913,0528.27-31.
- 65 For the model, circa 1783-1785, see British Museum, inv.-no. 1890,0512.2.
- 66 McPherson, "Sculpting Her Image", 183-202.
- 67 Thomas Campbell, *Life of Mrs. Siddons*, 1834, vol. 2, 166-167.
- 68 Asleson, *Passion for Performance*, 28; McPherson, "Sculpting Her Image", 187.
- 69 Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.-no. S.86-1978; for a plaster copy of the bust by Robert Shout (1764-1843), circa 1820, also in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see inv.-no. Dyce.3329.
- 70 <https://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/british-bronze-founders-and-plaster-figure-makers-1800-1980-1/british-bronze-founders-and-plaster-figure-makers-1800-1980-p>. In 1802, Wedgwood purchased busts of Siddons, Lord Nelson and the Hon. Mrs. Damer, from B. Papera, see Reilly *Wedgwood*, 2:457.

- 71 British Museum, inv.-no. 1931,0509.171.
- 72 McPherson, "Sculpting Her Image", 189.
- 73 National Gallery, London, inv.-no. NG683.
- 74 For the first see an illustration published by Harrison & Co., on 1 December 1782, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.-no. Dyce.3065.
- 75 The painting is in the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford, inv.-no. WA1929.2.
- 76 Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, inv.-no. 21.2; Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016), 54.
- 77 What, indeed, must the tragedienne have made of the coloured wax-portraits after her well-known Wedgwood portrait medallion; see Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL, inv.-no. AFl.1233.2008.
- 78 Heather McPherson, "Tragic Pallor and Siddons", in "Performance", special issue, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 479-502
- 79 McPherson, "Tragic Pallor and Siddons", 479-502.
- 80 Kevin Bourque, "Heady Similitudes: Kitty Fisher, Mezzotint Culture, and Material Narratives of Celebrity, ca. 1750", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 54, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 310.
- 81 Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity: 1750-1850*, trans. Lynn Jefferies (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 10.
- 82 Rebecca M. Howard, "The Sitter's Impression: Memory and Early Modern Portrait Medallions", *Journal of Material Culture* 24, no. 3 (2019): 293-312.
- 83 Howard, "The Sitter's Impression", 293-312.
- 84 Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, 146.
- 85 Buchanan, "Sarah Siddons and Her Place in Rhetorical History", 413-434.
- 86 Yvonne Ffrench, *Mrs. Siddons: Tragic Actress* (London: Derek Verschayle, 1954), 135, 146, cited in Richards, *Rise of the English Actress*, 81.

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Classical Histories, Colonial Objects: The Specimen Table Across Time and Space

Freya Gowrley

Abstract

This article seeks to contextualise the production, purchase, and display of specimen tables in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, considering their fragmentary forms as a material result of both British neoclassicism and imperialism. Made for an audience of (often British) travellers, collectors, and settler colonists across the British empire and Continental Europe, specimen tables were named after the variety of specimens from which they were made, from pieces of marble (both newly sourced and procured from ancient ruins and monuments) to semi-precious hardstones and inlaid “exotic” woods. Reconceptualising the specimen table as a site that collapsed time and space, the article reads these objects through their fragmentary surfaces to explore how their interconnected forms echo their multitudinous connections across the complex geographies and temporalities of the British experience of travel and empire during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Authors

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Introduction

John Singleton Copley's portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Izard (1775), now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, is a typical example of a "grand tour portrait" (fig. 1). As a distinct series of images that commemorate eighteenth-century travellers during their Italian sojourns, the backgrounds of these works brim with the treasures of the country's classical past. Copley's portrait is no exception: it depicts the colonial American couple in a location that is as richly furnished with fine materials as it is with antiquities. The opulence of the silks, brocades, and gilded wood that make up the room's furnishings is matched only by the impressive classical material culture that also surrounds them, which includes an ancient sculpture (likely of Orestes and Electra) and a fifth-century Greek vase. Finally, the positioning of the Colosseum as the central perspectival focus rounds off the objectscape of antiquity that the painting conjures.



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Figure 1.

John Singleton Copley, Mr and Mrs Ralph Izard, 1775, oil on canvas, 174.6 x 223.5 cm. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (03.1033). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Edward Ingersoll Brown Fund (all rights reserved).

As Maurie D. McInnis has observed, unlike the "swagger" found in paintings of Grand Tourists produced by Pompeo Batoni, "Copley has shown the Izards in the active pose of thinking, of engaging in connoisseurship, of managing ideas and exercising judgement over the lessons posed by the antiquities

surrounding them”.¹ McInnis accordingly reads the portrait as a complex amalgam of messages encoded in classical objects, which collectively serve to suggest the couple’s taste and knowledge. Within this engaged and engaging arrangement of human and object, the table across which the pair leans is also worthy of further attention. The glistening slab of porphyry—a ruddy mauve igneous rock that is usually flecked with crystals of feldspar or quartz—that formed the table’s top would have signalled a venerable geological tradition to informed viewers of the portrait. Prized for its rich colour and the mottled dispersal of its constituent crystals, porphyry had been highly valued in imperial Rome since its discovery at a site in Egypt in 18 CE.² Like the column and plinth which frame the space to the left of the couple, clearly identifiable as being composed of the green marble *verde antico*, the table’s top affirms that ancient marbles were as important in the visual language of connoisseurial expertise and refined judgement as the other classicising objects in the image. Far from being simply a passive surface or practical furnishing, the table sits prominently alongside the Colosseum and the sculptural group, its significance within this assemblage gestured to by its central position within the portrait.

Crowned with its impressive slab of porphyry, the painted table is one of a large number of objects within the category of furniture known as “specimen tables”, which can be broadly defined as tables whose tops are formed either from an intact piece of esteemed stone, or from fragments, parts, and pieces of material such as stones, minerals, and different types of wood. A particularly beautiful example of this category of furniture can be seen in figures 2 and 3, which show a rosewood occasional table featuring a specimen tabletop from around 1815, recently sold by Christie’s. Its top showcases 120 specimens, including everything from Liberian granite to Sicilian breccia and cipollino marble, which are cut so as to display the specimens’ brilliant colour and geological splendour. These are rendered identifiable by an accompanying *Catalogo Della qui annessa Serie di Pietre Silicie e Calcarie, in No. 120*, which sits in a sprung frieze drawer below the table’s surface, and which would have facilitated further reflection on its makeup following its purchase.



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Figure 2.

A Regency brass-inlaid, parcel-gilt, ebony, and Brazilian rosewood specimen stone occasional table, c.1815, ebony, rosewood, brass, and stone, 76 x 51 x 43.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of Christie's (all rights reserved).



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Figure 3.

A Regency brass-inlaid, parcel-gilt, ebony, and Brazilian rosewood specimen stone occasional table (detail of table top), c.1815, ebony, rosewood, brass, and stone, 76 x 51 x 43.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of Christie's (all rights reserved).

Specimen tables have a long history and a complex legacy, making their precise definition difficult to pin down, but in general they emerged as a distinct typology in Italy in the eighteenth century, before taking on new, more globalised, forms in the nineteenth, as this article will explore. In their use of rich marbles and semi-precious stones, they are reminiscent of *pietra dura*, a European form of decorative craft production featuring inlaid hardstones, yet are somewhat distinct from this practice in that it is their constituent materials, and not the patterns into which they are arranged, that are privileged. So named after the variety of specimens of which they were composed—including small and large pieces of marble, semi-precious hardstones, minerals, and woods of all kinds—specimen tabletops represent a crucial intersection between classical antiquity, Continental European and British imperial manufacture, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultures of collecting.

An immensely popular decorative object among European elites, the specimen table's remarkable survival in the collections of innumerable museums, in historic properties, and on the art market reflects its pervasiveness. Many cultural institutions concerned with the history of

European design and material culture own a number of specimen tables, and they form part of the decorative fabric of country houses and National Trust properties across the United Kingdom.³ Yet despite their physical ubiquity, specimen tables are not necessarily afforded proportional cultural significance, with examples often not prominently displayed within their institutional homes.⁴ Forming the literal and metaphorical furniture of the spaces in which they reside, they are commonplace and, as in Copley's portrait, functional objects, upon which people lean and display other works of art, and as a result they are often overlooked. Again, in contrast with their remarkable material profusion, the critical literature examining specimen tables is comparatively limited, characterised by only a few accounts of their consumption and production from the discipline of furniture history, and by their scant appearances within literature on the Grand Tour and its souvenirs.⁵ Collectively, this body of work provides a useful foundational account of these objects—including analyses of their materials and the workshops in which they were made, and descriptions of particularly exceptional examples.⁶ Nevertheless, more sustained discussion of the tables as a complex and shifting body of objects, which fully situates the genre within its relevant critical contexts, has yet to be undertaken.

Why has this category of object not yet received deeper scholarly attention? One answer might be to do with abundance, and therefore the question of how we can discuss so many objects in a meaningful manner. Most specimen tables are completely unaccounted for within the extant literature on this type of furniture—perhaps regarded simply as examples of a broader fashion within the decorative arts, with many not fine enough to be worthy of further attention. Furthermore, by virtue of their being made from the fragments of stone unearthed at the “cava” (excavation sites established officially and unofficially in Italy) or sourced from the assorted detritus of Roman marble yards, specimen tables exist beyond the regimes of value long established around Grand Tour collecting. When the dealer Patrick Moir, who in 1794 secured export licences for “*Due Tavoli ... uno di Verdo Antico impelliccato, l'altro di Granito*”, is described by Ilaria Bignamini as enjoying merely a “modest” career because his extant export licences refer only to “modern decorative marbles and paintings as opposed to ancient works of art”, we can see this hierarchical dynamic of high and low at play.⁷ Falling outside the confines of the sculptural masterwork, specimen tables deploy their classical materiality in a manner that recalls Adolf Michaelis's dismissal of John Soane's collections (“an immeasurable chaos of worthless fragments ... mixed together”) rather than the dedicated display of a choice ancient marble.⁸ As such, paying greater attention to specimen tables as significant objects purchased from the market in classical objects in their own right

disrupts what Vicky Coltman has called “a nineteenth-century object fetishisation that misunderstands the heterogeneity of the neoclassical collection”.⁹

A final issue for the analysis of specimen tables is likely to do with their physical and semantic complexity. As objects they are visually and materially highly intricate, and critically immensely complicated to try to understand: objects of multiple parts that relate to multiple contexts. In their piecemeal forms, the tables reflect the period’s dual emphasis on order and categorisation that produced highly systemised forms of knowledge, while echoing the wider aesthetic concern with complexity and the accordant emergence of collage as a central visual and material rhetoric that also occurred at this time.¹⁰

Despite these difficulties, the profusion of this group of objects clearly suggests their deeper significance. As a definitional category encompassing hundreds of examples both in museums and on the art market today, specimen tables beg answers to multiple complex questions. What are we, as scholars, to do with an overwhelming abundance of examples made in a notably consistent manner? How do we account for their popularity and survival, and how might we consider them through more critically and theoretically engaged lenses? While the great number of specimen tables produced firmly situates them in relation to narratives around the fashion, taste, and stylistic concerns of this period of history, they are simultaneously manifestations of broader cultural and intellectual paradigms that also characterise the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, to misappropriate Claude Levi-Strauss’s famous formulation, specimen tables are good to think with.¹¹ Whether one is undertaking an examination of specimen tables as a broad category, reading individual tables closely, or paying sustained attention to the small fragments that made up their surfaces, thinking about specimen tables as standard eighteenth- and nineteenth-century decorative arts objects reveals much about the world that made them. This article introduces some possible contextual and theoretical frameworks for understanding this profuse yet underexplored category of object. Building upon the connoisseurial approaches and narratives of Grand Tourist souvenir acquisition that have previously dominated scholarship on this genre of furniture, this article seeks to theorise the specimen table through a reading that emphasises concepts such as geology, history, and the fragment. In so doing, it attempts to rethink the specimen table as a dynamic object whose fragmented surface marries the historical, the environmental, and the decorative, and which collapses the space and time of the ancient past with the imperial expansion that characterised the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world.

Tables on the Tour: Consumable Goods in Italy

Specimen tables were regularly seen and acquired by Grand Tourists of various nationalities during their travels around Continental Europe throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This section provides an introduction to the earliest forms of specimen tables for purchase, namely those acquired by Grand Tourists, giving a sense of the kinds of tables purchased by travellers as well as the ways in which they were acquired.

The constituent fragments of specimen tables were reputedly sourced from ruins, archaeological excavations, and the destruction of classical monuments, sites, and surfaces such as mosaic pavements. For example, in 1773, Thomas Martyn and John Lettice recorded “a great quantity of African marble” found at Portici, “out of which some tables were made”.¹² This was a task likely undertaken by stonecutters (*scalpellini*), who, as Elizabeth Fairman has suggested, “would have had a stock of decorative stones, including rare, ancient slabs that would have been salvaged from archaeological digs, various engineering works, or the demolition of ancient villas”.¹³

In addition to tables being purchased directly from such skilled artisans, they were available from shops and dealers. Sometimes collectors in Britain entrusted their purchases to family members, as when Thomas Watson-Wentworth, first Marquess of Rockingham, asked his son, Charles, Lord Malton, to make such acquisitions on his behalf: “if when at Rome you chuse to lay out 4 or 500£ in Marble Tables, statues, as you Shall judge agreeable to you I will answer your Bills to that summ”.¹⁴ Henry Temple Palmerston obtained a pair of marble-topped tables from the artist-cum-dealer Piranesi, as well as “two granite tables for £30 and two tables of green porphyry with Alabaster border for £37” from an unknown source.¹⁵ An unspecified type of table also features in the account of Italian shopping by Sydney, Lady Morgan, in which she recorded how “every town in Italy has its *Bottegone*, or great shop, *par excellence*; which, sometimes called *Bottega Francese*, is invariably and exclusively filled with French merchandise and manufactures. There, lamps and stockings, gloves and tables, rouge and loungers, caps from the Palais-Royal and china from Sevres, the ornaments of the boudoir and the necessaries of the pantry, are all purchased by the upper classes”. In Lady Morgan’s account, characterised by “petty dealers, with various small wares, vegetables, fruit and fish”, tables occupy the same space as sausages, “spangled fans, silver combs”, and “coral necklaces”.¹⁶ As such, furniture was one element of a veritable cornucopia of consumable goods available for purchase on the Tour. Indeed, the specimen table’s status as a fashionable commodity is exemplified by the tabletops taken from the *Westmorland*, a British privateer frigate captured in 1778, which contained

fifty-seven crates of art objects collected by aristocratic tourists. At least six specimen tabletop slabs were included in the ship's ill-fated cargo, which arrived in Spain as part of a diverse shipment of sculpture, marble fragments, prints, paintings, and books, as well as cod, anchovies, silk, coral, and Parmesan cheese, among other luxuries. ¹⁷

With many of their constituent fragments emerging from the antiquity-rich soil of the *cava*, specimen tables can be profitably located within the "digging and dealing" models of collecting discussed by scholars such as Clare Hornsby and Ilaria Bignamini, who have described the complex and protracted routes that classical sculpture and works of art followed from marble yard to British country home. As Hornsby and Bignamini have noted, all objects found at excavation sites, including statues, busts, inscriptions, slabs, and even water pipes, had to be recorded and reported to the *Commissario*, the keeper of classical monuments and their fragments in Rome and throughout the Papal States. The *Commissario* would have to inspect these objects before they could be moved or sold, but only after the share due to the *Reverenda Camera*, the Papal Treasury, had been agreed. ¹⁸

Despite the thriving trade in illegal treasure hunting, which has left substantial archival gaps, the textual record of the formal machinations of the antiquities market at the time—from licence documents to correspondence between dealers and buyers—has ensured that extensive documentation of many excavations and their finds survives. Specimen tabletops repeatedly crop up within these sources. For example, in 1771, Isaac Jamineau sold, among other antiquities such as "*una colonnetta di alabastro orientale alta palmi cinque una vasca longa palmi sei antico di tipo africanato*", "*una tavola con ornate di pietre diverse*", while Thomas Jenkins, the famous art and antiquities dealer, exported "*due tavole di graniti di palmi quattro*", and sold another specimen table to Sir George Strickland, who travelled to Italy between 1778 and 1779. ¹⁹ Likewise, we know that Henry Blundell, of Ince Blundell, received two tabletops made by Ferdinando Lisandroni from a slab of *verde antico* as a gift from Pope Pius VI, given in exchange for a sarcophagus donated by Blundell when he could not secure its export licence. ²⁰

As a result of these (sometimes vexed) transactions, specimen tables feature in the collections of estates such as Osterley Park, Powis Castle, and Castle Howard. ²¹ Sold by merchants to their eventual British owners, many slabs were attached to bases made by local artisans once home. ²² At Petworth House, for example, tabletops made from porphyry and *verde antico* were affixed to giltwood frames supplied by the English furniture makers Whittle and Norman sometime around 1760. ²³ The easy integration of classical object with English furnishing is exemplified by a specimen table owned by

Soane, who acquired “a mahogany frame reeded all round on turned and reeded legs on castors for a marble top” from Edward Foxhall Senior in 1816 for one of his specimen tops. ²⁴ The slab, perhaps acquired during Soane’s 1778-1780 Grand Tour, features twenty-eight perfect squares of specimen marbles, and was one of several examples owned by Soane, but it seems to have been the only one to be fitted with a dedicated base (fig. 4). ²⁵



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Figure 4.

Edward Foxhall Senior, Rectangular mahogany table with brass frame of marble samples, 1800, mahogany, brass, and marble, 68.5 x 59 x 46 cm. Collection of Sir John Soane's Museum, London (MRG4). Digital image courtesy of Sir John Soane's Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Evocative Fragments

Soane's *Description of the House and Museum of the North Side of Lincoln's Inn Fields*, an ekphrastic translation of his home, hints at how he (and, therefore, other contemporary collectors) may have conceptualised fragments such as those collaged into the surfaces of his slab tabletops. Soane writes: "on every side" there are "objects of deep interest alike to the antiquary who loves to explore and retrace them through ages past; the student, who, in cultivating a classic taste, becomes enamoured of their forms; and the imaginative man, whose excursive fancy gives to each 'a local habitation and name' in association with the most interesting events and most notable personages of the past of history has transmitted for our contemplation".²⁶ Soane's characterisation of classical objects as transportive devices that entrance viewers by conjuring imaginary geographical contexts certainly finds its echo in tourist literature of the period, which consistently figures both historic ruins and geological specimens as evocative pieces of the landscape. Reading specimen tables against contemporary British tourist narratives that mention the stones and fragments encountered while travelling accordingly suggests how we might think more conceptually about this type of furniture, providing a model for understanding these objects wherein their fragmented surfaces could conjure the imaginary and experiential contexts of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century travel.

Tourists often viewed and acquired specimens, pieces of antiquity, and mosaicked surfaces during their travels, making the fragment a central material form for travellers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Charles Dickens's character Meagles, for example, comes back from his Italian sojourn with "morsels of tessellated pavement from Herculaneum and Pompeii" in *Little Dorrit*.²⁷ Indeed, fragments of classical material culture repeatedly appear in literature documenting travels around Italy, with writers such as Selina Martin recording that she saw "the famous grotto of the Sybil", "the ground on all sides strewn with beautiful pillars and fragments of marble"—ruins that might have made apt raw materials for later transposition into specimen marbles.²⁸ Maria Graham's travel narrative likewise conveys the impression of the Roman campagna as riddled with the fragments of antiquity—"many of [the hills] are crowned with the ruins of towers, of temples, and of tombs, whose painted ceilings and Mosaic flooring now and then attract the eye of the passing traveller. As we drove along, the polygonal pavement of the antique road frequently appeared, and on either hand the plough-share annually makes discoveries which, unless they timely attract the notice of an antiquary, or the avarice of a marble-worker, it buries [*sic*] again the next season".²⁹ These texts reinforce what Rosemary Sweet has called the "perception of Rome as cabinet of curiosities",

presenting it, and Italy more broadly, as a land of glittering morsels, its fields littered with the fragments of urns, its beaches covered with a layer of lapidary detritus, the very walls of its houses covered in an intricate canvas of ancient gems.³⁰

This body of travel writing is remarkable for the impressive material knowledge demonstrated by authors as they identify and describe the precious stones and minerals encountered on tour.³¹ Anna Riggs Miller's description of the Pantheon's pavement, for example, lists "a great variety of morsels of fine Italian marble, opaque gems, alabasters, agates, and jaspers", while she designates the floors of the Basilica di San Marco as one of the church's "numberless rarities" thanks to the "carnelian, agate, jasper, serpentine, and verd antique" that comprised its mosaics.³² Like Miller, Hester Piozzi was particularly taken with the mosaic floor of the Pantheon, whose pavement was inlaid "so as to enchant the eye with its elegance". She continues by recording that the pavement "dazzles one with its riches: the black porphyry, in small squares, disposed in compartments, and inscribed as one may call it in pavonazzino perhaps; the red, bounded by serpentine; the granites, in giall antique".³³ These texts show comprehension of different types of marble and other forms of precious stone, a form of knowledge that evokes the kinds of interactions we might presume were had with the labelled and numbered specimen tabletops produced during the period, which, as Fairman suggests, should be considered as objects of "antiquarian curiosity".³⁴ Important examples of such tops are those captured from the *Westmorland*. Described in the ship's inventory as "beautiful marble tables inlaid with various fine stones", the decorative tabletops are inlaid with samples of stones arranged in a rigid, geometric format, with each specimen assigned an individual number.³⁵ An attendant key for the purpose of distinguishing the marbles would often accompany such slabs, allowing for continued analysis and comparison of the individual specimens upon arrival on British soil. A rare surviving example of a specimen table complete with such a list is housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, having belonged to a successive triumvirate of collectors, namely Dr. John Fothergill, Dr. J. C. Lettsom, and the architect George Gwilt, the latter of whom purchased the slab in 1824.³⁶ The original handwritten key identifies each of the 137 specimens of Italian marble within the table, including pieces whose provenance apparently related to Roman ruins.³⁷

Beyond Piozzi's ability to recognise the variety of specimens on display, the extract is noteworthy as the author directly compares these fragmented mineralogical surfaces with inlaid marble tables, exclaiming that they "have an indescribable effect, no Florence table was ever so beautiful".³⁸ Although it is not clear whether Piozzi is referring to *pietra dura* examples or traditional

specimen tables here, she nevertheless continues a reading of these surfaces as spaces that align the various visual and material cultures of the Tour, as begun in her discussion of the Villa Borghese. Describing the residence in ecstatic terms—“the tables! the walls! the cameos stuck in the walls! the frames of the doors, all agate, porphyry, onyx, or verd antique!”—she presents table, furnishings, and space as of shared mineralogical richness.³⁹

Beyond their identification with the opulent surfaces of the Italian city, the antiquarian nature of such fragments is also repeatedly highlighted in travel literature from the period. For example, in a passage from *A Visit to Italy* (1842), Frances Trollope recalled the fragments of “antique statuary, in which the first glance of an unlearned eye discerns little or nothing beyond a mutilated piece of marble, interesting perhaps, from its well-authenticated antiquity, but worthy of attention from no other cause. A lengthened examination of this fragment, however, will very often force upon the mind such a conviction of the truth of its details as leads to wonder and delight”.⁴⁰ Objects like Trollope’s mutilated marble sit comfortably between Samuel Johnson’s roughly contemporary definition of antiquities as a “remain of ancient times; an ancient rarity”, and Crystal B. Lake’s more recent theorisation of the artefact as a fragment that exceeds “the perceptual capabilities of its immediate observers while that which persists must continue to be available for observation”.⁴¹ Within this formulation, specimens of ancient stone recall a known (or presumed) “shape and history”; yet that which is broken, absent, or lost, prohibits full identification, opening up conceptual space wherein numerous imaginary, and specifically historical, contexts can be projected.

The Latin root of fragment—*frangere*—means to break into pieces. This etymological reference to the relationship between the part and the intact reminds us of the fact that the fragment is (or at least was) always an element of a larger whole.⁴² As Deborah Harter argues in *Bodies in Pieces*, the fragment is always “a part in a larger system”, whether that whole relates to its fragment’s former state or its new material relationships.⁴³ While previous literature on the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fragment has most often focused on the “fragmentary mode” in Romantic poetry and on contemporary interest in the ruin, an interdisciplinary reading allows us to recognise the pervasiveness of this dialogue of part and whole within a range of visual, material, and literary forms. Through this reading, we can recognise the significance of the constituent elements of specimen tables not only as fragments in and on their own terms, but as objects that gain particular meaning when placed in dialogic juxtaposition with and against other objects, as facilitated through practices of acquisition, curation, and selection, of combination, placement, and creation. Within the space of

the table, made from an evocative juxtaposition of natural stones shaped through cultural means, these mediating processes assigned meaning and status to fragmentary objects, even when their originating contexts were absent, or only opaquely evoked.

Notably, fragments encountered on Tour functioned in highly mnemonic and experiential ways, evoking both scenarios of personal signification and much longer historical contexts. Both Miller and Piozzi record their overwhelming desire to dig in the grounds of classical sites to find specimens of ancient gems, or the “caryatid pillars said by Pliny to have graced” the Pantheon.⁴⁴ When Miller was unable to view the Caduta della Marmora cascade at Terni, she subsequently wrote to her mother that her husband, who had continued alone, had returned with incrustations “plucked” from its spray, “some of which he brought me in his pocket”, and which served to represent the experience in which Miller could not physically partake.⁴⁵ As such, the fragments encountered on significant journeys such as these can be understood as spectacles reduced to souvenirs, or history reduced to the enduring materiality of the object.⁴⁶ These examples highlight the role of fragmentary material culture in creating important moments when narrating the act of travel. Reading responses to the collected fragmentary objects found on Tour within their textual descriptions, we can see how highly experiential models of travelling, looking, and owning might have coalesced around the surface of the table, as an object that brought many such fragments together. The table therefore functions as an object that collapsed the sites and sights of such journeys within a unified material plane that commodified these experiences for eventual translation into an English collection.

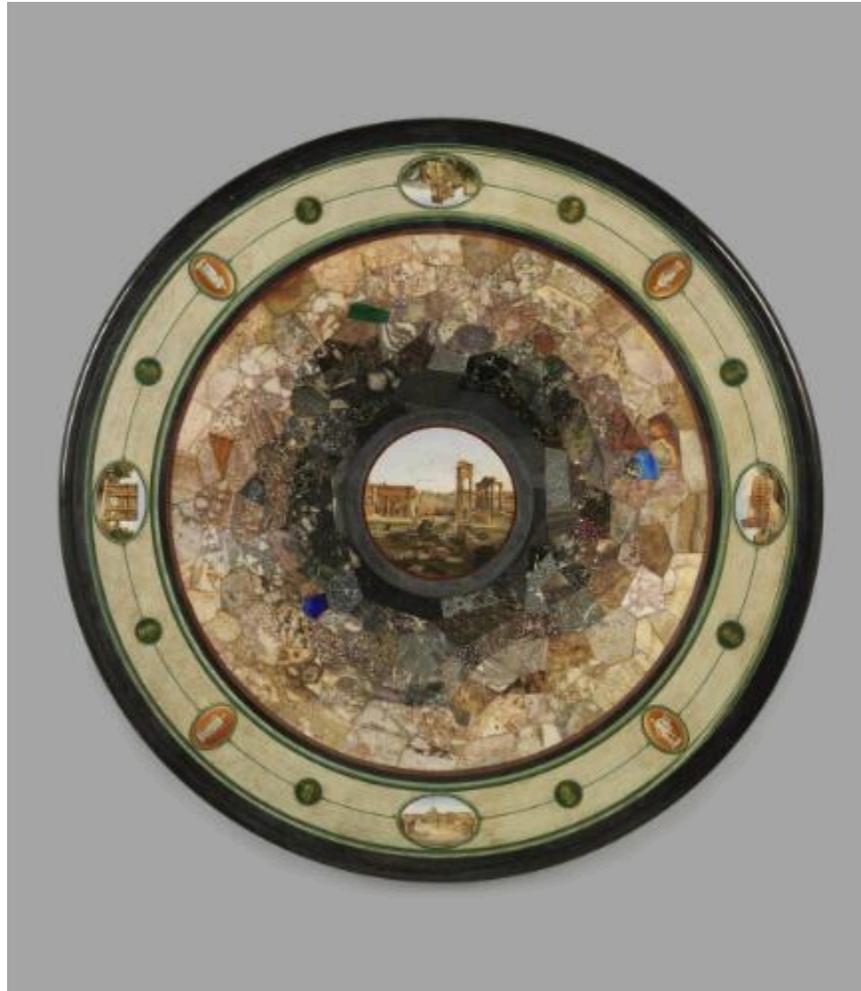
Site and Sight

Furthermore, a number of accounts by tourists from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries affirm that inlaid marble tables not only evoked Grand Tour travel but were among the regular sights experienced during it. Piozzi, for example, inventoried a table “encrusted with *verd antique*” as part of the furniture of her lodgings during her stay in Rome, while Starke recalled viewing “a table made of precious marbles” when she visited the Palazzo Barberini.⁴⁷ Of course, for contemporary tourists, such tables not only formed the physical furniture of the interior spaces they visited and the apartments in which they stayed, but were also routinely available for purchase as souvenirs and exportable home furnishings.⁴⁸ Such acquisitions constituted meaningful replications of the material cultures of the Tour translated home, or, as Coltman has described it, “a process of transposition from one cultural context”, with the object subsequently “appropriated into another”.⁴⁹

Alongside processes of transcription and translation, contemporary travel writing shows us that such tabletops also evoked the ruined materiality found on Tour. Miller's discussion of the several tables that she encountered in Italy, including "a table of *lapis lazuli*, which appears to consist of several pieces", and another "composed of excellent morsels of lapis, amethyst, and agate, 22 inches broad, and 3 feet 10 inches long", employed notably consistent language that connected these objects to the classical objectscape of the Italian past.⁵⁰ Deploying the fragmentary "morsel" as a shared descriptor, she relates the materiality of the table to many other objects found throughout her epistolary transcription of Italy's wonders. Using "morsel" to describe narratively rich specimens, she appends the term to everything from the pavement of the Pantheon to ruined temples. In so doing, she highlights the relationship between the geological richness of the sights of the Tour and the site of the table, one echoed by the fact that many such objects were literally composed from the ruins of ancient monuments.

This connection between site and sight was literalised within several nineteenth-century examples of specimen furniture. Figure 5 depicts one such table, now in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, donated by the prominent art collector Henry Vaughan. Made by the renowned mosaicist Michelangelo Barberi sometime between 1850 and 1867, it features a combination of micromosaics and specimen marbles, mounted on a base of black slate. Unifying specimen marbles with micromosaic production and *pietra dura* inlay work, this type of table combines a number of prevalent forms of Italian craftsmanship available for purchase in the form of souvenir objects throughout this period. Specimen tables joining these crafts became particularly popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the plethora of examples surviving from these decades.⁵¹ Designs of this type typically feature a central micromosaic plaque depicting a famous site associated with classical antiquity, such as the Colosseum, the Tomb of Cecilia Metella, the Temple of Vesta, the Pantheon, or the Doves of Pliny. The Victoria and Albert Museum table depicts the Forum, another location favoured by the producers of such objects. The micromosaics forming the outermost border of the table depict a mixture of capriccios of Roman monuments and sculpture (including the Temple of Vesta, the Colosseum, St. Peter's Square, the Arch of Titus, the Capitoline Flora, and the Belvedere Apollo) alongside representations of Italian worthies such as Virgil, Horace, Galileo Galilei, Raphael, Michelangelo, Dante, the Roman emperor Augustus, and Cicero, a significant inclusion given the transformation of Italy into a unified nation around this time. Developed by mosaicists employed by the Vatican Mosaic Workshop, micromosaics depicting such sights became increasingly popular from the late 1750s.⁵² When visiting Rome in 1817, Charlotte Eaton noted the proliferation of micromosaic wares and their producers within the city, describing "hundreds of artists, or rather artisans, who carry on the

manufactory of mosaics on a small scale. Snuff-boxes, rings, necklaces, brooches, earrings, &c. are made in immense quantity; and since the English flocked in such numbers to Rome, all the streets leading to the Piazza di Spagna, are lined with the shops of these Musaicisti".⁵³



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Figure 5.

Michelangelo Barberi, Black slate with inlaid marble specimens and micromosaics tabletop, 1850–1867, stone, overlaid with a mosaic of coloured marbles and other stones, 83.5 x 3.1 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (924-1900). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Variouly bordered or surrounded by specimen marbles, the surfaces of this type of specimen table draw a direct link between the depicted sight and the material site of Rome. Unlike the neatly arranged specimen marbles of tables made in the previous century, the Vaughan donation deploys a tonal gradation of bands of stone, which undulate from deepest grey-black to rosy-pink and fleshy yellows at its outermost edge (fig. 6). Amid this jumble of

fragments, individual pieces of porphyry and *verde antico* stand out, and likewise the brilliant blue of a slice of lapis lazuli interrupts its formal coherence. Thanks to their unregimented forms, the table's specimens evoke not only a natural, even geological mode, but the classical fragment in its raw form, as confirmed by a note affixed to the tabletop's reverse, which identifies its marbles as "found in the Palace of the Caesars on the right of the Forum". Fragmentary souvenirs that related to the landscapes, sites, and histories of the places visited by travellers during this period thereby evoked Horace Walpole's conceptualisation of souvenirs as literally the inanimate parts of places visited, small objects liberated from their imbrication within larger cultures to become pieces of them.⁵⁴ By unifying these specimens with a visual depiction of the very space from which the stones were reportedly sourced, the table collapses the physical site of the city with its famed sights, thereby rendering the connection between the specimen table and the place of its production explicit. In this way, they evoke Richard Wendorf's formulation of Rome as a site of "perpetual double-exposure", wherein the ancient and modern cities coexist in powerful and evocative ways through its enduring classical material culture.⁵⁵



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Figure 6.

Michelangelo Barberi, Black slate with inlaid marble specimens and micromosaics tabletop (detail), 1850-1867, stone, overlaid with a mosaic of coloured marbles and other stones, 83.5 x 3.1 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (924-1900). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

History and the Geological Specimen

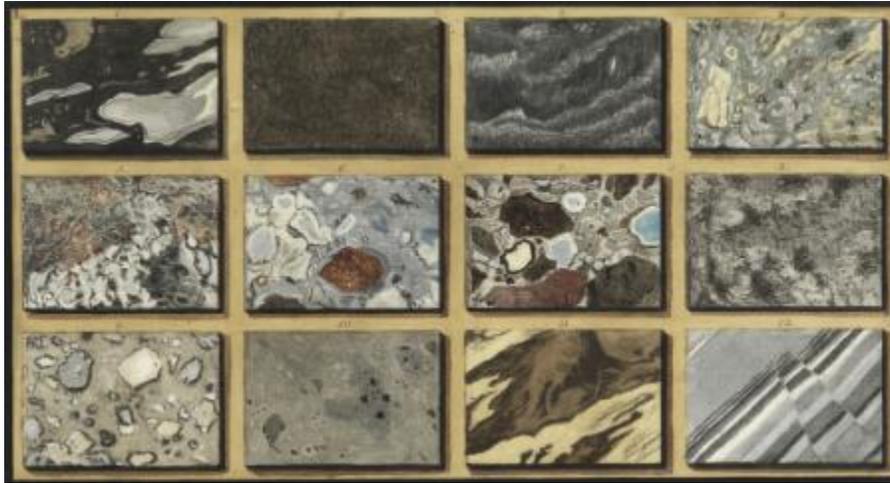
Beyond the individual experience of the traveller, the fragmentary objects and sites encountered on the Grand Tour also evoked more universal experiences, such as the passage of time and the frailty of human life.⁵⁶ Nowhere was this fragility more keenly displayed than at the ruined sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii. The excavation of these locations not only revealed preserved classical civilisation, but powerfully suggested timescales beyond the human. It is no coincidence that the concept of “deep time”—that is, the geological temporality that stretches beyond the scale of human history—was first coined in the eighteenth century by the Scottish geologist James Hutton, whose work revealed that the formation of the earth occurred over such a prolonged period as to render “human history comparatively inconsequential”.⁵⁷ As Stephanie O’ Rourke has noted, geological illustrations and artworks from this period accordingly suggest not only a past prior to human existence, but also a possible “geological future marked by the absence of living human actors”.⁵⁸

Marked by the traces of the classical past and the destructive forces of the earth’s “raw geological power”, Pompeii and Herculaneum also evoke Florence M. Heltzer’s concept of “ruin time”, an anthropo-biological temporality that combines both human history and natural processes of ruination.⁵⁹ Drawing upon this unique position, Noah Heringman has discussed antiquarianism undertaken in the shadow of Vesuvius as fracturing antiquity into “historical, prehistoric, and pre-human domains”.⁶⁰ For visitors on the Grand Tour, these overlapping temporalities were rendered even more palpable by Vesuvius’s ongoing activity throughout the eighteenth century, with violent eruptions taking place between the years 1765 and 1794.⁶¹ The constant rumblings of the volcano were recorded in Miller’s tour diary, when in 1770 she spent a night watching its eruptions: “it bellows like distant thunder, and then throws out flames and red-hot stones with *lava*”.⁶² As Heringman writes, this “shared experience of Vesuvius in action” aligned geological, ancient, and contemporary moments, a connection materialised through the volcanic matter that characterised the geological profile of the Bay of Naples.⁶³ From its “fields of fire”, to the tuff, or solidified volcanic ash, that blanketed the ancient towns, the region was literally formed from many millennia of volcanic eruptions.⁶⁴

Yet the status of rocks as “signs of obscure, titanic processes” beyond human comprehension is complicated by their presentation within specimen tables, a translation that rendered their forms commodifiable and ownable, reframing them from “nonhuman agents of violent deformation” into potentially knowable specimens, crystallised in time for future study.⁶⁵

Utilising fragments marked by both geological (in their formation) and historical (in their use by classical civilisations) time, classical specimens help to reconcile sublime unknowability through transformations of scale, ordering, and improvement. Subjected to cyclical and reciprocal processes of refinement, wherein rock was transmuted into stone so it could be translated into cultural objects such as buildings, monuments, and structures, before eventually being ruined, lost, rediscovered, and refined again, the object biography of the specimen table is one of transformative acts of commodification that rendered “magnitude, formlessness, inscrutable antiquity” into consumable goods. ⁶⁶

Hamilton’s *Campi Phlegraei*, published in Naples in 1776, directly contributed to the period’s “growing connoisseurship of the earth” and its attendant consumer culture. ⁶⁷ Featuring illustrations by Peter Fabris, the text chronicled Vesuvian emissions, ancient structures, and classical antiquities, which are discussed alongside thirteen plates depicting “the different specimens of Volcanick matters, such as lava’s tufa’s, pumice stones, ashes, sulphurs, salts”, of which the region was composed. ⁶⁸ Of the plates, which feature carefully posed displays, one is particularly significant: Plate XXXIX (fig. 7), in which the rigid presentation of perfectly square fragments undeniably resembles a specimen tabletop. Like the rest of the illustrations, which juxtapose encrusted seashells, snuff boxes, and “crystals commonly call’d Gems of Mount Vesuvius” with more clearly geological fragments, the image is an evocative combination of natural specimens and cultural objects. ⁶⁹ While Heringman notes that the specimens in these plates are grouped “on table tops or on shelves”, I would propose that Plate XXXIX is grouped as a tabletop, an interpretation hinted at by its numbered key. ⁷⁰



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Figure 7.

Peter Fabris, Specimens of the lavas of Vesuvius polished, in William Hamilton, *Campi Phlegraei* (Naples, 1776), Plate XXXIX, 1776, hand-coloured engraving. Digital image courtesy of Sepia Times/Universal Images Group via Getty Images (all rights reserved).

This was an appropriate mode of presentation given that specimen tables featuring Vesuvian fragments would become a popular sub-type. As with the other types of specimen table discussed, the production of these objects mirrored contemporaneous forms of Grand Tour acquisition. Tourists often record obtaining souvenirs of Vesuvius and the surrounding volcanic landscapes. Anne Flaxman (wife of the sculptor John Flaxman) recalled picking up “a piece of the sulphureous matter which was rather too hot to hold” following a breathless climb up the volcano, noting with satisfaction that she “manag’d to keep it” despite its preserved heat.⁷¹ Likewise, Lady Elizabeth Holland displayed a “complete collection of the volcanic eruptions of Mount Vesuvius, and the correspondent volcanoes of Lipari and Ischia” in her cabinet of curiosities at Holland House.⁷² Alongside the commodities, specimen slabs, and works of fine art included in the cargo of the *Westmorland*, several crates included sulphurs and lava.⁷³ As such, we can view lava tabletops as part of a wider economy of Grand Tour souvenir production, which included portraits, marble sculpture, and even the volumes of *Campi Phlegraei* itself.

Although often not the focus of accounts of his prodigious sculpture collection, it is notable that Charles Townley’s first antiquities were specimens of lava from Vesuvius and “slabs of coloured marbles from Capri and Pozzuoli”.⁷⁴ Later in 1774, Isaac Jamineau wrote to Townley to offer him five busts and two more “inlaid lava tables”, these made by “a rascal ... one Tamasino who shews the paintings at Herculaneum”, but Townley would not take the dealer up on his offer.⁷⁵ These were such popular souvenirs of the

tourist experience that Rudolf Eric Raspe warned potential buyers of “the subtle lava-dealers at Naples, who like their kindred Italian antiquity-sellers, cannot be supposed to be remarkably conscientious. I have seen dear-bought pretended Vesuvian precious stones, which, upon nearer examination, were found to be artificial glasses; and some tables, inlaid with pretended Vesuvian and Sicilian lavas, which, for the greater part, were extremely apocryphal, or consisted of marbles”.⁷⁶ As Richard Hamblyn argues, this anecdote demonstrates the importance of the veracity of specimens, as it was lava, not marble, that was “the souvenir sample of Naples”, and it was this unique materiality that gave it value as a specimen, and as part of a tabletop.⁷⁷

A surviving example of a lava specimen table from 1764 gives a good sense of the appearance of such objects (figs. 8, 9). Mounted on a base likely produced by the furniture makers Ince & Mayhew, it was one of a set of three lava tables that Brownlow Cecil, 9th Earl of Exeter, acquired for Burghley House, Lincolnshire, during his Grand Tour of 1763–1764. Tables of this class make use of an evocative combination of *pietra del Vesuvio*, *pietra di lava*, *palombino*, *giallo*, *granito*, *breccia*, sienna, and labradorite marbles, alongside green and red porphyry, some of which are displayed here in a rigid geometrical arrangement of polished discs interlinked by looped rings and stars, with a yellow marble surround. Such tables accordingly demonstrate how ornamental objects subsumed natural materials, specifically those with a classicising signification, within their decorative schemes. Here the geological and the classical pasts and temporal modes are linked. With Vesuvius’s pyroclastic flow responsible for one of the most infamous events in classical antiquity, the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the associational resonances of the tabletop, even in the lava’s transformed state, would have been powerful ones.



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Figure 8.

Ince and Mayhew, Wood table inlaid with specimen lava and marble top, 1764-1767, wood, lave, marble, 89 x 144.5 x 76.5 cm. Collection of The British Museum, London (1764,0928.1). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



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Figure 9.

Ince and Mayhew, Wood table inlaid with specimen lava and marble top (detail), 1764-1767, wood, lave, marble, 89 x 144.5 x 76.5 cm. Collection of The British Museum, London (1764,0928.1). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Colonial Objects

In its hybridisation of the ancient past and the eighteenth-century present, the specimen table therefore represents a rather typical Grand Tour souvenir. Grand Tour collecting, particularly the acquisition of antiquities, can be viewed as an explicitly colonial enterprise. Indeed, in telling language, Ilaria Bignamini argues that the “‘British Conquest of the Marbles of Ancient Rome’ can be regarded as one of the most important consequences of the ‘Golden Age’ of the Grand Tour”, while Heringman has also described contemporaneous antiquarianism as a “conquest of the past”.⁷⁸ Coltman has discussed this kind of material acquisitiveness in plainly imperial terms, arguing that from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards “Britain was no longer a peripheral European state paying lip service to ancient Rome via her literature and architecture, but instead an empire ready to take on the material legacy of that paradigm of empires”.⁷⁹ Apart from the intellectual association between Britain and great ancient empires created and reinforced by Grand Tour collecting, the model of digging and dealing was very much a colonial one of unearthing and removing the goods of one nation to another: classical objects reused, redisplayed, and integrated into the cultural heritage of the newly ascendant British empire. Although the objects were often purchased, this was not always the case, as the tourist John Morritt of Rokeby described, noting “some we steal, some we buy” in reference to the consumptive practices of travellers.⁸⁰ Indeed, tourist accounts teem with narratives of taking fragmented specimens of ancient stone directly from the earth. Writing from Naples on 16 March 1771, for example, Miller recounted her visit to the Cumæan Sibyl’s cave, located near Puzzuoli, in which she filled her pockets with some handfuls of the earth, among which there were an “abundance of antique bits of mosaic, broken agate ... one intaglio of jasper”.⁸¹ This manner of collecting and the archaeological and excavatory practices that went along with it are exemplary of the perceived ownership of the landscape that typifies British imperialism. As Coltman writes of British collectors: “their attitude to the *spolia opima* of their travels was proprietary rather than exploratory. They identified with the imperial Roman paradigm to such an extent that, rather than encountering the other, they seemed to be furnishing an indigenous tradition”.⁸² In the context of these encounters with the Italian landscape, strewn with classical objects ripe for the taking, specimen tables can accordingly belong to a broader model of colonialism predicated upon an unquestioned ownership of the land, and its resources and materials; occasioned by a deep-seated British belief that it was owed these classical objects and stones as the rightful heir to the ancient past.

A possible interpretation for the specimen table as directly connected to British imperialism and its artistic manifestations through the exploitation of the landscape and its resources is reinforced by the emergence of a specifically and explicitly colonial variety of specimen table during the second half of the nineteenth century. Like the eighteenth-century tables that made use of Italy's distinct history and geological record by employing classical stone and materials such as lava, these late nineteenth-century tables also employed distinctive regional materials, specifically those rendered accessible by the rise of the British empire. As a direct response to expanded colonial geographies, this group of tables inherited the visual and material languages established in eighteenth-century Continental European examples—that is, of fragmented specimens of specific types of notable or rare materials—but used them in tabletops made not of stone or minerals, but of inlaid “exotic” woods. As such, the tables can be read in relation to Richard Wrigley's model of artistic influence, which seeks to look beyond the “transhistorical universal joint that is invoked in order to articulate links between all manner of artefacts and styles”, to instead highlight “the particular models, mechanisms, and metaphors by which means influence was understood to work at a given moment”.⁸³ Beyond the aesthetic commonalities between objects made across two centuries and within distinct geographical contexts, read in this way, specimen tables emerge as a distinctive cultural mode, one which reflects the particular “models, mechanisms, and metaphors” of empire as much as it does histories of taste and collecting.

Such wood-inlaid tables were made in parts of the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, India, and Sri Lanka, these areas' local flora and fauna being utilised to produce tables that directly employed the geographies of empire and the very physicality of which echoed the possessive commodification of colonialism. “Ceylonese” tables form a particularly distinct local grouping, comprising a large number of examples characterised by radially inlaid spirals of woods that emanate from the central point of the tables, which are typically round, hexagonal, or octagonal in shape (fig. 10). Employing a mixture of materials such as ebony, palm, zebra wood, satinwood, and other regionally specific materials such as ivory, they showcase the botanical and natural fecundity of the area through a highly aestheticised presentation of colour and grain. This exhibitionary mode for showing off the fruits of empire was exploited by the organisers of contemporary international exhibitions, where wooden specimen tables were frequently displayed.⁸⁴



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Figure 10.

Wood inlaid centre table, mid-nineteenth century, ebony specimens, 79 x 48 x 122 cm. Digital image courtesy of Christie's (all rights reserved).

Exemplars of this form of specimen table were made by Ralph Turnbull, a Scottish furniture maker who set up shop in Jamaica sometime around 1815.⁸⁵ One of a number of Scots who sought to exploit the business opportunities afforded by imperial expansion, Turnbull consistently used the indigenous woods of Jamaica in his designs, employing mahogany, rosewood, cedar, logwood, palmetto palm, ebony, allspice, wild lime, Jamaican dogwood, live oak, and coconut palm. Figure 11 shows a particularly impressive example of his workshop's furniture, recently acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. The subject of important new scholarship by Catherine Doucette, the table uses the indigenous woods yacca and mahoe to create heraldic designs, *trompe l'oeil* elements, and vignettes of what we presume to be Jamaican scenery.⁸⁶ Less intricate, but nevertheless significant, are an array of smaller tables produced by the same workshop that follow the typical language of specimen display, featuring concentric circles of mahogany, palmwood, and satinwood, alternated so as to emphasise visual contrasts between individual wood specimens.⁸⁷ As Cross has argued, Turnbull took

particular interest in the indigeneity of the woods used in his furniture, as evidenced by an advertisement for the company that asked people to send him “any new or unnamed specimens of wood, the leaf, flower, and fruit of the tree”, as he had an “excellent opportunity (by the assistance of a scientific Gentlemen) of ascertaining its real botanical name”. ⁸⁸ Beyond the self-evidently colonialist strategy of renaming plant varieties that were presumably only “new” and “unnamed” to the eyes of European colonists, Turnbull’s employment of a botanist is significant, as it denotes his participation in the botanical cultures and methodologies of the period. This reading is underlined by the existence of paper keys identifying the timbers used on several of his workshop’s specimen tables that associate Turnbull’s productions with the numbered examples discussed, and thereby with the “sciences of antiquity”, Heringman’s characterisation of the Romantic period’s shared material spaces of antiquarian and natural historical enquiry.



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Figure 11.

Ralph Turnbull, Wood inlaid centre table, 1846–1851, rosewood, ebony, bird's-eye maple, sabicu, satinwood, padouk, lacewood, palm wood, amboyna, mahogany, and oak specimens, 75 cm x 133.5 cm. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (2019.1803). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Henry H. and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund (all rights reserved).

The use of natural materials within this type of enquiry has been discussed by scholars such as Theresa M. Kelly and Kay Dian Kriz, as part of the botanical technologies of empire.⁹⁰ Kelly identifies the taxonomical modes that characterised the natural historical enquiry of this period as a method for mapping variety, thereby creating order and comprehensibility out of the chaos of generic diversity occasioned by imperial expansion.⁹¹ Beyond the decorative functions of specimen tables, the well-ordered presentation of their fragmentary samples renders them a kind of visual and material translation of the organisational mode described. It is not by accident that specimen tables are so named—their nomenclature directly evokes natural historical modes of compilation and presentation. Yet, while highlighting the

alien nature of these species by demarking them as worthy of individuated display, the table's formal adherence to established aesthetic models marks its specimens as nativised and domesticated: subsumed within time-honoured visual and material cultures of Europeanness, they are reshaped and marked as European themselves.

As such, these overtly colonial specimen tables evocatively emulated the material strategies of Britain's imperial Roman forebears, who quarried coloured marbles from the furthest corners of their vast empire in order to express their power over, and ownership of, distant lands.⁹² Read alongside the wooden specimen tables created at the height of the British empire, the inclusion of specimens of porphyry and *giallo antico* (as quarried in North Africa under the auspices of the Roman Republic) in eighteenth- and earlier nineteenth-century marble tables is a double echo of empire. Collectively, these objects function as a tangible record of past and present material conquest, one articulated through a shared visual and material language of collection, exhibition, and display that semantically united wood with stone, and several iterations of empire.⁹³ Sophie Thomas has argued that because the fragment is associated with "the incomplete and the open-ended", it is able to "operate more productively as a mode than simply as a 'kind': it uses, transforms, and hybridizes genres".⁹⁴ The fragmentary mode of the specimen table was a particularly apt form for such colonialist transculturation.⁹⁵ Repackaging the "possessive commodification" that characterised the Grand Tour into a framework of exoticisation within the space of the table, ancient objects and exotic curiosities alike were transformed into consumable goods. Utilising pieces of landscape and the fruits that it bore, their production literalised British ownership of the land in an ownable form.⁹⁶

Conclusion

To return to the opening image of this article, in Copley's portrait of the lizards we see a specimen table physically moved by many hands and placed among objects that call to mind diverse historical, geographic, and cultural contexts. As Jennifer L. Roberts has written of another of Copley's portraits that prominently features a table, his famous *Henry Pelham (Boy with a Squirrel)*, it is vital to consider the "transit, and the challenges [of] movement", in the consideration of these works, as a way to reinstate the formative geographical and temporal "intervals that determined the development of eighteenth-century art and material culture".⁹⁷ From the stone quarried and sourced in the table's creation, to its movement into the studio, and its eventual translation into and display within the pictorial space of the portrait, the image evokes the overlapping stories of manufacture, excavation, travel, and colonialism that typify this genre of furniture as a

whole. As these broader histories affirm, while an examination of individual tables can reveal highly particular stories of specific people and specimens, thinking across the broad oeuvre of surviving specimen tables demonstrates how they, as a genre of furniture, can also reveal much bigger narratives: global histories of natural materials; the complex chronologies of the geological record; and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century obsession with fragmentary things. By looking across this selection of objects, we gain a sense of the specimen table as a form of decorative arts production that became a recognisable model of knowing, understanding, and processing the world, something echoed by other forms of fragmentary production from this period, such as the commonplace book or the herbarium. Yet, as these examples demonstrate, the specimen table was also deeply connected with notions of *owning* the world—a characteristic typical of objects that were the material manifestations of imperialistic world building. These tables brought together fragments of natural materials as a kind of microcosmic replication of the fruits born from the very land of the empire. Yet it is only when considering the specimen table en masse and across two centuries that we gain a better understanding of these issues. This approach reveals how a collective of objects might be positioned so that we can think about them as reflective and constitutive of some of the seismic shifts that occurred in global eighteenth- and nineteenth-century politics and culture. When considered in this way, specimen tables must be understood not only as a critically complex site of knowledge production, antiquarian contemplation, and aesthetic surface experiment, but also as one upon which the more difficult legacies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture must be projected and unpacked.⁹⁸ Made from the material and extractive practices central to British imperialism, from the looting, plundering, and mining of local landscapes, specimen tables are inherently embedded with these histories.

As a space of both physical and semantic transformation wherein raw stone, minerals, and woods were reconstituted as cultural objects, and in which the classical past was linked with an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century present, the specimen table's bricolaged form is echoed by its multitudinous relationships to other cultural modes, historical moments, natural materials, and landscapes. Collapsing space and time, the environmental and the decorative, specimen tables are a powerful category of object through which to think about the ways in which the classical past and the imperial present were experienced, acquired, and consolidated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revealing how these processes were reflected within the very forms of the period's decorative modalities.

Footnotes

¹ Maurie D. McInnis, "Cultural Politics, Colonial Crisis, and Ancient Metaphor in John Singleton Copley's 'Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Izard'", *Winterthur Portfolio* 34, no. 2/3 (1999): 86.

- 2 A.A. Vasiliev, "Imperial Porphyry Sarcophagi in Constantinople", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 4 (1948): 3.
- 3 For example, 58.75.130a, b (Metropolitan Museum of Art), and NT 266650 (Basildon Park), NT 771744 (Osterley Park and House), NT 137668 (Uppark House and Garden), and NT 129481.1 (Knole).
- 4 For example, the 1764 lava table discussed later in this article is not on display in the British Museum but is instead housed behind the scenes.
- 5 See Martin Drury, "Italian Furniture in National Trust Houses", *Furniture History* 20 (1984): 38–44; Godfrey Evans, *Souvenirs: From Roman Times to the Present Day* (Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, 1999).
- 6 Kate Hay, "Mosaic Marble Tables by J. Darmanin & Sons of Malta", *Furniture History* 46 (2010): 157–188; Peter Thornton, "Soane's Kent Tables", *Furniture History* 29 (1993): 59–65; Freya Gowrley, "Craft(ing) Narratives: Specimens, Souvenirs, and 'Morsels' in A la Ronde's Specimen Table", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 31, no. 1 (2018): 77–97.
- 7 Ilaria Bignamini and Clare Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing in Eighteenth-Century Rome*, 2 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 1:301.
- 8 Adolf Michaelis, *Ancient Marbles in Great Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882), 164.
- 9 Vicky Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique: Neoclassicism in Britain 1760–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4.
- 10 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2005); Ariane Fennetaux, "Female Crafts: Women and Bricolage in Late Georgian Britain", in *Women & Things, 1750–1950: Gendered Material Strategies*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 91–108.
- 11 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 162.
- 12 Thomas Martyn and John Lettice, *The Antiquities of Herculaneum, Translated from the Italian* (London: J. Taylor, 1773), xi.
- 13 Elizabeth Fairman, "Inlaid Decorative Stone Tabletop", in *The English Prize: The Capture of the Westmorland, An Episode of the Grand Tour*, ed. M.D. Sánchez-Jáuregui and S. Wilcox (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 292.
- 14 Cited in Christopher Christie, *The British Country House in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 181.
- 15 *Catalogo d'impronti cavati da gemme incise dal Cavaliere Giovanni Pichler Incisore di sua Maestà Cesarea Giuseppe II, 1790*, cited in Bignamini and Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing*, 1:317; Christie, *The British Country House*, 250.
- 16 Sydney, Lady Morgan, *Italy*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn & Co., 1821), 1:299.
- 17 Fairman, "Inlaid Decorative Stone Tabletop", 292; Vicky Coltman, *Classical Sculpture and the Culture of Collecting in Britain since 1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 134.
- 18 Bignamini and Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing*, 1:24–25.
- 19 *ASR, Camerale I, Diversorum del Camerlengo*, b. 682, fol. 138v. *ASR, Camerale I, Diversorum del Camerlengo*, b. 679, fol. 235, cited in Bignamini and Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing*, 1:287–293; Coltman, *Classical Sculpture*, 153.
- 20 Bignamini and Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing*, 1:300–301.
- 21 Christie, *The British Country House*, 250; Drury, "Italian Furniture", 43.
- 22 Clive Edwards, *Eighteenth-Century Furniture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 118.
- 23 Drury, "Italian Furniture", 43.
- 24 Helen Dorey, "A Catalogue of the Furniture in Sir John Soane's Museum", *Furniture History* 44 (2008): 171.
- 25 Dorey, "A Catalogue of the Furniture", 171.
- 26 John Soane, *Description of the House and Museum on the North Side of Lincoln's Inn Fields* (London, 1836), 13.
- 27 Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1857), 140.
- 28 Selina Martin, *Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Italy, 1819–1822* (Dublin: W.F. Wakeman, 1831), 99.
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- 32 Anna Riggs Miller, *Letters from Italy, Describing the Manners, Customs, Antiquities, Paintings, &c. of that Country*, 3 vols. (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1776–1777), 2:193, 1:152.
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- 34 Mariana Starke, *Travels in Italy, Between the Years 1792 and 1798; Containing A View of the Late Revolutions in that Country*, 2 vols. (London: R. Phillips & T. Gillet, 1802), 1:203; Fairman, "Inlaid Decorative Stone Tabletop", 292.

- 35 Fairman, "Inlaid Decorative Stone Tabletop", 292.
- 36 Roman specimen table, c.1760. Marble, 5 cm × 79 cm × 178 cm. Museum no. W.54-1953, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- 37 Evans, *Souvenirs*, 23–25.
- 38 Piozzi, *Observations*, 2:130–131.
- 39 Piozzi, *Observations*, 1:434.
- 40 Frances Trollope, *A Visit to Italy*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1842), 2:322.
- 41 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1755), 1:146; Crystal B. Lake, *Artefacts: How We Think and Write about Found Objects* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 6.
- 42 Camelia Elias, *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 1.
- 43 Deborah Harter, *Bodies in Pieces: Fantastic Narrative and the Poetics of the Fragment* (Redwood, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 29.
- 44 Harter, *Bodies in Pieces*, 131; Miller, *Letters from Italy*, 2:130.
- 45 Miller, *Letters from Italy*, 3:132.
- 46 Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography 1600–1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 159.
- 47 Piozzi, *Observations*, 2:119–120; Starke, *Travels in Italy*, 2:34.
- 48 For example, it is reputed that Lord Torrington of Powis Castle acquired a *pietra dura* tabletop in imitation of that seen at the Palazzo Borghese. Drury, "Italian Furniture", 43.
- 49 Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 15.
- 50 Miller, *Letters*, 1:154.
- 51 See, for example, LOAN:GILBERT.951:2-2008, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- 52 Andrew Wilton and Ilaria Bignamini, *Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), 284.
- 53 Cited in Evans, *Souvenirs*, 26.
- 54 W.S. Lewis, ed., *Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 48 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 37:57.
- 55 Richard Wendorf, "Piranesi's Double Ruin", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 2 (2001): 161.
- 56 For example, for Jane Waldie, writing in 1816–1817, the ruins of Rome were the source of strikingly powerful feeling, while for the French traveller Constantin-François de Volney, "antique monuments, wrecks of temples, palaces, and fortifications, pillars, aqueducts, and sepulchres" provoked "serious and profound meditation".[fn]Jane Waldie, *Sketches Descriptive of Italy in the Years 1816 and 1817*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray), 1:xvii; Constantin-François de Volney, *Les Ruines, ou Méditations sur les revolutions des empires* (Paris, 1791), 2.
- 57 Stephanie O'Rourke, "Staring into the Abyss of Time", *Representations* 148, no. 1 (2019): 30–31.
- 58 O'Rourke, "Staring into the Abyss of Time", 41.
- 59 Florence M. Hetzler, "Causality: Ruin Time and Ruins", *Leonardo* 21, no. 1 (1988): 51–55.
- 60 Noah Heringman, *Sciences of Antiquity: Romantic Antiquarianism, Natural History, and Knowledge Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78.
- 61 Heringman, *Sciences of Antiquity*, 78.
- 62 Miller, *Letters*, 2:47.
- 63 Miller, *Letters*, 2:47.
- 64 Heringman, *Sciences of Antiquity*, 91.
- 65 Noah Heringman, *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 4.
- 66 Heringman, *Romantic Rocks*, 10. Indeed, Heringman specifically argues that the specimen trade "mingles the archaeological and geological past". *Sciences of Antiquity*, 92.
- 67 Richard Hamblyn, "Private Cabinets and Popular Geology: The British Audiences for Volcanoes in the Eighteenth Century", in *Transports: Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600–1830*, ed. Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 188.
- 68 William Hamilton, *Campi Phlegraei* (Naples, 1776), 5.
- 69 Hamilton, *Campi Phlegraei*, Plate LIV.
- 70 Heringman, *Sciences of Antiquity*, 108.
- 71 Ann Flaxman, Journal, 1787–1788, Add MS 39787, British Library, London, 70.
- 72 Thomas Faulkner, *History and Antiquities of Kensington* (London, 1820), 91.

- 73 Fairman, "Inlaid Decorative Stone Tabletop", 292.
- 74 Eloisa Dodero, *Ancient Marbles in Naples in the Eighteenth Century: Findings, Collections, Dispersals* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 5.
- 75 Jamineau to Townley, 25 January 1774, TY, 7/96, cited in Bignamini and Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing*, 1:288.
- 76 John James Ferber, *Travels Through Italy, in the Years 1771 and 1772*, trans. R.E. Raspe (London, 1776), 30.
- 77 Hamblyn, "Private Cabinets", 192.
- 78 Bignamini and Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing*, 1:1; Heringman, *Sciences of Antiquity*, 3.
- 79 Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 11.
- 80 Cited in Jonathan Scott, *The Pleasures of Antiquity: British Collectors of Greece and Rome* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 219.
- 81 Miller, *Letters*, 2:130.
- 82 Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 11.
- 83 Richard Wrigley, "Infectious Enthusiasms: Influence, Contagion and the Experience of Rome", in *Transports: Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600–1830*, ed. Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 75.
- 84 On this topic, see Robin Jones, "Furniture from Ceylon at International Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1904", *Furniture History* 40 (2004): 113–134.
- 85 John M. Cross, "Ralph, Cuthbert and Thomas Turnbull: A Nineteenth-Century Jamaican Cabinet-Making Family", *Furniture History* 39 (2003): 109.
- 86 Catherine Doucette, "Ralph Turnbull's Center Table: Re-Crafting Colonial Identity in Post-Emancipation Jamaica, c.1846–1851" (MA dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2020).
- 87 An example of this type was for sale online in 2021: https://www.1stdibs.co.uk/furniture/tables/center-tables/19th-c-jamaican-mahogany-round-specimen-table-attributed-to-ralph-turnbull/id-f_1195990/.
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- 89 Heringman, *Sciences of Antiquity*.
- 90 Theresa M. Kelly, "Romantic Exemplarity: Botany and 'Material' Culture", in *Romantic Science: The Literary Forms of Natural History*, ed. Noah Heringman (New York: State University of New York Press), 225–254; Kay Dian Kriz, "Curiosities, Commodities, and Transplanted Bodies in Hans Sloane's 'Natural History of Jamaica'", *William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2000): 35–78.
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- 98 I have borrowed the idea of "surface experiment" from the work of Jennifer Chuong. See "The Nature of American Veneer Furniture, circa 1790–1810", *Journal 18*, Issue 9 (2020), <http://www.journal18.org/issue9/the-nature-of-american-veneer-furniture-circa-1790-1810/>.

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Serving as Ornament: The Representation of African People in Early Modern British Interiors and Gardens

Hannah Lee

Abstract

Objects which featured representations of African figures in postures of servitude were common features in British houses and gardens of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This article focuses on three such sets of stands in the National Trust collections of Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park. Combining evidence found in letters and household inventories with analysis of the design of these objects, this article dissects the development of the decorative category of the “blackamoor”. It argues that, by exploring the language used to describe these figurative pieces of furniture, the manner in which they were displayed, and the materials from which they were made, we can gain a greater understanding of how decorative objects reinforced racial hierarchies through the normalisation of black servitude and explicitly celebrated the wealth and status gained through the exploitation of enslaved African people.

Authors

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Introduction

In the long gallery at Ham House in Richmond, a pair of stands flank a lacquered cabinet above which sits a portrait of Charles II ([fig. 1](#)). The stands are formed in the shape of two human figures made from carved softwood, which has been ebonised, painted, and then gilded. Over their heads, they support large tambourines into which each individual cymbal has been delicately carved. The two men depicted are naked to the waist. They wear skirts made from tobacco leaves or feathers, where the paint, which would once have made these highly colourful pieces, has now faded with time. They each wear a gilded turban on their heads and bracelets studded with bells around their wrists and ankles. There are quivers of arrows slung across their backs.

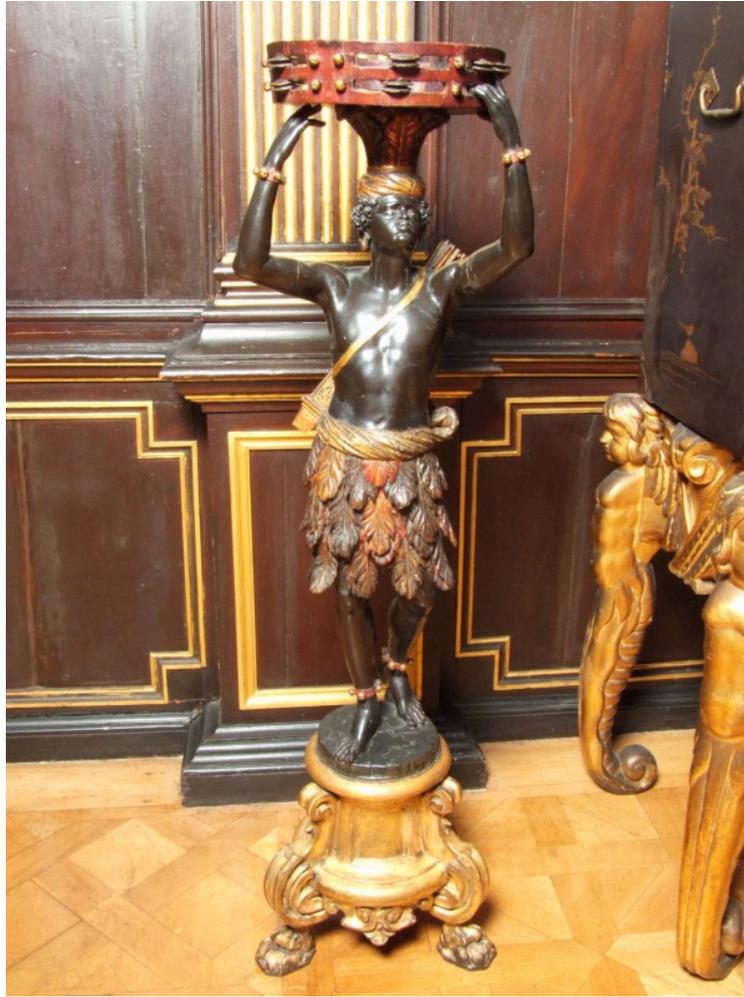


Figure 1.

Unknown artist, One of a pair of torchères, circa 1675, painted and gilt softwood, 126 x 35 x 30 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Ham House, Richmond (NT 11400880). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Christopher Warleigh-Lack (all rights reserved).

This article begins with a discussion of the documentary evidence of the “blackamoor” stands at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park, with a particular focus on the language used to describe the stands in letters and household inventories between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. It examines what the shift in terminology can tell us both about a developing vocabulary of race and ethnicity and whether it provides any indication of where these objects were made. The second part of the article will focus on the function and display of these pieces. It will present a case for considering the relationship between these pieces and objects such as dummy boards, which were designed with illusion and entertainment in mind, and the connection between these objects and people from Africa and of African descent who lived and worked in these properties during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It will then move on to a discussion of

the evidence of who might have made the sets of stands at Ham House and Knole whilst considering all three objects within the context of the growth of the domestic English lacquer industry. The third section will highlight how specific details of the stands' design place them within a long-standing European iconography of representing people of African descent. The set of case studies will broaden in the final section of the article to include examples of other objects such as candlesticks and sundials, which demonstrate the breadth of popularity for such designs.

Any examination of these pieces today must be framed within the growing body of literature which focuses on the country house, race, and empire. The release of *Slavery and the British Country House*, developed from a conference in 2009 of the same name and published by English Heritage in 2013, marked a significant moment in the field of country house studies. In the introduction to the volume, the editors Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann cite the work of Alistair Hennessy on Penrhyn Castle and Simon Smith and James Walvin on Harewood House as early examples of research that explored links between individual properties and enslavement.¹ However, over the last decade, it is wide ranging research endeavours such as *Slavery and the British Country House* and the "Legacies of British Slave Ownership" project that have emphasised how many British families benefited from wealth gained from enslavement for generations.

Oliver Cox highlights a "global turn" in country house studies where "the country house and its collections increasingly function as pivot points out from the rural, the parochial and the English into global sites that help scholars explore the structures of power and inequality that sustained the British empire".² Object-led studies which focus specifically on the collections of such properties demonstrate how deeply saturated these colonial links often were, and, increasingly, the decorative arts are becoming part of this conversation. The "East India Company at Home" project, for example, highlighted how a wide range of objects, from porcelain to carpets and wallpaper "played pivotal roles in processes of imperial fashioning and refashioning".³

This study aims to contribute to the growing movement that calls for the decorative arts to be given greater value as complex historical sources. A number of scholars have argued that the European construction of the decorative "blackamoor" figure ought to be considered within a broader contextual framework. The scholarship of Adrienne Childs is foundational to this article's argument and presents a powerful case for thinking about how the "blackamoor" figure was "a means by which Europeans could celebrate, domesticate, and naturalize racial domination".⁴ Childs has pointed to the ways that these figures functioned as "a celebration of black servitude in the

guise of fashionable frivolity” in the form of German porcelain production.⁵ More recently, she has also demonstrated that the trope of “blackamoors” as forms of ornamental blackness extended to furniture, including the examples studied in this article. The stands at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park, along with other comparable examples in British country houses, formed part of what Childs describes as the “multidimensional matrix of ideas and contexts that transcended the limits of their specific functionality, implicating larger social issues such as the concept of race itself, black slave labour in the colonies, and the presence of black servants in wealthy European households”.⁶

“Two Indean Stands”

Central to understanding changing discursive practices around racialised decorative forms in the country house context are the references to these objects found in household inventories and letters, which provide a sense of how the vocabulary used to describe them changed over time. The set of stands at Ham House first appeared in the household inventory made of the property in 1677. It has been suggested that they were purchased by the Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale, John Maitland and Elizabeth Murray, as part of the extensive refurbishment of the property which followed their marriage in 1672. Positioned in the great dining room, the two figures were described in both the inventories of 1677 and in 1679 as “Two Indean Stands”.⁷ In 1683, they became “Two blackamore stands” and, in around 1729, when the cabinetmaker George Nix was employed by the 4th Earl of Dysart to restore the objects, Nix’s billed “For new Gilding and Japanning 2 fine Indian figures ... £4”.⁸ By 1844, when they were displayed in the picture gallery, the inventory describes “a pair of black figures on carved gilt pedestals—supporting two tambarines”.⁹

The origins of the set at Knole are not as easy to determine. This set cannot be definitively identified within the household inventories of the property until 1864, when that year’s inventory described them as “A pair of finely carved and painted Ethiopian Figures on carved and Gilt stands each supporting a Tambourine” (fig. 2).¹⁰ A number of sets of stands do appear in earlier Knole inventories, but the references lack any specific details which would directly identify these pieces as the figures with tambourines. In the inventory dating to 1706, twelve pairs of stands are mentioned, of which a reference to “One Looking glass 36 inches with Indian Table and stands” in the closet in the Lester Gallery provides the closest descriptive match.¹¹ It is possible that the stands came into the collection at Knole from the royal collection. In 1689–1695, Charles Sackville was Lord Chamberlain to William III and Queen Mary. As part of the role, which focused on managing the

domestic affairs of the royal family, he was permitted to remove any furniture in the palaces that was no longer required. Similar objects were present in the royal collection at this time. The inventory of Kensington House of 1699 describes “two india figures of wood guilt” in the queen’s old bedchamber.¹² The entry in the inventory comes at the end of a long list of all the pieces of china which were on display in the room. As these objects are described as “wood guilt” these pieces were clearly not made of porcelain and could have been used as display stands for the ceramics they are listed alongside. It is possible that these pieces were sent, along with all the porcelain mentioned in this room, to the Earl of Albemarle. Despite lacking documentary evidence to directly connect the stands at Knole to the royal residences, the presence of similar objects in the queen’s collection emphasises that the style had at least once found royal approval, a fact which would presumably have driven demand for similar pieces.

Similarities in design between the Knole set and the stands at Ham House suggest that the Knole stands can also be dated to the 1670s. Indeed, the stylistic similarities between the two sets are so evident that these two sets of stands were quite possibly the product of the same workshop. Their proportions are almost identical. The four figures hold the same posture; the Knole pair also support carved tambourines above their heads, have bells around their wrists, and wear turbans on their heads. The main difference between the two sets is that the supporting figures of the Knole set are female. In place of the feathered skirts, the two women wear elaborately decorated tunics with red painted sashes and trim, which are rolled down to expose the left breast of each figure. Around their necks, they each wear a long necklace of red beads which end in a diamond-shaped pendant. A jewel is placed at the centre of each turban. Unlike the Ham House pair, the coloured paint used to add these finishing details has survived with much greater vibrancy. The tambourines of the Knole set, which in the Ham House set are brown, are still a bright red with the individually carved cymbals picked out with gold gilding.

The stands at Dyrham Park do not share these distinct visual connections with the sets at Ham House and Knole. However, a letter dating to 1700 suggests that they could also date to the latter part of the seventeenth century (fig. 3). On 5 December, John Povey wrote to his uncle, Thomas Povey, from Dyrham Park in Gloucestershire. John Povey was the guest of William Blathwayt, another of Thomas Povey's nephews. Throughout the letter to his uncle, John Povey describes the various locations in the house where the paintings and pieces of furniture which had once been in Thomas Povey's collection were now on display. A few years earlier, finding himself in difficult financial circumstances, Thomas Povey had sold a number of pieces to his nephew William Blathwayt, who had recently completed substantial renovations of the house at Dyrham Park. ¹³



Figure 2. Unknown artist, One of a pair of torchères, circa 1675, painted and gilt softwood, 122.6 × 35 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Knole, Kent (NT 129512). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Jane Mucklow (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

Unknown artist, Stand, 1680–1700, painted giltwood, probably beech, 98 × 64 × 56 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Dyrham, Gloucestershire. Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images (all rights reserved).

John Povey writes: “In these several Apartments your pictures have a Great share in the Decoration as the two Black Boys have a Proper Place on Each side of an Indian Tambour in one of the Best Rooms”.¹⁴ The “two black boys” to which John Povey refers take the form of two depictions of African men, each kneeling and supporting a large gold shell above their heads. Both figures are dressed in red shirts decorated with a pattern in gold and loose pale gold short trousers. The skin of each of the figures has been varnished or lacquered, and the whites of the eyes have been picked out using paint. The facial expression of both figures is serious, and their brows are furrowed, perhaps to suggest the physical effort of supporting the shell. Each of the figures is kneeling upon a three-point gilded base. Their enslavement is clearly indicated by the gold shackles and chains, which feature around their ankles. This is highlighted still further by the gold collars, which are placed around each of the necks of the men. In addition to John Povey’s letter in

1700, the stands at Dyrham Park appear in the household inventory of 1710, referred to here as “2 blacks”. Karin M. Walton notes that by 1871 they were described simply as “stands for Flowers”. ¹⁵

The changing terminology used to describe these objects provides a unique insight into how these pieces were understood by those who saw them on display. The term “Indian”, whilst possessing obvious geographical connotations, can also be understood as a reference to the materials and techniques from which the object was made. The terms “blackamore” and “blacks” would have been used both to describe living individuals and to describe functional objects. As such, the references in John Povey’s letter and the 1710 Dyrham Park inventory to “the two Black boys” and “2 blacks” both simultaneously humanise and objectify the figures depicted, cementing a link between their skin colour and the state of oppressed servitude in which they are depicted.

Thomas Povey and William Blathwayt, the former owners of the Dyrham Park stands, played high-profile roles in England’s colonial activity during the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. Thomas Povey, the original owner, had a career which was defined by his influence over colonial affairs from the 1650s. Povey was appointed to the Council of Trade in 1655 and to the Council for America in 1657. In the 1660s, Povey became receiver-general for the rents and revenues of Africa and America and secretary of the committee of foreign plantations. ¹⁶ Like John Maitland, Duke of Lauderdale, who later lived at Ham House and quite possibly commissioned the set of stands there, Povey is named in the charter of the Royal Africa Company in 1663. Indeed, the costumes and arrows worn by the stands at Ham House bear a striking resemblance to the “two blackamores” detailed on the company seal. ¹⁷

Given his uncle’s connections, it is unsurprising that William Blathwayt, who was brought up by Povey, also achieved success in colonial administration. Blathwayt joined the Plantation Office in 1675 and soon gained a reputation for the organisation of colonial finances. In 1680, he was made surveyor and auditor-general of the king’s revenues in America. ¹⁸ Madge Dresser states that Blathwayt was “an energetic advocate of the slave trade”, whose position in the Plantation Office reportedly made him “well placed and willing to take bribes from those merchants and planters who wished him to use his influence on behalf of their slaving interests”. ¹⁹

Both Povey and Blathwayt were beneficiaries of colonial activity during this period, both financially and for the political influence which involvement in the management of such affairs provided. Equally, they both seem to have been keen to invest some of their wealth into furnishing and decorating their homes. At Dyrham Park, the profits of Blathwayt’s colonial career are woven

into the interior structure of the building, which he extensively remodelled between 1692 and 1702. The main staircase is made from Virginia walnut with panelling to match.²⁰ To a visitor to the house today, the origins of the timber of the staircase and its connections to a past inhabitant's dealings in colonialism might need to be pointed out. However, the presence of the kneeling figures of two enslaved men make the connection more apparent.

Serving as Ornament

Function was at the centre of these objects' purpose and plays a large part in their objectifying nature. The stands at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park could have been used for a number of different purposes, from supporting light sources to other decorative objects such as pieces of porcelain or flowers. Many objects which fall within this category, some of which were designed to support trays or torches, mirror the tasks that would have been performed by living servants.

It should be considered whether in some instances such pieces played a more performative role in the spaces in which they were on display. Comparisons can be made between these decorative figures and dummy boards, which were particularly popular in both England and the Netherlands from the second half of the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Deriving from the tradition of *trompe l'œil* and the inclusion of shadowy silhouettes in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, dummy boards were life-size figures of humans or animals, painted onto cut-out flat boards. They were placed in various locations within domestic spaces, and sometimes appear to have fulfilled a practical function, such as a fireplace cover or doorstop. Illusion was central to their purpose, imitating the presence of a living figure. As is the case with many of the torch-bearing figures representing African people, Clive Edwards has argued that both light and positioning played an important role in the deception of the dummy boards. "When they were to be seen at night, they were sometimes supplied with lighted candles, and in other cases they might be placed to be silhouetted against a lighted room, doorway, or staircase. For a successful illusion, a combination of lifelike painting, judicious positioning, and suitable lighting were essential".²¹

Edwards cites the account of Arnold Houbraken, from 1719, which describes how a gentleman placed a dummy board depicting a servant at the door to a salon where guests were entering. Houbraken goes on to recall the laughter as some of the arriving guests mistook the board for a living figure and attempted to give it a tip.²² Clare Graham provides another example of an unusual double-sided dummy board, thought to have once been in the collections of Clarendon House, which features the painted figure of a white liveried manservant on one side, and a depiction of a black man, who is

naked to the waist and holding an axe, on the other.²³ This is a highly racialised object and it is possible to imagine that part of its entertaining purpose was its ability to provoke different responses from visitors depending on which side of the board was visible. While both figures were evidently intended to momentarily unsettle viewers, the uniformed, white male servant, an expected presence in a house of this type, is deliberately presented as a benign, “civilised” contrast to the more threatening armed black man on the other side of the board. While the kneeling and servile figures of the functional stands at Dyrham Park, Ham House, and Knole were designed to emphasise the concept of a racialised hierarchy through their presentation of black servitude, this dummy board reinforces the idea of European superiority through the representation of African people as violent and uncivilised. As Adrienne Childs argues, Africans were frequently portrayed as “the most barbaric and savage” and were “often featured as the antithesis of the civilised European. Hierarchies and binaries espoused by these theories were reinforced through visual and literary tropes such as the Noble Savage, the Allegory of Africa and exotic blackamoor”.²⁴

Given their scale, it is difficult to imagine that examples such as the stands at Ham House and Knole could have possibly been designed as visual deceptions in the same manner as dummy boards. The stands at Dyrham Park, however, could have occupied such a role. As three-dimensional figures rather than flat dummy boards, figures such as those at Dyrham Park took the illusion one step further. Some examples of stands such as the figure which was once in the collection at the Old Court House, Hampton Court, appear to have been life-size and can be regarded as part of this wider culture of using artistic imitation and deception as a form of amusement (fig. 4).²⁵



Figure 4.

The Old Court House, Hampton Court, in *Country Life*, Vol. 84, Iss. 2176 (1 October 1938), 1938, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Country Life. (All rights reserved)

When we examine who might have encountered these objects in the spaces in which they were displayed, and under what circumstances, it is vital to consider that they were in houses where people from Africa and of African descent lived and worked. Although the provenance of the set of stands at Knole remains unclear, there is evidence to suggest that there were black servants working in the household during the seventeenth century and perhaps before. A document, dating to 1624, confirms the presence of two black servants who were working at Knole then. They are listed as Grace Robinson, who worked as a laundry maid, and John Morockoe, who worked in the kitchen and scullery. Both are described in the documents as “blackamoor”.²⁶

Gretchen Gerzina provides the example of references to a series of black servants employed at Knole who were all known as John Morocco, regardless of what their original name was.²⁷ Kim F. Hall has noted that the tradition of having a black servant with this name at Knole was continuous for over a century.²⁸ In her history of her ancestral home at Knole, Vita Sackville-West states that “there had always been one at Knole”, since the days of Lady Anne Clifford, whilst noting, fairly casually, that the tradition had come to an end “ever since the house steward had killed the John Morocco of the moment in a fight in Black Boy Passage”.²⁹ In 1662/63, the tailor James Abbot sent his bill to Knole for the task of making “the little blackamore’s

shute".³⁰ It is possible that the person described here was also one of the individuals given this name. Peter Fryer has described the common practice where African people who were enslaved or employed by titled families were renamed as the denial of "elementary human dignity".³¹ The dehumanising nature of this process is emphasised still further in the Knole context with the use of a single name over many generations and the reinforcement of embedded perceptions of racial and social hierarchies masked as family tradition.

At Ham House, visual evidence suggests the possible presence of a number of individuals from Africa or of African descent who were part of the Tollemache household during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A portrait dating to the early 1650s by Peter Lely shows the young figure of Elizabeth, Duchess of Lauderdale, during her first marriage to Lionel Tollemache. Dressed in a brown silk dress with full sleeves and swathed with a blue sash, the young duchess looks out to the viewer whilst reaching out with her left hand to touch some roses, displayed to her in a bowl by a stooping attendant who looks up to her face (fig. 5). The young man wears a pale green suit, with a single pearl drop earring hanging from his ear. The gold bowl in which he displays the flowers has a scalloped edge and is similar in design to the gold shells which the figures at Dyrham Park support above their heads. A second portrait, dating to about 1735, depicts Lady Grace Carteret, Countess of Dysart, with a small child and a young black boy in the attire of a servant (fig. 6). A spaniel and a cockatoo also feature in the painting. As is typical of the genre, the young black boy looks directly at the countess and the child, while the woman's gaze is fixed resolutely away from him to meet the eyes of the viewer.



Figure 5.

Peter Lely, Elizabeth Murray and an Unknown Attendant, circa 1651, oil on canvas, 124 × 119 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Ham House, Richmond (NT 1139940). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 6.

Attributed to John Giles Eccardt, Lady Grace Carteret, Countess of Dysart with a Child (Lady Frances Tollemache?), an Unknown Enslaved Child, a Cockatoo and a Spaniel, circa 1735, oil on canvas, 132 x 130 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Ham House, Richmond (NT 1139940). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images (all rights reserved).

Although the two young men represented in these paintings are portraits of individuals, the compositional structure of the paintings form a disturbing visual alignment with the wooden stands in the same collections. The individuals depicted in the portraits perform a servile function, offering flowers and holding the bird, but equally they are being used by the white sitters and the white artists as fashionable accessories to emphasise status. When considering stands such as those at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park, it is evident that their designs were formed by the same oppressive racist ideologies, which shaped the lives of so many individuals including people living and working in the spaces in which these objects were displayed.

Makers and Materials

The language used in documentary sources to describe the stands at Ham House and Dyrham Park provides little indication as to where these objects might have been made. Geographical or stylistic origins often appear in inventories of this period as a descriptive term. Italian, French, or Dutch would have been included by clerks as a means of identifying specific items of furniture. More than this, these geographical descriptions would have indicated particular values, both cultural and economic. Although we must be cautious of reading decisions made by individual clerks as indicators of wider documentary trends, if the stands in question had been imported from the Continent, it seems possible that this might have been noted in the inventories.

It has been stated previously that the set of stands at Ham House are Venetian.³² The association between these figures and the city is not unfounded. Objects which are described as *mori* or *moretti*, occasionally with the added detail of their function (torchbearer or a stand for vase), appear frequently in Venetian household inventories from the first half of the seventeenth century.³³ It is likely that a number of these figures that survive in British collections today were either made in Venice, or designed with Venetian examples in mind. A set in the collection at the House of the Binns in West Lothian includes the device of the Venetian Doge on their pedestals.³⁴ A chair in the collection at Sissinghurst Castle features the figures of two African men supporting each arm, and its design is directly inspired by the set of state room furniture which was created in Venice for the Venier family by the sculptor Andrea Brustolon in 1701 (fig. 7).



Figure 7.

Manner of Andrea Brustolon, Open armchair, Venice, circa 1880, limewood, pine, textile (silk), 128 × 88 × 79 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Sissinghurst Castle Garden, Kent (NT 802613). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Charles Thomas (all rights reserved).

A set of “moor” figures in the collections of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris must also be considered as part of this discussion (fig. 8). Measuring 117.5 cm in height, they are slightly smaller than the tambourine stands at Ham House and Knole but certain elements of their design are strikingly similar. Bells feature around the wrists and ankles of all three sets of figures. In addition, the turbans of the male figure in the Parisian set and the figures at Knole all feature a central diamond-shaped decoration. The bases of all three sets are highly similar in form, as is the posture of all the figures—each stands with their weight on one foot, with the heel of the other foot slightly raised. Given these close visual connections, it seems likely that if the Parisian set were not made in the same workshop as the Ham House and Knole pairs, then they were certainly closely associated. The designs were clearly the product of the same visual influences.

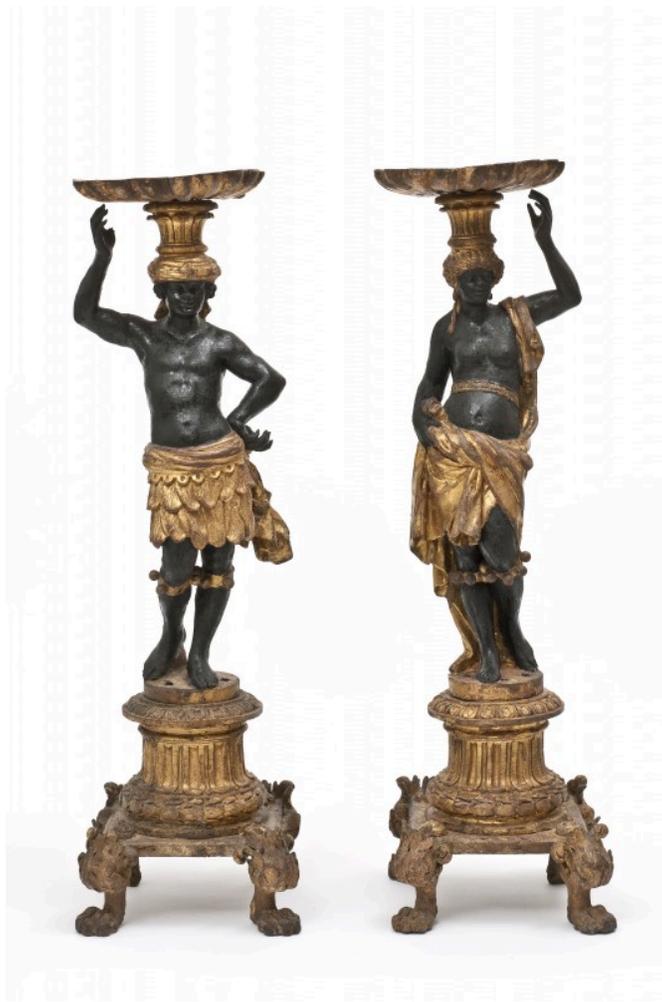


Figure 8.

Unknown artist, Pair of Torchholders, Venice, circa 1650-1660, carved lime tree painted black and gold, oak legs, height 117.5 cm. Collection of Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD), Paris (38364 (a) (b)). Digital image courtesy of MAD, Paris / Jean Tholance (all rights reserved).

The Parisian set has been dated to between 1650 and 1660, but no further information on its provenance is known. Nicolas Courtin has tentatively suggested that this set was Venetian in origin. Courtin notes that the style saw a particular rise in popularity in France during the middle of the seventeenth century with examples found in the inventories of elite French homes between 1652 and 1700. ³⁵

The Parisian set and its clear similarities with the pairs at Ham House and Knoke raises the question of where these pieces were made, and by whom. Despite its enduring association with the design, Venice was by no means the only city in Europe where objects which featured figures of African people performing a functional or structural roles were produced. A design for a

large gueridon by the engraver Jean Le Pautre enhances the possible French connection and a decorative cabinet in the collections of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam demonstrates that the use of African figures in Dutch furniture design was popular from the seventeenth century (figs. 9 and 10). This connection with the Netherlands is reinforced by an early reference to such objects in England. An entry in the diary of Henry Slingsby from 1638 describes a cast lead “blackamore”, which sits “holding in either hand a candlestick to set a candle to give light to ye staircase”. The artist of the piece is described as Andrew Karne, a Dutchman.³⁶ Over a century later, in 1761, J. Marsh notes a childhood fascination with a walking stick with “a Blackamores head upon it, curiously carved in the Dutch style”.³⁷ Adam Bowett challenges the assumption that such objects were always continental imports. On the stands at Dyrham Park, Bowett states: “It is usual to state that blackamoor stands were ‘Venetian’, and although many were apparently made in Venice during the nineteenth century, there is no reason to suppose that the illustrated examples are anything but English”.³⁸



Figure 9.

Jean Le Pautre, A Large Guéridon, France, late seventeenth century. Collection of the Getty Research Institute. Digital image courtesy of Getty Research Institute (public domain).



Figure 10.

Unknown artist, Cabinet, Antwerp, circa 1670-1690, oil on marble, 265 × 150.5 × 55.5 cm. Collection of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (BK-16434). Digital image courtesy of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (public domain).

In their refurbishment of Ham House during the 1670s, the Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale employed a number of different craftsmen to create furniture for their home, patronising workshops both in Europe and in London. The records of a number of these commissions include descriptions of items which could refer to the figure stands; however, they could equally refer to other pieces which can still be found in the Ham collection today.

Peter Thornton notes the record of a payment made by the Duchess to a certain Mistress v. der Huva in Holland for “a cabinet of black ebonie with a table and two gardons cost 440 guilders”.³⁹ In addition to this, James Yorke provides evidence of orders made by the Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale to a French furniture maker named Peletyer for a number of ebonised pieces to arrive during the summer of 1673.⁴⁰

The Duchess of Lauderdale's accounts reveal a number of payments made to different cabinetmakers from 1672 to 1683, including Gerrit Jensen, Jorkim Andler, Balthasar Gray, and Johannes van Santvoort.⁴¹ Surviving bills indicate that Gerrit Jensen made furniture for both Ham House and Knole during this period. Although Jensen's birthplace remains unknown, Adam Bowett and Laurie Lindey argue that the craftsman's signature, specifically his use of the double dotted capital J, which stands for the digraph ij in old Dutch, suggests that he was of Dutch origin.⁴² He was admitted to the freedom of the Joiners Company on 22 October 1667, when he was thirty-three or thirty-four years old. The "fine" of 30s. which he paid was the standard fee for admission by redemption, rather than the usual seven-year apprenticeship. Bowett and Lindey make the point that this, and his subsequent career, suggest that he did not complete his training in London, but in one of the great cabinet-making centres such as Amsterdam, The Hague, or Paris.⁴³ By 1673, Jensen was working from premises on the south side of Long Acre in Covent Garden, when the Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale were already customers. On 29 May 1672, "Mr Jensen Cabenett:Maker" was paid £9 "in full" for work produced at Ham.⁴⁴ If this payment represented a first commission from the Duke and Duchess then they were clearly impressed with the work he delivered. In 1674, he was paid £50 in part with a number of other substantial commissions recorded into the 1680s.⁴⁵ At Knole, bills for Jensen's work date from 1680 to 1697. The bill for 1680 relates to the commission of an elaborate silver cabinet with matching stands and a large mirror as part of the set.⁴⁶ His favour with both families is unsurprising, as, by 1674, he held the position of cabinetmaker in ordinary to Queen Catherine of Braganza. There is, as yet, no clear evidence to connect Jensen to the production of the figure stands at Ham House and Knole. Although he was clearly a craftsman favoured by both the Maitlands and Sackvilles, the documentary evidence which survives of his work for the families lacks a clear identifying reference to the stands that would confirm Jensen either made the pieces or imported them as finished goods to be sold.

If the stands at Ham House and Knole cannot be confidently attributed to Jensen, the details of a number of his high-profile commissions from the period do reveal the growing appeal of objects which display the application of the same materials and techniques, in particular the layers of dark varnish applied to create the skin tone of the figures. A bill sent to Knole by Jensen in 1690 details "Table stands and Glass Japan", which are still thought to be in the collection. Without clear evidence that the stands at Dyrham Park, Ham House, and Knole were imported, or conclusive documentary evidence which connects the objects to a particular maker, we must consider how such pieces fit within the domestic industry of furniture production and in particular the developing fashion for lacquer wares and chinoiserie.

The residents at Ham House and Dyrham Park clearly adopted the fashion for lacquered objects. John Povey's letter indicates that the "two Black Boys" at Dyrham Park had been placed either side of an "Indian Tambour", while the inventories of Ham House suggest that the "Indian stands" were positioned in close proximity to "two Indian screens".⁴⁷ In Venice, the increased appearance of pieces of furniture that featured depictions of African figures in household inventories directly correlates with the rise of the city's burgeoning domestic lacquer industry. By the 1660s, Venice was the foremost producer of lacquer in Europe, although by the eighteenth century it had lost some of its market to other centres of production such as Florence, Genoa, and Lucca.⁴⁸ It could be argued that the appearance of figures such as these in English homes during the 1670s could reflect a similar pattern. As in Venice, a clear correlation can be made between the development of the English lacquer industry and the growing demand for objects of this type.

Although East Asian lacquerware was known in Europe from the sixteenth century, the establishment of the Dutch and English East India companies in the early seventeenth century marked the beginning of a steady flow of objects into centres such as Amsterdam and London. This would soon be followed by the establishment of a domestic lacquer industry where makers would attempt to imitate the fine finishes achieved by their Chinese and Japanese counterparts. The production of lacquerwares in England initially relied upon the East Indies trade as the raw materials for lacquer production were not available in Europe. Gum-lac which formed an opaque varnish was imported by the East India Company from India.⁴⁹ The evident appetite for the style in England also drove innovation within the domestic industry and, as Maxine Berg notes, from 1700 to 1820, thirteen patents were registered for japanning and varnishes.⁵⁰ In 1688, John Stalker and George Parker published a *Treatise on Japanning and Varnishing* providing craftsmen with a step-by-step guide of the lacquering process, including suggestions for the types of pictorial designs which they might want to include, such as figures, buildings, and wildlife (fig. 11).⁵¹



Figure 11. John Stalker, Patterns for Japan-work, in George Parker and John Stalker, *A Treatise of Japaning and Varnishing* (London, 1688), 1688. Collection of the Getty Research Institute. Digital image courtesy of Getty Research Institute (public domain).

Close Readings

It is also clear that when used to represent skin tone, the material process of lacquering became central to the creation of a recognisable and racialised type within the decorative arts. In 1683, a bronze bust of Catherine Bruce, the mother of the Duchess of Lauderdale, was listed in the White Closet in the household inventory of Ham House as a “brasse head of her Grace’s mother”; however, in 1728, after the bust had been painted with a coat of black shellac varnish, it was described as a “Black[a]moors Head over the Chimney”.⁵² Analysis of the piece by the V&A in 2011 demonstrated that there was evidence that several layers of this patination had been applied

over time, suggesting that it was perhaps the desired original finish on the piece. While the application of such a technique was not unusual in bronze sculptures of many different subjects during this period, it remains noteworthy that, by 1728, this lustrous finish of black paint or lacquer had become synonymous with the “blackamoor” genre.

The use of lacquer to represent skin tone ought to be understood as part of a wider cultural development of the racialised representation of the bodies of African people during the period. This was by no means limited to visual cultures, and both Chi-ming Yang and Benjamin Schmidt highlight the manner in which the skin of the two African characters (the prince and the enslaved woman Imoinda) in Aphra Behn’s novella *Oroonoko* (1688) is likened to “perfect ebony or polished jet” and described as “japanned”. Yang argues that Behn’s representation of “African bodies as collectible artefacts” evinces how the text itself is an example of chinoiserie: “a fantasy of globality in the form of ornamentation”. Schmidt likewise states that Behn’s description of Prince Oroonoko invokes “a full inventory of material arts”.⁵³ The bodies of Africans depicted in the form of the stands at Ham House, Dyrham Park, and Knole demonstrate the close association of black skin with precious and fashionable commodities such as lacquer. To understand this association purely as visual, with black subjects offering craftsmen the opportunity to work with a highly valued material, or solely in the context of the rise of the domestic English lacquer industry, would be to bypass the unavoidable reality that African people were themselves viewed as commodities by the British consumers who purchased such objects.⁵⁴

Just like Behn’s textual descriptions of the physical appearances of two African people, the costume worn by the figures at Ham House can be interpreted as a fusion of geographical references. Even the smallest details of design must be understood within the context of a wider European construction of African culture presented in sources such as travel narratives, cartographic sources, costume books, and performance culture.

When comparing their design with contemporary allegorical figures of the continents, the tobacco leaf or feathered skirts and headdresses more closely align them with figures representing America than Africa. Bows and arrows, however, were frequently shown in allegorical depictions of both continents. Again, this could be interpreted as a random assortment of design elements brought together to create a sense of the “exotic”, but equally it could allude to a more nuanced understanding of the realities of the colonial world, albeit in a sanitised fashion. In her work on the tobacco culture of eighteenth-century London, Catherine Molineux demonstrates how shop signs and advertisements highlighted the widespread societal recognition of enslaved African labour on tobacco plantations in the Americas.⁵⁵ In fact, William Marshall’s frontispiece to *The Smoaking Age or*

The Life and Death of Tobacco (London, 1617) illustrates that this connection was already well established from the early seventeenth century (fig. 12). The engraving shows the small figure of a black man smoking a pipe displayed in the window of a shop. An early precursor to the carved shop signs of the eighteenth century, the figure is depicted in costume more closely associated with allegorical figures of Africans, including a breastplate, tunic, and a headband reminiscent of those worn by classical athletes.



Figure 12.

William Marshall, Frontispiece in *The Smooking Age or the Life and Death of Tobacco*, (London, 1617), 1617, engraving, 12.8 × 7.6 cm. Collection of The British Museum (Gg,4U.13). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The bells worn by the figures at both Ham House and Knole connect the pieces intrinsically with the popular early modern dance of the *moresca*, where the dancers would wear such bells and, in some contexts, blacken their faces. Similar bells can be seen on the sixteen wooden sculptures of

Morris dancers produced by Erasmus Grasser for Duke Albrecht IV of Bavaria in 1480 (fig. 13). Now in the Münchner Stadtmuseum, the set of dancers includes a depiction of a young African man. In *A Treaty on the Art of Dancing*, Giovanni-Andrea Gallini notes the custom of African dancers wearing bells around their ankles stating that “the women ... have little bells tinkling at their feet”.⁵⁶ The musical theme of the Ham House and Knole stands is extended by the tambourines which the figures support above their heads, an instrument which, Irene Alm has argued, was played by dancers representing African characters in seventeenth-century Venetian operas.⁵⁷



Figure 13.

Erasmus Grasser, Morris Dancer, 1480, painted limewood, 63 cm. Collection of Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich (K-Ic / 222). Digital image courtesy of Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich (CC BY-SA 4.0).

The wearing of earrings, such as the gold hoops seen on the figures at Dyrham Park or the small red gems which hang from the ears of the female figures at Knole, were part of a long-established visual trope in representations of African people produced across continental Europe and in Britain. Typically a gold hoop or a pearl drop, these small details feature in all forms of representation, from heraldic heads to carefully realised portraits of individuals.

Kate Lowe has argued that the connection between African people and gold jewellery can be traced back to accounts of the costume and adornment practices of African cultures in early modern travel texts, citing the example of the description of the gold ornaments worn in the nostrils and ears by the nobles of King Bormelli in the account of Diogo Gome's voyage to West Africa of 1456-1457.⁵⁸ It could be suggested that, by depicting these later carved figures wearing earrings, their makers were simply inheriting a well-established visual trope connected to textual accounts of African cultures in previous centuries. Yet, accounts of the adornment practices of other cultures continued to play a central role in travel narratives of the seventeenth century when these figures were being made. Thomas Herbert recorded the adornment practices of the people of Zaire and Angola. In his account, first published in London in 1634, Herbert notes that "their ears are long and made longer by ponderous baubles, they hang there, extending the holes to a great capacity, so put a link of brass or iron, others chains, glass, blue stones or bullets in them".⁵⁹ The earrings and other pieces of jewellery worn by the carved figures can be understood, therefore, as the product of a long-standing visual connection between African cultures and the wearing of jewellery established by descriptions in both older travel narratives and those which were contemporary to the period in which these figures were made.

These textual descriptions of adornment practices could certainly have contributed to the widespread association of African cultures with jewellery; however, it is equally important to note the connections which might be made with the material culture of enslavement. Bells and earrings remain subtle details in comparison to the chains, shackles, and collars which are visible on the stands at Dyrham Park. The particular barbarity in the design of these stands is revealed when we consider the manner in which the chains which restrain the kneeling men are connected from ankle to neck, which presumably would have been devised to make it impossible to stand at full height and therefore enforce a kneeling position (fig. 14).



Figure 14.

Unknown artist, Stand, 1680-1700, painted and giltwood, probably beech, 98 x 64 x 56 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Dyrham, Gloucestershire (NT 452977). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Clive James and Rod Stowell (all rights reserved).

The Most Extensive Sale

To argue that the kneeling shackled figures at Dyrham Park symbolically represent investments in exotic commodities such as sugar or tobacco, or a successful career in colonial administration, ignores what the objects are telling us. The shining varnish and colourful paint of these pieces did not attempt to tastefully disguise the racist ideologies; instead, they represent, quite literally, a gilded endorsement. The particular cruelty of the objectification in the design of Thomas Povey's stands, and the gold paint used to highlight the violent symbols of the figures' enslavement, demonstrates that these objects were deliberately made and commissioned

by men who knew that the African men represented here were the commodity. They understood that it was as a direct result of the enslaved labour of African people that their fortunes and status grew and that this was something to be celebrated and prominently displayed in important parts of their homes through decoration.

The stands at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park and the documentation on them which survives provide us with a sense of how racialised European constructions of African bodies were represented in English decorative arts during the second half of the seventeenth century. The survival of other objects, however, demonstrates not only the different forms which this type of representation took, but also its apparent popularity well into the eighteenth century and beyond. Their constructed “exoticism” might lead to the belief that such objects were unusual or a rarity but surviving documentary and material evidence suggests the opposite.

A still life, dating to 1695 and painted in London by the artist Pieter van Roestraten, shows a silver candlestick in which the figure of a man, with knees bent, supports the candle above his head ([fig. 15](#)). In a reference from Ham House in 1756, the Count of Dysart paid £8 1s. for a “Sylver Black Boy branch Candlestick Gouderone Weight 23 ounces”, where the silver boy’s skin was patinated black to achieve the desired aesthetic effect.⁶⁰ Although now lacking the patination described in the case of the Ham House candlesticks, we can imagine that the design was not unlike a silver gilt pair sold at Sotheby’s in 2007 ([fig. 16](#)). Made by the silversmith John Pero in 1733, this set features kneeling enslaved African men supporting holders for the candles in their outstretched hands. Their shackles, along with their triangular base with paw feet, make them reminiscent of the seventeenth-century Dyrham Park stands.



Figure 15.

Pieter van Roestraten, Teapot, Ginger Jar and Slave Candlestick, London, circa 1695, oil on canvas, 68.6 × 54.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (P.2-1939). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 16.

John Pero, A pair of George II silver-gilt two-light candelabra, 1733, silver-gilt, 19 cm (height). Digital image courtesy of Sotheby's (all rights reserved).

The closest comparisons can perhaps be made with the lead sundials in the form of kneeling men of African descent, which were popularised by the Belgian sculptor Jan van Nost from his workshop on Piccadilly in London (fig. 17). Van Nost arrived in London at some point before 1686 and worked as a foreman in the workshop of Arnold Quellin. Following Quellin's death, he married his widow and took over his workshop, rapidly establishing himself with high-profile patrons such as the Duke of Devonshire.⁶¹ At the turn of the century, Nost was awarded a contract for an extensive programme of sculptural works at Hampton Court Palace, including a sundial in the shape of a "blackamore". The records state that Nost was employed "for modelling a figure of a Blackamore kneeling being 5 ft high holding up a sundial" and for "casting the said Blackamore in hard metal and repainting".⁶² The sundial would be positioned in the privy garden of William III and was also accompanied by a kneeling "Indian" figure.⁶³

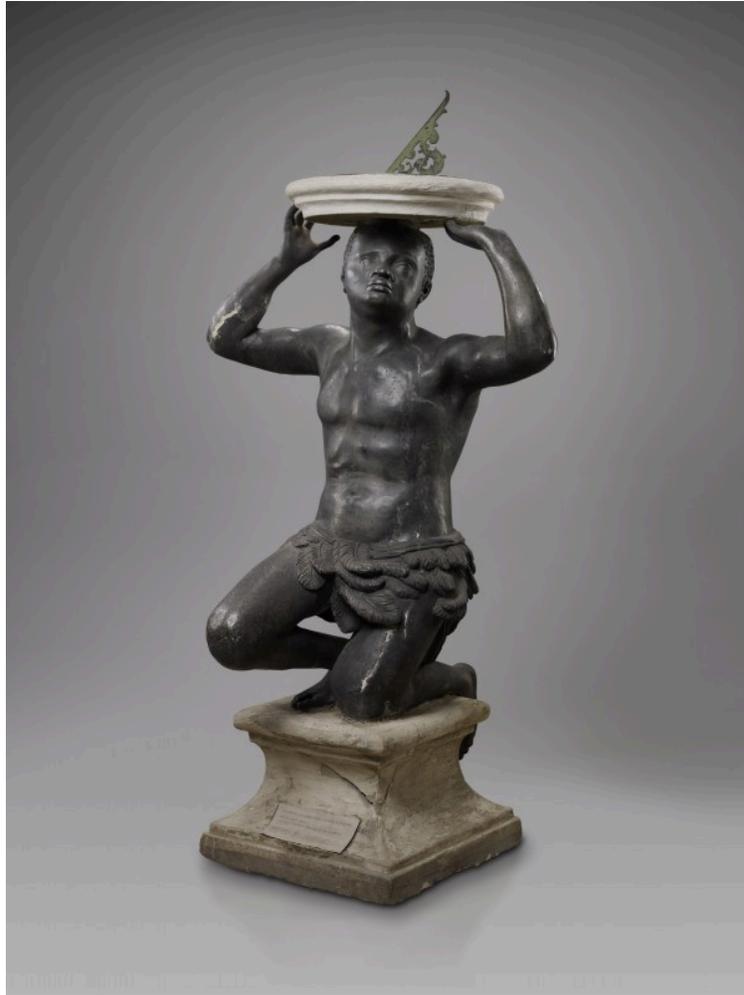


Figure 17.

Unknown artist, Elihu Yale Sundial, circa 1708, bronze, cast lead, and cement, 161.29 x 84.46 x 68.26 cm. Collection of Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven (1922.8). Digital image courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery (public domain).

It would appear that this royal commission to Nost would begin a fashion for such sundials in the properties of other members of the English elite over the course of the eighteenth century. The “blackamore” sundial had become one of Nost’s signature pieces, and many of those which survive in collections today are either attributed to, or associated with, his workshop. Following his death in 1711, the style was adopted by other sculptors, who evidently wanted to capitalise on Nost’s success with the design. The Dunham Massey example is thought to have been produced around 1735 by Andries Carpentier who worked as an assistant in the workshop of Nost before becoming an established sculptor in his own right. ⁶⁴ When viewed from the south of the property, the example at Dunham Massey appears almost to support not only the sundial, but also the entire façade of the mansion above his head (figs. 18 and 19). During the 1730s, Carpentier was also employed

to create a number of sculptural commissions for Wrest Park in Bedfordshire, including “a blackamoor and a gladiator” and a “little miller” with a pedestal and a “blackamoor”. For this latter commission, he was paid the fee of £28.
65



Figure 18.

John Harris II, A Bird's-Eye View of Dunham Massey from the South, circa 1750–1751, oil on canvas, 132.0 × 200.7 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Dunham Massey, Cheshire (NT 932335). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Angelo Hornak (all rights reserved).



Figure 19.

Dunham Massey, National Trust. Digital image courtesy of Mike Peel (CC-BY-SA-4.0).

Although Carpentier had worked directly in the Nost workshop, he was by no means the only London craftsman to recognise the commercial possibilities of the design. In 1741, John Cheere, whose workshop at Hyde Park Corner led the market for lead garden sculptures during the 1740s and 1750s, produced a “Blackamoor with a sundial after John Nost I” for Okeover Hall in Staffordshire for the price of £8.⁶⁶ A significant number of other examples, for which no clear artistic attribution can be made, still survive today, whilst numerous references exist to those which are no longer in their original location. A large number of these have been documented by Patrick Eyres and include examples found at Fetcham Park in Surrey, Glenham Hall in Suffolk, and Norton Conyers in North Yorkshire.⁶⁷

Several nineteenth-century sources attest to the popularity of the “blackamoor” motif in garden sculpture during the eighteenth century. In his work on ornamental leadwork, W.R. Lethaby notes that “above all an African kneeling with a sundial upon his head found the most extensive sale”. Lethaby provides the example of the sundial that can still be seen in place in the Inner Temple Garden in central London, which had previously been positioned at Clement’s Inn. Lethaby notes that an engraving on the side of this example names the donor: “The sides have the initials of the donor, P.I.P., and the date, 1731”.⁶⁸ He also states that other writers had claimed that the piece was brought back by John Holles, Lord Clare, following his travels in Italy during the seventeenth century, but he concludes that the inscription on the work renders this claim to be “local gossip”.⁶⁹

Given the number of documented examples which survive, it is clear that the sundial now at Lincoln’s Inn was almost certainly made in England and in the style of those made in Van Nost’s workshop. Nevertheless, this connection made between the object and Italy during the nineteenth century demonstrates how quickly the facts of the object’s history were separated from it. Perhaps, even in 1893, it was more comfortable to think of the object as Italian, creating distance between the kneeling figure and Britain’s deeply entrenched role in the enslavement of African people in the preceding decades and centuries.

Reframing and Reinterpretation

Frequently selling for high prices on the antiques market today, it would be wrong to assume that the market for objects which feature representations of African people performing a structural function is a past phenomenon. In the Italian context, the last two decades have seen a number of artistic interventions that attempt to catalyse further discussion about their past, present, and future significance. This includes the work of American artist Fred Wilson and his installation “Speak of Me as I Am” at the 2003 Venice

Biennale and the project *ReSignifications: European Blackamoors, Africana Readings*, which took place at New York University's Florence Campus, Villa La Pietra in 2015. The project brought together artists and scholars from all over the world to discuss and produce responses to the thirty-six figures collected over the twentieth century by the British writer Harold Acton. The curator of the accompanying exhibition, Awam Amkpa, described the project as an opportunity to "reframe and refract the history of representing African and African diasporic bodies". ⁷⁰

For those which survive in collections inherited by heritage organisations such as the National Trust, key questions remain (and, as yet, are unanswered). Should such clearly racist objects remain on display? If they do, then how can they be interpreted for a public audience in 2021? Such debates are by no means new, as is demonstrated by the example of the lead sundial at Wentworth. At the time of its creation, it might have been interpreted as the material expression of Thomas Stafford's political and economic achievements and ambitions. For the students who resided in the house more than 200 years later, when the property had become a teacher training college, the presence of the statue, and what it represented, was regarded as an unacceptable affront. Patrick Eyres describes how, in protest, the students painted the black lead statue with white gloss paint in "a symbolic gesture of role reversal". ⁷¹ The statue has since been restored yet the story of the students and their protest raises interesting questions about the significance and interpretation of such pieces today.

At Dunham Massey, now owned by the National Trust, the decision was made in 2020 to temporarily remove the sundial from its position in front of the house and place it into storage. In its place, a sign explains that the sundial had been removed "to protect it from harm after complaints about the man's subjugated pose". The sign goes on to note that the National Trust are "taking time to review how to sensitively redisplay and interpret this historic object" and are "working closely with different people and organisations ... on the next chapter of the statue's history".

Whether through more traditional formats of interpretation in the context of the heritage space, or through artistic responses, what must be central to our understanding of these objects today is the vital importance of a close analysis of each element of their design. Each of these details deserves consideration in turn for the specific social and cultural reference it relays. No clearer example exists as to why the decorative arts ought to be taken seriously for what they can tell us about the past. The objects with which people decorated their homes reveal both individual values and the values of the time. How we choose to interpret and discuss these objects today will tell future generations about the values of our own.

Footnotes

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- 6 Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors", 159.
- 7 National Trust, Ham House Archives, Inventories of 1677, 1679, and 1683, transcribed in *Ham House: 400 Years of Collecting and Patronage*, ed. Christopher Rowell (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 439, 447, and 458.
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- 20 Walton, "An Inventory of 1710 from Dyrham Park", 35.
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- 25 "The Old Court House, Hampton Court: The Home in his Last Years of Sir Christopher Wren", *Country Life* 84, no. 2176 (1 October 1938): 330.
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- 42 Adam Bowett and Laurie Lindey, "Looking for Gerrit Jensen", *Furniture History* 53 (2017): 28.
- 43 Bowett and Lindey, "Looking for Gerrit Jensen", 28-29.
- 44 Renier Baarsen, "Seventeenth-Century European Cabinet Making at Ham House", in *Ham House: 400 Years of Collecting and Patronage*, ed. Christopher Rowell (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 198.
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- 46 Bowett, *English Furniture, 1660-1714, from Charles II to Queen Anne*, 126-127.
- 47 National Trust, Ham House Archives, Inventory of 1679, transcribed in Rowell, *Ham House*, 447.
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- 62 National Archives, WORK 5/52, in Roscoe, *A Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain 1660-1851*, 915.
- 63 For creating these sundials, Nost was paid £30 and £35; see National Archives, WORK 5/52, in Roscoe, *A Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain 1660-1851*, 915.
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- 69 Lethaby, *Leadwork*, 102.
- 70 Awam Amkpa, "Introduction", in *ReSignifications: European Blackamoors, Africana Readings*, ed. Awam Amkpa (Rome: Postcart SRL, 2017), 6.
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Ruth Ellis's Suit

Lynda Nead

Abstract

On 10 April 1955 Ruth Ellis shot and killed her lover outside a north London pub. She was arrested on the spot and tried for murder in the Number One Court at the Old Bailey; her highly publicised trial was short, and the jury took just over twenty minutes to reach a guilty verdict. She was executed on 12 July 1955 and was the last woman to be hanged in England.

This is an article about the suit that Ellis wore to her trial. It was a smart, fur-trimmed, tailored suit, which she wore with a white silk shirt and high-heeled black shoes. Her hair was freshly dyed, and her make-up was perfect; she intended to look her best for the Old Bailey. And yet, her biographies record that someone in the courtroom was heard to announce that she looked like “a typical West End tart”. What can be learned from the disjuncture between Ellis’s self-perception and the perception of the public? What can a suit tell us about gender, sex, and class in post-war Britain?

Clothes weave in and out of Ellis’s life story and the story of Britain after the war; they were necessary and desirable, part of a personal and national self-fashioning. There are no photographs of Ellis in her suit, so this article is also an exercise in historical imagination. By examining the written reports of her dress and appearance in newspaper articles and biographies, it is possible to access broader historical and cultural meanings concerning gender and class in post-war Britain and the significance of material things in the individual aspiration for social mobility.

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Introduction

Yesterday the girl who sought the bright lights made her last appearance as a glamour girl. Her "stage" was the dock of the No. 1 court at the Old Bailey. And her act ended in a sentence—of death.

—*Daily Mirror*, 22 June 1955

Ruth Ellis was the last woman to be hanged in Britain. On 10 April 1955 she shot and killed her lover, David Blakely, outside a north London pub ([fig. 1](#)). She was arrested on the spot and tried for murder in the Number One Court at the Old Bailey. The highly publicised trial was short and her defence perfunctory, and the jury took just over twenty minutes to find her guilty. Ellis was hanged in Holloway Prison on 13 July 1955. She was twenty-eight years old.



Figure 1.

Ruth Ellis and David Blakely at the Little Club in London, 1955. Digital image courtesy of Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

This is an article about the suit that Ellis wore to her Old Bailey trial. It was a smart, black, fur-trimmed, tailored skirt suit, which she wore with a white silk shirt and high-heeled black shoes. Her hair was freshly dyed, and her make-up was perfect; she intended to look her glamorous best for her Old Bailey appearance. And yet, her biographies record that someone in the courtroom

was heard to comment that she looked like “a typical West End tart”.¹ What can be learned from this disjuncture between Ellis’s self-perception and the view of the public? While the decorative arts have traditionally described the connoisseurial study of style and patronage, they take their place within an expanded field of historical visual studies when inflected by more recent methodologies drawn from design history, anthropology, and material culture.² This is the intellectual context for my reading of Ruth Ellis’s suit, in which reflections on the details of one woman’s dress and appearance become the prompt for a much broader consideration of gender, class, and social aspiration in post-war Britain.

There are no photographs of Ellis in her trial suit, but it was, and remains, part of the spectacle of femininity that was put on display and judged at the Old Bailey. Ellis’s appearance on the day of her trial, and in the years leading up to it, was described in meticulous detail in newspaper reports and was then retold in her biographies and in histories of the murder. Through a reading of the written discourse around her courtroom appearance and the broader semiotics of women’s clothing in this period, it is thus possible to reconstruct the different meanings generated by the black suit as Ellis stepped into the dock of the Number One Court. This is an exercise in historical imagination: a method that is based in a critical engagement with archives and images but is also broader in scope and involves a creative imagining in excess of what can be seen in an image or distilled from a text. It reads the gaps and the spaces in between the historical evidence.

Clothes punctuate key moments in Ellis’s life and the press reports, biographies, films, and television series, and histories of crime and jurisprudence that retell her story.³ Ellis’s vanity and childhood interest in clothes have been treated as signs of her excessive desire for social mobility and portents of her later moral transgressions. Clothes defined her identity as a young woman working in the metropolitan leisure industries after the war and made manifest her transformation into a glamorous peroxide blonde. She was given evening dresses and a clothing allowance to work as a nightclub hostess, and it was even suggested that she had sex with a clothing wholesaler in exchange for dresses.⁴ Within days of her execution it was reported that a waxwork had appeared in a chamber of horrors representing Ellis in an off-the-shoulder black evening dress and tulle stole. But the black suit represented the apogee of this preoccupation with Ruth Ellis’s clothes; it was the focus of attention during her trial and, after her death, was even drawn into the web of conspiracy theories about Blakely’s murder and Ellis’s guilt. Clothes weave in and out of not only Ruth Ellis’s life story but also the story of Britain after the war; they were necessary and desirable, part of a personal and national masquerade.⁵

Ordinary and Extraordinary

To get to the figure of Ruth Ellis in her black, fur-trimmed suit and the casual insult voiced in the public gallery, it is first necessary to rehearse something of her life story; highlighting, in this case, the role that clothes and appearance play in her personal history and subsequent notoriety. Ellis was born in North Wales in 1928. She came from a modest, working-class family; her father, Arthur Hornby, first worked as a musician on ocean liners; her mother, Elisabertha Goethals, was a Belgian refugee and, at the time she met Hornby, a single mother working in domestic service.

As Arthur Hornby's financial and social situation deteriorated, he became increasingly violent and abusive towards his wife and children. Ruth's sister, Muriel Jakubait, has claimed that she was raped by their father and that he also sexually abused Ruth.⁶ Ellis experienced male violence throughout her life; her relationship with Blakely was also violent and abusive, and she was one of many women in the post-war period who endured male aggression in their relationships and bore its traces—the bruises and fractures—on their bodies.⁷ What made Ruth Ellis infamous and turned her into a notorious femme fatale was the fact that she was herself driven to violence and was hanged for her crime.

Ellis was thirteen years old when war broke out and, like many other girls from poorer families in this period, she left school at fourteen with hardly any formal qualifications. In 1942, the social researcher Pearl Jephcott published the findings of a study she had carried out on the lives and aspirations of teenage girls living through the early years of the war. Options and prospects for girls in this situation were few: "Even the very typical factory girl of sixteen who has been earning money for two years may only have managed to acquire ... limited possessions."⁸ The girls in Jephcott's survey owned little: a brush and comb set, some magazines, a pot of face cream and some pieces of crockery. One girl commented: "My mother buys all my clothes".⁹ Choices were extremely limited for young, under-educated, working-class women; glamour and possessions belonged to the world of Saturday matinees and were the objects of dreams. Ruth Ellis wanted more than this, however, she wanted a better lifestyle and better clothes than the women in Jephcott's survey.

Ambition is commonly regarded as a good thing, but in women excess ambition is seen to lead to deviancy and immorality.¹⁰ In an interview with a newspaper while Ellis was awaiting execution, her mother recalled:

Ruth hated us to be poor ... she always liked clothes and she would borrow mine and dress up in them. She wasn't like my other children. She was so very ambitious for herself. She used to say "Mum, I'm going to make something of my life". ¹¹

This comes so close to being acceptable, and yet every clause declares Ellis's deviation from the feminine norm. Who would not hate being poor? But Ruth is unlike the other children in this poor family—she is abnormally ambitious; she dresses up and performs another self, a somebody rather than an anybody. In the aftermath of the murder, newspapers scoured Ellis's early life for signs of the aberrance to follow. Rather than a simple desire to pull herself out of poverty and violence, her love of clothes, her vanity, and her ambition all suggested a moral waywardness that would inevitably end on the scaffold.

Having left school, Ellis spent her teenage war years living and working in London. She started working as a waitress in Lyon's Corner House and during her leisure time began to experience the sexual culture of wartime Britain at dances, bars, and clubs, and in "dives" where the American forces met up. It was in one of the American nightclubs that Ellis met a Canadian soldier called Clare Andrea McCallum; they had a relationship, and she became pregnant. This was the first of a number of pregnancies, births, abortions, and miscarriages that punctuated her life, as they did the lives of so many women in this period. McCallum asked Ellis to marry him but prevaricated until he was sent overseas and it was discovered that he had a wife and family in Canada. Ellis's son, Andre, was born in September 1944.

From waitressing, Ellis moved on to nude photographic modelling and hostessing in London's drinking clubs. This was a familiar progression for attractive young women in the metropolis—a modern harlot's progress, according to some of the newspapers. In one of a number of exposés, following Ellis's execution, of corruption in the metropolis, the mass circulation paper the *People* put it bluntly and in capital letters: "WHEN RUTH BECAME A CLUB HOSTESS SHE TOOK HER FIRST STEP ON THE ROAD THAT LED TO MURDER". ¹² Modern, post-war Britain borrowed the morality and rhetoric of Victorian melodrama. While the locations and some of the dramatis personae had changed, the moral lesson had not: the fallen woman, identifiable by her dress and appearance, suffers the wages of sin, from which there is no escape. ¹³

In many respects, hostessing was a rational choice for Ellis. The basic salary of a nightclub hostess at this time was significantly higher than those of the clerks and factory workers interviewed by Jephcott; and, in addition, there

was commission on the alcohol and food that she persuaded customers to buy while in the club, along with free evening dresses and accommodation.

¹⁴ Moreover, the clubs also brought Ellis into contact with men of a higher social class than her own. Membership of the clubs varied according to cost and reputation but consisted generally of men of the middle classes, some of whom had served as officers in the armed forces. Demobbed men mingled with civilians, tradesmen, criminals and gangsters in the heterogeneous spaces of post-war pleasure, creating a heady mix of opportunity, sleaze, and ersatz glamour.

Ellis worked in the Court Club in Mayfair, which was owned by a racketeer called Morris Conley. Conley had progressed from rigging slot machines and property development to organising prostitution from his nightclubs. As the investigative journalist Duncan Webb declared: "Right in the centre of corruption in the West End of London stands the figure of Morris Conley. I hereby name him as Britain's biggest vice boss and the chief source of the tainted money that nourishes the evils of London night life". ¹⁵ Ellis had moved into the heart of London vice, and no tailored black suit could disguise the spectacle of sex; to the readers of the mass daily press she was, in the words of that memorable phrase, "a typical West End tart".

It was in the Court Club that she met George Ellis, a well-off, heavy-drinking, and violent man, who worked as a dentist. They married in 1950 and moved out of London to Southampton, where George had been offered a job. A female neighbour recalled that Ruth stood out from the rest of the village where they lived because of her glamorous appearance: "Everyone looked at her because of the way she was dressed ... she looked very fashionable—a glamour girl She wore a lot of make-up and I seem to remember red nails". ¹⁶ The phrase "a glamour girl" defines Ellis within the discourse of femininity and desirability of the period; she is out of the ordinary because of her clothes and her style, her artfulness and artifice. It matters little whether the neighbour ever actually saw her nails: a "glamour girl" could only ever have red-painted nails.

The etymology of "glamour" is an enchantment or spell; it then becomes more specialised, referring to magical beauty and, ultimately, to a particular form of physical attractiveness defined by Hollywood films in the 1930s, disseminated in magazines and practised by ordinary women, filmgoers, and readers—working-class women, mothers, daughters, and sisters. Glamour retained its association with artifice and performance, with a seductive aesthetic of surface embellishment and sheen: red nails and lips, metallic blonde hair, jewellery. As cultural historian Carol Dyhouse observes: "Glamour was often linked to a dream of transformation, a desire for something out of the ordinary, a form of aspiration, a fiction of becoming". ¹⁷

The marriage lasted a year. George was drinking heavily and had become violent, and although she was pregnant again, Ruth left her husband. She returned to London, where her daughter, Georgina, was born in October 1951. Ellis at this stage had only a few years left to live, and they were shaped by her life in the clubs. It is also around this time, 1952–1953, after she returned to London to work, that she made the momentous decision to dye her hair platinum blonde.

Desire and Aspiration

Blonde was a critical element in Ellis's physical self-transformation, tapping into a visual language of post-war femininity that made her even more camera-ready. For Ellis, blonde was a perfectly reasonable choice, and she was not the only Englishwoman in her twenties in the 1950s who thought being blonde was the way to achieve her dreams. The actress Diana Dors ([fig. 2](#)) remembered a friend who:

sported natural platinum-blonde hair, whereas mine was merely mousey. Somewhere, in the recesses of the mind ... was born the dream of becoming a blonde, alluring film star, a woman who enchanted men and lived a life of glamour and fame. ¹⁸



Figure 2.

Carl Sutton, Diana Dors, Picture Post, 22 January 1955, 24-25 (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1955). Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / Picture Post (all rights reserved).

Blonde was synonymous with Hollywood glamour, and advertisers played on women's dissatisfaction with their looks, and the gap between their self-image and the image of the female star, to sell goods. "Mousey" was a constant accusation thrust at women who resisted the incitement to have glowing, film-star locks.¹⁹ As feminist critic Ros Coward has observed, adverts constantly rework female dissatisfaction as desire and play on "an anxiety rather than a pleasurable identification ... a relation of narcissistic damage".²⁰ One of the leading hair dye companies in this period, Hiltone, advertised week after week in women's journals and film magazines; in February 1953, around the time Ellis dyed her hair, an advert in *Photoplay* asked its female readers: "Do you fret at your mirror, hoping against hope to see your hair suddenly sparkle and gleam? It will, if you use Hiltone" (fig. 3). Blonde was the first step towards a new glamorous beauty that was

embodied in the figure of Marilyn Monroe. In 1953, with the release of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Monroe was at the height of her success, and Hiltone secured the rights to use her image in their advertisements (fig. 4).²¹ Blondes, advertising copy claimed, were more confident and successful, and more attractive to men. As one English actress testified:

Going blonde had an extraordinary and exciting effect on me ... I was more vivacious. More alert mentally ... I felt I had a new personality. Almost instinctively I walked with more of a wiggle ... I've discovered a completely new ME since I changed from being mousey.²²



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 3.

Advertisement for Hiltone Hair Dye, Photoplay, February 1953, inside cover (London: Samuel Stephen Ltd, 1953). Digital image courtesy of Samuel Stephen Ltd / Photoplay (all rights reserved).



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 4.

Advertisement for Hiltone Hair Dye, Photoplay, August 1953, 7 (London: Samuel Stephen Ltd, 1953). Digital image courtesy of Samuel Stephen Ltd / Photoplay (all rights reserved).

Ruth Ellis did, however, not just go blonde: she became a peroxide blonde. Within the lexicon of blonde hair dye, peroxide blonde has a particular signification. Newspapers habitually referred to her as a “platinum blonde”, differentiating her “bottle blonde” style from other, more natural shades.²³ Platinum blonde is achieved by using hydrogen peroxide, a bleach that strips the hair and creates a white blonde look. It is a harsh chemical process that requires constant upkeep to prevent dark roots from showing through. By the 1950s platinum was beginning to appear vulgar and artificial, and it was up to one of the most famous advertising campaigns of the 1950s to transform the haircolouring industry by simply posing the question “Does She ... or Doesn’t She?”. Clairol blondes, it suggested, looked natural and respectable,

and you could not tell whether they did, or they didn't. Ellis was not a Clair blonde, however, and the problem with her look was that it was hard and unnatural. It was obvious that "she did", in all senses of the double entendre.
24

Her sister, Muriel Jakubait, describes a physical transformation in Ellis at this time. She was now managing the Little Club, a drinking club owned by Morris Conley. She was earning good money and dressing well. The Little Club was in Knightsbridge; Ellis had a flat above the club that came with the job, and it is likely that she was buying some of her clothes at Harrods, which was directly opposite. Ellis was wearing ready-to-wear but expensive garments, at the top end of the market and certainly way beyond the means of the young women in Jephcott's survey. Jakubait recalls catching sight of Ellis during an unexpected visit: "[S]he was walking like a model, swinging as she walked and really confident She'd been totally transformed. She was thinner ... she'd had her original auburn colour stripped and changed to platinum blonde. It was immaculately styled ... I remember sweet rationing ended about that time and she'd brought loads of sweets for the children From the time she started bleaching her hair her character changed. It was like two different people. Being blonde does that. It made her confident and more carefree. She looked beautiful [T]his was the time in 1953 that my sister became the Ruth Ellis whom two years later everybody would know, her photograph would be on every newspaper in the country."²⁵

Jakubait associates Ellis's transformation with sweets and the end of rationing, and there is a certain sense to this. Her look, achieved through hard work and money, expresses abundance and commodification, a new kind of femininity that is at once glamorous and distasteful. The utility clothing scheme, introduced during wartime to conserve labour and materials, had ended in 1952; however, the discourse of fashion and morality and the suspicion of luxury and consumerism had not entirely disappeared.²⁶ By 1955, the year of Ellis's execution, Britain was beginning its uncertain economic transition from post-war austerity to a kind of affluence. Economic recovery was predicated on building consumption, with women as the foundation of this new economic model.

In an environment in which women's appearance was so highly commodified, blonde was over-determined and contested. It can hardly be surprising that Ellis wanted to get her hair freshly dyed for the Old Bailey. Mousey, the adverts told her, was bad, and dark roots even worse; she wanted to look glamorous and to feel confident, and little wonder that her defence counsel was troubled when they saw her on the day of her trial. The journalist Duncan Webb summed up the ambivalence of Ellis's appeal: "There could be no denying that she was attractive in a nightclub sort of way, but behind that tinsel-like beauty ... I could not help discerning a certain hardness, a brittle

sense of calculation".²⁷ Ellis's beauty, her sexual attractiveness, is part of her offence and seems to inspire hostility and a desire for retribution in the men who write about her. After visiting her shortly before her execution, George Rogers, a member of Parliament, observed: "Although she was much refined by the weeks of suffering, I thought that in normal conditions she was probably a hard, brassy blonde".²⁸

In Britain in the early 1950s, women like Ruth Ellis were exhorted by advertising campaigns to seek perfection and condemned to endless dissatisfaction and anxiety. Ambition and desire for this generation of working-class women were so often articulated in terms of clothes and personal appearance, which were seen as indices of social mobility and success. Perhaps the most memorable articulation of this sartorial longing is that described by Carolyn Steedman in her account of her mother's desire for a New Look skirt. She recalls her mother's constantly thwarted or only ever partially satisfied desire: "the proliferation of consumer goods that marked the mid-1950s, were used by my mother to measure out her discontent: there existed a newly expanding and richly endowed material world in which she was denied a place".²⁹ For women, clothes seemed to offer a gateway to a world of stylish advantage; the rules of fashion could be learned from magazines and films, and social origins could be camouflaged and transcended by the cut of a coat or the length of a skirt. Success and pleasure were fleeting, however, as discontent reasserted itself in the minds and self-critical gazes of modern female consumers.

Autobiographies of women who grew up in the 1950s are peppered with anecdotes about fashion and aspiration, about observing and absorbing the longing of their mothers. In *Bad Blood*, Lorna Sage describes her upbringing in North Wales and her visits with her mother to a clothes shop in town. Most of the items were second-hand classics, suits and coats, "genteel cast-offs" that represented a better life and wider horizons to Sage's frustrated mother. The shop owner, Mrs. Smith, had a seductive sales routine: "When [she] insisted on the quality of the cloth and the superiority of the cut, she was addressing my mother as a class casualty and a dreamer, someone in danger of getting stuck in a council house at the kitchen sink, unless she had a good suit, or a really *dressy* dress".³⁰ This was the cultural capital of a good suit to women who came from less well-off, working-class backgrounds: it promised so much more than its material value; it offered "class" in every sense of the word.

Ellis built a carapace around herself. She worked on her dress and appearance, even her voice and mannerisms, in order to assume a new, more socially elevated identity. Perhaps, like Sage's mother, she was frightened of "getting stuck", or longed for the world of goods and clothes,

like Carolyn Steedman's mother. The emotional anxiety of wanting more and the frustrated longings were not unique to Ellis, but were shared by many women in 1950s Britain.

Ruth Ellis met David Blakely at the Little Club while working as the manageress. Blakely came from a well-off, upper-middle-class family. Educated at a private school, he went on to the military academy at Sandhurst and an undistinguished service career. When Ellis met him, he was working as a racing driver and was part of a social crowd who mixed at the racing tracks and in London's drinking clubs. They had a turbulent and abusive relationship; within two weeks of meeting, Blakely had moved into Ellis's flat, and so began a cycle of commitment, betrayal, recrimination, and violence. Blakely's erratic behaviour made Ellis increasingly insecure and suspicious, leading to their separation and, almost inevitably, to the fatal shooting.

What seems to have struck everyone, including the press and judiciary, about their relationship was the class difference. In spite of Ellis's attempts to improve and reinvent herself, it was evident that they came from different social backgrounds, and this was understood as a major factor leading to the murder. Detective Chief Inspector Davies, who led the investigation, was quick to conclude: "The two people, Blakely and Ellis, are of completely different stations in life On meeting Blakely and realising that his class was very much above her own ... it seems she was prepared to go to any lengths to keep him. Finding this impossible, she appears to have decided to wreak her vengeance upon him".³¹ The press also highlighted their differences and Ellis's desperate and hopeless attempts to assume the manners of Blakely's class. The *Daily Mirror* drew the conclusion that "Ruth knew it was going to be difficult to become Mrs. Blakely. David, willing to have fun, still knew that to marry a girl from a drinking club would mean disgrace in the eyes of his family and friends". In the face of irreconcilable differences, Ellis "tried every trick she knew to marry him. French lessons for when she accompanies him to Le Mans" and an elocution course because "David thinks I've still got a bit of a Manchester accent".³² It is important to acknowledge the significance of these apparently incidental observations, to imagine a world where social identity is of such anxious symbolic importance that it can be proposed as a motive for murder.

In certain respects, the signs of class difference were more significant in post-war Britain than they had ever been. In spite of, or because of, the levelling experiences of war and the social changes and universal benefits introduced by the welfare state, the nuances of class distinction seemed to become increasingly pressing. Ellis had the money to buy good clothes; she was glamorous and good looking. But even with increasing numbers of British people identifying as middle class and accessing new levels of

consumption, authentic upper-class identity was a chimera and could not be bought or learned.³³ One slip, one error of vocabulary or deportment, threatened to unravel the masquerade and expose the interloper. Social mobility was a performance that involved dressing up, and looking and speaking in particular, approved ways; women were taught how to lose their regional accents, which were regarded as vulgar and common, and to adopt the preferred BBC southern pronunciation.

Whereas the *Daily Mirror* claims that Ellis took a speech course to get rid of a Manchester accent, her biographer, Robert Hancock, suggests that “she dropped her aitches”. While these observations are not entirely compatible, they seem to be more concerned to expose the crack in Ellis’s performance, the crucial detail that revealed her true identity, than to correctly determine her “natural” accent. Her sister offers a different version of the narrative: “She spoke well enough without needing elocution lessons. Even if she had a high-pitched voice it was still good”.³⁴ It is possible, also, to imagine Ellis’s voice and its affectations through a letter that she wrote to Blakely’s mother after the murder. An impossible letter to write under any conditions, Ellis adopted a self-conscious and incorrect formality:

Dear Mrs Cook

No doubt [*sic*] these last few days have been a shock to you
Please try to believe me, when I say, how deeply sorry I am to have
caused you this unpleasantness.³⁵

“Unpleasantness”—a polite, awkward euphemism that reveals every particle of effort to sound and be right. There is, then, a real cruelty in the way that the press relishes her social failure. In an account of Ellis, “The Woman”, the *Daily Mail* rehearses her attempts to improve herself: the glamorous transformation, the speech-training and deportment classes. The judgement is severe. It concludes: “every turn failed, for Blakely was still ashamed of her”.³⁶

What all of these accounts point to is that Ellis’s makeover was imperfect; that in spite of the surface simulation, there was always the possibility of exposure, of the wrong word, the wrong gesture or the wrong expression that would result in embarrassment or humiliation among Blakely’s upper-class friends. In her brilliant account of the post-war fashion journalist and editor Madge Garland, Lisa Cohen describes the way that Garland’s manners at once camouflaged and displayed her class deficiency: “In response to this pressure, she produced a style that was at once correct and distinctive, that played on correctness and was something more than correct: a bold performance”.³⁷ For me, this vividly evokes Ellis’s experience as she

struggled to maintain her masquerade and to negotiate her ambiguous social position. It is, at the same time, both brave and brittle, exciting and exhausting; and, as Cohen observes, there was much to gain and even more to lose.

A Black, Fur-Trimmed Suit

It may seem that we have deviated far from the black, fur-trimmed suit that Ellis wore at her trial, but it is necessary to situate Ellis in relation to post-war class, gender, and sexuality in order to understand what the suit meant to her and the values she may have invested in it. A good, tailored skirt suit was perhaps the easiest aspect of her performance, the one that needed least practice and rehearsal. As British fashion sought to re-establish itself internationally after the end of the war, it was the tailored suit that was seen to express a quintessential form of national style that could be exported throughout the world. Among British designers, Digby Morton was one of the leading London names, working with the classic suit in fabrics such as wool and tweed, in subtle, low-key colours (figs. 5 and 6). As *Picture Post* fashion editor Marjorie Beckett stated: “No one tailors quite as well as we do ... even Paris acknowledges that we are unequalled”.³⁸ The tailored skirt suit was a particularly restrained and timeless creation that perfectly reflected the self-effacing beauty of British women while also advertising the social and income groups to which the wearer belonged. Seasonal change was articulated through small, nuanced details of pleating, folding and wrapping rather than bold, high-fashion statements: “hence the reputation of London couture for beautifully tailored coats and suits, for ‘wearable’ rather than ‘dramatic’ clothes”.³⁹



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Figure 5.

Picture Post, 17 September 1949, cover (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1949). Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / Picture Post (all rights reserved).



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 6.

Marjorie Beckett, "The World's Best Suits", *Picture Post*, 17 September 1949, 40-41 (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1949). Photograph by Nancy Sandys Walker. Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / *Picture Post* (all rights reserved).

The upper-class elegance of the made-to-measure tailored suit was also marketed in ready-to-wear ranges, sold in department stores and mid-range clothing shops to women who wanted to buy into the timeless chic of the skirt suit, at prices that still conveyed good taste but were more suited to post-war incomes.⁴⁰ The well-designed ready-to-wear tailored suit was resilient and versatile; equally at home at the racetrack (fig. 7), in a London club, or a courtroom, it conveyed a classy elegance, with a certain edge. There is a *Picture Post* fashion spread from 1952 devoted to London fashion; models are photographed in a range of smart and tailored outfits in traditionally male settings—a wine cellar, the Albany Club, a boxing ring (fig. 8). They are elegant and aloof and pay little attention to the men in the images; they strike mannequin poses and are there to be pored over and desired by men and women alike. The shot in Mr. Bloom's Boxing Academy is particularly striking, with its contrast between the classic, formal attitudes of the models and the poses of the semi-clothed boxers; upper-class femininity is juxtaposed with working-class pugilism. These women are timelessly elegant but also, just a little bit, sexy.

Picture Post, October 15, 1955



*You've made sure
of a winner!*

It's not always easy to pick a winner, at least that's how we find it— but choose a Drivay Monarch Weathercoat and be sure of one. Monarch Weathercoats are "thoroughbreds" for Autumn wear.

**DRIWAY
MONARCH
WEATHERCOATS**

Reign over Rain

Other quality coats in the inimitable Drivay style are available from leading Men's Wear shops throughout Great Britain. This range offers a wide choice in shade, style and price.

If you have any difficulty in obtaining Drivay Garments, please write to:—
DRIWAY RAINCOATS LTD., DRIWAY HOUSE, WATER LANE, LEEDS.

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Figure 7.

Advertisement for Drivay Monarch Weathercoats, Picture Post, 15 October 1955, 40 (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1955). Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / Picture Post (all rights reserved).



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 8.

“London—Smart Girls in a Man’s World”, *Picture Post*, 20 September 1952, 22–23 (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1952). Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / *Picture Post* (all rights reserved).

By the mid-1950s the image of the tailored skirt suit was shifting from a rural to an urban aesthetic. Retaining some of the moral values associated with austerity fashion, the ready-to-wear skirt suit conveyed elegance and restraint, good taste, and a sensual allure. It is not surprising, therefore, to find an illustrated article titled “The Tailored Clubwoman” in the 1953 *Guide to London Clubs* including the observation: “There was a time when [the tailored suit] meant a severe, rather masculine garment, useful undoubtedly, but often neither chic nor flattering. In this enlightened day and age, however, a tailored suit can be elegant, feminine, and eminently suitable for every occasion” (fig. 9).⁴¹ The *Guide* was basically a directory of London night clubs and, just a few pages from the article on women’s tailoring, it lists clubs in the SW1 area, including the Little Club, 37 Brompton Road, listed as a bar open on Sundays. This is Ruth Ellis’s world: at the time of the *Guide*’s publication, she was manageress of the Little Club, with a salary that would make it possible to buy high-end, ready-to-wear suits at Harrods.



Figure 9.

Joan L. Rothschild, "The Tailored Clubwoman", in Anon., *The 1953 Guide to London Clubs*, (London: Regency Press, 1953) 60-61. Digital image courtesy of Regency Press (all rights reserved).

What happens when a platinum blonde wears a black tailored suit? How do the meanings of the suit and the woman shift and accommodate each other? One of Ellis's biographies mentions that when she left her flat for the last time in order to kill Blakely, she left behind the book that she had been reading, a photo-novel of the film *Dead Reckoning* (directed by John Cromwell; USA, 1947), starring Humphrey Bogart and Lizbeth Scott (fig. 10).⁴² The photo-novel offered a prose retelling of the movie's narrative, illustrated with stills from the film; it was "a radically lowbrow, throwaway pulp subgenre".⁴³ *Dead Reckoning* is a film noir, in which the hero/tough guy, played by Bogart, falls in love with "Dusty", the girlfriend of his recently murdered best friend and army comrade. The plot is littered with deception and counter-deception focused on the figure of Dusty, a nightclub singer and suspected murderess. At the end of the film she shoots Bogart but sustains fatal injuries in a car crash. In the novel, and as played by Scott in the film, Dusty is "a tall, languorous blonde" (fig. 11); a classic femme fatale, duplicitous and deadly. In those Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s, now referred to as film noir, the femme fatale defines a particular kind of dangerous and fascinating femininity, a fatal temptress who is both destructive of masculinity and also inevitably the object of violent

retribution.⁴⁴ Readers of the photo-novel would have seen in Dusty, the lounge singer and killer, beautifully dressed in suits and evening wear, a cold, hard style of seductive femininity.

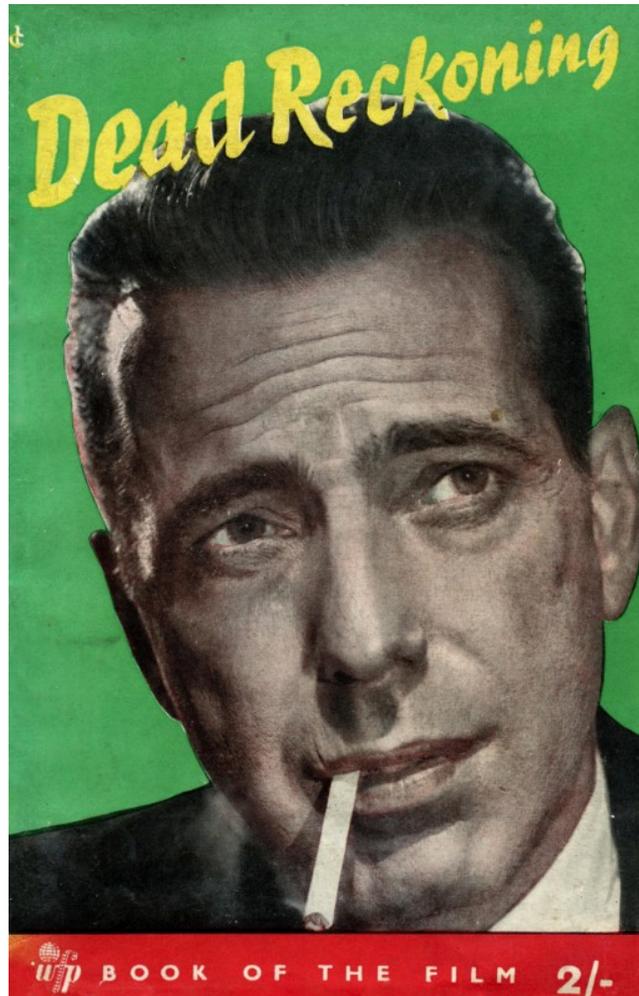


Figure 10.

Alex Morrison, *Dead Reckoning: Book of the Film*, (London: Hollywood Publications, 1947), cover. Digital image courtesy of Hollywood Publications Ltd. Photo: Columbia Pictures (all rights reserved).



Figure 11.

Dead Reckoning (still), reproduced in: Alex Morrison, *Dead Reckoning: Book of the Film* (London: Hollywood Publications, 1947), 1. Digital image courtesy of Hollywood Publications Ltd. Photo: Columbia Pictures (all rights reserved).

Perhaps the most stunning tailored blonde in the early 1950s was Marilyn Monroe in the 1953 noir thriller *Niagara* (directed by Henry Hathaway; USA, 1953) (fig. 12). Released in the same year as, but before, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the film is set at the Niagara Falls. Monroe is the unfaithful wife, Rose, who plots with her lover to murder her husband, George. The plan fails, and it is instead the lover who is killed; George strangles Rose and kills himself. In the scene where Rose is murdered by her husband, Monroe wears a tailored black skirt suit, with a low-cut white shirt and strappy sandals. The outfit is fitted and stylish; the jacket reveals and, at the same time, enfolds her body. The sexually expressive blonde inflects the meaning of the tailored suit. No longer just a sign of urban elegance and British tailoring, it is also the costume of the dangerous, sexualised woman who must be punished for her seductive beauty and provocative behaviour.



Figure 12.

Marilyn Monroe in *Niagara*, (USA, 1953; dir. Henry Hathaway). Digital image courtesy of 20th Century Fox Film Corp. / Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

The black suit was thus not a simple or unambiguously decorous outfit for a court appearance. In *Witness for the Prosecution* (directed by Billy Wilder; USA, 1957), Marlene Dietrich plays a woman who is an accomplice to a murder carried out by her husband; she deliberately commits perjury at the Old Bailey, and when she is betrayed by him she stabs and kills him (fig. 13). For her appearance as a witness for the prosecution, Dietrich appears in a well-cut black suit, white shirt, and black beret, and until her husband's final, unexpected betrayal she is ruthless, in control and a liar. The black suit is a charade of elegant restraint; it may appear the embodiment of British moderation, but this disguises sexual power and aggression. In the 1950s, it is also the attire of the femme fatale, the "typical West End tart".



Figure 13.

Marlene Dietrich in *Witness for the Prosecution*, (USA, 1957; dir. Billy Wilder). Digital image courtesy of MGM / APL Archive / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

There is a passage in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, after Dorian has begun his pursuit of murderous sensuality, when his friend Lord Henry tells him: "You are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found".⁴⁵ If Dorian Gray can be understood as the type of late-nineteenth century aestheticism and sensual gratification, the besuited peroxide blonde can be seen as the type of the post-war period, an embodiment of desire and consumerism, and a receptacle of the age's dreams of abundance and anxieties of decline and disorder. When Ruth Ellis entered the dock at the Old Bailey in her black, fur-trimmed, tailored suit, she represented so much more than herself: she was the type of the age and its nemesis.

Court Number One—the Old Bailey

From the moment Blakely's murder hit the newspapers, attention was focused on Ellis's appearance: her hair, her make-up, her clothes, her mannerisms. Readers of the *Daily Mail* were treated to a film noir version of the events: "Six revolver shots shattered the Easter Sunday calm of Hampstead and a beautiful platinum blonde stood with her back to the wall. In her hand was a revolver". And in its report on her committal trial at Hampstead Magistrates Court she was described as wearing "an off-white tweed suit with black velvet piping". Reporters were struck by her composure and lack of emotion; the *Daily Express* observed that she "showed the poise of a mannequin", although the *Daily Mail* noticed that at one critical point in the five-hour hearing she started "tapping her high-heeled shoes against the iron rails of the dock".⁴⁶

The committal trial was merely a rehearsal for the far greater stage of the Old Bailey, for which Ellis wore a black tailored suit with astrakhan fur trim on the lapels and pockets.⁴⁷ Fur was fashionable in the early and mid-1950s; used as trim on tailoring, it was more affordable while maintaining its long-established associations with sensuality and luxury.⁴⁸ Clothes do not just adorn and narrate lives; they are also given meaning by spaces and places. "Yesterday the girl who sought the bright lights made her last appearance as a glamour girl. Her 'stage' was the dock of the No. 1 court at the Old Bailey".⁴⁹ The words of the *Daily Mirror* have the ring of a finale, and in many respects this was the climax for Ellis; it was her moment of total visibility, and she had to look her very best. In her memoir, Ellis's daughter states:

Ruth Ellis, femme fatale, was ready for her first and only starring role, and she was not going to be seen as anything less glamorous than ... any of the other blonde bombshells of her day. This was Ruth's big show, for which the rest of her life had only been a rehearsal.⁵⁰

Court Number One is the largest of the four courts that lead off from the formal marble Grand Hall at the Old Bailey (fig. 14). Originally built in 1907, the Grand Hall had been restored after the war and reopened in 1952. To move from the entrance hall to the courtroom is to move from grandiose domes and marble walls and floors to a cramped, intimate space designed for ritualised legal drama. Court Number One is a small, enclosed, almost theatrical space, in which all the players in the drama—jury, defendant, judiciary, members of the public—are in close physical proximity (figs. 15 and 16).⁵¹ Admission to the public area is by ticket only, and it was not

unusual during the most notorious mid-century trials for long queues to form in the early hours of the morning and for touts to sell tickets at hugely inflated prices.⁵² In the centre of the courtroom is the dock, a relatively large enclosure that contains the accused. As it is able to hold up to ten prisoners, a solitary defendant—a small blonde woman in a black tailored suit, for example—can appear isolated and alone. The defendant in the dock faces the judge; on the right of the dock are the benches of the prosecution and defence, and on the left the jury box. Between the jury box and the judge's bench is the pulpit-like wooden witness box; to enter the witness box, a witness has to walk through the well of the court and past the jury and, in plain sight of the gallery, climb the steps into the box. This is the setting for Ruth Ellis's appearance at her trial.



Figure 14.

The Restored Interior of the Grand Hall of the Central Criminal Courts, September 1952. Digital image courtesy of Central Press / Stringer / Hulton Archive, Getty Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 15.

Interior of a Courtroom at the Old Bailey, May 1981. Digital image courtesy of Varley / Mirrorpix / Getty Images (all rights reserved).

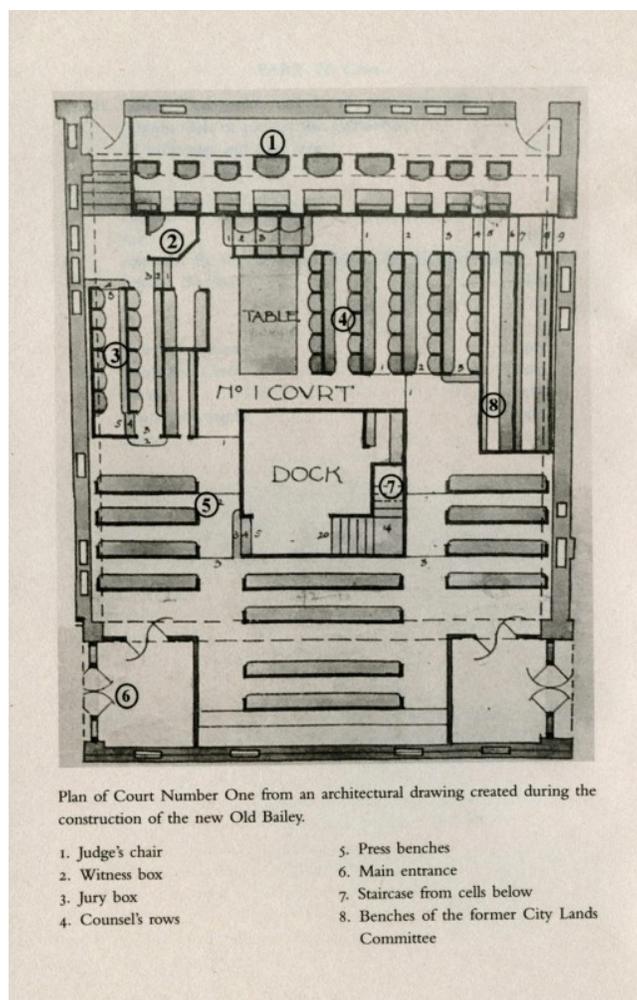


Figure 16.

Plan of Court Number One from an Architectural Drawing Created During the Construction of the New Old Bailey, in Thomas Grant, *Court No. 1 The Old Bailey: The Trials and Scandals that Shocked Modern Britain* (London: John Murray, 2019) facing page, 1. Digital image courtesy of His Honour Judge Nicholas Hilliard, QC, the former Recorder of London and the City of London Corporation / John Murray (all rights reserved).

The defendant takes their place after the rest of the court is assembled, accessing the dock from a flight of stairs below the courtroom. Every report, along with counsel and witnesses, commented on Ellis's composure: at the time of the murder, during her arrest and committal, and at the trial itself. During his examination by the prosecution, the policeman who conducted the interview following her arrest observed: "I was most impressed by the fact that she seemed very composed There was no sign of confusion in her manner, or attitude ... at all".⁵³ Even her defence drew the jury's attention to her self-possession in the courtroom, explaining: "You will

observe that she is now a calm and undisturbed person'; at the time of the murder she was "driven to a frenzy which for the time being unseated her understanding that she committed the crime".⁵⁴ We might now describe Ellis's behaviour as detached or traumatised, but with Ellis showing few signs of emotion it was critically important that the defence should convince the jury that the killing was unpremeditated and the result of a complete loss of control.⁵⁵ Everything in Ellis's appearance, demeanour, and words in the court militated against this judgement, however. The woman in the dock did not appear a deranged, emotional victim; rather, she seemed like a cool, flawless blonde in a black, fur-trimmed suit.

In her study of women and British justice, Queen's Council Helena Kennedy has described that atmosphere in court when a defendant gives evidence: "Whenever a defendant walks from the dock to the witness box to give their own account there is always a strong sense of anticipation ... especially in a murder trial".⁵⁶ Imagine this short walk from the dock of Court Number One, directly past the jury and in plain view of counsel and the public. Ruth Ellis: model, mannequin, mother, murderer. This judicial catwalk was where Ellis's suit and newly dyed hair would be most visible. Was there a sound as she descended from the dock and walked across the floor of the courtroom—any sound other than that of her high-heeled black shoes?

Ellis was a small woman and enjoyed wearing fashionable high-heeled shoes. Her sister recalls: "The children remember their Auntie Ruth with her clippety-clop shoes, her stilettos".⁵⁷ The heel of a stiletto tapers from the shoe to the tip; until the mid-1950s, when new materials and techniques were introduced in the construction of the shoe, stilettos were impractical and uncomfortable and required skill to wear with ease. The word "stiletto" derives from the Italian for dagger, and the style is a recurrent motif in crime films of the period. It was design historian, Viv Chadder, writes: "The pointed heel of deviance, delinquency and the modern woman".⁵⁸

So Ellis would have made her way to the witness box, where she was asked by the prosecution: "Mrs. Ellis, when you fired the revolver at close range into the body of David Blakely, what did you intend to do?" She replied: "It is obvious that when I shot him I intended to kill him".⁵⁹ Her evidence was brief; the trial lasted a day and the jury took twenty-three minutes to find her guilty of murder. Ruth Ellis's suit was smart, fashionable, and elegant, but it could not disguise the ways in which her life transgressed the sexual and moral norms of the period. In his summing up of the case, the judge, Mr. Justice Havers, reminded the jury:

[T]his court is not a court of morals. You will not, therefore, allow your judgement to be swayed or your minds prejudiced in the least degree because, on her own admission, when Mrs. Ellis was a married woman she committed adultery, or because she was having two persons at different times as lovers. Dismiss these questions from your minds. ⁶⁰

Of course, far from dismissing Ellis's moral identity, the judge firmly rooted it in the jury's heads. She was, he had confirmed, "a typical West End tart".

The fur-trimmed, tailored suit was an eloquent piece of clothing, expressing wealth, taste, and social prestige, but on Ellis's body it was the costume of the blonde femme fatale, the model and nightclub hostess, an identity that had been established in the newspapers in the weeks leading up to her trial. One symbolic component of the suit fails, but another assumes control. Not simply an image of restrained British haute couture, on Ellis the suit is the fitted, sexualised carapace of blonde noir. ⁶¹ Ellis is both ordinary and exceptional; in so many ways, her life mirrors those of other women in the late 1940s and 1950s, women who wanted more and who were persuaded by post-war consumer culture that adornment and display were the ways to get it. Sadly, she was also not the only woman in this period who was violently abused by their partner. She was, however, one of the few who fought back so fiercely, becoming an icon of post-war British modern femininity: self-promotional, consuming, ambitious, aggressive, sexually desiring, socially mobile.

Ellis was hanged on Wednesday, 13 July 1955. While there were those who continued to justify capital punishment, public opinion began to shift away from support of the death penalty. There seemed, to many contemporaries, something particularly gruesome surrounding the execution of a woman, and particularly a young, good-looking woman. ⁶² The execution of Ruth Ellis proved to be a turning point in the history of capital punishment in Great Britain; in 1957 the Homicide Act introduced the defence of diminished responsibility and limited the death penalty to certain types of murder. The Death Penalty (Abolition) Act 1965 abolished capital punishment for an initial period of five years, and in 1969 it was abolished permanently.

In the end, there remains a life frozen in a face: frozen both at the moment when the image was taken and on 13 July 1955, when Ellis was hanged (fig. 17). Critics have celebrated the iconic female faces of the twentieth century—Garbo, Monroe. Ellis's face is the negative side of those beautiful masks, the face of blonde noir, of the femme fatale whose beauty disguises evil and transgression. Following her arrest, Ellis always seemed to be

composed; it bothered the police and the judiciary, and it was reported by the press. They wanted her to break down, for her face and body to decompose and to express emotion and remorse, for the masquerade to shatter. But instead she dyed her hair, put on her smartest clothes, and carried on performing murderous violence re-presented as “unpleasantness”.



Figure 17.

Ruth Ellis and David Blakely at the Little Club in London (detail), 1955. Digital image courtesy of Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

Footnotes

- ¹ This is reported in Laurence Marks and Tony Van Den Bergh, *Ruth Ellis: A Case of Diminished Responsibility?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1977] 1990), 134, 148; also, Anette Ballinger, 'Dead Woman Walking: Executed Women in England and Wales, 1900–1955', PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1977, 2.
- ² My first degree was in the History of the Decorative Arts, combined with History of Art, at the University of Leeds and Leeds City Art Galleries.

- 3 For film and television see, for example, *Dance with a Stranger*, directed by Mike Newell (UK, 1985); *The Ruth Ellis Story*, directed by Chris Goddard (United Kingdom: Thames Television, 1977); *Ruth Ellis: A Life for a Life*, directed by Farren Blackburn (United Kingdom: BBC, 1999); *The Ruth Ellis Files: A Very British Crime Story*, directed by Gillian Pachter (United Kingdom: Wall to Wall Media, 2018). Biographies and other publications will be cited throughout.
- 4 See Robert Hancock, *Ruth Ellis: The Last Woman to be Hanged* (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, [1963] 1989), 23–24.
- 5 I use the term “masquerade” here to refer to a particular form, or mask, of exaggerated femininity and national self-fabrication. In recent decades a number of feminist critics have taken the publication of Joan Riviere’s article “Womanliness as a Masquerade” in the *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* X (1929), 303–313, as the starting point for analysing cultural representations of women. I have found discussions in film studies particularly helpful; see, for example, Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator”, *Screen* 23, nos. 3–4 (1982), 74–88; Laura Mulvey, “Thoughts on Marilyn Monroe: Emblem and Allegory”, *Screen* 58, no. 2 (2017): 202–209.
- 6 Muriel Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis: My Sister’s Secret Life* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2005), 23. See also Carol Ann Lee, *A Fine Day for a Hanging: The Real Ruth Ellis Story* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2012), 38.
- 7 On the traces of bruises on Ellis’s body and the acknowledgement of Blakely’s violence at her trial, see Lynda Nead, “A Bruise, a Neck and a Little Finger: The Visual Archive of Ruth Ellis”, in “Visual Archives of Sex”, special issue, *Radical History Review*, forthcoming.
- 8 A.P. Jephcott, *Girls Growing Up* (London: Faber and Faber, [1942] 1944), 47.
- 9 Jephcott, *Girls Growing Up*, 36–37.
- 10 This association of excess social ambition and sexual deviancy was first established in Victorian discourses on female prostitution; see Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 168–175.
- 11 Interview given to Geoffrey Winn, “The Woman Who Wants to Die”, *Sunday Dispatch*, 26 June 1955, as cited in Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 16.
- 12 Duncan Webb, “Corruption”, *People*, 4 December 1955, 3.
- 13 For an excellent discussion of post-war Victorianism and the imagery of melodrama see Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. 15, 122–125, and 358.
- 14 On salaries of women working in offices and factories see A.P. Jephcott, *Rising Twenty: Notes on Some Ordinary Girls* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 119, 137. On Ellis’s starting salary and terms of employment as a hostess see Ruth Ellis, “My Love and Hate by Ruth Ellis”, *Woman’s Sunday Mirror*, 26 June 1955, 7. See also Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 22.
- 15 Duncan Webb, “The Monster of Mayfair, Vice Boss Morris Conley”, *People*, 11 December 1955, 3.
- 16 Mrs. Margaret Woodford, as cited in Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis*, 67–68.
- 17 Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (London: Zed Books, 2010), 3. Dyhouse’s book is one of a large number of studies that are now referred to within the interdisciplinary field “glamour studies”. See also Joseph Rosa, ed., *Glamour: Fashion, Industrial Design, Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2004); Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Alice T. Friedman, *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). My interest in the larger book project, of which this research is a part, is in what happens to American glamour when it crosses the Atlantic and encounters the specific class and gender identities of post-war Britain.
- 18 Diana Dors, *Dors by Diana* (London: Macdonald Futura, 1981), 10.
- 19 “Sta-Blond” regularly sold its products in terms of keeping blonde hair lustrous and preventing it from darkening. See, for example, its advert in *Picture Post*, 31 May 1947, 5: “If your hair was once natural fair or blonde and is now mousy or brownish ...”
- 20 Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire* (London: Paladin, 1984), 80.
- 21 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, directed by Howard Hawks (USA, 1953). Monroe starred with Jane Russell in this film adaptation of Anita Loos’s 1925 comic novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Intimate Diary of a Professional Lady* (New York: Liveright, [1925] 2014). On the impact of American-style advertising in Britain in this period see Sean Nixon, *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c.1951–69* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); also Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).
- 22 Janette Scott discussing her look in *The Beauty Jungle*, directed by Val Guest (UK, 1964) in *Photoplay*, August 1964, 32, and September 1964, 52.
- 23 My thanks to Josh Wood for his insights into the history of hair dye. See Grant McCracken, *Big Hair: A Journey into the Transformation of Self* (London: Indigo, 1997), 81–96; Caroline Cox, *Good Hair Days: A History of British Hairstyling* (London: Quartet, 1999), 154–165, 216–217; Malcolm Gladwell, “True Colors: Hair Dye and the Hidden History of Postwar America”, *New Yorker* (22 March 1999): 70–81.
- 24 On the Clairol advertising campaign see Shirley Polykoff, *Does She ... Or Doesn’t She? And How She Did It* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 22–36.
- 25 Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis*, 114.

- 26 On austerity regulations for clothing see Geraldine Biddle-Perry, *Dressing for Austerity: Aspiration, Leisure and Fashion in Postwar Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017). Clothes rationing was in place between 1941 and 1949. On the precarious affluence of the 1950s more generally see Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class* (London: John Murray, 2014).
- 27 Duncan Webb, *Line Up for Crime* (London: Frederick Muller, 1955), 208–209.
- 28 As cited in Jonathan Goodman and Patrick Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974), 57.
- 29 Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for A Good Woman* (London: Virago, [1986] 2005), 36; also Judy Giles, “Narratives of Gender, Class and Modernity in Women’s Memories of Mid-Twentieth Century Britain”, *Signs* 28, no. 1 (2002): 21–41.
- 30 Lorna Sage, *Bad Blood* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 159.
- 31 As cited in Goodman and Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis*, 45.
- 32 Howard Johnson, “The Bright Lights Led Her to the Death Cell”, *Daily Mirror*, 22 June 1955, 5.
- 33 On the Gallup poll that demonstrated that since 1945 increasing numbers of working-class people identified as middle class see Roy Lewis and Angus Maude, *The English Middle Classes* (London: Phoenix House, 1949), 18.
- 34 Johnson, “The Bright Lights”, 5; Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 16; Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis*, 58. A short recording of Ellis’s voice, consisting of audio clips from episode one of *The Ruth Ellis Story*, is available on YouTube: “Ruth Ellis Speaking”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaO3tMpkMEk>; the quality is not good but perhaps adequate for listeners to draw their own conclusions.
- 35 The letter is reproduced, with a facsimile, in Goodman and Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis*, 38.
- 36 Arthur Tietjen and Rodney Hallworth, “Ruth Ellis Jealousy Appeal?”, *Daily Mail*, 22 June 1955, 7.
- 37 Lisa Cohen, *All We Know: Three Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 201. With thanks to Lisa for engrossing Zoom calls on Garland and Ellis.
- 38 Marjorie Beckett, “The World’s Best Suits”, *Picture Post*, 17 September 1949, 40. See also Hardy Amies, *Just So Far* (London: Collins, 1954), 221. My thanks to Beatrice Behlen for sharing this reference with me.
- 39 Marjorie Beckett, “Paris Decides the Spring Look”, *Picture Post*, 18 March 1950, 30–33; and “Fashion—It’s A Man’s World”, *Picture Post*, 20 September 1952, 17–20. On style and national identity see Christopher Breward, Becky Conekin and Caroline Cox, eds., *The Englishness of English Dress* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); and particularly Edwina Ehrman, “Hardy Amies, Royal Dressmaker”, 133–145. Much of this research was done during Covid lockdown in 2020, and I am incredibly grateful to Rebecca Arnold, Beatrice Behlen, and Christopher Breward for responding so quickly and generously to my emails.
- 40 On the continuation of austerity morality in post-war fashion and the association of the ready-to-wear suit with good taste see Biddle-Perry, *Dressing for Austerity*, 80, 124–125. On post-war, ready-to-wear see also Christopher Breward, “Fashion’s Front and Back: ‘Rag Trade’ Cultures and Cultures of Consumption in Post-war London c.1945–1970”, *London Journal* 31, no. 1 (2006): 15–40; and Liz Tregenza, “London Before It Swung: British Ready-to-Wear Under the Model House Group and Fashion Group 1946–1966” (MA diss., Royal College of Art, 2014). My thanks to Liz for sharing her dissertation with me. For an exciting recent reading of the symbolism of the tailored suit see Shahidha Bari, *Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), 81–133.
- 41 Joan L. Rothschild, “The Tailored Clubwoman”, in Anon., *The 1953 Guide to London Clubs* (London: Regency Press, 1953), 59. The Little Club is listed on pp. 37 and 48.
- 42 See Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 137. The book Ellis was reading may have been Alex Morrison, *Dead Reckoning: Book of the Film* (London: Hollywood Publications, 1947).
- 43 Jan Baetans, *The Film Photonovel: A Cultural History of Forgotten Adaptations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 2.
- 44 The literature on the figure of the femme fatale is extensive. The following collections of essays are particularly helpful: Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir: A Reader* (London, New York: Verso, 1993); E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir*, rev. ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998).
- 45 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Project Gutenberg, 1994) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm>
- 46 *Daily Mail*, 29 April 1955, 7, 1; *Daily Express*, 29 April 1955, 1; *Daily Mail*, 29 April 1955, 1. See also the *Daily Herald*, 29 April 1955, 7: “Ellis ... twisted a white handkerchief and tapped her three-inch heel shoes”. Also, the *Daily Mirror*, 21 April 1955, 1.
- 47 See, for example, *Daily Mirror*, 21 June 1955, 4: the details of her clothes are described in all the newspaper reports. Astrakhan is extracted from fetal or new-born sheep and has a distinctive tightly coiled pile.
- 48 On the symbolism of women and fur see Julia V. Emberley, *The Cultural Politics of Fur* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1997).
- 49 Johnson, “The Bright Lights”, 5.
- 50 Georgie Ellis (with Rod Taylor), *Ruth Ellis, My Mother: A Daughter’s Memoir of the Last Women to be Hanged* (London: Smith Gryphon, 1995), 175.
- 51 For an excellent description of the physical space of the Number One Court see Thomas Grant, *Court No. 1 The Old Bailey: The Trials and Scandals That Shocked Modern Britain* (London: John Murray, 2019), 1–20, on which the following paragraph draws.

- 52 "CCC: Miscellaneous Books and Papers. Applications for press and visitor passes for notable cases. Ruth Ellis", CRIM 8/26, The National Archives.
- 53 Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 12.
- 54 Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 157.
- 55 The partial defence of "diminished responsibility" did not enter English law until the Homicide Act 1957, which was introduced, in part, as a response to Ellis's execution.
- 56 Helena Kennedy, *Eve Was Framed: Women and British Justice* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 195.
- 57 Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis*, 234, see also p. 67.
- 58 Viv Chadder, "The Higher Heel: Women and the Post-War British Crime Film". In Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy, eds. *British Crime Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 66. See also Lee Wright, "Objectifying Gender: The Stiletto Heel", in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., Malcolm Barnard, ed., (London: Routledge, 2007), 197-207; and Helen Persson, ed., *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain* (London: V&A Publishing, 2015), 161.
- 59 Goodman and Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis*, 53.
- 60 Goodman and Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis*, 115-116.
- 61 Leslie Boyd, chief clerk at the Old Bailey at the time of Ellis's trial, described her in his reminiscences as a femme fatale: "cold and calculating, an evil example of womanhood"; as cited in Kennedy, *Eve Was Framed*, 256.
- 62 See, for example, Bernard O'Donnell, *Should Women Hang?* (London: W. H. Allen, 1956).

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Colonial Trash to Island Treasure: The Chaney of St. Croix

Jessica Priebe

Abstract

Chaney is the name given to the porcelain shards found in the soil and washed up on the beaches of St. Croix, US Virgin Islands. A hybrid of the words for “china” and “money”, chaney refers to fragments of European ceramics brought to St. Croix by the island’s former colonisers: England, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Cast out as plantation garbage and broken in symbolic acts of destruction, chaney is a symbol of colonial entanglement, intercultural exchange, and resistance. Drawing on postcolonial critiques of colonial settlement and slavery, this article considers the distribution, circulation, and archival memory of chaney in the context of Atlantic slavery, especially as it relates to the consumption of European ceramics by enslaved individuals. This article also investigates the afterlife of chaney, which is collected by local artisans who repurpose the shards into jewellery. The recuperation of chaney shows how the remnants of prior contact and exchange with foreigners are being reworked by the people of St. Croix to create their own forms of cultural production that offer a symbolic resistance to the hierarchies of European luxury design. This paper concludes by examining the work of St. Croix-based artist La Vaughn Belle, whose Chaney paintings and porcelain designs for Royal Copenhagen move chaney beyond the limits of its materiality to explore the politics of resistance, identity, and colonial responsibility. To this end, I argue that the transformation of chaney from island debris into artworks and decorative objects can be viewed in the wider context of artists using broken or discarded former items of distinction to address the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

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Introduction

Buried in the soil and sand of St. Croix, US Virgin Islands is an abundant supply of “chaney”, the shards of imported ceramics that tell the story of St. Croix’s colonial history along with the reality of its fragmented present (fig. 1). Taking its name from the words for “china” and “money”, chaney refers to the remnants of European ceramic ware brought to St. Croix by the island’s former colonisers: England, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Thrown overboard by sailors to avoid port taxes, broken by settlers in celebration of European customs, cast out as plantation garbage, and ground into the earth during labour riots in the nineteenth century, chaney is a symbol of colonial entanglement, possession, and containment. While these terms are rightly suggestive of the legacy of colonialism and slavery, recent visual and material responses to chaney have sought to restage the historical narrative of these fragments by incorporating them into new works of art that create material value and produce a meaningful dialogue about present-day Caribbean societies.



Figure 1.

Denise Fashaw and Elizabeth Smith, Chaney, St. Croix, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Chaney Chicks & Island Gifts (all rights reserved).

This paper examines the aesthetic, social, ethical, and economic history of chaney. It begins by uncovering chaney's early colonial past and its role in the plantation economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Drawing on first-hand accounts, archaeological surveys of Caribbean sites, and Crucian oral histories, I consider the distribution, circulation, and archival memory of chaney among European plantation owners and enslaved African populations, especially as it relates to the postcolonial theory of mimicry and the Danish model of slavery.¹ This essay also investigates the visual and haptic engagement with these fragments, which have been transformed over hundreds of years on St. Croix in ways that have both preserved and eroded their ceramic forms. Often unearthed after heavy rain, chaney is hunted by local artisans who repurpose the shards into high-end jewellery (fig. 2). This process has contributed to a reassessment of chaney's material status as items of memory and identity. While these fragments still stand as evidence of their colonial context, their transformation from imported ceramic ware to locally produced jewellery crafted from found objects is seen by both makers and consumers of these wares as a symbol of contemporary resistance that speaks to an alternative narrative of the island's history of colonisation and slavery.²



Figure 2.

Nicole Canegata, Chaney Jewellery by ib Designs, St. Croix, 2014. Digital image courtesy of Nicole Canegata (all rights reserved).

Finally, this essay considers the work of contemporary artist La Vaughn Belle, whose paintings on wood weave together different chaney motifs as part of her project to map and restore identity for Caribbean populations (fig. 3). Belle's appropriation of chaney is deeply ingrained in decolonial aesthetics in its ability to both invoke and move beyond the colonial context for these

fragments and their afterlife on St. Croix.³ The essay concludes with an analysis of Belle's design for a line of twelve porcelain dinner plates inspired by her *Chaney* paintings and produced in partnership with the luxury brand Royal Copenhagen (fig. 4). By inscribing the plates with Chaney motifs and patterns, Belle's ceramic series pushes beyond the limits of materiality to reframe the shared histories of St. Croix and its European colonisers.



Figure 3.

La Vaughn Belle and the Chaney (*We Live in the Fragments*), exhibition at Brookfield Place, NYC, 2020, oil on wood, 152.4 × 121.9 cm. Digital image courtesy of Brookfield Properties / Photo: Jakob Dahlin (all rights reserved).



Figure 4. La Vaughn Belle, Chaney (Plate Series), twelve porcelain plates produced by Royal Copenhagen, 2017. Digital image courtesy of La Vaughn Belle (all rights reserved).

A Fragmented Past

Before Chaney became the coveted debris of St. Croix, it belonged to an entirely different artefact class. These fragments were once ceramic objects brought to St. Croix during the second millennium by Europeans in search of territorial expansion and imperial conquest. While the Chaney discussed in this essay is primarily concerned with the household ceramic wares used by the plantation populations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is worth noting that European ceramics had been objects of trade since Christopher Columbus first set foot on St. Croix in 1493.⁴ Olive jars and majolicas were among the most commonly exchanged objects throughout the region.⁵ However, given the Spanish never colonised St. Croix, it is unlikely these objects circulated in large numbers. The wares that did arrive

were probably destroyed during the repeated violent clashes with the Kalingo, an Indigenous Carib population of the Lesser Antilles, whose annihilation at the hands of the Spanish left the island virtually uninhabited by the end of the sixteenth century.

A limited number of ceramics accompanied the English, who were the first to colonise St. Croix in 1631 with plantations of tobacco, maize, sweet potatoes, and watermelons.⁶ The English colony was short lived. Four months after it began, the colony fell to Spanish invaders, who burned crops, destroyed household property, and expelled the English. The French followed in 1634 only to suffer the same fate as the English.⁷ Over the next seven years, England made several attempts to establish a colony on St. Croix. However, it was not until the Dutch fortified the island in 1642 and subsequently adopted the remaining English and French settlers that the Europeans established a more consistent presence on the island.⁸ The population grew significantly under the Dutch, whose mandate for settlement required a minimum of twenty households with at least three members in each.⁹ It stands to reason that Dutch delftware was among the items shipped by the monopolistic Dutch West India Company, who were responsible for supplying approximately three hundred Dutch, French, and English settlers living on the island.

St. Croix changed hands twice more in the seventeenth century. English settlers took control from the Dutch in 1645, followed five years later by the French, who evacuated the island in 1696 as they battled the English and Dutch in the War of the Great Alliance. St. Croix remained mostly uninhabited until 1733, when Frederik Moth, the Danish Governor of St. Thomas, convinced the directors of the Danish West India Company to purchase the island from the French.¹⁰ Moth's attempts to entice Danes to immigrate to St. Croix proved initially difficult. To fill the void, he gave land to fifty English families, which soon led to the increased arrival of other English, Irish, and Scottish settlers.¹¹ As Neville Hall has shown, by 1741, English settlers outnumbered the Danes five to one, with the largest landholders (three hundred acres or more) belonging to people from the British Isles.¹² Accordingly, English was widely spoken throughout the colony and formed the unofficial language of the island's first newspaper *The Royal Danish American Gazette*.¹³ While English-speaking settlers maintained cultural hegemony through language, the Danish governed St. Croix for 184 years except for two brief interludes in 1801-1802 and 1807-1815, when Britain occupied St. Croix during the Napoleonic Wars (fig. 5).



Figure 5.

Paul Kuffner, Danish Map of St. Croix, 1767, etching. Collection of the National Museum of Denmark. Digital image courtesy of National Museum of Denmark (all rights reserved).

European colonial rule ended in 1917 when Denmark sold St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas (Danish West Indies) to the United States for \$25,000,000 million in gold coins. ¹⁴ Upon transfer, the island's records were divided between the former and new owners, effectively stripping St. Croix of its archive. ¹⁵ While much of the Danish West Indian archive was digitised by the Danish National Archives in 2017, the centennial year of the sale, significant barriers to access remain for the predominantly English- and Creole-speaking residents of St. Croix. Consequently, they rely on alternative knowledge systems such as oral histories and artefacts to serve as evidence of the island's fragmented past. ¹⁶ To this end, Chaney presents a reliable diagnostic tool that reveals valuable information about the location and date of the manufacturer, as well as the cultural traditions it produced and the impact of its afterlife on St. Croix.

The China of the Plantation Economy

European intervention in the Caribbean resulted in the dispersal of ceramics fragments throughout the region. However, the Chaney of St. Croix is unique in that it has a Creolian name to describe it. ¹⁷ A Creolism that merges the words for "china" and "money", the name Chaney invokes its colonial function as imported ceramics, along with its afterlife as island refuse. ¹⁸ The term "money" relates to Chaney's historic use by children on St. Croix, who after finding fragments rounded the edges on large rocks and the sidewalk to use as coins to trade and play with in games (see [fig. 1](#)). ¹⁹ By contrast, the word "china" refers to the caseloads of ceramic plates, teacups, saucers, urns, platters, and chamber pots brought to St. Croix during the European

colonial era. These wares are distinct from the pottery made by Indigenous populations of the pre-colonial era.²⁰ They also exclude Afro-Cruzan ceramics, the low-fired hand-built, unglazed earthenware produced by individuals of African ancestry who were transported to St. Croix as part of the forced migration of tens of thousands of enslaved Africans to the Danish West Indies from the seventeenth century.²¹

The prevalence of chaney means that fragments are often sourced for aesthetic purposes and without regard for a shard's provenance or archaeological status. For this reason, a definition of chaney must include all imported ceramic material that surfaces on the island. However, the large volume and variety of shards unearthed are generally associated with the Danish occupation (1733–1917). From the 1740s, Danish investment in the large-scale production of sugarcane created a thriving plantation economy on St. Croix built by its enslaved African population (fig. 6). The wealth of sugar, which drove consumer markets in the Caribbean, America, and Europe, created an affluent planter class on St. Croix.²²



Figure 6.

Frederick von Scholten, Sugar Plantation, St. Croix, Danish West Indies, in *The Slave Ship Fredensborg*, ed. Leif Svalesen (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000), 203 (original in the M/S Maritime Museum of Denmark), 1833, watercolour. Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora, 18, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora, 18, 2021 (CC BY-NC 4.0).

While the plantations produced a system for wealth to be extracted locally and exported globally, these communities were far from being self-sufficient. They required massive amounts of imports to sustain their life, including household wares, food stores, and farm equipment. Restrictive trading policies between Denmark and St. Croix demanded that all European goods were sent on Danish ships manned by Danish crews (fig. 7).²³ Any foreign items that competed with Danish commodities were taxed heavily before leaving Copenhagen.²⁴ However, these mercantilist policies did little to hamper international trade in the Danish West Indies. The establishment of a free port at Charlotte Amalie (St. Thomas) in 1764, combined with the lucrative, but not always legal, inter-island market, provided opportunities to trade with many different nationalities. It was standard practice for settlers to order large shipments of luxury and material goods for personal use and to sell at local markets. Trading locally and with partners throughout the region was a way for planters to supplement their farming income and to ensure that a portion of the wealth remained in the colony. English ceramics and Chinese porcelain were among the items distributed throughout the Danish West Indies through flexible trading arrangements. According to Desmond Nicholson, the stockpile of Chinese porcelain on St. Croix was sufficient, so that by the 1780s merchants began exporting these luxury wares to the American colonies.²⁵



Figure 7.

Henrik Gottfred Beenfeldt, Christiansted Wharf, circa 1788-1794, watercolour, 32.47 × 18.95 cm. Collection of M/S Maritime Museum of Denmark (1943:0036). Digital image courtesy of M/S Maritime Museum of Denmark (CC-BY-NC-SA).

Visitors to the Danish colony on St. Croix testify to the role imported ceramics played in the operation of the great houses (fig. 8).²⁶ Writing about his “sybaritic life” on St. Croix during the 1840s, Hans Dahlerup, an Admiral in the Danish navy and outspoken critic of slavery, spoke of elegant parties and lavish balls.²⁷ He recalled eating:

at the polished mahogany table without a tablecloth, but covered with the most expensive cut crystal, porcelain, and silverware and laden with the most beautiful fruits of all kinds, cakes, jellies, and blancmanges.²⁸

According to Dahlerup, almost all of the planters on St. Croix “belonged to old and distinguished families”, and led a life of luxury, “which in elegance and taste did not lag behind the richest nobility in Europe”.²⁹ While Dahlerup did not specify the type of porcelain on display, he noted that dining etiquette followed the English manner.³⁰ This is a testament to the English hegemony within these blended communities and the Eurocentric cosmopolitanism of the Danish colony on St. Croix.



Figure 8.

Henrik Gottfred Beenfeldt, Dinner Party at Inspector Claus Schonning in Hospitalsgade 10 in Christiansted, 1794, watercolour, 32 × 17.2 cm. Collection of the National Museum of Denmark (F.1658). Digital image courtesy of National Museum of Denmark / Photo: Roberto Fortuna (all rights reserved).

Producing Luxury and the Cult of Blue Willow

Chaney connects St. Croix to the global cultures and economies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The fragments also reveal the changing tastes for ceramics during this period. The popularity of Chinese porcelain in Europe saw rapid technological advancements in the production of earthenware and porcelain. The introduction of English enamel-glazed creamware and pearlware in the eighteenth century superseded tin-glazed earthenware like delft. Savvy marketing by Josiah Wedgwood and his partner Thomas Bentley elevated enamelled earthenware to a level where it competed with Chinese and European porcelain. Cheaper to produce and seemingly comparable in quality, creamware and pearlware—the latter with its signature bluish appearance known as “china glaze”—proved popular at this time in Europe and throughout the colonies.

Reduced trade barriers for entry combined with demand from English planters led to an influx of English earthenware on St. Croix, including the famous willow pattern (fig. 9). Consequently, a common type of chaney found on the island is blue willow (fig. 10).³¹ First developed by Josiah Spode in the 1780s, this imitation Chinese design falsely claimed to copy ancient Chinese porcelain. Catering to British tastes for exotic household wares, the willow pattern presents a fantasy landscape of China. Widely copied, the pattern’s authenticity lies in its insistence upon the precise replication of its motifs, including a bridge with three figures, a willow tree in the centre, a boat, birds, a fence, and an orange tree blooming behind a teahouse.³² The cost of production was significantly cheapened after the invention of transfer earthenware in the 1780s, which allowed the pattern to be transferred directly onto the ceramic body before glazing. Its mass production saw it widely distributed in upper- and middle-class homes in Britain and throughout the colonies. The popularity of blue willow lasted well into the nineteenth century, gaining a cult following in Victorian Britain.³³ The pattern inspired poems and plays such as *The Mandarin’s Daughter*, first performed at the Playhouse and Strand Theatre in 1851. However, the argument in favour of blue willow’s importance to British society goes beyond the economic and aesthetic. As Elizabeth Chang notes “the willow pattern came to be this national touchstone because it was always present as a point of reference, whether in imagination or in point of fact”.³⁴ For British settlers living in the colonies, including St. Croix, blue willow transferware with its invented Chinese design, could be understood as a form of nostalgia that spoke of technological advancements in ceramic production, domesticity, and the logic of empire. While these ideas have become tied to the narrative of chaney, blue willow’s history of appropriation and transference provides a metanarrative consideration of the postcolonial discourse of cultural hierarchy and colonial responsibility.



Figure 9.

Blue Willow Plate, Blue Willow Chaney, Blue Willow Pendant, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Crucian Gold, St. Croix (all rights reserved).



Figure 10.

Nicole Canegata, Blue Willow Chaney excavated from Hospital Street Estate, Christiansted, St. Croix, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Nicole Canegata (all rights reserved).

Other commonly found chaney fragments include English pearlware and whiteware featuring the mocha pattern, known for its distinctive fernlike motif; Wedgwood flown blue, with its flowing blue glaze appearance; and Wedgwood shell-edged wares with a cockled rim painted in either blue, green, or red (fig. 11). The prevalence of these types of chaney signals the dominance of English potters and the sustained interest in Chinese designs. The developments in England also influenced potters in Denmark, who made faience and creamware in the English manner.³⁵ Chaney refers to these Danish wares and the later blue and white porcelain tableware produced in Denmark following the establishment of Royal Copenhagen in 1775. Common fragments recovered include blue fluted, also known in Danish as “musselmalet”, the company’s first dinner service (fig. 12). The hand-painted design, which is still produced today, features a stylised Chinese

chrysanthemum motif interwoven with a Danish cinquefoil.³⁶ The combination of these two flowers represents a symbolic gesture that signals the influence of Chinese porcelain on European ceramics.



Figure 11.

Nicole Canegata, Chaney Jewellery Fragments by ib Designs, St. Croix, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Chaney Chicks & Island Gifts (all rights reserved).



Figure 12.

Arnold Krog, Royal Copenhagen plate with blue fluted design, produced 1960s, 19cm diameter. Digital image courtesy of Royal Design Group Ltd (all rights reserved).

Slavery and Consumption

Blue and white china can be seen in the Great House at Estate Whim ([fig. 13](#)). Built in the 1760s, this grand coral walled structure is now home to a museum. The estate presents a living history of colonialism, showcasing the museum's collection of antique furniture, china, silver, and art. The recreation of plantation life reveals the contrast between the serving ware and luxury objects in the Great House and the rustic kitchen equipment and farm machinery operated by its formerly enslaved labourers. While the museum holds contemporary exhibitions and events, its legacy is rooted in colonial discourse.³⁷ This is evident in the display of furniture and objects in the Great House. For instance, the placement of blue and white china on the table shows how imported ceramics operated within a strategy of power and control among the planter class. These instruments of empire functioned as symbols of wealth and taste. Inside the Great House, the proper handling of ceramics required knowledge of European customs of display and table

etiquette. The fragility of ceramics meant frequent breakages by settlers and their servants, as satirised in prints from the period (fig. 14). The constant threat of breakage spawned an industry of repairers in England and America, while those in colonial outposts opted to either replace or mend using homemade glue recipes published in magazines aimed at housewives. ³⁸



Figure 13.

The Great House at Estate Whim, St. Croix, 30 January 2012. Digital image courtesy of Sipa USA / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).



Figure 14.

J. Baldrey, *Dinner Just Over, or The Consequences of a Toe Tripping at the Top of a Stair-Case* (Cambridge: J. Baldrey, 20 July 1799), 1799, black-and-white etching with period hand colour, 17.1 × 20.3 cm. Collection of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Museum Purchase (1957-30). Digital image courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (all rights reserved).

The narrative of consumption, ruin, and repair remains an important fixture for thinking about how imported china came to symbolise the ideology of colonial possession over bodies, both ceramic and human. However, it does not consider the use of European ceramics by enslaved populations, who were active participants in the consumer revolution of the modern Atlantic world. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, enslaved people played a crucial role in supporting the Caribbean economy.³⁹ Their labour powered the plantations that drove global markets, while their spending contributed to the success of local markets. From the establishment of the Danish African Company in 1659 to its official termination in 1802, an estimated 75,000 enslaved people were sent to the Danish West Indies.⁴⁰ Those that survived the treacherous journey were transported to slave villages on the island's estates. By 1751, enslaved people accounted for sixty per-cent of the population of the main towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted.⁴¹ Despite a formal end to the Danish slave trade in 1803, illegal slave trading and poor working conditions continued well into the nineteenth century. Subsequent legislation failed to meet the demands of enslaved communities and other groups, such as tenant farmers and freed slaves. The tension and civil unrest in the colony resulted in a series of

uprisings culminating with the 1848 revolt that led to an emancipation proclamation and the 1878 labour riot known as Fireburn, which abolished unfair labour laws and promised a more stable pathway towards equality (fig. 15).⁴²



Figure 15.

From the Rebellion on St. Croix, in *Tidende* (November 1878), engraving, 288.8 × 206.8 cm. Collection of the Danish Royal Library. Digital image courtesy of Danish Royal Library (public domain).

The devastating impact of the slave trade has generated interest across multiple scholarly disciplines, including archaeology. Since the 1970s, archaeologists have excavated slave villages on plantations throughout the Caribbean. Material removed from these sites has revealed that enslaved people were consumers of European ceramics.⁴³ Recent excavation of the slave village at Governor Moth's former Estate Little Princess by the Society of Black Archaeologists found blue and white transferware dated to the 1780s (fig. 16).⁴⁴ In addition to the ceramic material, the team found the remnants of a silver pewter spoon and several bone buttons, but no flat bone pieces, indicating that the buttons were finished rather than carved by enslaved people (fig. 17). The material properties of these items raise questions about how enslaved individuals on St. Croix encountered luxury imports. A common misconception is that household wares, including European ceramics, were passed down from the great house to the slave village as off-casts. Such acts of paternalism are evident in the American colonies where the distribution of possessions to enslaved peoples operated as an act of dominance and control.⁴⁵ By contrast, this system is largely absent in the Caribbean, where enslaved populations were given little in the

way of material possessions. Instead, enslaved labourers throughout the region purchased and bartered wares at local markets using the money they made from selling provisions (fig. 18).⁴⁶



Figure 16.

Excavation of Estate Little Princess on St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Archaeology in the Community (all rights reserved).



Figure 17.

Excavation of Estate Little Princess on St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands, 2020. Digital image courtesy of M. CANTWELL/SCIENCE (all rights reserved).



Figure 18.

Agostino Brunias, *Linen Day, Roseau, Dominica—A Market Scene*, circa 1780, oil on canvas, 49.8 × 68.6 cm. Collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1981.25.76). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (public domain).

Slave Planters

The success of the island markets reflects the laissez-faire pan-Caribbean attitude to provisioning enslaved people. Despite this, purchasing power varied depending on the wealth of the colony and its system of governance. As the Danish were relatively late to operating plantations in the Caribbean, they benefited greatly from adopting various policies and practices from their more established neighbours. This resulted in a composite approach that allowed for some degree of negotiation between enslaved and planter communities.⁴⁷ Under the Danish system, labourers were given a choice to reduce their already meagre rations in return for small plots of land to farm on the outskirts of the estates.⁴⁸ Many chose to farm these plots to avoid starvation by supplementing their food rations and selling crops and other provisions at the island markets.⁴⁹ When presented with this option, raising subsistence crops and rearing livestock represented a natural extension of their enforced daily farming practices on the plantations. The island markets were an opportunity for enslaved people to extract money from this process and exercise a degree of consumer choice in the objects they purchased for their households.

The extent to which conspicuous consumption was employed as a mode of self-expression by enslaved people on St. Croix requires further consideration. Multiple period references attest to enslaved individuals wearing expensive European clothing on their free days (Sunday and holidays), dressed up to such extent “that a stranger would not think that they were slaves”.⁵⁰ Such comments could be understood as an attempt by the enslaved to demonstrate their aspirations beyond the reality of their position by seeking out the same objects appreciated by their enslavers. However, rather than suggest that enslaved individuals came to share the tastes of their European colonisers, a more inclusive approach is to show how the Danish model of slavery contributed to a form of consumerism that positioned the colonised subject as a necessarily imperfect imitation of the coloniser. This can be understood in relation to Homi Bhabha’s well-rehearsed concept of mimicry, which argues that the coloniser aimed to produce compliant subjects that mimic their customs, dress, and activities.⁵¹ In the case of the enslaved population on St. Croix, this imposed mimeticism took the form of a slave planter, whose self-provisioning created limited social and economic freedoms that absolved plantation owners from their obligations without threatening their authority. As illustrated in Agostino Brunias’s idealised painting of a Dominican linen market from circa 1780, the provisioning of enslaved people was an inherently gendered process whereby men assumed responsibility for the farming of crops, while the women handled the market trade, including the purchase of wares for domestic use and decoration (see [fig. 18](#)).

The gendered nature of the consumption of European ceramics by women of different status on St. Croix creates further space for thinking about Bhabha’s theory of mimicry and how this definition can be broadened along the lines of gender as well as race. The items of chinaware from which Chaney derives were produced largely for domestic use by women in the home. The gendered aspect of this Chaney shows how the consumption of European china by women in the Danish West Indies extends the life of Bhabha’s theory of mimicry to include a model for the female slave planter.

The similarities in the consumption of china by women throughout the Caribbean colonies highlight the need for postcolonial theories of economic and socially modelled behaviour to be expanded to include gendered practices. Yet it must also take into consideration the differences in the levels of consumer choice that arise in these contact zones.⁵² Analysis of the ceramics recovered from plantation estates across the US Virgin Islands has revealed discrepancies in the style of decoration between the great houses and slave villages. For instance, women in the great houses preferred to collect sets of blue and white patterned china, whereas those in the slave cabins seem to have favoured polychrome wares ([fig. 19](#)).⁵³ These variations can be attributed, at least in part, to the planters’ access to

shipments, purchasing power, and taste for Georgian order versus the gradual accumulation of European ceramics by enslaved people at the island markets. Reflecting on such issues in her study of the Clifton Plantation in the Bahamas, Laurie Wilkie has suggested that a “creolization model” should be adopted to recognise how enslaved communities used and perceived European commodities in ways that were unique to their African heritage.⁵⁴ Establishing an “African-based identity” to the consumption of European ceramics in Atlantic colonies will help determine how the selection of certain forms and decorations was shaped by cultural differences and identity politics.⁵⁵



Figure 19.

Two Black Women Outside a Cabin in a Former Slave Village on St. Croix, after 1848, photograph. Collection of the National Museum of Denmark (Inventory number 6030 DVI). Digital image courtesy of National Museum of Denmark (all rights reserved).

Symbolic Acts of Destruction

The consumption of imported ceramics by enslaved individuals on St. Croix reflects the Danish system of colonial power relations. However, it also reveals an alternative narrative, which in the context of finding and reusing chaneý has become a symbol of Crucian resistance. Next to glassware, imported broken ceramic wares are among the most frequently cited items listed in the household inventories compiled in the wake of the labour riots in the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ While the scale of destruction accounts for some

of the chaney recovered on St. Croix, archaeological surveys have uncovered a link between the labour revolts of the nineteenth century and the ceramic refuse disposed of in the aftermath. The charred remains of European ceramics were among the items excavated by the Office of Archaeological Research at the University of Alabama from deep within the strata of the Frederiksted Landfill site. The area has been identified as the town's historic landfill site, with deposits dating as far back as the eighteenth century. As Brooke Persons argues, the burned chaney found at this site suggests that it belongs to the debris collected in the clean up after the Emancipation and Fireburn revolts, the latter resulting in most of Frederiksted being set alight along with fifty-three estates across the island.⁵⁷ The scale of destruction and the unrest that followed in the days after these riots required swift and efficient disposal of debris, making it likely that the Frederiksted Landfill site includes broken ceramics from both the great houses and the slave villages.

The fragility of ceramic ware almost certainly ensures its destruction during any large-scale violent uprising. However, the contradictions arising from the enslaved communities' consumption of European ceramics can be weighed against these assumed expectations. Far from producing a facsimile of the coloniser, mimicry, according to Bhabha, produces "ambivalent" subjects who oscillate between "attraction" and "repulsion".⁵⁸ For enslaved individuals participating in the local markets on St. Croix, the desire to possess imported ceramics may have been simultaneously met with contempt for the same objects that symbolised their possession by a colonial power. The destruction of these wares during the labour riots, which Hall suggests went well beyond collateral damage, points to the justifiable rage and frustration from enduring more than a century of oppression on St. Croix.⁵⁹ The deliberate breaking of ceramics during the labour uprisings suggests a mockery and rejection of European colonial life.⁶⁰ Indeed, the destruction of both settler- and slave-owned ceramics has emerged as a symbol of resistance in the storied history of emancipation.

These destructive acts of resistance and anger can be compared to another form of symbolic destruction that also accounts for a large volume of chaney on St. Croix. At the beginning of each year, kitchen middens and the Frederiksted Landfill received an unusually large number of fragments following the Danish custom of smashing chipped or broken plates against the doors of neighbours in a gesture of good luck.⁶¹ In the case of St. Croix, the protracted rule by the Danish saw this tradition enacted once a year for nearly two hundred years.

As the Danish New Year ritual and other symbolically weighted acts of destruction reveal, the social action around the breaking of ceramics on St. Croix suggests the need to give attention to disposal as much as

consumption and use. To this end, the work of Kevin Hetherington has made significant progress in his call for waste to be considered part of the narrative of consumption, which, unlike rubbish, has been the focus of extensive sociological research.⁶² Hetherington's argument that the act of "disposal is never final as is implied by the notion of rubbish", sees him adapt Robert Hertz's two-phase system of human burials to the discarding of non-living objects.⁶³ For Hetherington, the first stage of burial is inside the house, where objects are removed from their intended function and left in a state of limbo "while their uncertain value is addressed".⁶⁴ The second burial exists beyond the "representational" door, where they are dumped or incinerated, an act that divests objects of their value to the owner. The saving of broken dishes from the start of the new year, for example, shows how the materiality of things impacts on the shifting meanings behind the organisation and categorising of disposed objects, which in this case is classed as a special kind of clutter that will be broken again in further symbolic action.

The Danish New Year custom of breaking damaged china on St. Croix tests the limits of Hetherington's theory. Even when the damaged china goes beyond the owner's door to be rebroken in a gesture of good luck, the piles of broken shards have not yet exhausted their value. As the Danish custom dictates, the bigger the pile of smashed china the more friends you are perceived to have. While the pile of broken china contains links to its former owners, suggesting that it falls within Hetherington's first burial, the inability to identify the shards positions this pile of rubbish as a new state that lies between the first and second burials. It is only when swept into the estate middens and landfill at Frederiksted that this waste divests itself of its owners and the social and political activities that dictated its end.⁶⁵

The Return of the Disposed

At 11km wide and 35km in length, St. Croix is the largest island in the US Virgin Islands. Prone to strong tropical storms and Category 5 hurricanes, the island was devastated in 2017 when hurricanes Irma and Maria hit within two weeks of each other with wind speeds of up to 157 mph. Natural disasters are part of chaney's journey from its historic breakage to its contemporary recovery. For instance, the destruction of the 1772 hurricane, which famously inspired a young Alexander Hamilton to write a vivid account of the storm, caused significant property damage.⁶⁶ While chaney surfaces in the wake of natural disasters, it is in abundant supply throughout the year. Often unearthed after heavy rain, chaney is found in garden beds, gutters, on the beaches, and in the water.⁶⁷ For this reason, it is divided into two categories: "ocean chaney" and "land chaney".⁶⁸

Ocean chaney, as the name suggests, is found in the water and on the beach having been carried in by the changing tides (fig. 20). Most of this china never made it to shore, ending up in the water as refuse. Any china broken during rough seas was thrown overboard. Likewise, bags of ceramic wasters obtained from European potteries were sometimes used as the ship's ballast, only to be dumped at Caribbean ports to avoid paying cargo taxes (fig. 21).⁶⁹ Emptying the ballast before port made economic sense as the ship's hull could be filled with caseloads of sugar, rum, cotton, and other lucrative exports extracted from the island plantations. Shipwrecks also played a role in the accumulation of ocean chaney on the island. Between 1523-1917, there were 114 shipwrecks recorded at St. Croix, many of which were English ships.⁷⁰ For instance, of the nine shipwrecks that occurred between 1769 and 1803, six were English flagged including the *Mary* in 1797 and the *General Abercrombie* in 1803, both of which were carrying enslaved people deported from Africa.⁷¹ While most of the enslaved people escaped death, only the cargo on board the *General Abercrombie* was saved. Conversely, the cargo belonging to the remaining six English ships was either partly or completely lost in the water.⁷²



Figure 20.

Denise Fashaw and Elizabeth Smith, *Ocean Chaney, St. Croix*, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Chaney Chicks & Island Gifts (all rights reserved).



Figure 21.

Wasters, 1650–1670, tin-glazed earthenware with fragments of fire-resistant clay (Delft), 50 × 42 × 35 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (C.10-2005). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Ocean chaney has evolved over the years, changed by the composition and motion of the water. While the lustre of the glazes has dulled, the edges of ocean chaney have been smoothed by the sand and grit, leaving them soft to the touch. By contrast, land chaney relates to the fragments found in the soil and other types of catchments such as gutters (fig. 22). These pieces are sometimes referred to as “plantation chaney” due to the historical connection with the estates. The term plantation chaney invokes both the colonial function of these fragments as ceramic ware and their afterlife as estate garbage. Land or plantation chaney is distinct from ocean chaney on account of its method of disposal and the aesthetic effects accrued during its afterlife. The more stable elements of the soil, as opposed to ocean water, protect the land chaney, leaving the original glazes and rough edges intact. Unlike iron that rusts away, or glass, which splinters and devitrifies, land

chaney withstands the ravages of time. While both types of chaney reveal a connection to the colonial history of St. Croix, the preserved fragments of land chaney ensure the most direct experience of colonial ceramics, whereas ocean chaney bears the visible marks of its marine adventure.



Figure 22.

Nicole Canegata, Land Chaney Excavated from the Hospital Street Estate, Christiansted, St. Croix, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Nicole Canegata (all rights reserved).

The return of ceramic material emphasises the alchemy of nature and recalls the long-standing analogy between shells and porcelain. Up until the middle of the seventeenth century, it was still widely believed that Chinese porcelain comprised pulverised shells ground down into a paste and returned to the earth for up to one hundred years to mature under nature's supervision.⁷³ While such transformations belong to the realm of myth, there is nonetheless a certain reverence attached to the rebirth of chaney. Being of ceramic material, chaney forms a symbiotic relationship with the natural

environment. Entombed in the landscape the fragments lie in wait, ready to resurface by an act of nature or human extraction. Through this process of rebirth, chaney adopts a new life as the island treasure of St. Croix. Nature's seemingly endless return of disposed fragments reinforces the idea that chaney is native to St. Croix. Tourist blogs and lifestyle television programmes promote the finding of chaney as a locally sourced artefact.⁷⁴ As these sources suggest, its special appeal lies in the unique character of the fragments. While some shards derive from the same factory or even the same ceramic body, the broken edges and the effects produced by its interaction with nature ensure that no two pieces of chaney are alike.

Counternarratives: Chaney as Jewellery

The recovery of chaney marks a new stage in its biography that not only extends its life but also leads to a reassessment of its aesthetic, economic, and cultural value. The idea that objects maintain "social lives" as they shift contexts and undergo reassessments in their material status and value has been well documented.⁷⁵ Such arguments have stated that an object enjoys a similar life to that of a person, often inhabiting multiple locations and positions of value that fluctuate according to different economic or cultural systems.⁷⁶ The ebb and flow of chaney's shifting biography are marked by its many afterlives, stretching from its historic use by Crucian children to objects of upcycled design in St. Croix's flourishing jewellery scene (fig. 23).
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Figure 23.

Nathan Bishop, Chaney Jewellery, 2017. Digital image courtesy of Crucian Gold, St. Croix (all rights reserved).

The repurposing of fragments into coins marks Chaney's earliest known transformation into a local commodity. Nathan Bishop, the owner of Crucian Gold, one of the first Chaney jewellery stores on the island, explains that the tokens were used as currency by children who traded them as items of value as well as playing with them in games.⁷⁸ Bishop's father, Brian, knew of these stories and began handcrafting pieces of Chaney jewellery in the 1970s to keep the rich history of the island alive. Born and raised on St. Croix, Bishop Sr. worked as a commercial diver specialising in hazardous search and recovery missions, welding, and tugboat inspection. According to his son, Bishop made Chaney jewellery in his spare time as a creative outlet, proudly displaying "his art" in a mahogany box that he carried everywhere with him on the island (fig. 24). His designs "were inspired by his knot tying and blue-collar family background" and a desire for "elevating common materials and motifs to fine jewellery". Nearly fifty years later, Brian Bishop's passion for Chaney has evolved into a thriving jewellery business in Christiansted, where his family continue to create handcrafted pieces from Chaney for both men and women (fig. 25). The making and wearing of jewellery—typically understood as feminine—by men and women, shows how Chaney is being used to problematise social and gendered hierarchies that are traditionally associated with the consumption of European ceramics on St. Croix. Indeed, the reuse of colonial-era china as jewellery demonstrates the potential for Chaney, as a statement of aesthetic and luxury perfection, to move beyond the realm of the domestic to become an expression of ornamental selfhood that is neither uniquely feminine nor European.



Figure 24. Nathan Bishop, Brian Bishop's Jewellery Case, 2016. Digital image courtesy of Crucian Gold, St. Croix (all rights reserved).



Figure 25.

Nathan Bishop, Wondrous Willow Cufflinks, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Crucian Gold, St. Croix (all rights reserved).

Today more businesses advertise the sale of chaney jewellery including ib Designs and the aptly named Chaney Chicks & Island Gifts. Filed, polished, and set in 14-karat gold, silver, or wrapped in wire, chaney is transformed by these artisans into high-end bracelets, pendants, earrings, rings, cuffs, cufflinks, and money clips (see [fig. 2](#)). All of the jewellers contacted for this article stated that they prefer working with land chaney as the glazes are still intact, protecting both the colour and the integrity of the ceramic material. ⁷⁹ By comparison, ocean chaney is more brittle and the lack of glazing makes it susceptible to staining when it comes into contact with the skin's natural oils. ⁸⁰

Chaney jewellers acquire the fragments through different means. While the owners of ib Designs, Crucian Gold, and Chaney Chicks all reported finding chaney on St. Croix to transform in the studio, they noted the uptake in residents and tourists bringing fragments to sell, trade, or commission into one-of-a-kind pieces. Kris Massicott co-owner of ib Designs in Christiansted, said that she used to hunt for chaney on weekends with her son and her husband, Whealan Massicott, ib Designs' head jeweller and co-owner.

Although Massicott continues to find shards on the island, she noted that chaney is also brought to the store by builders and landscapers who recover shards from construction sites across the island. ⁸¹

Photographs taken by St. Croix photographer Nicole Canegata for this article show the journey of land chaney from the soil to the store (fig. 26). The chaney, which includes blue willow, was excavated in 2021 nine feet below the surface at a construction site on the grounds of a historic estate (est. 1793) in Hospital Street, Christiansted (fig. 27). The shards were taken to ib Designs where Whealan Massicott transformed the raw pieces into pendants set in silver (fig 28). The photographs, which chart the process of chaney's recovery and reuse, attest to the jewellery's local and handcrafted material alteration. Its loose and unassuming assembly at the site and in the plastic sorting bucket in Whealan's workshop confirms chaney's middle status as island refuse (fig. 29). The chaney is given agency through Whealan's hands, which shape and sculpt the pieces into designed objects. The final image illustrates the finished pendants on display at ib Designs, where the story of the recovery of these historic shards and their use by children features in the marketing of these wares (fig. 30). The fluid nature of chaney's disposal and return reveals the extent to which former objects of distinction such as patterned china can achieve a higher status of luxury by acknowledging its many afterlives.



Figure 26.

Nicole Canegata, Chaney excavated from the Hospital Street Estate, Christiansted, St. Croix, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Nicole Canegata (all rights reserved).



Figure 27.

Nicole Canegata, Hospital Street Estate, Christiansted, St. Croix, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Nicole Canegata (all rights reserved).



[Watch Video](#)

Figure 28.

Nicole Canegata, Chaney Jewellery in Production at the ib Designs Workshop, St. Croix, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Nicole Canegata (all rights reserved).



Figure 29.

Nicole Canegata, Chaney Jewellery Fragments by ib Designs, St. Croix, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Nicole Canegata (all rights reserved).



Figure 30.

Nicole Canegata, Chaney jewellery by ib Designs, St. Croix, 2021. Digital image courtesy of Nicole Canegata (all rights reserved).

Through the process of design, chaney undergoes a renewed process of commodification to become a souvenir of St. Croix. However, its meaning goes far beyond its newly acquired status as an island export. The jewellery represents the convergence of chaney's past and present lives. This has the potential to be experienced by the maker and wearer as an imagined third state that challenges formulaic notions of hybridity through a conceptual re-engagement with notions of dominance, oppression, and emancipation. The jewellery also invokes the idea of displacement both as a function of colonialism and as a contemporary reference that connects the wearer to St. Croix.⁸² If chaney represents a symbol of colonial possession and abandonment, the process of reclaiming pieces for new decorative works used in conjunction with locally smelted metals becomes a mode of artistic, economic, and cultural production for Virgin Islanders. As Nathan Bishop argues:

Some people look at the things from the colonial period with resentment and see it as a symbol of oppression, whereas other people want to reclaim what was once lost. They want to take back the negative parts of history.⁸³

Reclaiming the historical narrative through making and wearing chaney jewellery demonstrates how an object's afterlife can accrue in meaning and representation through physical modification. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the performance of luxury historically associated with the consumption of colonial china, by people of both enslaved and free status, can be re-enacted through the recuperation of these fragments.

The upcycling of disposed fragments recasts chaney within a new materialist frame, not just through its emphasis on the primacy of matter but also in its de-privileging of colonial discourse and the logic of empire. Chaney is no longer just the colonial trash of St. Croix; its afterlife imbues the material fragments with a sense of agency and vitality.⁸⁴ The physical changes to chaney, both in the environment and through the process of design, reinforce the connection with St. Croix and its inhabitants. In displacing its link with Europe, the recuperation of chaney overturns the linear and conclusive narratives of eighteenth-century British naturalists such as Hans Sloane travelling to the colonies to recover strange, curious, and untouched objects. Instead, the focus has shifted to consider how the remnants of prior contact and exchange with foreigners are being reworked by the residents of St. Croix to create their own forms of cultural production that are counter-archival in their resistance to the European idea of progress.⁸⁵

Chaney and Contemporary Art: La Vaughn Belle

Other aesthetic interpretations of chaney invoke similar decolonial practices. St. Croix-based contemporary artist La Vaughn Belle explores themes of resistance, identity, and colonial responsibility across a wide range of media including painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, photography, video, and public interventions. Belle's work with chaney, which began in a painted series in 2014 and is still ongoing, sees her weave and magnify different ceramic patterns and motifs in acrylic on wood (fig. 31). Most of the paintings are executed in blue and white, a reference to the Danish and English chaney found on St. Croix. However, Belle's *Chaney* is not concerned with recreating precise patterns or designs, but rather constitutes a visual history drawn from her memory of finding chaney on St. Croix. Familiar European ceramic motifs of flowers, boats, and trees are interwoven with expanded geometric and vegetal forms. The formal geometric patterns balance the exuberance of the vegetal ornament, evoking the lush gardens of an imaginary paradise

(fig. 32). The interplay of motifs references the Eurocentric vision of the Virgin Islands as a landscape untarnished by the stain of colonialism.⁸⁶ The paintings respond to the Danish narrative of colonial innocence as a tonic to appease the guilt and shame attached to the country's long history of colonialism throughout the world.⁸⁷ As Belle has stated, her experiences in Denmark have revealed little awareness of the legacy of colonialism in contemporary Danish society, while the Danish imprint remains ever present in the minds of Virgin Islanders.⁸⁸



Figure 31.

La Vaughn Belle, Chaney series (We Live in the Fragments) shown in the St. Croix studio with chaney, 2015, oil on wood, 152.4 × 121.9 cm. Digital image courtesy of La Vaughn Belle (all rights reserved).



Figure 32.

La Vaughn Belle, Chaney series (We Live in the Fragments), 2015, oil on wood, 152.4 × 121.9 cm. Digital image courtesy of La Vaughn Belle (all rights reserved).

Belle's integration of ceramic motifs copied from her memory of finding chaney on St. Croix with imaginary forms created by her in the present comment on the nature of mimetic representation as a construct of artifice. The amplification of the details as they appear on the boards allows for close reading of the aesthetic forms. However, as Erica Johnson argues, the recreation of European motifs is often fragmented, cut off, or silhouetted, such as the ship seen floating on the water (fig. 33).⁸⁹ The corollary of this aesthetic dislocation is a sense of the uncanny, where the visible occupies an uncomfortable space between the familiar and unfamiliar. While it is the fragments that drive Belle's practice, her work creates room for other forms of cultural and historical recognition. Danish researcher Camilla Lund Mikkelsen recalls her mother's reaction to seeing Belle's *Chaney* for the first time at an exhibition at the Royal Copenhagen Library. Looking at the painting, Mikkelsen's mother instantly recognised the reference to Royal

Copenhagen china, using the Danish word “musselmalet” to describe its blue fluted design (see [fig. 12](#)).⁹⁰ The incident, itself a fragment in time, reveals how Belle’s visual appropriation of chaney operates as an aesthetic frisson that brings awareness to invisible histories through a dialectic of art and decoration.



Figure 33.

La Vaughn Belle, Chaney series (We Live in the Fragments), exhibition at Brookfield Place NYC (detail), 2020, oil on wood, 152.4 × 121.9 cm. Digital image courtesy of La Vaughn Belle (all rights reserved).

As an ongoing series, Belle’s paintings respond to the material culture of chaney. Through the medium of paint on board, the *Chaney* series disrupts a linear reading of the object’s biography and sequential trajectory from domestic china to luxury jewellery. In this way, the paintings bring greater complexity and plurality to the afterlife of chaney as multimedia. More poignantly though, the paintings are a conduit to process and dismantle the rhetoric of colonial mimicry by acknowledging and celebrating the

incompleteness of their forms. Belle's *Chaney* imparts agency to the fragments that have broken away from their serialised bodies, just as the slave planters revolted against their European colonisers in resistance to the Danish model of slavery that positioned them as imperfect facsimiles long after slavery was abolished in the colony.

Belle's paintings have been interpreted as counter-archival in their acknowledgement of the limited and one-sided nature of St. Croix's historical record.⁹¹ Indeed, the enduring nature of *chaney* is a fitting emblem for the uncertain and unseen aspects of the Danish West Indian archive. Belle's paintings, which instead rely on the interplay of artistic innovation, memory, and blended knowledge systems of *chaney*, unpack the historical weight of the collective archive to reveal new agencies and perspectives. While Belle has stated that she remembers *chaney* from her childhood in the 1980s on St. Croix, she admits that she had not seen a plate series in its entirety until a visit to the Royal Copenhagen store in Denmark in 2008.⁹² The atemporal and unconventional nature of Belle's encounters with *chaney* shows how artistic reworkings of the scraps and fragments of colonial exchange offer a symbolic resistance to the process and hierarchies of European luxury design.

As the title of the series *Chaney [We Live in the Fragments]* suggests, Belle's paintings are part of her ongoing project to chart and restore identity for Caribbean populations. As she explains:

Similar to how we have reconstructed our histories, these paintings represent a symbolic gesture of restoration, a type of map that charts both the real and the imagined. They gather and take control of the fragments and recast them as embodied wholes, making visual the process of taking control of one's narrative and being one's own possession.⁹³

In transposing these fragments onto canvas, Belle reorders and layers them with ethical questions surrounding the history of slavery and the collective erasure of a population sold to the USA without consultation. The sale of the Danish West Indies to America in 1917 effectively ended European colonial rule. However, it took another ten years for residents to achieve US citizenship. Belle's *Chaney* series challenges subversive notions of possession and containment through references to leftover fragments and people. As Belle concedes, the paintings are a "symbolic gesture" towards reshaping the shared Euro-Afro-Carib-US histories. Symbolism is important to Belle. Her *chaney* bracelet is often visible in promotional photographs of the artist, recorded interviews, and lectures. While the wearing of fragments is a

way to reframe colonial discourse, Belle's *Chaney* uses the painted medium to give new context to chaney's historical narrative of possession and cultural amnesia.

In 2017, Belle's *Chaney* paintings inspired a new line of twelve blue and white hand-painted porcelain dinner plates produced in partnership with Royal Copenhagen (see [fig. 4](#)). Exhibited alongside recovered fragments at Christiansborg Palace, the plates mark a conceptual reuniting of chaney to its ceramic body ([fig. 34](#)). However, this return, which coincided with the centennial of Denmark's transfer of St. Croix to the US Virgin Islands, grounds postcolonial discourse in the language of decoration. While the floral designs and blue-and-white colour scheme are in keeping with decorative traditions of Royal Copenhagen, the plates are inscribed with the shared histories of St. Croix in ways that transcend the limits of materiality. Reinforcing this idea is Belle's hand-painted signature on the back of the plate underneath the Royal Copenhagen stamp ([fig. 35](#)). The luxury status of the plates, together with their royal display, shows how Belle's practice brings historic and present-day arguments about the commodification and consumption of European ceramics into dynamic conversation. Moreover, she proposes a new way to approach the well-rehearsed problems of colonialism and slavery.



Figure 34.

La Vaughn Belle, *Chaney* (Plate Series), twelve porcelain plates produced by Royal Copenhagen, exhibited with chaney pieces at Christiansborg Palace, 2017. Digital image courtesy of La Vaughn Belle (all rights reserved).



Figure 35.

La Vaughn Belle, Underside: Chaney (Plate Series), porcelain plate produced by Royal Copenhagen, 2017. Digital image courtesy of La Vaughn Belle (all rights reserved).

Belle's *Chaney* plates have rich parallels with British artist Lubaina Himid's overpainted series *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service* from 2007 (fig. 36).⁹⁴ Originally conceived as a museum intervention to mark the two hundredth anniversary of the Act of Parliament abolishing the slave trade in Britain, *The Lancaster Dinner Service* sees Himid paint caricatures from the dining room of the British upper classes and the forgotten enslaved people that served them over eighteenth- and nineteenth-century porcelain, including the iconic willow pattern (fig. 37). Loosely drawn cartoons and scrawling text detailing stories of excessive consumption and slavery are transposed onto serialised china plates, cups, milk jugs, and soup tureens. The original ceramic pattern is still visible on each of the items. However, the overpainting disrupts a logical reading of their stately designs as the

uncomfortable reality of the meaning of the words domestic service is brought into sharp focus as issues of gender, class, and race play out as an aesthetic dialectic of the old and the new.



Figure 36.

Lubaina Himid, *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service*, Judges' Lodgings, 2007, acrylic on porcelain, dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Lubaina Himid and Hollybush Gardens, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 37.

Lubaina Himid, *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service, Judges' Lodgings* (detail), 2007, acrylic on porcelain, dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Lubaina Himid and Hollybush Gardens, London (all rights reserved).

By contrast, Belle's *Chaney* plates are more subtle agents of disruption. The series invokes the aesthetic perfection of Royal Copenhagen's luxury brand but layers it with references to the broken and disposed. Its latent histories of colonialism, slavery, and gender hierarchies are preserved for posterity, protected by the glaze and the wholeness of its material form. The epistemological messages contained within the plates serve up a new narrative of luxury consumption that looks to the broader practices of global decorative arts. The *Chaney* plates, which are not currently being mass produced by Royal Copenhagen, despite generating serious interest from many parties including Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, sit somewhere between artistic series and commodified design.⁹⁵ The tangential status of the plates reads as a cypher for much of Belle's work, which deals with the politics of resistance, gender, and identity.⁹⁶ With their references to the broken, Belle's porcelain plates challenge existing and past traditions of European decorative arts by offering a mode of decolonial aesthetics that brings fragmented bodies—both ceramic and human—together as a lesson for a different future.

Conclusion: The Rhetoric of Trash

The transformation of chaneys from island debris into artworks and decorative objects can be viewed in the wider context of other Caribbean artists using trash in addressing the legacies of slavery and colonialism. The Haitian collective Atis Rezistans, a Creole term for “artist resistance”, upcycles rubbish into mixed-media sculpture with strong cyberpunk and voodoo themes (fig. 38). The loud, brash street gallery of the Atis Rezistans offers an alternative to the comparatively sterile, quiet, and conservative gallery experience. Although aesthetically different, there are ideological similarities between the transformation of foreign junk into art and the repurposing of chaneys into mixed media. To this end, the recuperation of chaneys can be understood as a response to a broader aesthetic of contemporary art that deals with the politics of resistance and identity. There is still much to be learned from chaneys and its reuse in contemporary art and design. The fact that Belle’s plates were produced in partnership with Royal Copenhagen in their studios in Denmark presents an exciting opportunity for other well-known porcelain brands to revisit historic patterns, such as blue willow, to incorporate micro-art histories that ask big questions about the role of empire in art and culture.



Figure 38.

Philipp Lichterbeck, *Atis Rezistans*, Haiti, 2011. Digital image courtesy of Philipp Lichterbeck (all rights reserved).

Footnotes

- 1 Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”, *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 125–133.

- 2 On the wearing of chaneý jewellery as a symbol of cultural resistance, see the 2017 exhibition, *Museum Exhibits: Chaneý-Stories from Migrant Fragments*, organised by Gitte Petersen-Westergaard and La Vaughan Belle, National Parks Service, Christiansted, Virgin Islands, <https://www.nps.gov/chri/learn/photosmultimedia/museum-exhibits.htm>; La Vaughn Belle, "Friends Lecture: CHANEY: Stories from Migrant Fragments", YouTube, 16 May 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQN4cXMN_d8; and Helle Stenum's documentary, "We Carry It Within Us—Fragments of a Shared Colonial Past", Vimeo, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/wecarryitwithinus>.
- 3 The decolonial aspects of Belle's work are discussed in Tami Navarro, "Beyond the Fragments of Global Wealth", *Social Text*, 7 June 2018, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/beyond-the-fragments-of-global-wealth/.
- 4 The Spanish arrival on St. Croix in 1493 was part of Columbus's four voyages between 1492 and 1502. These voyages mark the commencement of the transatlantic trading system.
- 5 On the circulation of Spanish ceramics in the Caribbean, see Marlieke Ernst and Corinne Hofman, "Breaking and Making Identities: Transformations of Ceramic Repertoires in Early Colonial Hispaniola", in *Material Encounters and Indigenous Transformations in the Early Colonial Americas: Archaeological Case Studies*, ed. Floris W.M. Keehnen, Corinne L. Hofman, and Andrzej T. Antczak (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 124–145.
- 6 See Alfredo E. Figueredo, "The Early Colonization of St. Croix (1621–1642)", *Journal of the Virgin Islands Archaeological Society* 6 (1978): 59–64.
- 7 Figueredo, "The Early Colonization of St. Croix (1621–1642)", 61.
- 8 By 1686, the Spanish had lost interest in destroying the European colonies on St. Croix. Figueredo, "The Early Colonization of St. Croix (1621–1642)", 63.
- 9 Figueredo, "The Early Colonization of St. Croix (1621–1642)", 62–63.
- 10 A formal transfer of power to the Crown took place in 1754, with the kingdom of Denmark-Norway assuming responsibility for the governance of the Danish West Indies. On the early years of the Danish colony, see Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix* (Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 1992), 11–17.
- 11 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 11. By the 1760s, the Irish accounted for around 30 per-cent of Danish sugar exports from St. Croix. See Orla Power, "Beyond Kinship: A Study of the Eighteenth-Century Irish Community at Saint Croix, Danish West Indies", *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 5, no. 3 (2007), <https://www.irlandeses.org/0711power3.htm>.
- 12 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 13 and 15.
- 13 Published regularly between 1770 and 1802, most of the paper's content, including the masthead, was printed in English. Government business appeared in both English and Danish, with occasional announcements in French and Spanish. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 15.
- 14 "Purchase of the United States Virgin Islands, 1917", U.S. Department of State Archive, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/wwi/107293.htm>.
- 15 As discussed in Stenum, "We Carry It Within Us—Fragments of a Shared Colonial Past".
- 16 On the complexities surrounding the digitisation of the Danish West Indian archive, see Erica L. Johnson, "Comparative Counter-Archival Creativity: M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and La Vaughn Belle's *Chaneý*", *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 13, no. 1 (July 2021): 4–5; and Daniela Agostinho, "Archival Encounters: Rethinking Access and Care in Digital Colonial Archives", *Archival Science* 19 (2019): 141–165.
- 17 While the term chaneý is known and used widely on St. Croix, Caroline Frank has shown that the word "chaneý" also appears in English and American inventories during the eighteenth century, where it refers to unbroken pieces of porcelain. More research is needed on the connection between the two. Caroline Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 104, 117, and 144.
- 18 Chaneý is sometimes spelt cheney, see *Crucian Dictionary*: <https://cruciandictionary.com/cruzandictionary/c.html>.
- 19 Nathan Bishop, email communication with author, 13 September 2021. I am grateful to Liz Smith and Denise Fashaw for sharing the photo of coins found on the island.
- 20 Although significant to St. Croix's history, Igneri, Taíno, or Kalinago pottery lie outside the scope of this article as they pre-date colonisation.
- 21 Gartley was the first to identify these wares, which he described as "fired in open hearths". See Richard T. Gartley, "Afro-Cruzan Pottery: A New Style of Colonial Earthenware from St. Croix", *Journal of the Virgin Islands Archaeological Society* 8 (1979): 47–61, esp. 47. Other scholars working on enslaved populations throughout the Caribbean have discussed these wares, see Mark W. Hauser and Christopher R. DeCorse, "Low-Fired Earthenwares in the African Diaspora: Problems and Prospects", *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 7, no. 1 (2003): 67–98; and Douglas V. Armstrong, *The Old Village and the Great House: An Archaeological and Historical Examination of Drax Hall Plantation, St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
- 22 By agricultural standards, St. Croix is considered the most successful island in the Danish West Indies.
- 23 On Danish trading policies, see Orla Power, "Irish Planters, Atlantic Merchants: The Development of St. Croix, Danish West Indies, 1750–1766", unpublished PhD thesis, NUI Galway (2011), 91.
- 24 Power, "Irish Planters, Atlantic Merchants", 91.

- 25 Desmond Nicholson, "The Dating of West Indian Historic Sites by the Analysis of Ceramic Sherds", *VIAS* 7 (1979), 70. While Nicholson suggests that the Dutch and Spanish may have traded Chinese porcelain with the Danish on St. Croix, Rikke Søndergaard Kristensen has shown the consumption of Chinese porcelain in Danish households was widespread by the middle of the eighteenth century, making it more likely to be imported to St. Croix in large volumes. Rikke Søndergaard Kristensen, "Made in China: Import, Distribution and Consumption of Chinese Porcelain in Copenhagen c.1600-1760", *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 48, no. 1 (2014): 151-181.
- 26 The name given to the owner's residence on the estate.
- 27 "det var et sybaritisk liv". Hans Birch Dahlerup, *Mit Livs Begivenheder 1815-1848* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske, 1909), 2: 33.
- 28 "ved det blanktpolerede Mahognibord uden Dug, men dækket med det kostbareste slebne Chrystal, Porcellain og Sølvtoi, og belæsset med de skønneste Frugter af alle Slags, Kager, Geléer, blancmangéer". Dahlerup, *Mit Livs Begivenheder 1815-1848*, 49.
- 29 "Planterne tilhørte næsten alle gamle og fornemme familier og førte et liv på deres plantager, der i elegance og smag ikke stod tilbage for den rigeste adels i Europa". Dahlerup, *Mit Livs Begivenheder 1815-1848*, 33. I am grateful to Gitte Backhausen for her help with the translation.
- 30 Dahlerup, *Mit Livs Begivenheder 1815-1848*, 49. For other first-hand accounts of St. Croix during this period, see Hans West, *Accounts of St. Croix in the West Indies*, ed. Arnold R. Highfield and trans. Nina York (St. Thomas: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 2004).
- 31 See "What is Chaney?" Chaney Chicks & Island Gifts, <https://www.chaneychicks.com>. Confirmed by Liz Smith and Denise Fashaw, email communication with author, 6 September 2021.
- 32 The willow pattern is also produced in green, pink, brown, and black.
- 33 See Patricia O'Hara, "'The Willow Pattern That We Knew': The Victorian Literature of Blue Willow", *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 4 (1993): 421-442. See also Catherine Lanone, "'Toujours la porcelaine': George Meredith and the Willow Pattern", *Miranda* 7 (2012).
- 34 Elizabeth Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 89.
- 35 G. Savage, "Pottery", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 18 August 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/pottery>.
- 36 On the history of Royal Copenhagen and the production of patterns, see www.royalcopenhagen.com.
- 37 A notable exception to this is La Vaughn Belle's 2011 video *Somebody's Been Sitting in My Chair, Somebody's Been Sleeping in My Bed*, which features Belle wandering through the Great House at Estate Whim in a modern-day recreation of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears". The video explores Belle's response to the space as an Afro-Caribbean woman. As she navigates the objects on display, she draws attention to the issues of power, possession, and agency. The video ends with Belle's escape from the room by jumping out of a window, a symbolic reference to the role of the Great House as a locus for physical and physiological containment among enslaved individuals.
- 38 Angelika R. Kuettner, "Simply Riveting: Broken and Mended Ceramics", *Ceramics in America*, ed. Robert Hunter (Milwaukee, WI: Chipstone, 2016), 122-140.
- 39 There is a substantial volume of literature on this topic. See, for example, Douglas V. Armstrong, *Creole Transformation from Slavery to Freedom: Historical Archaeology of the East End Community, St. John, Virgin Islands* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); and Laurie A. Wilkie and Paul Farnsworth, *Sampling Many Pots: An Archaeology of Memory and Tradition at a Bahamian Plantation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005).
- 40 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 70.
- 41 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 87.
- 42 On the labour uprisings, see Neville Hall, "The Victor Vanquished: Emancipation in St. Croix; its Antecedents and Immediate Aftermath", *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids / New West Indian Guide* 58, nos. 1-2 (1984): 3-36; Waldemar Westergaard, "Account of the Negro Rebellion on St. Croix, Danish West Indies, 1759", *The Journal of Negro History* 11 (1926): 50-61; Arnold R. Highfield, ed., *Emancipation in the US Virgin Islands: 150 Years of Freedom* (St. Croix, VI: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1999); Arnold R. Highfield and George F. Tyson, eds., *Negotiating Enslavement: Perspectives on Slavery in the Danish West Indies* (Christiansted, VI: Antilles Press, 1999); and Isaac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Kingston: Canoe Press, 1994).
- 43 On the consumption of European ceramics by enslaved populations, see Laurie A. Wilkie, "Culture Bought: Evidence of Creolization in the Consumer Goods of an Enslaved Bahamian Family", *Historical Archaeology* 34, no. 3 (2000): 10-26.
- 44 These findings are part of the Estate Little Princess Maritime and Terrestrial Archaeology Field School. Led by Ayana Flewellen, Justin Dunnivant, William White, Alicia Odewale, and Alexandra Jones, the project trains students in archaeological practices at former slave villages on St. Croix. See Lizzie Wade, "Caribbean Excavation Offers Intimate Look at the Lives of Enslaved Africans", *Science*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/11/caribbean-excavation-offers-intimate-look-lives-enslaved-africans>. The transferware is discussed in Bill Kossler and Linda Morland, "Ancient Footprints—Lots of Archeology Happening on St. Croix", *St. Thomas Source*, 22 July 2019.
- 45 As noted in Robert Steven Kidd, "An Archaeological Examination of Slave Life in the Danish West Indies: Analysis of the Material Culture of a Caribbean Slave Village Illustrating Economic Provisioning and Acquisition Preferences", unpublished master's thesis, Department of Anthropology, Florida State University, Tallahassee, 2006, 2.
- 46 For discussion of the markets in the Danish West Indies, see Karen Fog Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation and Resistance on St. John: Three Centuries of Afro-Caribbean Life* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1985), 45-46.

- 47 On the Danish model of slave provisioning, see Kidd, "An Archaeological Examination of Slave Life in the Danish West Indies", 42-45.
- 48 J.L. Carstens, a planter on St. Thomas in the 1740s describes the poor conditions and the Danish solution: "plantation slaves receive nothing from their master in the way of food or clothing except only the small plot of land at the outermost extremity of his plantation land that he assigns each slave". J.L. Carstens, *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times: A General Description of all the Danish, America or West Indian Island*, ed. and trans. Arnold R. Highfield and George F. Tyson (St. Croix, VI: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1994), 72. On the St. Croix plots, see Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 59.
- 49 On the importance of the local markets to enslaved communities on St. Croix, see Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 114-115.
- 50 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 112.
- 51 Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man", 125-133. On the issue dress and the slave planter on St. Croix, see Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 112.
- 52 I am drawing here on Mary Louise Pratt's use of the term as contact zones, to describe spaces where communities, who would otherwise be separated geographically and historically, are brought together in new circumstances and forced to "meet, clash and grapple with each other". Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone", in *Professing in the Contact Zone*, ed. Janice M. Wolff (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002), 34.
- 53 On the consumption of European ceramics by enslaved populations, see Wilkie, "Culture Bought", 10-26; and Kidd, "An Archaeological Examination of Slave Life in the Danish West Indies", 84-85.
- 54 Wilkie, "Culture Bought", 23.
- 55 Wilkie, "Culture Bought", 23.
- 56 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 225.
- 57 A. Brooke Persons, "Archaeological Correlates of Emancipation on St. Croix", (2018): 1-16, https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/AA/00/06/19/61/01077/1_Persons.pdf.
- 58 For a summary of Bhabha's theory of ambivalence, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 1998), 10.
- 59 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 224.
- 60 Bhabha argues that all colonial relations are ambivalent and therefore end in destruction. His argument of the inevitable end of the colonial relationship has shown itself to be controversial in that it assumes no action is required on the part of the colonised. See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 125.
- 61 I am grateful to Gitte Backhausen for sharing her knowledge of this Danish custom.
- 62 Kevin Hetherington, "Secondhandedness: Consumption, Disposal, and Absent Presence", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22, no. 1 (2004), 158. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the connection with Hetherington.
- 63 Hetherington, "Secondhandedness", 169.
- 64 Hetherington, "Secondhandedness", 169.
- 65 A notable exception being the burned chaney recovered from the Frederiksted Landfill in 2016 (see [footnote 57](#)).
- 66 Hamilton's letter is dated 6 September 1772. It was published one month later in St. Croix's newspaper, the *Royal Danish American Gazette*. The letter impressed colony leaders, who sponsored Hamilton's education in America. See "From Alexander Hamilton to The Royal Danish American Gazette, 6 September 1772", *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0042>.
- 67 St. Croix receives an average rainfall of 1099 mm (43.3 in.) per year.
- 68 This distinction is made by retailers of chaney. See, for example, Chaney Chicks & Island Gifts. "What is Chaney?".
- 69 On the use of porcelain as ballast, see Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 86 and 88.
- 70 For current research on shipwrecks on St. Croix, see David Morgan, Jessica Keller, Jeneva Wright, Meredith Hardy, Dave Conlin, Stephen Lubkemann, Paul Gardullo, and Chris DeCorse, "Slave Wrecks Project in National Park Units of St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands", presented at the conference of the Society for Historical Archaeology, Washington, DC, 6-9 January 2016, *The Digital Archaeological Record*, <https://core.tdar.org/document/435001/the-slave-wrecks-project-in-national-park-units-of-st-croix-us-virgin-islands>.
- 71 Edward L. Towle, *Shipwrecks of the Virgin Islands: An Inventory 1523-1825* 2nd ed. (St. Thomas, VI: Island Resources Foundation, 1976), nos. 21-22, 24, 35, 41, 44-45, and 48.
- 72 Towle, *Shipwrecks of the Virgin Islands*, nos. 21-22, 24, 35, 41, 44-45, and 48. For a fascinating study on the afterlife of a shipwreck and the ethical salvage of cargo, see Leonor Veiga's interview with Natali Pearson about her research on the Belitung shipwreck; "The Afterlife of a Shipwreck?", *Leiden Arts in Society*, 15 June 2018, <https://www.leidenartsinsocietyblog.nl/articles/the-afterlife-of-a-shipwreck>. Thank you to Iris Moon for suggesting this important connection.
- 73 On the relationship between shells and porcelain, see Jessica Priebe, *François Boucher and the Art of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Routledge, 2021), 189-192.

- 74 See, for example, the “St. Croix” episode of the Netflix series *Restaurants on the Edge*, aired 8 May 2020, www.netflix.com.
- 75 Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63; and Arjun Appadurai, “The Thing Itself”, *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006), 15.
- 76 Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process”, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66.
- 77 On the upcycling of rubbish in art and culture, see Bahar Emgin, “Trashion: The Return of the Disposed”, *Design Issues* 28, no. 1 (2012): 63–71.
- 78 Nathan Bishop, email communication with author, 13 September 2021.
- 79 As confirmed by: Denise Fashaw, Liz Smith, and Nathan Bishop, email communication with author, 13 September 2021; and Kris Massicott, email communication with author, 11 September 2021.
- 80 Nathan Bishop, email communication with author, 13 September 2021.
- 81 Kris Massicott, email communication with author, 11 September 2021.
- 82 I am expanding here on Bhabha’s concept of the third space of enunciation, a hybrid space that he uses to explore the nature of colonial relations. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 55.
- 83 Nathan Bishop as quoted in Westergaard and Belle, “Museum Exhibits”.
- 84 In this way, chaneý can be explored further in the context of “Thing-power”, which Jane Bennett describes as a pull “toward the strange ability for ordinary man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence of aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience”. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xvi.
- 85 For a revisionist account of Slone’s expeditions, see James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2017). I am grateful to Iris Moon for suggesting this.
- 86 I am building here on Jacqueline Bishop’s analysis of Belle’s work as representation of an island fantasy. See Jacqueline Bishop, “La Vaughn Belle’s Contemporary Art Practice of Speaking in Layers”, *HuffPost*, 3 October 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/la-vaughn-belles-contempo_b_5917632.
- 87 On the issue of innocent colonialism, see Astrid Nonbo Andersen, “The Repatriations Movement in the US Virgin Islands”, *Journal of African American History* 103, nos. 1–2 (2018): 104–132; and Lill-Ann Körber, “Gold Coast (2015) and Danish Economies of Colonial Guilt”, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 10, no. 2 (2018): 25–37.
- 88 Belle’s comments are discussed in Bishop, “La Vaughn Belle’s Contemporary Art Practice of Speaking in Layers”, n.p. The issue of cultural amnesia is addressed in Stenum, “We Carry It Within Us—Fragments of a Shared Colonial Past”.
- 89 Johnson, “Comparative Counter-Archival Creativity”, 6.
- 90 Johnson, “Comparative Counter-Archival Creativity”, 9.
- 91 Johnson, “Comparative Counter-Archival Creativity”, 6–8.
- 92 On Belle’s experience at Royal Copenhagen, see Stenum, “We Carry It Within Us—Fragments of a Shared Colonial Past”. Belle discusses her childhood memory of chaneý in Gudrun Marie Schmidt, “Artist from St. Croix to the Danes: I Believe Everyone Should Give an Apology”, *Politiken*, 9 March 2017.
- 93 As quoted in La Vaughn Belle, “Solo Exhibition | Peachcan Gallery | January 12–Feb 28, 2018”. *La Vaughn Belle*, 19 January 2018, <http://lavaughnbelle.blogspot.com/2018/01/>.
- 94 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this excellent connection.
- 95 La Vaughn Belle in conversation with the Queen of Denmark. Belle email communications with author, 13 and 22 September 2021.
- 96 The *Chaneý* plates are linked to Belle’s series *Collectible* (2008), in which she recreates Royal Copenhagen’s commemorative plates from the early 1900s that reference the Danish West Indies in blue ink on white paper plates. See La Vaughn Belle’s works on <http://www.lavaughnbelle.com>.

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In the Flesh at the Heart of Empire: Life-Likeness in Wax Representations of the 1762 Cherokee Delegation in London

Ianna Recco

Abstract

In 1762, a delegation of Cherokee leaders arrived in London for negotiations with King George III following the Anglo-Cherokee War (1759–1761), itself part of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). The British public reacted to the men's presence in London with fervent zeal; throngs of Londoners flocked to the men's private rooms and any public house, garden, or theatre they attended to see them in person before their very eyes. This article asks why the delegation became such a spectacle by studying three wax statues that were made in the image of the men and were exhibited at Mrs. Salmon's Royal Wax-Work in London from 1762 to approximately 1793, after which they were lost to history. In questioning how the life-likeness of the wax statues was achieved through materiality and visual elements, and analysing contemporary accounts of the London public's reception of the men, it emerges that the statues worked to retain their subjects as objects of spectacle long after they returned to North America. Due to the low aesthetic status and fragility of wax statuary, the medium has received little art-historical attention despite the significance of the art form in eighteenth-century London. This article seeks to address this oversight and bring new insight to the imperial visual culture of eighteenth-century Britain.

Authors

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“A New Press of the Cherokee King, with his Two Chiefs”

In 1762, a “new press” of wax statues was unveiled at Mrs. Salmon’s Royal Wax-Work at 189 Fleet Street in London. In the eighteenth century, the terms “press” and “presses” were commonly used to describe wax statues, most likely in reference to the physical process of creating them in which wax was poured into a mould and an exact impression, or cast, was made.¹ According to the handbill, this particular ensemble consisted of typical subjects for an eighteenth-century British waxwork such as members of the royal family and Mark Antony and Cleopatra, but one group stands out in the announcement, that of “a new Press of the Cherokee King, with his two chiefs, in their Country Dress, and Habilments [*sic*]”.² Although their names are omitted, we know that the “Cherokee King” refers to Utsidihi, an *asgayagusta*, or military leader, with “his two chiefs” referring to Kunagadoga and Atawayi, all of whom ruled alongside the Tennessee River in the southeast region of North America at that time.³

Although seemingly far removed from a London audience, visitors to Mrs. Salmon’s waxwork would have instantly recognised these wax statues with their dark skin, plucked scalps, and red cloaks as representations of the three men who made up the Cherokee delegation that toured London from 16 June to 25 August 1762. They received an enormous amount of attention from the British public and press, and their likenesses were captured and disseminated in a range of British visual and performative media.⁴ Despite the fact that these men were significant players in North American politics during the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) and the British press demonstrated a vested interest in Cherokee military and political affairs, primary sources make clear that Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi were reduced to objects of spectacle in London. They attracted crowds that would surround them in public venues, cram into their living spaces to watch them dress, and flock to public houses to watch them eat and drink. I use the term “spectacle” here and throughout the article in the sense that Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi were turned into curiosities by the British public, which, in large part, negated the men’s status as emissaries and their diplomatic mission. The term’s connotations of display and exhibition are of particular relevance as are its performative and theatrical aspects.⁵ What emerges from the archive is that the specific goal of the London masses was to see the men in the flesh before their very eyes. The effect of this aggressive scrutiny was an objectification that largely disregarded, and even neutralised, the significant political and military power that the Cherokee wielded in North America.

Representing Life-likeness

The emphasis on spectacle that characterised the British public's reaction in 1762 is reflected in the wide variety of images of the delegation in a range of media. The artworks that have survived in the largest number are the engravings and mezzotints done after paintings and studies of the men, their countenances, adornments, and facial tattoos incised and inked and pressed for individual purchase and magazine publication.⁶ The two known paintings that survive of the delegation are portraits by Joshua Reynolds and Francis Parsons, depicting Utsidihi and Kunagadoga, respectively, arresting countenances that now sit unseen in storage in the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma (figs. 1 and 2). In contrast, there were also less durable representations that have not survived to the present day, their existence only recorded in advertisements and descriptions in British newspapers. Such examples include a popular ballad titled *Cherokee Chiefs* (fig. 3) as well as a pantomime called *Harlequin Cherokee* that was regularly performed at Drury Lane in 1763 and depicted "the Return, Landing and Reception of the Cherokees in America".⁷ One letter published in the *St. James Chronicle* relayed that Utsidihi was even rendered as the puppet Punch when a puppeteer "clapping on a Pair of Whiskers upon Punch, blacking his Face, and dressing him in a strange Robe, passed him off through half the Country for the Cherokee King".⁸ Apart from one broadside with a ballad, most of these have been lost to time likely due to both their more performative elements and their low rank in the hierarchy of art history. The wax statues exhibited at Mrs. Salmon's emerge as the most ephemeral representation of Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi. The fact that we have no visual record of them nor any knowledge of where they ended up (or, more likely, of their destruction)—the most probable answer being that they were melted down and formed into new statues—has discouraged any research into them. While an art-historical examination of any of these examples of artwork would allow significant and varied insight into British imperial visual culture of the eighteenth century, the wax statues exhibited at Mrs. Salmon's will lie at the heart of this analysis to determine the inherent function and significance of "life-likeness" in representations of the 1762 delegation as a physical manifestation of the British public's relegation of powerful political leaders to objects of spectacle. Although the particular theme of life-likeness is traditionally associated with portraits in the art-historical discipline, an even more fruitful discussion will unfold if we extend the same ideas of life-likeness typically only applied to painted portraits to sculpted wax portraits. While Reynolds's and Parsons's portraits of the 1762 delegation served to memorialise and preserve the diplomats for posterity through life-like representations in a medium accorded aesthetic legitimacy, the wax statues were constructed to sustain British engagement with, and perpetuate the otherness of, inaccessible foreign peoples. By transcribing the men within

such a life-like mode of British visualisation, the wax statues can be understood as the ultimate art objects of empire in the sense that they mimetically froze their Indigenous North American subjects as objects of spectacle stripped of their agency and political power in the heart of the British empire for decades. ⁹



Figure 1.

Joshua Reynolds, Portrait of Syacust Ukah, 1762, oil on canvas, 140 × 109.5 × 7.3 cm. Collection of the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK, Gift of the Thomas Gilcrease Foundation, 1964 (0176.1017). Digital image courtesy of Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

Francis Parsons, Cunne Shote, Cherokee Chief, 1762, oil on canvas, 118.4 × 99.2 × 5.6 cm. Collection of the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK, Gift of the Thomas Gilcrease Foundation, 1955 (0176.1015). Digital image courtesy of Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK (all rights reserved).

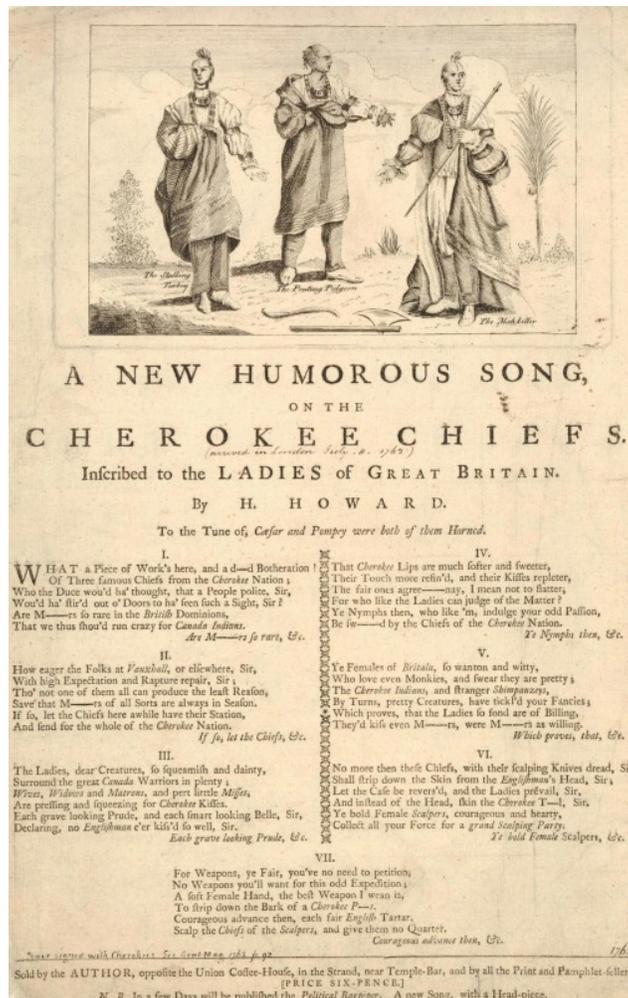


Figure 3. Henry Howard, Satirical Broadside: A New Humorous Song, on the Cherokee Chiefs inscribed to the Ladies of Great Britain, 1762, etching with letterpress, 12.3 × 20.2 cm. Collection of The British Museum, London (1868,0808.4183). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Life-Likeness in Art History

In his examination of the “phenomenon of loss” in material culture, Glenn Adamson describes how lost objects suffer a double loss, one of survival to the present day as well as a lack of representation in the historical record. ¹⁰ Both ideas are true for the wax statues discussed in this analysis. Eighteenth-century British wax statues have largely been pushed to the periphery of art-historical study because, as Roberta Panzanelli and Uta Kornmeier determined, scholars consider them “disreputable” subjects that are regarded as “old-fashioned popular entertainments without any internal

logic”.¹¹ The seminal work that remains the most influential analysis is Julius von Schlosser’s “History of Portraiture in Wax”, published in 1911.¹² No significant work in this field had then been undertaken until 2008, when *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, edited by Roberta Panzanelli, was published. In it, she wrote that this lack of scholarship has only been exacerbated by the dearth of Early Modern wax statues that have survived over time; to her, the history of wax statues is essentially “a history of disappearance”.¹³ Histories of disappearance, Adamson remarks, can be especially confounding when the objects that have been lost were once popular and commonplace at a particular moment in time, as wax statuary was in mid-eighteenth-century London.¹⁴ For these particular objects, their disappearance is further dramatised because wax statuary was a medium that strove to achieve material presence and existence and, as a result, life-likeness was, and remains, the defining trait of the medium.

“Life-likeness” as a term emerged from studies of the use of *ad vivum* in the visual culture of the Early Modern period as an assertion of the verisimilitude of an art object. While the tradition of inscribing “*ad vivum*” directly onto artworks flourished in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it waned in the eighteenth century, making space for other articulations of life-likeness in European visual culture that conveyed the same ideas.¹⁵ Daston and Galison also identify the terms “after life” and “drawn from nature” in addition to “*ad vivum*” as artistic and scientific claims commonly made in the Early Modern period, particularly on botanical drawings.¹⁶ Significantly for this study, another function of *ad vivum* was to verbally substantiate a representation of unfamiliar non-European beings or foreign places.¹⁷

The principles of “*ad vivum*”, “after life”, and “drawn from nature” can be applied in the present examination of objects produced in mid-eighteenth-century London as cognates appear in advertisements for prints derived from Reynolds’s and Parsons’s paintings of Utsidihi and Kunagadoga that emphasised they were done “from the Life” and “after the Life”.¹⁸ These terms all work to not only “[preach] fidelity to nature” but also to articulate what is life-like or vivacious in a visual representation.¹⁹ A crucial connotation of these terms is that the image it describes is lively and animate, in the same sense that a viewer might say that a painted figure is following them with its eyes or that a statue looks alive.²⁰ In this sense, the term “life-likeness” is an appropriate one for this study as it has been established as a useful translation of *ad vivum* in recent art-historical research and relates directly to eighteenth-century descriptions of painted representations of Utsidihi and Kunagadoga, with “life” being the essential component of the term.

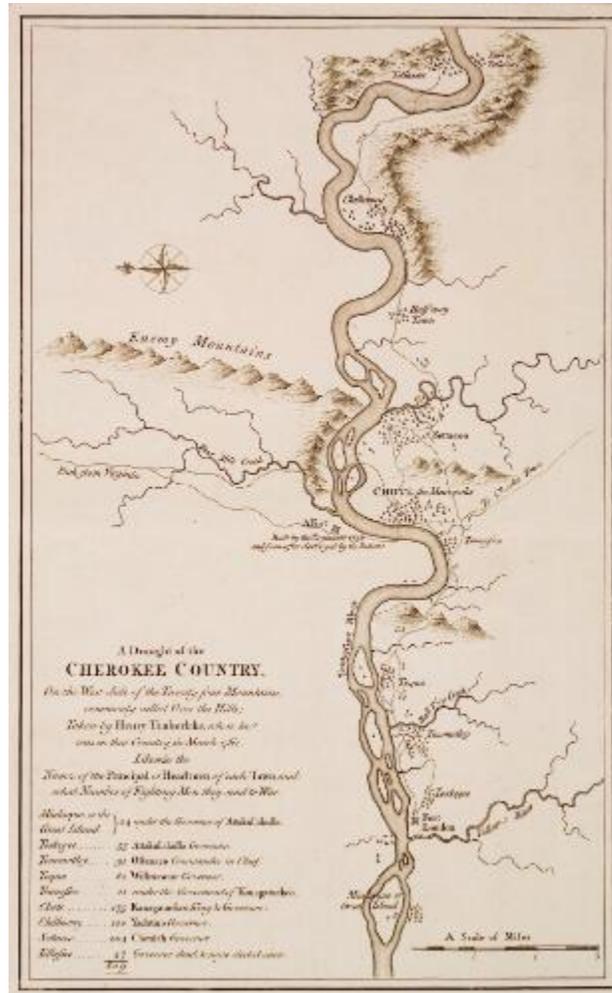
Life-likeness, however, is a cultural construct that has different connotations in an Indigenous context. Considering modern Cherokee conceptualisations of art, contemporary artist America Meredith also looks towards linguistic practice and encourages the examination of Indigenous vocabulary in forming theory. Meredith explains that the Cherokee word for “art” is “??????”, or *ditlilosdodi*, and signifies creating an imitation of reality.²¹ The suffix “????-”, *ditlil*, appears in many words, including “??????”, or “ditlilostanv”, meaning “artificial”, “copy”, “duplicate”, and “imitation”. The word for artist is “????????”, or *ditlilostanvsgi*, and the verb for “to copy” is “????????”, or *ditlilostanvhi*. Taking this into consideration, we can further establish that “life-likeness” is a relevant theme given this connotation of an artificial imitation or duplication of reality. In addition, the Cherokee term that members historically refer to themselves as is “*Aniyunwiya*” or “?????”, which translates to the “Principal People” or “Real People”. For Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi, whose individualism and agency were effectively swallowed by the British public during their time in London, affirming them as “Real People” reminds us of the living, breathing men who were transmuted into inanimate and illusory material representations and were largely erased from history.²²

The “Real People” in North America

The years from 1759 to 1761 were marred by warfare between the British and Cherokee during the conflict that came to be known by the British as the Anglo-Cherokee War. This occurred against the larger backdrop of the global Seven Years’ War (1756–1763). Despite waging war against the Cherokee people over trade and sovereignty conflicts, British army officers were quick to negotiate compromises once the military and diplomatic prowess of the Cherokee became apparent and, in 1761, the Holston River treaty ended the fighting that had spanned across South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia.²³ As eighteenth-century newspaper reports demonstrate, the British were acutely aware of the Cherokee’s power, around which there was a palpable anxiety. This unease is apparent in a report published in the *London Evening Post* in July 1762, when the delegation was already in London, that reads, “The Cherokees are the most considerable Indian Nation with which we are acquainted, and are absolutely free; [The] strength of an Indian nation consists in their warriors and of these, according to the best accounts, there may be about three thousand amongst the Cherokees”.²⁴ The pervasive fear of French encroachment compounded this apprehension and also loomed large in the press. Again, concurrent to when the delegation was already in London, a report from South Carolina was published in the *London Evening Post* that stated, “The French make their advantage of [the British inability to take Louisiana], and say we are not the warriors we

pretend; and I wish their arts may not at length prevail to make them disturb us, in which case we should be in an infinitely worse situation than in a Cherokee war". ²⁵

Historians have been able to reconstruct this period further using the trove of official correspondence and reports from British governors, officers, and colonial assemblies. ²⁶ The memoir published in 1765 by Henry Timberlake, the ensign who accompanied Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi to London, provides key information about the 1762 delegation. Timberlake had a previous relationship with the men, having met them when Utsidihi and Kunagadoga insisted that a representative of the British military appear at Chota, the principal town, to mark the peace treaty; Timberlake volunteered and acted as a diplomat himself, while fostering a relationship with Utsidihi in particular. ²⁷ Timberlake's memoir, titled *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake: (who accompanied the three Cherokee Indians to England in the year 1762); containing whatever he observed remarkable, or worthy of public notice, during his travels to and from that nation; wherein the country, government, genius, and customs of the inhabitants, are authentically described; also the principal occurrences during their residence in London; illustrated with an accurate map of their Over-Hill settlement, and a curious secret journal, taken by the Indians out of the pocket of a Frenchman they had killed*, begins in "Cherokee Country", where he establishes the basis of his narrative before the scene turns to London across the Atlantic. On first opening the book, the reader is met with a folded map, which unfurled, reveals a detailed illustration of Cherokee territory and a register of the principal leaders in the region, introducing us to Utsidihi and Kunagadoga as important figures (fig. 4). Timberlake's writing can be characterised as ethnographic in nature as he discusses the breadth of Cherokee cultural and political practices with the distinct voice of an outsider. Despite the limitations that his account presents, in lieu of a direct account from Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi, Timberlake's memoir provides valuable information for understanding the ways in which such literary productions conditioned the perception of the delegation in North America and their time in London. Moreover, Timberlake's text provides a vital connection between seeing Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi in their local context, and how the attention of curious onlookers rendered them "foreign" upon their arrival in London.



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 4.

Henry Timberlake, A draught of the Cherokee Country: On the West Side of the Twenty Four Mountains, commonly called Over the Hills. Taken by Henry Timberlake when he was in that country in March 1762, in *The Memoirs of Lieutenant Henry Timberlake* (London: J. Ridley, Nicoll and C. Henderson, 1765), 1762, ink on paper map, 20.8 x 13.3 cm. Collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) at Old Salem (Acc. 5549). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) at Old Salem (all rights reserved).

Unlike previous delegations of North American Indigenous representatives to London, most notably the 1710 Haudenosaunee delegation, the 1762 delegation had neither been invited by King George III to London, nor had it been authorised by the Cherokee council at Chota.²⁸ John Oliphant hypothesises that the delegation sought to meet with the king in part to symbolically acknowledge the newly ratified alliance between the British and

the Cherokee, but also so Utsidihi could bolster his standing within his own nation and lay the groundwork for establishing Virginia as a trade centre.²⁹ In fact, while the men were in London, the *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser* speculated that Utsidihi's political ambition and jealousy of another Cherokee leader, Attakullakulla or Little Carpenter, was the reason for his visit: "The cause of the Cherokee Chiefs coming to England having been variously, but not truly represented, it may not be amiss to inform the public, through the channel of your paper, of what were their real motives for visiting our court and kingdom. [...] A jealousy of this particular honour paid to Attakullakulla has prompted [Utsidihi] to come to England, imagining that the Little Carpenter owes all his power and influence to his having visited King George".³⁰ While we cannot know if this is historical fact, what is more noteworthy is the emphasis given in this report on the delegation's "real motives". This illustrates what Troy Bickham identifies as a shift in the British imagination over the eighteenth century to an increased appetite for "the reality of things" and topicality following the Seven Years' War when imperial issues took precedence over European ones.³¹ Sadiya Qureshi, in *Peoples on Parade*, identifies this same topicality in nineteenth-century newspapers advertising exhibitions of foreign peoples in London as a means to generate public interest and spectatorship.³² The Seven Years' War brought imperial matters to the forefront of British consciousness in what Bickham calls an "increasingly imperial, globally minded society that shared assumptions about alien cultures".³³ These assumptions were only magnified once Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, Atawayi, Timberlake, Thomas Sumter, a soldier in the Virginia militia, and William Shorey, an interpreter, sailed for London on 15 May 1762.³⁴

The "Real People" in London

The delegation's time in London is well recorded as a result of the intense attention they garnered in contemporary newspapers. What emerges from the archive is that Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi, all of whom were high-ranking and distinguished leaders, were reduced to objects of display and spectacle during their time in London. It is only with this archival analysis that we can proceed to our material analysis, that of the wax statues that maintained a life-like image of the men once they had departed London and were no longer available to the public as living spectacles.

The delegation landed in Plymouth, England, on 16 June 1762 and immediately became a major focal point of the British public. Timberlake wrote of the moment saying their ship "drew a vast crowd of boats, filled with spectators [...] and the landing-place was so thronged, that it was almost impossible to get to the inn".³⁵ Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi's

“foreignness” was an immediate draw for the London public: “The uncommon appearance of the Cherokees began to draw after them great crowds of people of all ranks”.³⁶ From the moment they disembarked, Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi became a regular fixture in the local newspapers, which reported on their dress, habits, interactions with the public, and their itinerary, and, as seen earlier, the events of the Seven Years’ War and Cherokee politics. The intense interest in the men that the press generated included reports on their itinerary and whereabouts throughout their entire visit, and advertisements of their presence were included on playbills, play-house doors, public gardens, and public houses among other spaces, underscoring their status as spectacles for the British public to come and watch.³⁷ It is useful to keep in mind the parallel between these advertisements of their location and the announcement of the “new press” of wax statues at Mrs. Salmon’s Royal Wax-Work; both the men and representations of them were announced to the public to garner attention and to attract an audience. On their very arrival, the specifics of their accommodations were published: both the *Public Advertiser* and the *St. James’s Chronicle* announced that: “A House is taken in Suffolk-street [...] for the three Cherokee Indian Chiefs”, on 24 June 1762.³⁸

Prior to the delegation’s arrival, a model existed of foreign peoples exhibited in London since the fifteenth century, which subsequently informed the “human displays” that proliferated in the nineteenth century as a form of popular entertainment and helped to fuel the racist hierarchies propagated in the scientific discourse of the period.³⁹ In the nineteenth century, foreign peoples, including other Indigenous peoples like Inuit and Anishinaabe, were exhibited in theatres, museums, galleries, and private apartments to satiate the curiosity of viewers, feeding into an Enlightenment system of knowledge.⁴⁰ As in the case of the 1762 delegation, printed materials were essential in advertising these exhibitions as evidenced by posters, playbills, handbills, and newspaper advertisements and reviews.⁴¹ In fact, Qureshi identifies that the performer’s ethnic origins were featured the most prominently in promotional materials, with the location of the exhibition commonly following, as in our eighteenth-century account.⁴²

Turning to Timberlake’s text, it is evident that Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi were wary of the unwanted attention they received during their transformation into objects of spectacle. Only a few days into their visit, Timberlake wrote of the discomfort that arose within the men given the intense and overwhelming scrutiny they faced at their residence, “at which they were so much displeased, that home became irksome to them”.⁴³ Timberlake and Charles Wyndham, the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, attempted to restrict the number of spectators, only to have the opposite effect, making more people eager to see them. In a telling account,

Timberlake writes that despite the restrictions, “[members of the public] pressed into the Indians’ dressing room, which gave them the highest disgust, these people having a particular aversion to being stared at while dressing or eating” to the effect that “they were so disgusted, that they grew extremely shy of being seen”.⁴⁴ This was echoed in the *London Chronicle* and the *London Evening Post* which relayed, “they are shy of company, especially a crowd, by whom they avoid being seen as much as possible”.⁴⁵ The intense scrutiny they were under is especially clear in the British public’s desire to see them perform daily, and personal, activities as if they were performers to be watched on a stage or objects on display.⁴⁶ The unwillingness and discomfort of the men with their new status as objects of spectacle are palpable in these accounts, particularly as staring is in direct opposition to Cherokee cultural sensibilities. Timberlake wrote early in his memoir in a general description of the Cherokee people that “they seldom turn their eyes on the person they speak of, or address themselves to, and are always suspicious when people’s eyes are fixed upon them”.⁴⁷ In fact, Jim Hornbuckle and Laurence French write in *The Cherokee Perspective* that “avoidance of eye and body contact ... when conversing with others” is historically a significant Cherokee cultural behaviour that has survived to the present day.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, there was a performative dimension to the delegation’s presence in London. Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi apparently even made public appearances to satiate the public and dissuade them from intruding on their accommodation on Suffolk Street. In one instance, the *Public Advertiser* announced that the men would be at a horse show at the Star and Garter in Chelsea on 17 July 1762, the advertisement for which stated, “they intend to be present, and will indulge the Company with their Appearance upon the Green for a sufficient Time to satisfy the Curiosity of the Public, in hopes that they may receive the Politeness from the Populate, in their Retirement to the Apartment appointed for them”.⁴⁹ Here we see that not only was their presence at this performance advertised, but their role as objects of spectacle was made clear by the statement of their purpose to “satisfy the curiosity of the public”. For these reasons, they became as much a performance as the shows they were attending. As seen in this example, in exchange for their presence, Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi hoped to find reprieve from the overwhelming attention, or as Timberlake wrote, the “ungovernable curiosity of the people”.⁵⁰ It is in these advertisements that the eighteenth-century construct of a British “Public” and “Populate” as an imagined entity is made especially clear.

Others sought to monetise and exploit the display of the delegation, pointing to the ways in which the scopic regimes of knowledge in the eighteenth century went hand in hand with the monetisation of a “foreign” spectacle.

There exists an account from the perspective of a public house owner planning to “exhibit” the men to stimulate business published in the 30 July 1762 edition of the *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser*. The author describes how another man, the owner of the Dwarf Tavern, “has got money by showing the Cherokees at his house”, and so he went “to see in what manner they were exhibited there”. The words “showing” and “exhibited” alone delineate the status of the men as spectacle, and, in further evidence of this, the tavern had a sign affixed to its door that read, “This day the King of the Cherokees and his two chiefs drink tea here”, similar to an advertisement one might find outside of a theatre. The author of the account relayed that over the course of the day, several hundred spectators came to see Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi, who, “if their looks or behaviour may be believed, [were there] not from their own choice”, yet another example of their discomfort at the attention. To amplify the connotations of an exhibition or performance, the author reported that the men were encircled by a rail to separate them from the spectators. For his own display, the author revealed that he had railed off a corner of his tap room, placed a chair for “the King”, meaning Utsidihi, in the centre of it, and hired a man to shout from the door “Walk in gentlemen, see ’em alive!”⁵¹ The spaces of exhibition examined here (the men’s apartment, dressing room, the Star and Garter, and the Dwarf Tavern) are all comparable to spaces identified by Qureshi as “sites in which social and political orders, often amenable to imperialism, were created or endorsed”.⁵² These examples illustrate Qureshi’s assertion that displayed people largely were reduced to “consumable commodities” through this process of exhibition and spectacle.⁵³ In effect, the British public demeaned and dehumanised Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi and effectively erased their identities as principal leaders of a complex political and cultural system. This can even be seen in the terminology of “King” used so frequently by the British press to describe Utsidihi although his status as an *asgayagusta* is one of great cultural specificity. A July 1762 report admits this saying, “so that when we call any of their Chiefs Princes or Kings, it is to accommodate their manners to our ideas”.⁵⁴

On a broader level, the intense public scrutiny of the delegation also fed into a symbolic desire for imperial conquest of the Americas. As discussed earlier, reports concurrent to the men’s time in London describe the Cherokee as “the most considerable Indian Nation” known to the British.⁵⁵ This anxiety is explicitly expressed in a report published in the *London Daily Advertiser* prior to the men’s departure from London: “In a few days the Cherokee Chiefs, with their King (as he is called) will leave this nation, the climate not being found to agree with them. This departure, while they are in good health, is prudent, for if any of them should die here, Indian jealousy would suspect

they had been poisoned or murdered here, and in the case probably bring on a cruel and revengeful war".⁵⁶ It is apparent that the British perceived the Cherokee to be a very real threat to their imperial expansion and thus feared their retaliation. By objectifying and stripping Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi of their agency while they were in London, the British public was momentarily able to symbolically control a politically independent people whose power in North America was viewed with apprehension and unease.

Life-Likeness in Wax Statuary

Utsidihi and Kunagadoga sat for their portraits by Reynolds and Parsons, respectively, in June and July, and afterwards they remained in London for one month and continued to be subject to intense scrutiny.⁵⁷ While it likely was intended more as societal commentary on British mores, some contemporary observers verbalised their distaste for the spectators' actions in the newspapers.⁵⁸ The best example of this is in the *St. James's Chronicle* of August 1762 in an anonymous letter to Henry Baldwin, the printer of the paper, which criticised the manner in which Utsidihi "was exposed to publick View as a Monster" and a "strange Sight", who was brought over merely "to be stared at". The author denounced the "English Curiosity [that] is easily imposed upon" and said, "Our Nation is remarkable for its Greediness after Novelty, which requires continually to be fed with fresh Matter".⁵⁹ After the delegation sailed from London on 24 August 1762, Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi left a void in the London public scene. In the absence of the public spectacle that they generated in person, London indeed needed "fresh matter" to feed the public's "greediness for novelty", and it would come in the form of the wax statues exhibited at Mrs. Salmon's.

A multitude of London guides and visitors' diaries illustrate that Mrs. Salmon's Royal Waxwork was founded by a Mr. Salmon in the late seventeenth century and passed through several owners and locations before it closed in the mid-nineteenth century, one of its last mentions being in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* in 1850.⁶⁰ Primary sources illustrate the popularity of Mrs. Salmon's among audiences across the social spectrum. The *Daily Advertiser* in 1776 wrote of the "inimitable" establishment, "This is one of those capital Exhibitions which no Person of Taste ever visits this Metropolis without seeing".⁶¹ The *Morning Herald* in 1785 wrote of "The great number of the fashionable world, who every day resort to Mrs. Salmon's Royal Waxwork".⁶² Mrs. Salmon's even moved from Aldersgate to Fleet Street near St. Dunstan's church in 1711, where it "was more convenient for the quality's coaches to stand unmolested", to attract a wealthy clientele.⁶³ In eighteenth-century Britain, wax statues were a way to convey an authentic likeness of persons who were otherwise inaccessible.⁶⁴

To many, the statues at Mrs. Salmon's were the next best thing to seeing an individual in person. This is especially true in the case of Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi, whom many Londoners may have only briefly caught sight of, if at all. In contrast to the rarer opportunities of encountering them in person, material exhibitions provided the British public with "sustained opportunities" of engagement.⁶⁵ These "sustained opportunities", as opposed to single observed moments, were an essential part of knowledge production in this period, particularly in achieving and capturing "truth-to-nature".⁶⁶ As such, in its guarantee for sustained opportunities and unique material and virtual engagements with the men, Mrs. Salmon's emerged as a significant exhibition space for the British public to seek entertainment and continue the objectification of Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi.⁶⁷

Despite their popularity across social classes, wax statues were not accepted in academy circles as works of art. In 1768, the Royal Academy of Arts prohibited the exhibition of wax statues like those in the fashion of the "Cherokee King" in their *Abstract of the Constitution and the Laws*. It stated: "no ... models in coloured wax, or any such performance, nor any Work of Art which has been publicly exhibited elsewhere for emolument, shall be admitted into the Exhibition of the Royal Academy".⁶⁸ Small wax medallions and busts, like those by Catherine Andras, were however accepted within the mode of portraiture.⁶⁹ The Society of Artists of Great Britain and the Free Society of Artists accepted wax models and portraits, and many were exhibited in the 1760s and 1770s, including those done in coloured wax, but these too were only on a small scale, were framed, were not free-standing, and did not incorporate glass eyes and human hair.⁷⁰ Alison Yarrington states that these restrictions were to prevent any affiliation with the popular entertainment form of waxworks.⁷¹ It is unsurprising that the Royal Academy restricted the exhibition of wax statues as Joshua Reynolds, the President of the Royal Academy from 1768 to 1792, despised them for their exact replication of nature. Reynolds's *Eleventh Discourse* (1782) reads, "To express protuberance by actual relief, to express the softness of flesh by the softness of wax, seems rude and inartificial, and creates no grateful surprise. But to express distances on a plain surface, softness by hard bodies, and particular colouring by materials which are not singly of that colour produces that magic which is the prize and triumph of art".⁷² These sentiments were not just held by Reynolds but were reflected in contemporary literature. A poem, published in the *Whitehall Evening Post* in 1790 by the Earl of Carlisle to mark Reynolds's resignation as President of the Royal Academy, praises the "nobler art" of painting compared to "waxwork figures [that] always shock the sight/too near to human flesh and shape, affright/and when they

best are form'd afford the least delight".⁷³ Wax's ability to resemble flesh too accurately and its overly illusionistic life-likeness were the reasons it was deemed unworthy of academic exhibition.

However, the very life-likeness condemned by art theorists like Reynolds was precisely why Mrs. Salmon's was the most famous waxwork of its time; the skill of their rendering and the degree of life-likeness were irresistible. Mrs. Salmon's was one of the best examples of waxworks of the eighteenth century and was a predecessor to Madame Tussaud's better-known waxworks.⁷⁴ The 1782 *London Guide* begins its description of Mrs. Salmon's with the telling line, "the figures are modelled in wax, many of them so just a resemblance of Nature, that if they were seen in any other place, and unexpectedly, they might be easily mistaken for the works of Nature".⁷⁵ A similar account appeared in an advertisement for a moving statue at Mrs. Salmon's in a 1710 edition of the *Tatler* that read "Nothing but life can exceed the motions of the heads, hands, eyes, &c., of these figures", perhaps referring to wax statues that were not just realistic in appearance but also in mechanised movement.⁷⁶ The glass eyes of wax sculptures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may have been mechanically set to occasionally glance at the viewer.⁷⁷ In fact, the flourishing of eighteenth-century wax statuary falls within what has been called the "period of the automaton craze", when there was significant public interest in moving and speaking anthropomorphic automata throughout Europe that achieved corporeal mimicry through impressive mechanisms.⁷⁸ In her analysis of biomorphic automata in the eighteenth century, Bianca Westermann determines that these mechanical figures lay "at the intersection of artificial and animate, of dead matter and lifelike behaviour", much as the wax statues at Mrs. Salmon's did, mechanised or not.⁷⁹

In these examples referencing "life" and "nature", we see a departure from the more straightforward *ad vivum*, or "from life", paradigm that was used to describe Reynolds's and Parsons's portraits. The wax statues cross the line that separates representational art objects from living organisms, or "the works of Nature".⁸⁰ Such a degree of *trompe l'oeil* can produce an unavoidable sensory impression that can mislead the eye.⁸¹ This is a phenomenon that Kornmeier has termed "the waxwork moment", which she defines as the time it takes a viewer to realise that a wax statue is an object and not a real person or the moment when an image reveals its artificiality.⁸² This doubt is illustrated in an advertisement of a waxwork exhibition in the 1780s where "[the statues'] countenances and attitudes are so expressive and animated, that they seem ready to address each other".⁸³ Quite simply, according to a 1784 visitor to Mrs. Salmon's, "you thought they were alive".⁸⁴

Wax statues created a bridge between representation and reality that had been “removed by time or space”.⁸⁵ This effectively promoted the viewer “from the beholder of an image to an eyewitness”, just as the quality of *ad vivum* might have compensated for the unfamiliarity or inaccessibility of a subject.⁸⁶ Exhibitions of Indigenous North American objects in the eighteenth century had a similar function. The British Museum and the Leverian collection, which opened in 1753 and 1773, respectively, displayed significant collections of objects taken from North America from drums and tomahawks to wampum and clothing. Visitors to the Leverian were especially impressed with the “reality” of the ethnographic display, as seen in the 1782 issue of the *European Magazine* which reads, “all conspire to impress the mind with a conviction of the reality of things”.⁸⁷ Bickham writes that these objects were displayed to engage audiences with “geographically distant peoples and places that the increasingly imperial-minded Britons perceived as relevant”.⁸⁸



Figure 5.

Attributed to Marie Tussaud, Portrait figure of Voltaire, undated (allegedly 1778), photo circa 1950, wax and mixed media, life size, in Leonard Cottrell, *Madame Tussaud* (London: Evans Brothers, 1951), facing p. 31. Digital image courtesy of Getty Research Institute (all rights reserved).

When the “Cherokee” wax statues were made, Mrs. Salmon’s business was in the hands of a surgeon-solicitor named Mr. Clarke, who took over following the death of Mrs. Salmon in 1760.⁸⁹ As the statues did not survive to the present day and there is scarce imagery of contemporary wax statues, we must use primary sources to reconstruct what they may have looked like and how they were exhibited (fig. 5). Given the seemingly high level of artistry at Mrs. Salmon’s that was praised by visitors, the statues would have likely been made of high-quality beeswax imported from the Ottoman territories, which was guaranteed to allow for a quick and easy whitening process.⁹⁰ Before the wax could be poured, a mould of the sitter’s face had to be made. If possible, this would be done from life with plaster. For example, Mrs. Salmon made likenesses from “Dead faces” upon request and likely made

these casts from life.⁹¹ As there is no mention of Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi undergoing such a sitting, it is much more likely that their wax statues were based on a mould produced from a pre-made cast, which is how the majority of contemporary wax statues were made. This is consistent with a visitor's description in 1783 that "all busts seemed similar to us".⁹² The heated wax would then be poured into the mould, and once set, the perfect wax impression would be extracted.⁹³ In addition to the head, the forearms and hands would also be made from a mould.⁹⁴ The question arises that if the wax sculptor used a pre-made cast, did they account for specific features like the men's elongated earlobes? This would have been possible as the sculptor could make subtle revisions after the wax face was cast, but perhaps it was a neglected detail as creating a "true-to-nature" image was, in fact, a highly mediated and selective process where the unusual or singular was largely excluded in favour of perceived generality and commonality.⁹⁵

A significant step in the creation of the statues would have been the application of oil paint to create an accurate skin tone. In the broader tradition of *ad vivum*, skin colour was an essential part in bringing an image to life.⁹⁶ Oil paint was likely used for the same reasons that portrait painters favoured it, namely, that it could be layered and had a life-like luminous quality. Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi's "copper" skin became a main focus of the British public and was described repeatedly in the press, and a visitor's diary entry in 1793 mentions the skin of the statues being rendered in a "copper" colour.⁹⁷ Their tattoos and face paint were also likely added at this stage, in addition to illusionistic veining and pigment spots.⁹⁸ These visual elements would have been key in establishing the effective illusion of vitality that was expected of waxworks.⁹⁹

The natural properties of wax allow the medium to absorb light and blur contours, which have the effect of creating an illusion of movement when viewed from different angles. Not only does the translucence of wax resemble human skin, but its form can sag and deform over time much like human skin itself.¹⁰⁰ Wax also has the appearance of being soft to the touch and has a silken and glossy texture.¹⁰¹ The illusionism created by the medium would have made the skin of the statues of Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi devoid of abstraction.¹⁰² Once the heads were painted, real hair, glass eyes, and teeth would have been fitted into the statues, likely imitating the men's true appearances including their specific hairstyles.¹⁰³ As the sculptor would only use wax to form the visible anatomy of the statue like the head, neck, forearms, and hands, the body would be constructed of a wooden frame and then covered in clothing.¹⁰⁴ We also know, according to

the handbill referenced at the beginning of this article, that the statues were clothed “in their Country Dress, and Habilments [*sic*]”.¹⁰⁵ The men supposedly gave their own clothes to be used for the display, but as their characteristic white shirts and red cloaks were made in London, they could have been specially made for the waxwork.¹⁰⁶ These would have served to transport the audience to an inaccessible setting.¹⁰⁷ Qureshi also notes that, for displays of foreign people in the nineteenth century, accurate ethnic clothing was highly significant and that spectators appeared to be especially concerned with the “authenticity” of performers.¹⁰⁸ It is the combination of all these persuasive visual effects that establishes a notion of vitality while simultaneously suppressing the mediations required to create the life-like objects.¹⁰⁹

Once the statues were made, they took their place among the two hundred other statues at Mrs. Salmon’s. After paying a shilling for admission, visitors were received by a woman who provided a short description of the statues as well as descriptive handbills.¹¹⁰ Many statues were exhibited theatrically in active poses rather than formal studio poses and were dramatised by strategic lighting.¹¹¹ It seems that by 1783, the delegation’s trio was reduced to just two figures.¹¹² According to a companion book, “A Cherokee king, with his chief”, was exhibited in the first of five rooms. The same room included the mythological figure of Andromeda chained to a rock, a literary scene from *Macbeth*, and the biblical scene of Susanna and the elders.¹¹³ In picturing this arrangement, the statues of Utsidihi and either Kunagadoga or Atawayi stood among literary, mythological, and biblical characters that were far more familiar and less foreign to the British public. This is a noteworthy juxtaposition that parallels Bickham’s analysis of contemporary exhibitions at the British Museum and the Leverian that not only displayed Indigenous North American objects, but also juxtaposed them with European objects to demonstrate, as Bickham determines, the conviction of “British cultural and technological superiority”.¹¹⁴ This adverse contextualising of Indigenous objects next to British and European objects included placing drums next to European instruments, bows and arrows next to swords, and tomahawks next to firearms, which worked to visually establish an Indigenous otherness.¹¹⁵ Mrs. Salmon’s similarly sought to fabricate difference with the juxtaposition of familiar European figures with those of foreign people, and the public conformed to this imperial mentality, as seen in the diary entry of a visitor in 1793 describing his memory of a childhood visit to Mrs. Salmon’s: “I was then quite a youth, and the hideous copper countenance of the chiefs, [...] contrasting so frightfully with the sweaty death-like faces of the principle figures, riveted the scene so firmly on my memory”.¹¹⁶ Despite the prestige and power that defined Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi as principal leaders from the Overhill towns, this reception to their wax countenances is a

sharp distinction from the function of sixteenth-century wax votives that Panzanelli writes “were meant to inspire ‘first devotion, then reverence and veneration’ for the great men represented there”. ¹¹⁷ The last mention of the statues was in 1793, after which they faded from history. ¹¹⁸

Conclusion

We have no evidence that Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi saw their wax statues or were at any point involved with their creation as they were for the sittings of their painted portraits. However, European portraits were present in North America, functioning as successful tools for mediating colonial and imperial relationships, particularly in representing physically absent individuals. ¹¹⁹ The Cherokee people also had a cultural tradition of portraiture themselves as seen in the Mississippian period AD 800–1650, in which they rendered elite human figures in copper plates and marble statues, which they carved and painted naturalistically (figs. 6 and 7). ¹²⁰ But what would Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi have made of the statues of themselves? Would their wax representations have interested the men? Or would it have been off-putting to see such uncanny representations of themselves, frozen in a room among other curious figures?



Figure 6.

Human Figure, South Appalachian Mississippian culture, Etowah Site, Bartow County, Georgia, AD 1300-1375, repoussé copper plate, 50.8 cm. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC (014255). Digital image courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

Seated Male and Kneeling Female Figures, South Appalachian Mississippian culture, Etowah Site, Bartow County, Georgia, AD 1325-1375, marble, 61 x 55.9 cm. Collection of the Etowah Indian Mounds State Historic Site Museum, Bartow County, Georgia. Digital image courtesy of the Etowah Indian Mounds State Historic Site Museum, Bartow County, Georgia / Photo: Richard W. Pirko (all rights reserved).

The moment that the wax statues were completed, they became outdated representations as their subjects continued to age and change in North America. ¹²¹ At Mrs. Salmon's, however, they were frozen in time and in form, in what Dustin Wax calls "a dead state". ¹²² This idea is reflective of the original function of wax statuary for funerary purposes as well as the colour of unpainted wax that resembles dead, not living, flesh. ¹²³ This applies to both the wax statues at Mrs. Salmon's and the most recognisable representations of the men, Joshua Reynolds's and Francis Parsons's portraits of Utsidihi and Kunagadoga. In both media, the subjects are trapped in their own representations. The life-likeness inherent to the media encourages viewers to expect that someone, or some internal life, will always be behind the image. ¹²⁴ The portraits of Utsidihi and Kunagadoga, meanwhile, have survived and sit in storage, protected from the effects of time. If the statues of Utsidihi, Kunagadoga, and Atawayi were indeed melted down into other figures at the end of the century, they likely were transformed into more topical and relevant characters, and perhaps European subjects at that.

Footnotes

- 1 For additional contemporary usage of the terminology, see "Advertisements and Notices", *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 10 June 1767, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000358293/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=4822bb2a>.
- 2 Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1978), 53; Troy Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things': Material Culture, North American Indians and Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 1 (2005): 30, www.jstor.org/stable/30053587; and Maurice W. Disher, *Pleasures of London* (London: Hale, 1950), 200.
- 3 Coll Thrush, *Indigenous London: Native Travelers at the Heart of Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2016), 70. While today there are 400,000 registered Cherokee Nation citizens, Tyler Boulware cautions against applying a nation framework to eighteenth-century Cherokees as it presents an oversimplified homogeneity and unity to a broad and diverse people who identified themselves primarily by town and regional affiliations. See Tyler Boulware, *Deconstructing the Cherokee Nation: Town, Region, and Nation among Eighteenth-Century Cherokees* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011).
- 4 Henry Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake: (who accompanied the three Cherokee Indians to England in the year 1762); containing whatever he observed remarkable, or worthy of public notice, during his travels to and from that nation; wherein the country, government, genius, and customs of the inhabitants, are authentically described; also the principal occurrences during their residence in London; illustrated with an accurate map of their Over-Hill settlement, and a curious secret journal, taken by the Indians out of the pocket of a Frenchman they had killed* (London: J. Ridley, 1765), 116 and 129.
- 5 The term has been established by other scholars in the field of Indigenous North American visitors to London including Kate Fullagar in *The Savage Visit: New World People and Popular Imperial Culture in Britain, 1710-1795* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2012); and Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones, David Bindman, Romita Rayet, and Stephanie Pratt in *Between Worlds: Voyagers to Britain, 1700-1850* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2007). In addition, the term is used in many scholarly analyses of wax statuary including Uta Kornmeier's essay "Almost Alive: The Spectacle of Verisimilitude in Madame Tussaud's Waxworks", in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 67-81; and by Altick in *The Shows of London*.
- 6 An entire discussion could be had about the relationship between engraving and tattooing in the case of the 1762 Cherokee delegation. For an analysis of the physical parallel between European engravings and Indigenous tattooing customs, see Michael Gaudio's discussion of Theodor de Bry's engravings of tattooed Algonquin people in "Savage Marks: The Scriptive Techniques of Early Modern Ethnography", in *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2008), 1-44.
- 7 "Advertisements and Notices", *Public Advertiser*, 11 November 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001087090/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=114cbc83>; and "Advertisements and Notices", *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser*, 10 May 1763, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000342044/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=b79bc3ae>.
- 8 "News", *St. James's Chronicle*, 5-7 August 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001255714/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=e64cd150>.
- 9 Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things'", 36 and 41.
- 10 Glenn Adamson, "The Case of the Missing Footstool: Reading the Absent Object", in *History and Material Culture*, ed. Karen Harvey (London: Routledge, 2017), 240.
- 11 Uta Kornmeier, "The Famous and the Infamous: Waxworks as Retailers of Renown", *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (2008): 280, DOI:[10.1177/1367877908092585](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877908092585); and Roberta Panzanelli, ed., *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 1.
- 12 Julius von Schlosser, "History of Portraiture in Wax", in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 171-303; Aby Warburg's seminal essay on wax effigies in the fifteenth-century Renaissance portraiture tradition has also been a key discussion in the use of wax. See Aby Warburg, "Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum", in *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike: kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance, Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gertrud Bing, in association with Fritz Rougemont (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1932).
- 13 Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 1.
- 14 Adamson, "The Case of the Missing Footstool", 243.
- 15 Thomas Balfe, Joanna Woodall, and Claus Zittel, eds., *Ad Vivum? Visual Materials and the Vocabulary of Life-Likeness in Europe before 1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 3.
- 16 Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "Truth-to-Nature", in *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2007), 98.
- 17 Balfe, Woodall, and Zittel, *Ad Vivum*, 5.

- 18 "Advertisements and Notices", *Public Advertiser*, 30 July 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001085751/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=4a780571>; and Thomas Mortimer, *The Universal Director; or, The nobleman and gentleman's true guide to the masters and professors of the liberal and polite arts and sciences; and of the mechanic arts, manufactures, and trades, established in London and Westminster, and their environs* (London: J. Coote, 1763), 21. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0101202820/MOME?u=ull_ttda&sid=MOME&xid=09b664f2.
- 19 Balfe, Woodall, and Zittel, *Ad Vivum*, 2, 4, and 5; and Daston and Galison, "Truth-to-Nature", 104.
- 20 Balfe, Woodall, and Zittel, *Ad Vivum*, 10.
- 21 America Meredith, "Cultivating Vocabulary: An Ongoing Process", *Ahalenia*, 30 September 2012, <http://ahalenia.blogspot.com/2012/09/>; the Cherokee syllabary ??? ?????, or *Tsalagi Gawonihisdi*, was invented by the Cherokee linguist Sequoyah in 1821. It was adopted by the tribe within five years and has remained in use ever since.
- 22 Jim Hornbuckle and French Laurence, eds., *The Cherokee Perspective: Written by Eastern Cherokees* (Boone, NC: Appalachian State University, 1981), 3.
- 23 Mark H. Danley and Patrick J. Speelman, eds., *The Seven Years' War: Global Views* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 325; Stan Hoig, *The Cherokees and Their Chiefs: In the Wake of Empire* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas, 1998), 45; and John Oliphant, "The Cherokee Embassy to London, 1762", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 27, no. 1 (1999): 1, DOI:10.1080/03086539908583045.
- 24 "News", *London Evening Post*, 3-6 July 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=BBCN&u=cioa&id=GALE|Z2000667146&v=2.1&it=r&sid=BBCN&asid=a3987ebf>.
- 25 "News", *London Evening Post*, 19-21 August 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=BBCN&u=cioa&id=GALE|Z2000667425&v=2.1&it=r&sid=BBCN&asid=fff6607f>.
- 26 John Oliphant, *Peace and War on the Anglo-Cherokee Frontier, 1756-63* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), xi-xiv.
- 27 Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake*, 10, 31, and 35.
- 28 Much has been written about the 1710 Haudenosaunee delegation, who were dubbed "The Four Mohawk Kings" by the English, as well as the four portraits of them by Jan Verelst commissioned by Queen Anne. On the portraits, see Kevin R. Muller, "From Palace to Longhouse: Portraits of the Four Indian Kings in a Transatlantic Context", *American Art* 22, no. 3 (2008): 26-49, DOI:10.1086/595806. For a discussion on performance and display in the Haudenosaunee visit to London, see Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University, 1996).
- 29 Oliphant, "The Cherokee Embassy to London, 1762", 1-2.
- 30 "News", *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser*, 7 August 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=BBCN&u=cioa&id=GALE|Z2000340323&v=2.1&it=r&sid=BBCN&asid=0e5233c1>.
- 31 Bickham, "A Conviction of the Reality of Things", 29-30; See Troy Bickham, *Savages within the Empire: Representations of American Indians in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006); and Fullagar, *The Savage Visit*.
- 32 Sadiah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 66 and 68.
- 33 Bickham, "A Conviction of the Reality of Things", 31.
- 34 Oliphant, "The Cherokee Embassy to London, 1762", 8.
- 35 Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake*, 115.
- 36 Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake*, 117.
- 37 "News", *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 5-7 August 1762.
- 38 "Business", *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 22-24 June 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001255493/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=4991f781>; and "News", *Public Advertiser*, 24 June 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001085329/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=8bcc11ce>.
- 39 Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 2.
- 40 Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 2 and 8.
- 41 Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 47 and 49.
- 42 Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 60.
- 43 Fullagar, *The Savage Visit*, 118; and Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake*, 117.
- 44 Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake*, 123.
- 45 "News", *London Chronicle*, 19-22 June 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001677284/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=004075d1>; and "News", *London Evening Post*, 19-22 June 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000667073/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=63734509>.

- 46 These accounts closely mirror the attention that previous delegations from North America experienced, especially the 1710 Haudenosaunee delegation in London. A central focus of Joseph Roach's study is the account of the Haudenosaunee men attending a showing of *Macbeth* at the Queen's Theatre and being seated on stage so the public could watch them as they, in turn, watched the actors; see Roach, *Cities of the Dead*.
- 47 Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake*, 55.
- 48 Hornbuckle and French, *The Cherokee Perspective*, 12.
- 49 "Advertisements and Notices", *Public Advertiser*, 17 July 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001085598/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&d=ff1b2530>.
- 50 Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake*, 118.
- 51 "News", *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 26–28 July 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000553435/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=9e8659f5>; and "Arts and Culture", *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser*, 30 July 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000340265/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=7d81e82b>. For a parallel historical moment of the British public going to see exhibited North American Indigenous people, see Jessica L. Horton "Ojibwa *Tableaux Vivants*: George Catlin, Robert Houle, and Transcultural Materialism", *Art History* 39, no. 1 (February 2016): 124–151, DOI:10.1111/1467-8365.12184.
- 52 Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 8.
- 53 Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 48.
- 54 "News", *London Evening Post*, 3–6 July 1762.
- 55 "News", *London Evening Post*, 3–6 July 1762.
- 56 "News", *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser*, 29 July 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=BBCN&u=cioa&id=GALE|Z2000340251&v=2.1&it=r&sid=BBCN&asid=e320bc56>.
- 57 Fullagar, *The Savage Visit*, 108; "News", *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 28–30 July 1762; "News", *London Evening Post*, 27–29 July 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000667290/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=3d40576b>; "News", *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 27–29 July 1762, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001255672/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=f5f42ab5>; Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1998), 48; and Sarah Erwin et al., *Treasures of Gilcrease: Selections from the Permanent Collection* (Tulsa, OK: Gilcrease Museum, 2005), 29. The only concrete mention of Utsidihi's sitting in Reynolds's sitter-book that I found, as did Kate Fullagar, is on 1 June 1762. The Gilcrease Museum, however, has published that there were three separate sittings for this portrait, a fact that they likely garnered from archival documents beyond the sitter-book.
- 58 This could in fact be part of a larger satirical literary tradition of fictionalising Indigenous North American voices to level a critique against contemporary British society. This has been discussed in terms of the 1710 Haudenosaunee delegation in Hackforth-Jones et al., *Between Worlds*.
- 59 "News", *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 5–7 August 1762.
- 60 Altick, *The Shows of London*, 54; and Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things'", 30.
- 61 "News", *Daily Advertiser*, 14 June 1776, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000159197/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=1cd1baab>.
- 62 "News", *Morning Herald*, 21 June 1785, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000920037/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=90076eaf>.
- 63 Uta Kornmeier, *Taken from Life: Madame Tussaud and the History of the Wax Museum from the 17th to the Early 20th Centuries* (Berlin: Humboldt University, 2003), 183.
- 64 Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 67.
- 65 Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things'", 29 and 31.
- 66 Daston and Galison, "Truth-to-Nature", 59.
- 67 Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things'", 29 and 31.
- 68 Royal Academy of Arts, *Abstract of the Constitution and the Laws of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, established December 10, 1768* (London: B. McMillan, 1815), 42.
- 69 Alison Yarrington, "Art in the Dark: Viewing and Exhibiting Sculpture at Somerset House", in *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780–1836*, ed. David H. Solkin (New Haven, CT: Paul Mellon Centre, 2001), 174.
- 70 Algernon Graves, *The Society of Artists of Great Britain 1760–1791, The Free Society of Arts 1761–1783: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from the Foundation of the Societies to 1791* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907), 103.
- 71 Yarrington, "Art in the Dark", 174.

- 72 Joshua Reynolds, "The Eleventh Discourse", in *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. John Burnet (London: James Carpenter, 1842), 188. In 1776, Reynolds added a clause to his theory to allow for the contradictory state that portraiture existed within. He said that artists could include "single features" if they were "innocent" like Utsidihi's ochre facial markings, which were superficial enough to not threaten the ideal of universal refinement and did not detract from the general humanity of the figure.
- 73 "Arts and Culture", *Whitehall Evening Post*, 13–15 April 1790, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001628986/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=aafe6581>.
- 74 Uta Kornmeier, "Madame Tussaud's as a Popular Pantheon", in *Pantheons: Transformations of a Monumental Idea*, ed. Matthew Craske and Richard Wrigley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 154–155.
- 75 *The London Guide: Describing the Public and Private Buildings of London, Westminster, & Southwark* (London: Printed for J. Fielding, 1782[?]), *The Making of the Modern World*, 116, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0107784531/MOME?u=ull_ttda&sid=MOME&xid=21b14e15.
- 76 M.C. Barres-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Newspaper Advertising* (London: Brent Museum, 2006).
- 77 Kornmeier, "Madame Tussaud's as a Popular Pantheon", 150–151; and Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 28.
- 78 Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 174–175; and Bianca Westermann, "The Biomorphic Automata of the 18th Century: Mechanical Artworks as Objects of Technical Fascination and Epistemological Exhibition", *Figurationen* 17, no. 2 (2016): 125 and 131.
- 79 Westermann, "The Biomorphic Automata of the 18th Century", 133.
- 80 Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 67–68.
- 81 Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 67–68.
- 82 Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 67.
- 83 "Advertisements and Notices", *The World*, 3 June 1788, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001505241/BBCN?u=cioa&sid=BBCN&xid=0467a12e>.
- 84 Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 230.
- 85 Lucia Dacome, *Malleable Anatomies: Models, Makers, and Material Culture in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2017), 7.
- 86 Balfe, Woodall, and Zittel, *Ad Vivum*, 6; and Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 74.
- 87 Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things'", 32, and 35–36.
- 88 Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things'", 31–32.
- 89 Altick, *The Shows of London*, 53.
- 90 Dacome, *Malleable Anatomies*, 6–7. In the British use of Ottoman wax to create a representation of North American Indigenous people, we see an example of the complex entanglement of power, people, materials, and art that is inherent to the idea and execution of empire.
- 91 Hanneke Grootenboer, "Introduction: On the Substance of Wax", *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 1 (2013): 17.
- 92 Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 230.
- 93 Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 63.
- 94 Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 63.
- 95 Daston and Galison, "Truth-to-Nature", 60.
- 96 Balfe, Woodall, and Zittel, *Ad Vivum*, 10. For an art-historical analysis of skin and flesh tones, see Mechthild Fend, *Fleshing Out Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2016).
- 97 Altick, *The Shows of London*, 53; and Bickham, *Savages within the Empire*, 33.
- 98 Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 30.
- 99 Balfe, Woodall, and Zittel, *Ad Vivum*, 4.
- 100 Kornmeier, "Madame Tussaud's as a Popular Pantheon", 149–150.
- 101 Dacome, *Malleable Anatomies*, 6.
- 102 Kornmeier, "Madame Tussaud's as a Popular Pantheon", 151.
- 103 Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 63.
- 104 Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 61.
- 105 Altick, *The Shows of London*, 53; Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things'", 30; and Disher, *Pleasures of London*, 200.
- 106 Stephen Foster, *British North America in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013).
- 107 Bickham, "'A Conviction of the Reality of Things'", 30.
- 108 Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 119 and 166.

- 109 Balfe, Woodall, and Zittel, *Ad Vivum*, 5.
- 110 *The London Guide*, 116.
- 111 Altick, *The Shows of London*, 52; and Kornmeier, *Taken from Life*, 80.
- 112 *A Companion to All the Principal Places of Curiosity and Entertainment in and about London and Westminster* (London: J. Drew, 1801), 87–89.
- 113 *A Companion to All the Principal Places of Curiosity and Entertainment in and about London and Westminster*, 94–96.
- 114 Bickham, “‘A Conviction of the Reality of Things’”, 36.
- 115 Bickham, “‘A Conviction of the Reality of Things’”, 37.
- 116 Altick, *The Shows of London*, 53; and Bickham, *Savages within the Empire*, 33.
- 117 Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 15.
- 118 Bickham, *Savages within the Empire*, 33.
- 119 Muller, “From Palace to Longhouse, 29–30; and Stephanie Pratt, *American Indians in British Art, 1700–1840* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 2005), 58.
- 120 Richard Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 7; and Susan C. Power, *Early Art of the Southeastern Indians: Feathered Serpents & Winged Beings* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2004), 67–71 and 84. For one of the most famous examples of this, *The Rogan Copper Plates*, see Lee Anne Wilson, “A Possible Interpretation of the Southern Cult Bird-Man Figure on Objects from the Southeastern United States, ad 1200 to 1350”, *Phoebus 3: A Journal of Art History* (1981): 6–18, <https://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.A.208472>.
- 121 Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 76.
- 122 Dustin Wax, “In the Flesh in the Museum: Representations of Indians in American Natural History Museums”, *Savage Minds* (2006), <https://savageminds.org/2006/08/10/in-the-flesh-in-the-museum/>.
- 123 Wax, “In the Flesh in the Museum”.
- 124 Kristina Huneault, *I’m Not Myself at All: Women, Art, and Subjectivity in Canada* (Montreal: McGill University, 2018), 58.

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Wild Porcelain

Michelle Erickson

Authors

Cite as

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In February 2020, my partner Robert Hunter and I flew across the country to visit the Legion of Honor at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The trip followed an intriguing invitation by curator Martin Chapman to respond to the Bowles Porcelain Gallery with my ceramic art—it would also mark our last flight to date. Upon our return the world changed, and the project and life in general was filled with uncertainty. Nonetheless, a seed had been planted as I saw a dynamic connection between the Bowles collection of eighteenth-century British porcelain and my own ceramic practice. I was compelled by the technical challenge of designing and manufacturing these decadent and delicate porcelain tablewares and equally inspired by the unlikely place this premier assemblage calls home on the hilltop of the Bay City overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge.

I was born and raised in the colonial triangle of Virginia, an area known for American history. My full appreciation of that history began, however, when my interest in clay as a medium collided with the region's rich resource of archeological ceramics. Fragments of clay vessels, from ancient Indigenous homesites to colonial sites of exploration, invasion, and settlement that have been excavated by archeologists from the earth beneath my feet, in the place where I grew up. Drawing on process and context, I create contemporary narratives in clay through the art of recreation, connecting twenty-first-century issues to the entrenched legacies of colonialism.

Wild Porcelain is one of three exhibition projects I had in 2020 that ran parallel to the unfolding pandemic, a selection of whose works are the covers for this special issue of *British Art Studies* (figs. 1–6). As deep social, political, and environmental inequities became radically exposed, themes that have been a career-long focus for me took on heightened meaning. In the traveling exhibition, *Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage* hosted by the Fuller Craft Museum, MA, guest curator Glenn Adamson invited ten artists to respond to the 400th anniversary of the *Mayflower's* journey across the Atlantic in 1620. The Protestant pilgrimage to escape religious persecution landed in Patuxent, the ancient home of the Wampanoag people, a history best known as the romanticized story of the first Thanksgiving. *Another Crossing* challenges this narrative to address the British migration and invasion that brought catastrophic effects on the Indigenous people of this land, and speaks to complex generational struggles and aspirations since the founding of the permanent English settlement of Plymouth. The show had been scheduled to open in fall 2019 at The Box in the sister city of Plymouth, UK, and return across the Atlantic to Fuller Craft Museum. Then COVID-19 hit and there was a palpable sense of history repeating itself. The 1620 landing of the *Mayflower* in Plymouth was preceded by the 1619 pandemic, devastating the Wampanoag people leaving the shores of Patuxent abandoned and vulnerable. By May 2020, the anniversary opening at Fuller Craft Museum was postponed as the country and the world were

feeling the effects of COVID-19. Perhaps most poignantly, Native communities still subjected to the legacies of colonialism were once again facing disproportionate hardship and loss in America.



Figure 1.

Michelle Erickson, Shell Dish and Helios Dish, 2021, 3D scanned printed, molded and slipcast porcelain with lifecast lobster and antler and ceramic transfer prints, width 8 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

Michelle Erickson, *Wild Tweets*, 2021, high temperature wood-fired indigenous North Carolina porcelain, height 8 in. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

Michelle Erickson, *Cauldron*, from the series *Ply-MYTH*, 2019, wheel thrown with lifecast shell and industrial artifacts, made from indigenous North Carolina woodfired stoneware with copper wash, 16 × 19.5 in. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 4.

Michelle Erickson, *Remember*, from the *MADE IN USA* series, 2020, commercial Starbucks "MADE IN USA" mug with artist's ceramic transfer designs and gold and pink luster enamel, height: 4.5 in. Collection of the Chipstone Foundation. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 5.

Michelle Erickson, Remember, from the *MADE IN USA* series, 2020, commercial Starbucks "MADE IN USA" mug with artist's ceramic transfer designs and gold and pink luster enamel, height: 4.5 in. Collection of the Chipstone Foundation. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 6.

Michelle Erickson, Trump Esq. QUID PRO QUO, from the *MADE IN USA* series, 2018, commercial Starbucks “MADE IN USA” mug with artist’s ceramic transfer print and luster enamel decoration, height: 4.5 in. Collection of a Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).

The group exhibition *American Clay: Modern Potters, Traditional Pots* opened on 7 January 2021, also at Fuller Craft Museum, the day after the insurrection at the United States Capitol on 6 January. Curator Steven Earp had brought together American potters with a mastery in “traditional” Western ceramic techniques. The events of 2020—the murder of George Floyd, the summer of protests for Black lives, the defacing and removal of Civil War monuments, the “Proud Boys stand back and stand by” call to arms by a sitting president, and even the unprecedented act of a British Royal couple renouncing the crown—coincided with my series of protest pieces. *MADE IN USA*, *Trumped up China*, *The Party’s Over*, *Remember Them*, and *MUGXIT* that continue the “tradition” of ceramics used to communicate ideas, advocate social justice, and propagate political change.

San Francisco is a city of incredible wealth, economic power, and societal influence, in contrast to its underlying social and economic disparities further exposed during the pandemic. *Wild Porcelain* draws on place through the lens of the beautifully appointed collection of eighteenth-century naturalistic porcelains which were marketed to Britain's social elite. These luxury wares were used in elaborate dining rituals and mirrored the desire to domesticate the unpredictable natural world. Boxes and tureens of ever-fresh fruits and vegetables and nestling pigeons forever defy their fate of becoming the delicacy held within. Serving dishes incorporate fanciful foliage in relief while others realistically depict flowers and insects safely bringing nature into homes and onto elite eighteenth-century dining tables. I experimented with the artful process of period porcelain manufacture to address specific concerns of the twenty-first-century Bay Area. Drawing on the iconic Transamerica Pyramid building in San Francisco and symbols of the world's largest tech companies "nested" in the Bay Area, the work *Transangel* references the impact of wealth disparity and the unfettered power and influence of technology corporations over our collective and personal lives—from anti-democratic propaganda to the devaluation of our children's self-worth (figs. 7-10). The name "Transamerica" itself inspired the concept of *Transangel*, evoking the struggles of American LGBTQ equality at the origin point of Gay civil rights.



Figure 7.

Michelle Erickson, Preparatory sketches and source material for *Transangel*, 2020. Digital image courtesy of the artist (all rights reserved).

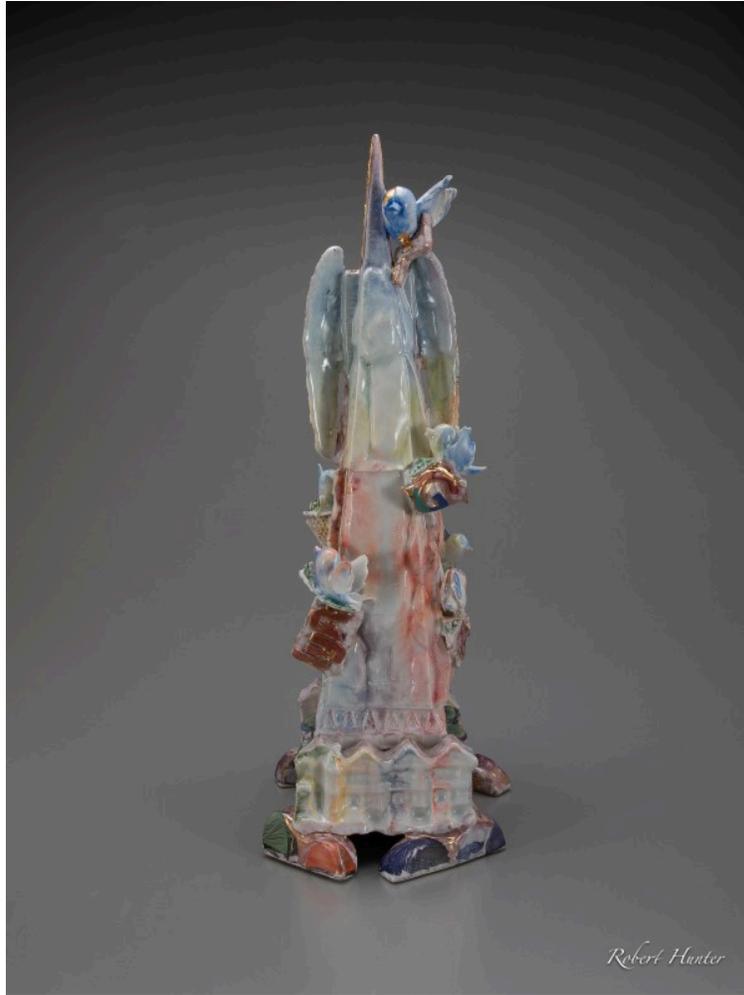


Figure 8.

Michelle Erickson, *Transangel*, 2021, 3D printed models from original artwork and 3D scans, molded slip-cast porcelain underglaze metallic oxides overglaze enamel and ceramic transfers, height 24 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 9.

Michelle Erickson, *Transangel*, 2021, 3D printed models from original artwork and 3D scans, molded slip-cast porcelain underglaze metallic oxides overglaze enamel and ceramic transfers, height 24 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 10.

Michelle Erickson, *Transangel* (detail), 2021, 3D printed models from original artwork and 3D scans, molded slip-cast porcelain underglaze metallic oxides overglaze enamel and ceramic transfers, height 24 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).

I reimagined the intimate scale and domestic function of vessels in the Bowles collection to address gun violence, fossil fuel geopolitics, and the undue corporate power and influence of big tech that has found its way into our lives. In *Head of a Child*, the subject becomes the existential threat to our most precious resource: our children. My portrait bust of child climate activist Greta Thunberg during her historic address to the UN in 2019 references an eighteenth-century example, *Head of a Laughing Child* designed by the French sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac and produced at the Chelsea porcelain factory (figs. 11-14). In stark contrast to Roubiliac's carefree and precocious depiction of youth, here the weight of the survival of her generation and generations to come consumes Thunberg's expression. This piece was in progress prior to the invitation by the Legion of Honor but its

inclusion and relevance in the exhibition was reinforced when curator Martin Chapman asked if I knew about the giant four-story mural portrait of the Swedish activist in downtown San Francisco. I didn't. The exhibition *Wild Porcelain* explores the challenges San Francisco faces as universal to this historic moment.

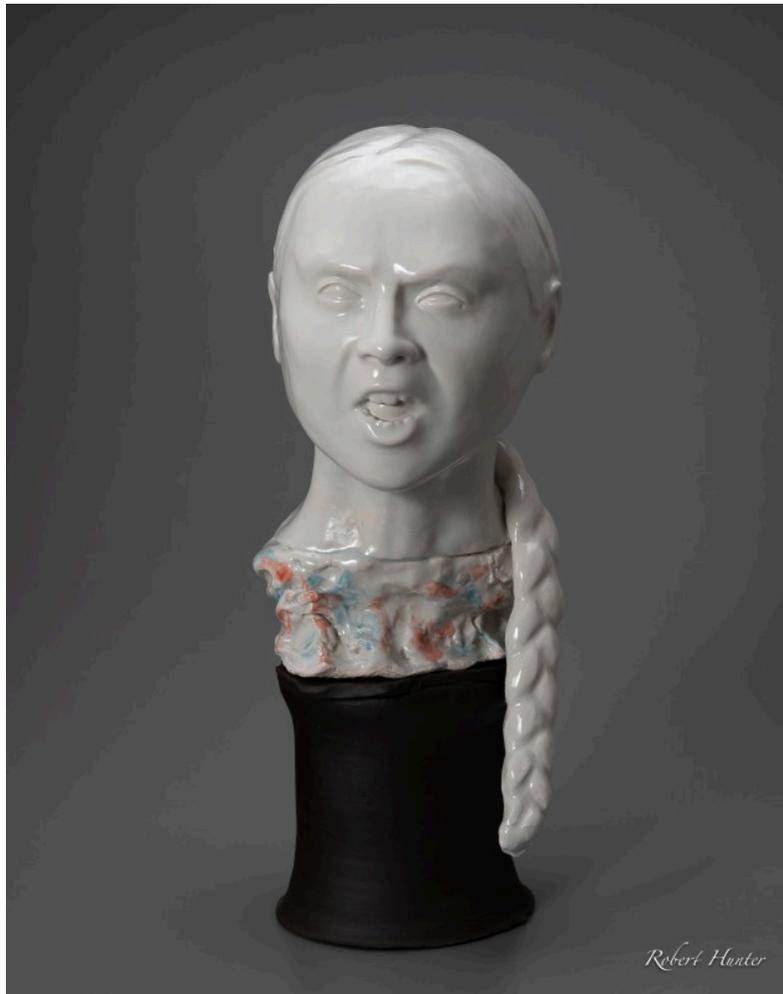


Figure 11.

Michelle Erickson, *Head of a Child*, 2021, artist original thrown, hand-modeled porcelain and black earthenware, 14.5 in. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 12.

Louis-François Roubiliac, *The Head of a Laughing Child*, circa 1746-49, soft paste porcelain, slip cast, 19.7 × 16.7 cm, Chelsea porcelain factory. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (C.37-2019). Digital image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 13. Michelle Erickson fabricating Head of a Child, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Michelle Erickson (all rights reserved).



Figure 14.

Michelle Erickson, Woodfired maquettes for inclusion in the exhibition Wild Porcelain, 3D scanned, recoded, and printed models molded in plaster and slip cast in indigenous NC porcelaneous clay. Wood fired in collaboration with David Steumpfle, Seagrove, NC. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).

Several works in the exhibition made use of the twenty-first-century technology of 3D scanning, printing, and design. For this I relied on my ongoing collaboration with Dr. Bernard Means at Virginia Commonwealth University's Virtual Curation Lab. Whether recoding and altering my original artwork, capturing my own hand in a glove holding a replica condor skull, merging a 3D model of the Transamerica building with a Civil War gravestone, or reducing the scale of a ten-foot BP gas station sign into eight-inch models for delicate porcelain boxes and dishes, the uniquely twenty-first-century technology was irreplaceable. The physical language of 3D printing itself creates patterns intrinsic to the intricate structural network of the printing process. It is usually removed from printed models and is quickly being engineered out of the technology as an unwanted byproduct but I try to enhance and even exploit this surface as it is impossible to achieve in any other way and represents a distinct fingerprint of this technological moment.



The Chelsea Porcelain Case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Iris Moon

Authors

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When visitors to the museum encounter carefully curated displays behind glass, the arrangements they see are the outcome of intense discussions, conversations, and dialogues, many of which span years. In an effort to open up the curatorial process to a broader audience, *British Art Studies* invited a group of curators and academics to participate in a round table discussion focusing on a case in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's British Galleries containing Chelsea porcelain, which each discussant had seen in person. The display, which served as a case study for pondering the challenges of curating and interpreting race and empire in a decorative arts gallery context, is unusual in that it combines useful porcelain wares such as plates alongside sculptural forms made as art works (figs. 1 and 2). Such an arrangement is not typical of decorative arts displays, which tend to separate wares for the table from ornamental sculpture. Even prior to the opening of the British Galleries in the spring of 2020, the case proved particularly challenging to configure, given its location in the central axis of the space devoted to the eighteenth century. An earlier iteration featuring Joseph Willems's (1715–1766) terracotta sculpture of a Black man holding a mixing bowl in the center of the case prompted questions for the curatorial team of how race figured in the broader narratives of the British Galleries (fig. 3). Save for Josiah Wedgwood's antislavery medallion, the sculpture marks the only Black presence in the entire suite of galleries (fig. 4). Although the decision was ultimately made to pivot the figure so that it faced north instead of being on axis, the impact of such a slight change in the arrangement prompted a larger discussion about what role the placement of works and museum displays play in propagating or challenging narratives from the past. The coordination or disjuncture between object and label, case height, as well as the visual and spatial relationships established between works within a display became crucial factors in recontextualizing and generating new perceptions in a three-dimensional format. Following the round table discussion, each participant contributed a response to the case, which provided a rich "object" for rethinking the British decorative arts.



Figure 1.

The Chelsea porcelain case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

The Chelsea porcelain case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

Joseph Willems, Man with a Mixing Bowl, 1736, terracotta, 74.3 × 29.2 × 22.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Gift of Wildenstein and Co., Inc., by exchange; Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation Incirca and Charles Ulrick and Josephine Bay Foundation Incirca Gifts, by exchange; and Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, by exchange, 2013 (2013.601). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).



Figure 4.

Josiah Wedgwood, Antislavery medallion, circa 1787, jasperware, 3 × 2.7 cm, on display in the British Galleries. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Frederick Rathbone, 1908 (08.242). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

Response by

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Amoy Chinqua, Joseph Willems, and the Politics of Scale

The Chelsea porcelain case in the newly reinstalled British Galleries of The Metropolitan Museum of Art seems to be a study in the scrambling and strangeness of scale. At one end of the waist-high vitrine, a group of botanical-print dinner plates evokes an imaginary table setting and its larger human theater of genteel domestic sociability.¹ The plates are joined by four white porcelain statuettes, which depict in turn the miniaturized forms of a finch, a beggar, and the allegorical personifications *Hearing* and *Sight*. Finally, Joseph Willems's 1736 terracotta figure of a Black man holding a mixing bowl stands at center, towering over the ceramic bodies and casting an outwards gaze that, in turn, meets ours. As spectators, we are confronted with an array of bodies and objects (or, in many instances, bodies-as-objects), each of which asks us to consider how scale shapes our perception of the material world.

Amidst the constraints of the coronavirus pandemic, I have written most of this response not from the museum but from my apartment, where the contents of the Chelsea porcelain case are most readily accessed through the Met's online collection page. They appear here in small square icons, placed specimen-like against gray backdrops that give little intimation of their respective sizes or scale in relation to one another. On the Internet, the figurines and dinner plates exist in a "gossamer virtual space", as Jennifer Roberts has written of reproductive surrogates of works of art, "released from any link to their real size".² Of course, a visit to the museum restores the realities—and surprises—of scale. Bodies in the vitrine may be larger than they appear, or smaller.

The Chelsea porcelain case is not the only vitrine in the British Galleries where the incongruities of scale come to the fore. In the adjoining gallery stands a case dedicated to Chinese export art that displays the sculptor Amoy Chinqua's 1719 polychrome unfired clay and wood figure of a European merchant, likely created as a luxury souvenir likeness of an official of the English East India Company (fig. 5).³ Chinqua's figure appears alongside a hard-paste porcelain punch bowl created in China for European markets in the late eighteenth century (figs. 6 and 7). The punch bowl, which features minute renderings of the architecture and bustling activity of European trading outposts in Canton (now Guangzhou), is itself quite large,

especially in juxtaposition with Chinqua's 12-and-15/16-inch-high figure.⁴ If the latter were placed on its side, it could comfortably fit lengthwise inside the former, whose diameter measures just over fourteen inches.

Scale is bound up with race, power, and agency. Scholars across disciplines have shown how it is no anodyne operation; to scale often means to enclose or contain. Susan Stewart suggests that the act of scaling, and miniaturization in particular, is fraught with the human desire to possess or control.⁵ Katherine McKittrick understands scale as something "coherently hierarchical" and, following Neil Smith, "a technology according to which events and people are, quite literally, 'contained in space'".⁶ Or, as Roberts succinctly reminds us: "The material implications of scale are always also political".⁷ Scale is at once relative and relational, and as such it asks us to attend to the asymmetrical and oftentimes hierarchical power dynamics that structure our world.

I am interested in the politics of scale because the vitrines of Chelsea porcelain and Chinese export art display bodies, themselves already miniaturized and rendered as objects, that alternately dwarf or are dwarfed by other objects. Both also implicate people of color as creative agents—as models, in the case of the unnamed Black man who posed for Willems in Tournai; or as makers, in the case of Chinqua, a Chinese artist who worked in major trading ports in Canton and Fujian provinces. As such, the two sculptures stand out amidst the many depictions of white people by white artists on view in the British Galleries. Yet their spatial and scalar proximity to wares like bowls and plates also opens onto a history of racial capitalism that, as Cedric Robinson has shown, was borne out of the consumptive patterns of Europeans and the exploitation of people across Africa, Asia, and the Americas.⁸ The deadly logic of racial capitalism turned—and continues to turn—upon the idea that some, but not all, bodies might be fungible as capital and objects. How and on what terms might the space of the museum, and the objects within its walls, challenge this logic? The juxtaposition of Chinqua's figure with the punch bowl allows us to begin to answer this question for the ways it demands that viewers see Asian makers as important creative agents in a narrative of British art, and indeed, exposes the limitations and exclusions of the term "British art" in and of itself.

But what further narratives would be possible if Chinqua's and Willems's figures were placed next to one another? What histories of making would they open onto? Certainly one beyond Britain, for starters. As a pair, the figurines evince a world of artists, artisans, and artists' models that was decidedly mobile and multicultural, with nodes not only in European cities but also in the African and Asian continents and their diasporas. "Diaspora" in this context is far from a neutral term but rather one contingent upon the

plural histories of mercantile exploitation, enslavement, and imperial invasion that shaped—and often coerced—the movements of people around the globe. There is a stark difference and asymmetry in the circumstances of how a man of African descent came to model for Willems in Tournai versus how a senior official of the East India Company came to model for Chinqua in China, but the movements (or, conversely, the fixity) of all four men were without a doubt impacted by accelerating European imperial projects in one manner or another. The British Galleries tell a largely triumphalist narrative of capitalist entrepreneurship that begins with the ornate oak paneling from the house of a seventeenth-century merchant venturer and ends with the dazzling manufactures of the Industrial Revolution. The bodies of Amoy Chinqua, Joseph Willems, and their anonymous models might interrupt this narrative, but the scale at which they do so hinges upon the manner in which they are displayed.



Figure 5.

Amoy Chinqua, Figure of a European Merchant, 1719, polychrome unfired clay and wood, 32.9 × 14.1 × 13.7 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Louis V Bell, Harris Brisbane Dick, Fletcher, and Rogers Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest and several members of The Chairman's Council Gifts, 2014, 58.52. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).



Figure 6.

Punch bowl, circa 1782-1785, hard-paste porcelain, overall 15.1 × 36.2 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Helena Woolworth McCann Collection, Purchase, Winfield Foundation Gift, (1958, 58.52). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).



Figure 7.

Punch bowl, circa 1782-1785, hard-paste porcelain, overall 15.1 × 36.2 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Helena Woolworth McCann Collection, Purchase, Winfield Foundation Gift, (1958, 58.52). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Response by

Alicia McGeachy, Postdoctoral fellow, Northwestern University/Art Institute of Chicago Center for Scientific Studies in the Arts (NU-ACCESS)

Between the Lines: Unpacking the Label of Willems's *Man with a Mixing Bowl*

Anchored in the center of one room in the newly renovated British Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art sits a thematic compilation of works by Joseph Willems before and during his tenure at the Chelsea porcelain manufactory. The case itself is varied, containing a small figure of a bird, allegorical figures of *Sight* and *Hearing* (fig. 8), botanical plates, a massive terracotta *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, and, at its foot, *Figure of a Beggar* (fig. 9). The outsize scale of the terracotta figure, which stands at just under two-and-a-half-feet tall, is exaggerated by the low profile of its neighbors and dominates the case in a way that is almost certainly intentional, as if the scale of the figure itself is meant to suggest that it communicates a “big idea”. Though incredibly beautiful and evocative, the *Man with a Mixing Bowl* seems foreign not only because of this significant height disparity, but also because of the difference in materiality that strongly contrasts with the largely white porcelains below. A quick glance at the accompanying labels reveals that Willems transformed the terracotta figure into a miniaturized porcelain version, thereby casting a thread of comparison between the two figures on display. Surely, viewers are meant to focus on the figures, but instead my eye wanders down to the labels, unpacking their content line by line to understand the story of this terracotta figure, but ultimately realizing that it is little more than a totem used to narrowly discuss economic exploitation, racism, and representation.

The opening line of the label accompanying Willems's terracotta figure, which depicts a Black man in tattered clothes, firmly acknowledges that the English luxury market in the eighteenth century directly benefited from the exploitation of slaves and the laboring class. Of course, label limits probably preclude the lengthier discussion of the direct and indirect financial implications of the slave trade and the marginalization of the laboring class that this topic deserves. As generalizable as it is to nearly every object in the gallery and to the idea of trade and empire, the acknowledgment of the luxury market's dependence on subjugation and enslavement should not rest on a single object and might be better placed on wall text for the entire space. Instead, *Man with a Mixing Bowl* is almost solely saddled with the ideas of slavery, race, and caricature, which in some ways diminishes and tokenizes the figure. Why is the discussion of slavery, marginalization, and racism reserved for the sole object depicting Black life? It seems like a classic case of those suffering under the burden of oppression to also bear the

charge and the weight of leading conversations about racism and oppression. Moreover, the text adds little value to telling the story of the work or life of Willems, which is supposed to be the unifying thread of the ensemble. It is confounding that there is no discussion about the skillful modeling of the subject or the rarity of the object as: first, only a few examples of Willems's terracotta figures are known to exist; and second, one of the only signed and dated objects by Willems on display in this gallery.

Although the label does explicitly say that this model was transformed from terracotta to porcelain, it seems unlikely that a viewer approaching the case and seeing the two figures would draw the connection. Both figures stand in similar stances with heads in profile and are in masterfully articulated, draped clothing, a true testament to Willems's skill with a variety of media—but this is where the similarities end. Beyond the difference in scale and perceived race, the different materialities of the two figures, porcelain versus terracotta, allow for interesting contrasts. The way that the gallery lights interact with the terracotta translates to a legibility in sculptural detail and visual interest that is absent or minimized in the glassy enamel of the porcelain *Figure of a Beggar*. In the label for *Figure of a Beggar*, the figure is upheld as a testament to Willems's competence and skill as a modeler and a symbol of "Willems's grasp on human anatomy", sentiments which could be equally applied to the terracotta figure as well. For example, the hair and expertly sculpted facial features of the terracotta figure go much further in "humanizing" the subject of *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, as opposed to the painted features of the porcelain figure. While the *Figure of a Beggar* stands with hands tucked away, with strong, articulated biceps peeking out from the tattered shirt, the terracotta figure shows Willems's ability to model both hands and feet in a natural way along with a great degree of muscle definition in the forearms and lower legs. The terracotta is enlivened by the implied movement of the subject, communicated by the folds and creases in the clothes and the suggested action of mixing, and the label notes that this figure itself was supposedly modeled from life. The labels could have also addressed or acknowledged one glaring question: Why would the subject's race change between the two figures, if one indeed inspired the other? Although the *Figure of a Beggar* is similarly draped in tattered clothes, in the case of the terracotta figure, the torn trousers and facial features are said to be a racial caricature. But in thinking about the terracotta as a caricature and the figure's transformation to the porcelain, is the racial caricature erased or is the significance of these features transformed as well? How then is the ragged clothing of the porcelain figure to be interpreted? It is unclear what Willems's views on race were and whether this object was meant to be a caricature or how it fits more broadly with the depictions of Black people during this period in England. There are no other examples of Black people in the gallery save perhaps for the Wedgwood antislavery medallion, so addressing these questions without prior or outside knowledge is difficult in this space.

On its own, perhaps the label accompanying *Man with a Mixing Bowl* is not distinctly problematic, but taken together with the label accompanying *Figure of a Beggar*, these texts are emblematic of the broader challenges faced in the discussion of race, racism, and prejudice in America. Specifically, there tends to be a reliance on minorities in largely white spaces to be the spokespeople for racial injustice and prejudice, a role sometimes assumed involuntarily; a role filled by *Man with a Mixing Bowl*. The societal and cultural implications of racism and prejudice extend beyond only those directly affected, and the conversation should be taken on by more people than just the oppressed. Certainly, the perceived race of the terracotta figure should not be wholly ignored but it seems that, in the context of this display, the piece could have done so much more work than serving as a point to briefly discuss race, wealth, and exploitation in eighteenth-century England. Surely, a balance must be struck between when and how to discuss race in labels and other museum texts and advancing the narrative of an exhibition. This case also raises broader questions about how British galleries in museums engage with their audiences and discuss race in spaces dedicated to Euro-centric stories, especially considering ongoing civil rights discussions and a re-examination of racism in America. Taking a more bird's-eye view of the case, one of the biggest strengths of this arrangement is that it inspires conversation and provokes critical thought. The case itself, supported by the rest of the gallery space, makes an important first step in creating a space for these conversations to take place.



Figure 8.

Joseph Willems, *Sight and Hearing*, both circa 1755, soft-paste porcelain with enamel decoration and gilding, 28.3 cm, Chelsea porcelain manufactory, on display in the British Galleries. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of John L. Cadwalader, 1914 (14.58.117 and 14.58.118). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).



Figure 9.

Joseph Willems, Figure of a Beggar, circa 1754-55, soft-paste porcelain with enamel decoration, 19.2 x 7.6 x 6.7 cm, Chelsea porcelain manufactory, on display in the British Galleries. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Austin B. Chinn Gift, in honor of Danielle Kisluk-Grosheide and Jeffrey Munger, 2013 (2013.600). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

Response by

Iris Moon, Assistant Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Am I Not a Who or a What?

What is he? Who is he? I oscillate between these two questions and how to order them when I stand before the terracotta figure of a Black man that looms large in a case dedicated to white painted Chelsea porcelain in the British Galleries. This case is particularly unusual in that it places Chelsea's sculpted figures alongside plates in a way that does not create a service, but rather a disparate ensemble of objects that clearly do not look as if they belong together. On the one side, lobed plates depicting botanical specimens, some native to England, others exotic, and on the other, a set of porcelain figures ostensibly modeled by Joseph Willems, the only sculptor at the manufactory whose name we know for sure. Then, the terracotta figure, which is so much larger than the diminutive porcelain figure of a beggar that mimics his pose. Unbalanced and incongruous, the strange nature of this case became clear when I showed an image of the Chelsea case to a group of curators of the decorative arts: remarks were made about the ugliness of the ensemble of objects. Or perhaps, I wondered, if it wasn't the terracotta figure alone that bore this burden?

What is he? Who is he? If I were to start by answering the question, what is he, an answer might sound something like this: made in 1736 by the Flemish sculptor Joseph Willems before he began his long tenure as a modeler at the Chelsea porcelain manufactory in London, the figure depicts a Black man who stands in a *contrapposto* pose stirring something in a bowl. The smooth and unwrinkled forehead is a contrast to the folds, crinkles, and creases found on the man's shirt, as well as the jagged tears of his pants. With pliant features and strong sinewy limbs, the male figure is shown wearing a billowy shirt open to the center of the chest, with a pair of pants torn at the knee. Shoeless, the splayed feet stand assertively on the base of the sculpture, even as structurally such a large figure requires support in the form of a plinth modeled into a textured surface that resembles the hair of the figure. The figure gazes off to the right.

The terracotta figure represents Willems's early and ambitious start as an academic sculptor before he eventually turned to making models for porcelain. Born in Brussels in 1715, Willems arrived in London sometime in 1755, and exhibited his works at the Society of Artists of Great Britain while working as a modeler at the Chelsea porcelain manufactory. Willems returned to Tournai in 1766, where, after his death, an inventory listed "plusieurs groupes de rondes bosse de terre cuite et colorées en blanc de

sa composition, et par lui modelées”.⁹ This either suggests that Willems was unable to sell these terracotta models, or perhaps they represented works that he hoped to use as the basis of new porcelain compositions when he took on the job as chief modeler at the Tournai porcelain manufactory in 1766, the year of his death.

But what about the question, who is he? Here is where the facts become much murkier. How many Black people were there in Tournai at the time of Willems’s active period in the 1730s, before he moved to London? How many were free? Could their labor be claimed as their own during this period, or were all Black people who lived and worked during this period conditioned by servitude, exploitation, and enslavement? Could he be himself? Is he an allegory meant to signify something else?

The sculpture was made in the years before Wedgwood’s antislavery medallion in 1787, and while it clearly lacks the ideological thrust of the kneeling enslaved African on the medallion, there is something about this man that makes one pause and ask who he is; in other words, to ask about his singular identity as a historical person, how he lived and worked in his time in Flanders. Is it possible that rather than being an imaginary figure, a fiction of the sculptor, the man mixing the bowl could have been modeled from life? Then who was he, so that Willems felt confident in depicting this Black man on his own, rather than choosing to show him supporting fruits, plinths, or capitals as was so commonly the case with the fetishized bodies of Blackamoors? His gaze is confident, looking directly at the viewer rather than positioned in a downcast glance. He is evidently confident enough in his task that he has no need to see what he is doing in order to make sure that the contents of his bowl do not spill out onto the floor. But mixing, stirring, taken as a metaphor, is also unusual in the lexicon of Black representation during this period. The picture of a man of African descent at work forms a strikingly subjective contrast to the many allegories of Africa made of porcelain that show the figures in heroic but ultimately ornamental poses. Unostentatiously dressed, powerful, but unshod, this figure troubles what we think we know about the immobility of the Black presence in the eighteenth century. Just about everything is wrong about this figure in the right way, because it does not settle neatly into the narratives that have been constructed out of the erstwhile beautiful luxury products born of a “creative entrepreneurial spirit” that is the central narrative thread of the British Galleries. How can we disassociate the desire to know about him without reifying his lived experience into a label that puts him on display?

The oscillation between what he is and who he is challenges the possibility of writing a single fifty-word panel that sits on the deck of the case. How can we squeeze all of the unsettling qualities of this piece into a small text meant to

smooth out the wrinkles of curatorial wrangling into a single narrative that reaches multiple audiences—specialist, connoisseurial, wealthy, poor, middle class, curious, bored, righteous, disinterested, Black, White, Brown, Yellow?

Response by

Max Bryant, Fellow, Downing College and Centre for the Study of Classical Architecture, University of Cambridge

Curatorial Fabulation

The roundtable discussions preliminary to writing this piece revealed a major difference of opinion in the interpretation of the Chelsea porcelain case's most prominent object, the terracotta sculpture by Joseph Willems, *Man with a Mixing Bowl*. The difference of opinion can be summed up by the following question: is there a probability that this man of African heritage was entirely imaginary? A respondent's particular inclination on the answer seems to inform their range of opinions about how the work could be appropriately displayed in the Chelsea porcelain case, and even whether it should be displayed there at all.

I would like to consider the possibility that a person of African heritage may have contributed to the creation of this object by posing or by serving as indirect inspiration. This approach may be accused of displaying, at best, a naïve belief in the "indexicality" of a work of art and, at worst, a failure to acknowledge the degree of racial stereotyping that a work by a white sculptor working in Brussels in 1736 would inevitably display. If it could be justified, however, *Man with a Mixing Bowl* may be read not only as a work by Willems, but also as a trace of an historical presence left by someone else, even if whatever level of participation was filtered through the racialised perspective of the person who signed and dated the work. This presence may even be said to persist into the works in which the figure's pose was recycled by Willems nearly two decades later in London in circa 1755 in his capacity as a modeller of Chelsea porcelain (see [figs. 9](#) and [10](#)).

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Figure 10.

Chelsea porcelain manufactory, Apollo, circa 1755, soft-paste porcelain, 29.21 cm high. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Jessie and Sigmund Katz Collection (68.809). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (all rights reserved).

I believe this argument to be worth making because of the fact that in London and Brussels there would have been people of African heritage participating in manufacturing industries who left no historical record, either through the general omission of their forms of labour from archives, or because of the active necessity for them to avoid leaving a legal trace. Such is the situation that has inspired innovative historical approaches such as Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation".¹¹ An important fact about the London porcelain industry in the 1750s is that because it was outside the City of London it was legally possible for people of African heritage to work there in a skilled capacity, in that they were not subject to the City's prohibition in 1731 on their apprenticeship.¹² To place the figure alongside Chelsea porcelain, therefore, can be read as an assertion of the presence of

figures of African heritage in the world of craft industries such as porcelain manufacture. Adapting Hartman, this approach might be called “curatorial fabulation”.

In the absence of positive evidence, my argument for an historical analogue may also be made negatively, by arguing that the alternative is equally speculative. This alternative is that the inspiration for depicting a figure of African heritage came exclusively from within the artistic conventions of the era, with no specific human analogue required. Such conventions included that of racial caricature embodied by contemporary Flemish genre painting, where the characterisations are such that the figures clearly do not reflect any trace of presence by a real person.

However, for an example of Willems working in this kind of mode, we would have a much stronger example than the terracotta in his figure of Aesop reciting ([fig. 11](#)). Considering the storyteller’s well-established mythical origins in Africa, Aesop had nevertheless mostly been depicted in art as a white man before this work, which was almost certainly modelled by Willems for the Chelsea manufactory. With its intersection of racist and ableist stereotyping, as well as the ambiguous tone of its presentation, this work is extremely problematic. Whether Aesop is intended to be magnificent or ridiculous, the work performed by this flamboyantly dressed orator is an antithesis to the manual labour of the man depicted in the terracotta. The racial stereotyping of the face, and the idea of an “African” physiognomy are both very different in the two works. If *Aesop* shows Willems working within artistic conventions of race as he understood them, the result could not be more different from *Man with a Mixing Bowl*. Perhaps the latter is merely the expression of a “naturalistic” convention while the former is that of a “caricatural” one. Even so, it still seems more likely to have required the presence of a real person to be achieved.



Figure 11.

Chelsea porcelain manufactory, Aesop, circa 1755, soft-paste porcelain, 24.7 × 10.2 × 13.3 cm. Collection of The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge (C.21-1932). Digital image courtesy of The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge (all rights reserved).

Any kind of “fabulation” may be considered a misleading or irresponsible approach for a museum to take. In the case of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, however, I would consider this case as a corrective approach not applicable to all institutions, specifically in order to debunk the idea of European crafts as exclusively white. New York remains the home of Donald Trump, who said Europe was “losing its culture” to immigration. The fantasy of European culture being exclusively white is expressed in his properties, with nineteenth-century Meissen and French ceramics furnishing Trump Tower and Mar-a Lago ([figs. 12](#) and [13](#)). The former is literally built on the site of the house where the core of the Met’s collection of Chelsea porcelain was originally located ([fig. 14](#)). In this context, it is not enough for curators to interrupt or question existing narratives; new ones need to be presented,

even though the means are imperfect. As well as the casualties of racial capitalism, curators must foreground the fact of skilled and creative involvement in historical European crafts by people of colour.



Figure 12.

Mantelpiece in the penthouse at Trump Tower, *Fifth Avenue*. Digital image courtesy of Sam Horine (all rights reserved)



Figure 13.

The "master suite" at Mar-a-Lago, *Florida*, 1993. Digital image courtesy of Splash News (all rights reserved).



Figure 14. House of John L. Cadwalader. 3 East 56th Street, on the site of Trump Tower, Fifth Avenue, 1915. Digital image courtesy of Cronobook.com (public domain).

Response by

Elyse Nelson, Assistant Curator, Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Representation of Black Life and Labor in Eighteenth-Century Flanders

Situated on the central axis of a gallery featuring The Metropolitan Museum of Art's newly installed collection of eighteenth-century British decorative arts is a large glass vitrine in which a varied assortment of Chelsea porcelain is presented alongside a monumental terracotta sculpture of a man of African descent stirring a substance in a bowl. The sculpture was made in Flanders by Joseph Willems, who is thought to have later modeled some of the Chelsea porcelain on display. The earthen medium, which stands out against the shiny surfaces of the surrounding plates and figurines, befits its modest subject who appears unshod and donning threadbare pants. The brawny muscles in his forearms and legs indicate a life of labor.

Unlike the various eighteenth-century representations of Black figures bound captive in decorative furniture and fixtures or fashioned as domesticated symbols of luxury in portraits of white aristocracy, this *contrapposto* figure stands upright and alone. Demanding to be seen, his outsized presence haunts the surrounding display of fancy wares with the specter of stolen African labor upon which much of the wealth of the British luxury market was built. Yet Willems's figure does not represent an individual whose labor supported the demand for British luxury goods, as this context would suggest. Rather, the deftly modeled statue, made in 1736, provides evidence of Willems's early ambitions as a sculptor, long before his name first appeared in the ledgers of the Chelsea porcelain manufactory in London in 1748.¹³ Willems probably created the piece after a Black model in Brussels. What can we know about the Black presence in Flanders that might inform our understanding of this work?

The arrival of Africans in the Catholic Netherlands was precipitated by the Portuguese trade networks established between the African continent and Portugal in the fifteenth century. Goods obtained from the Spanish territories in the Netherlands were traded in return for the labor of stolen Africans, who arrived in Antwerp on ships carrying raw materials.¹⁴ The distribution of sought-after commodities, including sugar, through the cosmopolitan shipping center made Antwerp the richest city in Europe in the sixteenth century. While no documentation exists to approximate the number of Africans living in Flanders at the time, travel accounts of foreigners visiting the commercial center attest to the fact that people of African descent inhabited Antwerp and its surrounding regions, some as servants, and others

illegally enslaved by powerful Spanish and Portuguese merchants who lived there.¹⁵ In seventeenth-century Flanders, African pages and servants became a common status symbol in the households of wealthy white residents, but Black labor was not limited to domestic spaces. A painting by Abraham Teniers shows a seated Black man polishing pistols in a guardroom as a group of white men, presumably off-duty guards, loiter in the background (fig. 15).¹⁶ The juxtaposition of his work to their pastime provides evidence of a social hierarchy, while the sensitive delineation of the figure—and brilliant reflections on the pistols and armor to which he attends—suggest that the model was an individual acknowledged for his skill. Black residents of Flanders also posed as models for painters such as Rubens, van Dyck, Breughel, and Jordaens. Character heads, or *tronies*, to use the Dutch term, sometimes depicting Black subjects, were made and collected by Netherlandish artists as naturalistic studies of expressive types (fig. 16). Practiced by master painters and apprentices alike, the copying of character heads comprised an essential aspect of an artist's training, and the rendering of dark skin tones in depictions of Black persons presented painters with a new technical challenge for honing their skill.¹⁷

Willems's portrayal of a Black man has aesthetic and conceptual roots in this enduring Netherlandish tradition. The figure may have developed from a character study or academic exercise intended to exhibit the sculptor's range and ability to model popularizing typological categories of human difference—in this instance, an impoverished Black laborer at work. But the skillful naturalism seen in the folded drapery of the shirt and balanced pose is notably lacking in the rendering of physiognomic details, where the lips, nostrils, eyes, and forehead appear exaggerated in their proportions.

The slippage between type and stereotype seen in the Willems occurs rather consistently in eighteenth-century Flemish art featuring scenes of everyday life. The French preference for decorative Flemish genre paintings and tapestries was fueled by the *goût moderne*, a new taste for quotidian subject matter, devoid of academicism, and spiced with everyday amusements, including references to “exotic” non-Europeans and the laboring lower classes.¹⁸ Considered in this context, the French provenance of Willems's prominently signed figure is unsurprising. Not only does the sculpture conform to the French vogue for large-scale terracottas that would gain in popularity throughout the eighteenth century, it also fits right into the milieu of Flemish art that catered to a French aristocracy preoccupied with gazing at the objectified bodies of the lower classes. Neither a commissioned portrait nor an index of an individual likeness, this representation—mediated by the assimilative act of artmaking—connects Blackness with destitution and labor, manifesting the ideologies that underpinned the oppressive systems of racial

capitalism and slavery. Indeed, Willems's representation of a laboring Black man in ragged clothing is nothing if not an image of alterity, produced in heroic scale for visual consumption by the European aesthete.

The history of Willems's figure opens onto a set of complex questions about racialized labor, representation, and the lived and imagined circumstances of people of African descent living in Europe during a period of accelerating imperialism and colonial enslavement. These complexities are largely lost in a display that frames the work primarily through the story of its maker's connection to London as a modeler of Chelsea porcelain. Imagine an alternative display in which the representation of Black life and labor were afforded greater consideration. The Willems figure would find meaningful context in a case dedicated to critically examining the construction of "types" in European decorative arts, for instance, or in a display of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Flemish art where it would provide visitors with crucial insight into the history of the Black presence in the Low Countries. This artwork has many stories to tell: not just about its maker, but also its subject and audience, and the power dynamics that existed between them.



Figure 15.

Abraham Teniers, *Guardroom Scene with African Soldier Cleaning Pistols*, circa 1650-1655, oil on panel, 69.2 x 88.9 cm. Collection of the Chrysler Museum of Art (2020.7). Digital image courtesy of Chrysler Museum of Art (all rights reserved).



Figure 16.

Pieter Paul Rubens, *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man* (detail), early 17th century, oil on canvas, 55 × 74 cm. Collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (3176). Digital image courtesy of Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (public domain).

Response by

Yao-Fen You, Acting Deputy Director of Curatorial/Senior Curator and Head of Product Design and Decorative Arts, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

A Case for Joseph Willems

Outside of England, the largest holdings of one of the most important modelers working in the English porcelain industry, Joseph Willems, can be found at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Despite this unrivaled strength in examples of the highly original models he created for the Chelsea porcelain manufactory, the recently installed British Galleries do not spotlight him in any monographic way, perhaps owing to him not being British born but a foreigner. His finely modeled works are dispersed in three disparate moments in the eighteenth-century room (Gallery 512) of the British Galleries. Each time, the Flemish-born artist is made to play a supporting role. His *Chinese Musicians* (circa 1755), a tour de force of porcelain sculpture documented in the 1756 Chelsea sales catalogue, is displayed to the left of the gallery's entrance, set on the central shelf of the double-sided glass case set into the archway (fig. 17).¹⁹ Grouped with vessels mostly of flat and curved surfaces with painted decoration, including plates and soup plates, punchbowls, and vases, the centerpiece, with its trio of figures exquisitely rendered in high relief, appears somewhat anomalous (fig. 18). The assembled group of Chinese-y and Chinese export objects are meant to speak to the keen popularity of chinoiserie in eighteenth-century Britain, as indicated in the nearby text panel ("The Near and Far East"). Masterfully decorated, it is also the only object in the case that best embodies how chinoiserie, as "colorful flights of the imagination", can be both beautiful and bizarre.



Figure 17. Case featuring Chinese Musicians, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).



Figure 18.

Joseph Willems, *Chinese Musicians*, circa 1755, soft-paste porcelain, 36.8 × 36.8 × 37.1 cm, Chelsea porcelain manufactory, on display in the British Galleries. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964 (64.101.474). Digital image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

Further examples modeled by Willems are displayed prominently in the free-standing case in the center, which is dedicated to the story of the Chelsea porcelain manufactory. His strong and sensitive modeling skills are represented by no less than four figures—two from the rare *Five Senses* series (see [fig. 8](#)) and a visually dissonant pairing of an outsized terracotta figure, titled *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, with a diminutive porcelain figure of a beggar (see [fig. 9](#))—but still Willems is only allowed a cameo appearance. The remainder of the case is taken up by flat tableware not designed by him. He pops up again in the form of *The Music Lesson* (circa 1765)—presumably among his last designs for Chelsea before returning to Flanders—which one encounters when exiting the gallery, in the glass case on the right, displayed with other “bocage” figural groupings ([figs. 19](#) and [20](#)). A label calls out Willems’s composition as “among the most ambitious examples of ‘bocage’ groups”.



Figure 19.

"Bocage" case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).



Figure 20.

Joseph Willems, *The Music Lesson*, circa 1765, soft-paste porcelain, 39.1 × 31.1 × 22.2 cm, Chelsea porcelain manufactory. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964f (64.101.519). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Willems, I contend, deserves his own plexiglass case. As the leading figure modeler at Chelsea from 1748 to 1766, I want him to have a starring role in the eighteenth-century gallery: that of the versatile and entrepreneurial Flemish artist who immigrated to London to work with the Liège-born Huguenot silversmith Nicholas Sprimont (1716-1771) to launch the first English porcelain factory to enjoy commercial success. A consolidated display would help to underscore Willems's wide range as both a sculptor and modeler, who was instrumental in helping Chelsea porcelain manufactory capture different market segments, whether following the latest rococo fashion from France and Germany or reviving popular seventeenth-century Flemish compositions. It would also serve to expand on the discussion of foreign artisans working in London and to amplify their vital contributions to the host community—a storyline seeded by Torrigiano's

portrait *Bishop John Fisher (1469–1535)* in Gallery 509. Assembling the figures modeled directly and indirectly by Willems in a discrete case, or perhaps even in a series of cases grouped together, would, for example, force a dialogue between *Chinese Musicians* and *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, signed and dated 1736, to engender a fuller discussion about Willems's relationship to the representation of racialized bodies.

A dedicated case, moreover, would force us to interrogate Willems's sculptural practice and the extent to which his figures were modeled after living persons. Contrary to the prevailing assumption expressed in the accompanying label that the terracotta "depicts a laborer of African descent who likely worked as an assistant in one of the Flemish studios where Joseph Willems was employed", I want to raise the distinct possibility that Willems may not have modeled the figure from life. This would help account for the curious mismatch between the head and the body—the head seems very small in relation to the muscular body—which contributes to the reading of his facial features as racial caricature. The haphazard fashion in which the hair has been depicted by a pick further reinforces this impression. The torn and tattered trousers, belonging to a long sculptural tradition of caricature of lower socio-economic classes dating back to Giambologna's *Fowler*, combined with the classicizing stance of the body reminiscent of late seventeenth-century Flemish sculpture, further suggests to me that Willems was not working from a live model.

Although we know very little about Willems's artistic training, there is a strong likelihood that Willems, like other Flemish artists of his generation, may have drawn inspiration for the Black man from the work of his prodigious predecessor Pieter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), as he has elsewhere.²⁰ The celebrated Antwerp artist continued to cast a long shadow over visual production in the Southern Netherlands well into the eighteenth century. Rubens's altarpieces dominated the most important of Antwerp's churches, as well of those in nearby Ghent, Mechelen, and Brussels, where Willems was born in 1715. Black male figures, ranging in skin color (from deep black to golden brown), age (from young to old), and facial expressions (from joyful to pensive and reserved), featured prominently both as kings and as acolytes in the great series of *The Adoration of the Magi* that Rubens made over the course of his life.²¹ Starting with the monumental canvas commissioned in 1609 for the Chamber of States (*Statenkamer*) in the Antwerp Town Hall, Rubens would go on to execute many versions of them for important churches throughout the Southern Netherlands, including the main altarpiece of the Capuchin Church at Tournai, where Willems is documented as active by 1739, based on his marriage to Marie-Joséphé Lahaize in November of that year (fig. 21). A similarity in likeness can be detected between the terracotta and the acolyte on the left in the Tournai painting (now in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Belgium) when viewing the

sculpted head from the side. It is entirely possible that Willems could have been there as early as 1736, when the terracotta figure was executed.²² The resemblance is even stronger when we compare Willems's head to one of the four heads represented in *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man* (figs. 22 and 23), which was one of several studies from life that Rubens used frequently. I am particularly struck by the closeness in the overall shape and facial proportions (high forehead, short distance between nose and lips, spacing between the ear and the mouth) with the head that is facing left (almost in three-quarters view) and smiling.²³



Figure 21.

Pieter Paul Rubens and his studio, *The Adoration of the Magi* for the Capuchin Church in Tournai, circa 1620-21, oil on canvas, 384 × 280 cm. Collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (165). Digital image courtesy of Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (public domain).



Figure 22.

Pieter Paul Rubens, *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man* (detail), early 17th century, oil on canvas, 55 × 74 cm. Collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (3176). Digital image courtesy of Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (public domain).



Figure 23.

Joseph Willems, *Man with a Mixing Bowl* (detail), 1736, terracotta, 74.3 × 29.2 × 22.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Gift of Wildenstein and Co., Inc., by exchange; Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation Incirca and Charles Ulrick and Josephine Bay Foundation Incirca Gifts, by exchange; and Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, by exchange, 2013 (2013.601). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

It is difficult to imagine how Willems could not have been familiar with the many iterations of Rubens's innovative treatment of this popular Counter-Reformation subject in which the figure of the black Magus was constantly reinvented and widely circulated, even after Rubens's death. Not only were engravings made after his paintings during his lifetime and remained in circulation (after his death), but as early as 1608 Rubens collaborated with publishers to conceive of Adoration of the Magi designs for illustrated books. Like Rubens exercising artistic license in moving between genuine likeness and imagined biblical characters, Willems, having reached his twenty-first year (in 1736), may have felt equally compelled to adapt and experiment with recognized visual predecessors as we know him to have done later during his time at Chelsea. ²⁴

Response by

Timothy Barringer, Paul Mellon Professor of the History of Art, Yale University

Racial Capitalism and the Ragged Man

The opening text panel of the British Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 24) launches a tendentious broadside of raw ideological aggression:

Creative risks. Artistic choices. Leaps of imagination and ventures for profit. The Met's wide-ranging collection of British art and design from 1500 to 1900 captures a bold, entrepreneurial spirit and complex social and political history. The objects within embody a complicated past, shaped by a commercial drive that developed among artists, manufacturers, and retailers over the course of four hundred years. This is the story of a rising economy fueled by global trade and the expansion of the British Empire, a time when innovation and industry yield both financial rewards and a defining national confidence.

This is a text clearly written for a particular kind of viewer. Think of the word cloud: Risk! Choices! Venture! Profit! Bold, entrepreneurial spirit! Commercial drive! Rising economy! Global trade! Financial rewards! National confidence! It is the Trump-era lexicon of venture capitalism, the argot of the boardroom in the age of the hedge fund and the corporate buy-out. It is the language, above all, of powerful men, men in suits, white men. Cliché after cliché flatters this patron class, the museum board member, the nouveau riche in search of cultural cachet.

The text locates the triumphal agency within the British Galleries, indeed finds the very essence of British culture and society, neither with artists, designers, theorists, or writers, nor with those who made the objects on view in the galleries. There is no hint of the mass of the population, nor of the vastly greater number of colonial subjects of the British Empire. Even the great aristocratic patrons—formerly credited with forming that apogee of good taste, the English country house—have no place in this account. The agent of change here is capital itself, in the hands of the entrepreneur, the capitalist. It echoes Thomas Carlyle's description of "Captains of Industry" as "virtually the Captains of the World".²⁵ These agents of world-historical change, the text implies, were *people like us*, rentiers, investors. An identification between the plutocratic billionaires of late capitalist New York with their bewigged forerunners in early modern England could hardly be

posited more plainly. What Threadneedle Street was then, Wall Street is now. Josiah Wedgwood, meets Steve Jobs. This makes comfortable reading for the one percent, the evening preview crowd between cocktails and dinner, but surely less so for most of the Met's five million visitors whose diversity of social and ethnic identity reflects that of the world beyond Fifth Avenue.

One final sentence is appended. "It is also a chronicle of brutal colonialism and exploitation". *Also*. The conjunction says it all. The human cost of empire—slavery, genocide, famine, ecological catastrophe, cultural destabilisation: these fall into the category of *also*. It's someone else's problem, far from 1000 Fifth Avenue.

The Britain celebrated here is that of Warren Hastings, Cecil Rhodes, Margaret Thatcher, Boris Johnson; not that of William Blake, Mary Wollstonecraft, Clement Attlee, Stuart Hall. It's the Britain of the Poor Law and the Poll Tax, not the NHS; a place of competition—Hobbes's war of all against all—not community and compassion. My critique here is of the opening texts and not of the galleries themselves, which are in many ways revelatory in their content and potential. The range of object types, the subtle and telling juxtapositions, the exploration of themes both familiar and recondite: all these have much to offer the visitor on repeated visits. The collection has expanded significantly; the installation of materials is often beautiful and in places brilliantly suggestive. With a different framing, the displays could foster a complex polyvocality, could give voice to multiple histories, mount critiques, open up debates.

Let us enter Room 512, the largest in the British Galleries, an open space at the core of their labyrinth. The former installation was notable for gilded mirrors and pairs of Georgian chairs. In the new galleries, by contrast, this room is marked by a harassing excess of form and colour, a forest of gewgaws suspended in Perspex cases. This postmodern assemblage reveals at a glance that eighteenth-century Britain was a cacophonous visual environment.

Before us stands a display case that mimics the size and height of a large dinner table. This association is only strengthened by the presence of five striking Chelsea plates, circa 1755, decorated with botanical motifs. A cluster of small, ornamental figural compositions, modelled in porcelain in the rococo taste, inhabit a cognate idiom and scale, demonstrating the skill of their designer, Joseph Willems. There are many delights for the eye in this group and detailed labels offer learned commentaries.

How does all this fit into the overarching "story of a rising economy fueled by global trade" that we were promised as we entered? Well, the ensemble illustrates quite nicely the rising technical and aesthetic acumen of the London ceramics industry, newly embracing porcelain production and

harnessing a burgeoning consumer market among the “middling sort”. Capitalism is doing its work on the dining table. Willems, born in Brussels, was an immigrant who, by the mid-1750s had brought renewed flair and expertise to Nicholas Sprimont’s Chelsea ceramics factory, founded in 1745. British commercial pluck, suggests the installation, draws out the commercial possibilities of the Flemish rococo: our hero (Sprimont, not Willems) makes a killing and we embark on the teleological pathway to the mass production and commercial innovations of Wedgwood. Buy shares now.

However, as anyone entering the room must immediately see, there is a further opus of Willems’s on view here, dating from 1736. It is identified on the label as *Figure of a man in ragged clothes*, but the museum's database now uses the title *Man with a Mixing Bowl*. Massively out of proportion with the other works on the table, the large *contrapposto* figure is modelled in terracotta. He is dressed in rough, ripped clothing and carries a basin. Moreover, the caricatured physiognomy leaves no doubt: this man is Black. There is a poor, Black labouring man standing at the heart of the British Galleries.

The rigid ideological matrix proposed by the opening text is here subjected to a moment of crisis. The ideological valence of *Man with a Mixing Bowl* cannot be contained within that larger purpose, and instead punctures through the heroic schema, revealing its underlying politics. These are the politics of racial capitalism, a politics of astonishing, and continuing, violence, a politics that inevitably alienates many of the Met’s visitors.²⁶ This figure stands as an unmistakable material signifier of a central fact of the eighteenth-century British Empire: the obscenity of slavery. At this key node of the galleries, the Black body refuses to be placed in the category of *also*, insisting, against the grain of the text panels’ narrative, that “Black Lives Matter”.

The labour of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean plantation system and the trade in human beings through the Middle Passage were key sources of the very wealth that these galleries so unquestioningly celebrate. We do not know the circumstances of this particular individual; indeed, we have no idea who the model was, or whether any particular person ever sat for Willems. Nonetheless, the sculpture demands that the labour of Black men and women is acknowledged in relation to the larger histories proposed here. The *also* takes centre stage and upends the heroic story of capitalism.

Man with a Mixing Bowl is accompanied by a small label acknowledging that “the eighteenth-century luxury market depended upon the wealth amassed via the slave trade and the exploitation of the laboring classes”. Indeed so: but this is too little, too late (and of course incorrect: it was not just the trade, but the institution of slavery over generations, indeed centuries, on plantations and elsewhere that generated profits for the slaveholding class).

Such a phrase could usefully have been included in the opening paragraph of the first text panel of the British Galleries, in place of the hymn to the white entrepreneur.

Next to the massive, brooding form of the *Man with a Mixing Bowl* stands a small, decorative porcelain figurine. It is a graceful rococo portrayal of a picturesque male English beggar, clad in rags. These are decoratively, if not erotically, ripped away to reveal smooth, milky skin. This object of desire acts to efface class difference; yet, the poor were harshly treated in eighteenth-century London.

The two paupers on the rich man's table, black and white, are related formally, and, from this imperfect rhyming of postures, specialists can speculate about Willems's working practices. But such matters of technique pale in comparison to the drama of race and representation embedded in the juxtaposition of a delicate, glazed figurine and rough terracotta model. Enculturated in the visual languages of an era of slavery, they offer up drastically differing associations: where whiteness and smoothness suggest refinement, consumption and luxury, blackness and roughness conjure labour, subjection, and abjection. Visually and ideologically dissonant on the Met's dining table, the *Man with a Mixing Bowl* demands a different context, materially and discursively. He stands for voices that need to be heard.

The objects in the British Galleries do indeed reveal the origins of our own world order, but they do so in ways that are painful to behold. Far from a heroic teleology from British commercial innovations to American boardroom triumphs, the galleries lay out in material form the brutal and continuing narrative of racial capitalism, the determining economic and social system of our own times. This history (to repeat that phrase buried in a label) "depended upon the wealth amassed via the slave trade and the exploitation of the laboring classes". The proletarianisation of the urban working classes under the factory system was the inevitable correlate of the geographically more expansive and even harsher regime of slavery and the plantation. Modern formulations of class and race are overlapping categories produced by capitalism. During the period covered by the British Galleries, new forms of racial oppression and new regimes of labour were interwoven, on the Jamaican sugar plantation and in the Manchester textile works. The gorgeous products of this era cannot truly be understood without a fuller picture of these circumstances of production. The *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, unlike the porcelain beggar, is at work.

What would the British Gallery's collections look like if these questions had been in the viewer's mind from the outset? The curators do indeed present several important case studies in this vein throughout the galleries, but each requires further interpretation. The tiny Wedgwood medallion bearing the figure of a kneeling enslaved man bearing the text "Am I Not a Man and a

Brother?” for example—here virtually invisible through its placement deep in a case—offers the possibility for a consideration of the ambivalence of abolitionist strategies (see [fig. 4](#)). Unlike *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, Wedgwood’s supplicatory enslaved labourer is on his knees. Likewise, throughout the gallery, a scattering of exhibits and their didactics militate against the overall schema—a sugar bowl here, a tea caddy there, trade goods from India and China. But rather than undermining the fundamental thesis, they hover at the margins of the narrative, retaining the status of *also*.

Presented under the sign of late capitalist triumphalism, the British Galleries do indeed unfold a “story of a rising economy fueled by global trade”. But divested of rhetoric comforting to the donor class, and understood as a history of racial capitalism, that narrative can be seen to embody a pernicious logic in which hierarchies of race and class are naturalised and bound into a single entity. In the Met’s narrative, the winners take all. The British Galleries, then, represent a paradox, an oxymoron, an open sore: the objects of refinement, beauty, utility, and originality on display emerge from a history of slavery and wage slavery, whose legacies are alive and reverberating into the present day. It’s magnificent to see the Met’s panoply of objects relating to Britain and its empire. But the *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, standing his ground among the luxury trinkets, demands that, from them, different histories be told. ²⁷



Figure 24.

Opening text panel, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

Footnotes

- 1 See Mimi Hellman's now-classic essay, "Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century France", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 415-445.
- 2 Jennifer L. Roberts, "Introduction: Seeing Scale", in *Scale*, Vol. 2 of Terra Foundation Essays, ed. Jennifer L. Roberts (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 13.
- 3 For further on Amoy Chinqua, see William R. Sargent, "'The Features are Esteem'd Very Just': Chinese Unfired Clay Portraits of Westerners", in *Picturing Commerce in and from the East Asian Maritime Circuits, 1550-1800*, ed. Tamara H. Bentley (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 195-219.
- 4 This measurement comprises the figure (which measures just under twelve inches high) and the base on which it stands, upon which, as Roberta Wue has recently pointed out, the artist signed, "Amoy Chinqua Fecit 1719" painted in a manner so as to recall the polychromed marble bases of European statuary. Roberta Wue, "Portrait-Objects: Amoy Chinqua and the Early 18th Century Export Clay Portrait", Lecture, The Society of Fellows and Heyman Center for the Humanities, Columbia University, New York, May 2021.
- 5 Susan Stewart, "The Miniature", in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 37-69, DOI:[10.1215/9780822378563-002](https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378563-002).
- 6 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 74 and 83.
- 7 Roberts, "Introduction: Seeing Scale", 18.
- 8 See especially Cedric J. Robinson, "Racial Capitalism: The Nonobjective Character of Capitalist Development", in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 9-28.
- 9 Arthur Lane, "Chelsea Porcelain Figures and the Modeller Joseph Willems", *Connoisseur* 145 (1960): 247.
- 10 For the dates of Willems's movements, see Arthur Lane, "Chelsea Porcelain Figures and the Modeller Joseph Willems", *The Connoisseur* 145 (1960): 245-251.
- 11 See, for example, "A Note on Method", in Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), xiii-xv.
- 12 Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 77.
- 13 Matthew Martin, "Joseph Willems's Chelsea Pietà and Eighteenth-Century Sculptural Aesthetics", *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 52, 4 July 2014, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/joseph-willems-chelsea-pieta-and-eighteenth-century-sculptural-aesthetics/>.
- 14 While recent scholarship has enriched our understanding of the Black presence in the Dutch Republic, less is known about the Black populations in eighteenth-century Flanders, leaving us without an adequate historical record from which to reconstruct the social roles Black people may have played in the region. Yet, by looking to the history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Flanders, a general impression of the Black presence in Flemish art and society can begin to emerge. On the Black presence in the Dutch Republic, see Mark Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650", in *Black in Rembrandt's Time*, ed. Elmer Kolfin and Epcó Runia (Amsterdam: Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 2020), 44-65. Lisa Lowe has emphasized the necessity of reading across archives to recuperate omitted histories of slavery and subjugation. See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 5-6.
- 15 Bernadette van Haute, "Black *tronies* in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Art and the African Presence", *de arte* 50, no. 91 (2015): 19; and Carl Haarnack and Dienne Hondius, "'Swart' (Black) in the Netherlands: Africans and Creoles in the Northern Netherlands from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century", in *Black Is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas*, ed. Esther Schreuder and Elmer Kolfin (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008), 90-91.
- 16 Many thanks to Tim Barringer for bringing this painting to my attention.
- 17 Van Haute, "Black *tronies* in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Art and the African Presence", 26. Black portraiture existed to a lesser degree as well. In the late 1640s, in Amsterdam, Black servants began to appear as the subjects of single-person portraits in which they assumed active poses, engaging in various aspects of their domestic labor. See Elmer Kolfin, "Black in the Art of Rembrandt's Time", in *Black in Rembrandt's Time* (Amsterdam: Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 2020), 22.
- 18 Koenraad Brosens, "Eighteenth-Century Brussels Tapestry and the *Goût Moderne*: Philippe de Hondt's Series Contextualized", *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 14, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 2006-2007): 62, DOI:[10.1086/studdecoarts.14.1.40663288](https://doi.org/10.1086/studdecoarts.14.1.40663288).
- 19 It was described in the sales catalogue as: "A most magnificent LUSTRE in the Chinese taste, beautifully ornamented with flower and a large groupe of Chinese figures playing on music". See Elizabeth Adams, *Chelsea Porcelain* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 132.
- 20 Some sources indicate that Willems, born in 1715, was the student of the Antwerp-trained sculptor Pierre Denis Plumier, who died in 1721. Since their life dates don't quite match up, I am disinclined to accept this claim. It remains probable that Willems would have been familiar with Plumier's public sculpture around Brussels, including his allegorical representation of the Scheldt River that remains *in situ* in the inner courtyard of the Brussels Town Hall at the Grand Place. See Léon Lock, "Flemish Sculpture: Art and Manufacture c. 1600-1750", unpublished dissertation (London: University College London, University of London, 2008), 160.

- 21 For further discussion, see Elizabeth McGrath, "Rubens and his Black Kings", *Rubensbulletin 2* (2018): 87-101, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/5898720/rubens-and-his-black-kings-koninklijk-museum-voor-schone->.
- 22 Willems most likely would have arrived in Tournai after having completed his training elsewhere since the Academy of Fine Arts in Tournai was not founded until 1756. It is very possible he trained in his native Brussels, where the Royal Academy of Fine Arts was established in 1711, shortly before he was born, but we cannot rule out the possibility of him having studied in Antwerp.
- 23 Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I have not been able to gain access to the latest scholarship on this head study, which is one of 136 *tronies* attributed to Rubens and his studio assembled and studied in the latest installment (Part XX) of the *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* by Nico Van Hout. See Nico Van Hout, *Study Heads and Anatomical Studies: 2 Study Heads*, Part XX, Vols. 1 and 2 of *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard: An Illustrated Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of Peter Paul Rubens Based on the Material Assembled by the Late Dr Ludwig Burchard (1886-1960) in Twenty-Nine Parts*, edited by Bert Schepers and Brecht Vanoppen (London: Harvey Miller for Brepols, 2020). The sheet under discussion graces the cover of Volume 1.
- 24 See Arthur Lane, "Chelsea Porcelain Figures and the Modeller Joseph Willems", *The Connoisseur* 145 (May 1960): 245-251; and Matthew Martin, "Joseph Willems's Chelsea Pietà and Eighteenth-Century Sculptural Aesthetics", *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 52, 4 July 2014, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/joseph-willems-chelsea-pieta-and-eighteenth-century-sculptural-aesthetics/>.
- 25 Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 1843, Book IV: Horoscope, Chapter 4.
- 26 The concept of "racial capitalism" originated in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); the new 2020 edition has a foreword by Robin D.G. Kelley.
- 27 I am grateful to Meredith Gamer for her comments on this text.

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Unpacking Wedgwood: An Interview with Roberto Visani

Caitlin Meehye Beach and Roberto Visani

Authors

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In 1787, the Staffordshire potter Josiah Wedgwood created a small jasperware medallion bearing on its surface the image of an enslaved Black man in chains (fig. 1). Wedgwood meant for his medallion to make an appeal for the abolition of the slave trade and the plight of the enslaved, and he drove home this point through both the figure of the enslaved, kneeling with hands clasped upwards, and the question that encircles him: "Am I Not A Man and A Brother?" Conceived and reproduced as an emblem for the London-based Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the medallion condensed the ideals of the antislavery movement into one tiny, handheld object to act as a form of "abolitionist shorthand".¹



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

William Hackwood, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Manufacturers, Antislavery Medallion, c.1787, jasperware, 3 x 2.7 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (414:1304-1885). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The artist Roberto Visani's recent sculptural work, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend*, shatters the Wedgwood medallion's tidy economy of image and text into something that is at once unwieldy and familiar to behold (figs. 2 and 3). The sculpture begins its life as a boxed flat-pack kit containing sheets of cardboard with cut-out body parts—head, right arm, upper body interior, lower leg, right foot (fig. 4). Not dissimilar to an IKEA Billy bookcase or a Poäng armchair, users are meant to assemble the work by themselves using a sheet of illustrated instructions supplied by Visani (fig. 5). This is a slow and painstaking process: Visani, a multimedia artist, has digitally enlarged Wedgwood's diminutive figure to a larger-than-life scale, broken it down into hundreds of geometric facets, and prepackaged it for us to assemble.



Figure 2.

Roberto Visani, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend*, installed in the exhibition *Do It Yourself: an introduction to the cardboard slave kits*, at Geary Contemporary, New York, Spring 2021, 2020, cardboard and hot glue, 6 × 5.7 × 4.4 ft. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

Roberto Visani, cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend, installed in the exhibition *Do It Yourself: an introduction to the cardboard slave kits*, at Geary Contemporary, New York, Spring 2021, 2020, cardboard and hot glue, 6 × 5.7 × 4.4 ft. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 4.

Roberto Visani, cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend, package, 2020, cardboard and hot glue, numbered open edition, 9 × 43 × 32 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 5.

Roberto Visani, cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend, owner's manual and assembly guide, interior view, 2020, 17.5 × 12 × 0.5 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

In May 2021, Visani debuted *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend* as one of two works in the exhibition *Do It Yourself: an introduction to the cardboard slave kits* at Geary Contemporary, a gallery on New York's Lower East Side (fig. 6). The other work, *cardboard slave kit: h powers blend*, reimagines the American sculptor Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* of 1848, a marble statue of an enchained white woman taken captive in the Greek Wars of Independence, in shards of white cardboard (figs. 7 and 8). Visani assembled both sculptures in the round for the exhibition, with their respective cardboard parts joined together through a series of corresponding digits penciled in at their seams in a sort of sculptural paint-by-numbers. 83 denoted the pieces of a tightly clenched pinkie finger of the Wedgwood figure's clasped hands, 62 a bent elbow, 60 a tensed shoulder.



Figure 6.

Roberto Visani, Installation view of the exhibition *Do It Yourself: an introduction to the cardboard slave kits*, at Geary Contemporary, New York, Spring 2021. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*, c.1841-1846, seravezza marble, 167.5 × 51.4 × 47 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington (2014.79.37). Digital image courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Gift of William Wilson Corcoran) (public domain).



Figure 8.

Roberto Visani, cardboard slave kit: h
powers blend, 2021, cardboard and hot
glue, open numbered edition, 8.2 × 2.6 ×
2.4 ft. Digital image courtesy of Roberto
Visani (all rights reserved).

The process of making—and apprehending—a sculpture is durational. Charles Baudelaire deplored the elusive nature of statues in his notorious polemic of the Salon of 1846, noting that the works on view displayed “too many facets at one and the same time”. It took time to understand them, for “the viewer who walks around the figures can choose a hundred different positions”.² In its painstaking construction and monumental scale, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend* slows the quick process of apprehension that was intended for the beholders of Wedgwood’s original medallion. It also revises it. The chains that bind the figure’s wrists do not simply loop downward as they do in the medallion, but they also snake about in a heavy tangle, demanding the viewer to confront the violence of slavery and its representation in the realm of the visual. The cardboard kit extends this confrontation even further.

Viewers-turned-makers must unpack—quite literally—the constitutive parts of the image in a process that raises a host of questions: Who participates in the production of such imagery? Who consumes it? And how is that consumption inextricable from a longer history of racial capitalism and the commodification of human life?

In August 2021, Visani and I met to discuss his ongoing confrontation with the visual archive of slavery through the *cardboard slave kits* series. In addition to taking on the works by Wedgwood and Powers, he has also created sculptures after Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's bust, *Pourquoi Naître Éclaire* (figs. 9 and 10) and John Quincy Adams Ward's statuette, *The Freedman* (figs. 11 and 12). Our conversation was wide ranging, considering the legacy of the Wedgwood medallion, the aesthetics of cardboard, his conceptualization of "social sculpture" and the participatory dimensions of art, and the paradoxical relationship between capitalism and social justice reform.



Figure 9.

Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *Pourquoi Naître Esclave*, 1872, cast terracotta, 53.7 × 44.5 × 34.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of James S. Deely, in memory of Patricia Johnson Deely, 1997 (1997.491). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 10.

Roberto Visani, cardboard slave kit: Carpeaux blend, 2021, cardboard and hot glue, open numbered edition, 38 × 27 × 22 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 11.

John Quincy Adams Ward, *The Freedman*, 1863, cast 1891, bronze, 49.5 × 37.5 × 24.8 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Charles Anthony Lamb and Barea Lamb Seeley, in memory of their grandfather, Charles Rollinson Lamb, 1979 (1979.394). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 12.

Roberto Visani, cardboard slave kit: freedman blend, 2021, cardboard and hot glue, open numbered edition, 69 x 53 x 30 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

Caitlin Meehye Beach: One initial striking aspect of these sculptures is, of course, the fact that they must be assembled. Can you share how the cardboard kits work and how they help us see an object like the Wedgwood medallion in new ways?

Roberto Visani: I think the medallion has such an iconic presence in terms of thinking about the history of Black figuration and the history of slavery... it is important because of its advocacy in the abolition of the slave trade, which was its intended use, but also is seen as problematic because of the supplicant pose of the figure. And it continues to be a potent image after all of this time. I wanted to really understand—to literally unpack—the artwork.

Making the kits allowed me to do so. It led me to the idea of, “Well, I’m probably not the only one who has these questions, and, as an artist, making is how I answer these questions”. A kit that asks you to think about the meaning of these images by reassembling and reconstructing them made a lot of sense from that point of view.

CMB: The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade intended for the medallion to be consumed as a shorthand—to be apprehended instantly as a sort of slogan or token. It seems to me that you’re trying to stretch out, or even slow, the process of understanding it as an image *through* the act of making. And perhaps this opens up a new kind of space for re-evaluating the medallion? I wonder if you could speak about the points in this process of making at which you came to new or different understandings of the Wedgwood figure.

RV: In general, I’m a very tactile thinker, so working with materials—touching, manipulating—really helps to generate new ideas and opinions. Any durational process helps delve deeper into the content of a work; seeing something in a museum from a variety of angles, writing about something, thinking about what it means to a particular viewer.

CMB: Right, I didn’t fully understand the Wedgwood medallions until handling them in museum storage. They appear much larger when reproduced in photos in books or on the Internet but, in person, are lightweight and even difficult to pick up because of their scale and fragility. You’re dealing with a little figure—one that’s barely sculptural, as opposed to a monumentally scaled figure in the round. This seems to resonate with what you’re describing as an image that is much larger than life in terms of its history and its legacy. How does scale come into play with your work, either metaphorically or practically? What made you decide to build these objects at this size and scale?

RV: I have to say that one aspect is practicality. I made several versions of the kneeling Wedgwood figure and from a structural standpoint realized it has to be this size, which is just slightly larger than human form. And then I wanted all the works to be of equal standing—I didn’t want to place the sculptures on a hierarchy by making one really big and one really small. But it is also kind of like the elephant in the room. The physical presence is a kind of echo of the work’s presence in other dimensions. With some of the historical works I draw from, the content and context of the work may be obscured. So, scale definitely helps reframe the works.

CMB: Scale seems to complicate the idea that a statue is a body to be consumed. A monumental sculpture forces the viewer into a different kind of viewing position than a handheld medallion or a small statuette might—it is harder to visually or phenomenologically “possess”, as Robert Morris would have it; instead, it is humbling.³

RV: Right. Along with the idea you are making this thing. The project is after all based around the idea of a kit—a do-it-yourself artwork. But it’s bigger than one person can probably manage. You’ll probably need several people to help you build it. So you’re forced to think about it in a social way and in a collaborative way. It also goes back to the emotional weight of the content and that large works or art are commonly displayed in social settings. That’s why I like to think of the series as a social sculpture.

CMB: How does materiality enter into this equation? I’m curious about the associations of cardboard in particular—its relationship to global supply chains and the fantasy popularized by megacompanies like IKEA that products and production can be put directly into the hands of the consumer.

RV: The tools and materials that I choose to work with are usually linked to what the finished object will be both formally and conceptually. For this I was really interested in cardboard for several reasons. We see it everywhere. It doesn’t really have a lot of value. We always feel like we can get more. Cardboard is also flat, yet takes on dimension. Its collapsibility relates in a way to how we compress history and archives, and the digital processes of creating and reproducing the sculpture complement those qualities. It’s also used to ship goods, and so the links to enslavement, commerce, and the trade of bodies for goods is echoed in many ways through the material.

CMB: This raises an interesting counterpoint to Wedgwood, who was constantly searching for ways for ordinary ceramics to imitate more expensive or precious materials. Jasperware becomes a substitute for onyx and sardonyx, creamware for porcelain, basalt for bronze. And technology and industry are key actors in enabling this. Whereas you are using technology in a wholly different way, as a mode of dissection and reimagination.

RV: The digital process refers to the content of the work itself. The data is just numbers. These things are made of triangles and polygons that basically get put together. Edge 25 gets glued to edge 25. This echoes slavery, which is a data-driven enterprise as well; traditionally, industry and technology have been the impetus for this kind of labor. In other ways, numbers can be very emotional. The kit is an open edition. The edges are numbered in a way that begins to numb our attention. Numbers in this way reference our inability to quantify important aspects of our histories. Both missing and counting “unknown numbers” can carry weight.

CMB: Numbers elide. I am reminded here of how scholars have contended with the archive of slavery; the way the ledgers of enslavers functioned as a shorthand for death, as Saidiya Hartman has written, or as a “monetarizing anatomization of the body”, as Ian Baucom has written.⁴

Can a work of art, and a sculpture specifically, counter this? It’s striking to look at the rendering of feet in the Ward sculpture and in the Wedgwood medallion. It seems like in the case of both statues, the communication of agency and resistance comes from the feet and the legs. With Wedgwood, it’s the curled toe of the kneeling figure that propels him upwards. With Ward, it’s the cupped foot and flexed legs that tell us he’s rising from a seated pose.

RV: And the hands also. They’re crunched together. It is a process of trying to identify some of those aspects of the original works and translate them. The drawings do this but in a different way than the sculptures. The drawings allow me to extract one part and say, “Look at this a little bit more carefully”. The drawing of the Wedgwood figure shows the figure from the back rather than the side, as he is usually depicted; the result is that we as the viewer have the same vantage point that he does ([fig. 13](#)). This changes our relationship to the figure from object to a more humanized subject. The Wedgwood medallion is a generalized African male, stylized according to the tools and materials of the time. My tools and materials speak to the mediating presence technology has on our lives. The drawings are laser cut onto the surface of paper and placed in antique frames. In doing so, I’m asking the viewer to consider the figure in both past and present tenses.



Figure 13.

Roberto Visani, *Back*, 2021, laser cut drawing on paper in antique frame, 29 × 19 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

CMB: Can you speak a bit more about the question of reception and interpretation? At Geary, you assembled your works as prototypes of sorts, with the idea that their respective kits would be purchased and then built by a consumer—maybe an individual, maybe an institution like a university art gallery or an art museum. What are the moral or ethical issues involved in participating in the making of your art? How does a collaborative process of reception—what you aptly term “social sculpture”—figure in here?

RV: By making a kit, I am inviting people to confront the legacy of slavery in a different way than simply being consumers of its history. I want to democratize that experience, so it’s not just about the history of the enslaved and enslaver, or the artist and the collector, but also about everyone in between. It’s the artist’s responsibility. It’s the institution’s and collector’s responsibility, and the audience’s responsibility. It’s shared

amongst all of those groups to engage in a common goal, which, in the case of the kit, is a constructed sculpture. So, the questions of labor and capital are some of the questions that I hope arise. I really don't want to tell people what to think. But posing these kinds of open-ended questions is really exciting to me—to see what people come away with. And that's sort of led me to this notion of a social sculpture, something that could be shared—something that I or an institution wouldn't necessarily define but would be defined by how people interact with it. And that's what I think the kits are beginning to do. I am also an educator and my experiences in the classroom and in developing curricula have informed how I created the kits. The interaction that is part of the artwork is different than a static work of art, but perhaps aligns more closely with how public-facing art organizations interact with their audiences, particularly within education and public programming departments.

CMB: Have you found that to be the case with the initial feedback you've got from viewers following the Geary show?

RV: Well, a bit. The audience is new to the work. It takes some time to consider the ideas contained within, so the first responses are usually supportive and complementary. In general, people seem to be really intrigued with the idea that this artwork can be made by just about anyone by simply following the instructions. And I think that there will be some really meaningful dialogue when the kits are built with a group of people. That durational experience, I think, will elicit more responses.

One of the reasons I came to the idea of describing my work as “social sculpture” is that when I was discussing with the gallery how to price these things, I wanted them to be affordable and accessible, from an institutional perspective. A school, library, or art museum should be able to acquire a kit so that it could be activated in that setting, ideally a public venue. And that relates back to the production and dissemination of the Wedgwood medallion—they wanted it to be accessible to everyone.

From your end, I'm curious. Your writing and the soon-to-be published book, *Sculpture at the Ends of Slavery*, is meant not only to inform, but also elicit a response from the viewer in terms of reconsidering what nineteenth-century artworks engaging with abolition mean to them. There is a kind of comparative history we are both asking the audience to consider, albeit through different media.

CMB: Like you, I'm thinking through the contradictions of antislavery imagery. In the case of Wedgwood, we have an object that is more often than not still seen today as a “good” or “positive” image simply because it's connected to the abolitionist movement. He contributes the medallions to the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade; the act of making

becomes a sort of philanthropic gesture in and of itself. But we know that philanthropy is not always unequivocally good or morally sound. A central preoccupation of my book is how the manufacture, circulation, and consumption of this genre of antislavery imagery—and sculpture in particular—remains embedded in circuits of commerce that are themselves related to slavery and racial capitalism. How is an image's capacity to prompt reform undercut by the ways in which it circulates through a capitalist network?

RV: What happens if we are all compromised because of the way the system is? In an earlier series of sculptures, I created guns that were connected to the slave trade ([figs. 14](#) and [15](#)). The trade of guns for enslaved Africans fueled the growth of cities like Birmingham, England, which became a producer and supplier for many of the firearms that were subsequently traded for people. It also destabilized tribal relationships and led to massive human suffering throughout West and Central Africa because of the influx of powerful new weapons. So historically, this web of commerce has often obfuscated a lot of human suffering and abuse.



Figure 14.

Roberto Visani, *Nigmatic Cross*, 2001, wood, concrete, clay, plastic, metal, and sea shells, 61 × 23 × 19 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 15.

Roberto Visani, *Ogun NY Money*, 2005, wood, metal, artificial hair, rubber, plastic, ceramic, and polyester resin, 33 × 33 × 5 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

CMB: Your mention of your earlier gun sculptures just now, as well as Birmingham’s ties to slavery and the slave trade, connects back to the broader theme of commerce, and its catastrophic legacies, that we have been grappling with throughout this interview. And as we’ve explored, and as other essays in this issue explore, sculpture and the decorative arts have historically been implicated in those catastrophic commercial networks in manifold ways. Your work not only calls back to those histories but moreover asks viewers to perform the urgent labor—do it yourself (!)—of reassessing and confronting those legacies.

RV: Well, the irony of a do-it-yourself ethos is that you are not a consumer of products—one can and does produce things for oneself. And much of the rhetoric around the founding of the United States is based on principles of independence and ingenuity. Pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, a

pioneering spirit, and other sentiments used to reinforce notions of hard work and freedom from the larger political and economic forces swirling around us. The reality, however, is that from slavery to the present day we have been inextricably dependent on global supply chains and consumption. That contradiction is what I hope the work ultimately addresses.

Footnotes

- 1 J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 179.
- 2 Charles Baudelaire, "Why Sculpture is a Bore", in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 98.
- 3 Morris's discussion of the subjective relation—or consumption—of a sculptural body through circumambulation is relevant here. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part 1", *Artforum* 4, no. 6 (February 1966): 42-44.
- 4 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 5; and Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the History of Philosophy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

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Baudelaire, C. "Why Sculpture is a Bore". In *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*. Translated by P.E. Charvet, 97-100. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

Hartman, S. "Venus in Two Acts". *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 1-14.

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The background of the top section is a painting of a forest. The trees are tall and thin, with a dense canopy of green and yellow leaves. In the foreground, two figures are visible. On the left, a person with long, dark hair is looking towards the right. On the right, a person wearing a wide-brimmed hat is looking towards the left. The overall style is that of a classical or romanticist painting.

What's in a Label? Revising Narratives of the Decorative Arts in Museum Displays

Authors

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For this feature, curators working with museum collections that represented the British Atlantic were asked to revisit and revise a label on a decorative arts object that they had previously written. The aim was to show the hidden mechanics involved in condensing a complex story around an object's history into a short text dictated by the physical size of the label. When that small and unassuming piece of paper sitting next to an object carries much of the interpretative weight in a museum, there are many factors involved in label-writing. Do you write from the neutral position of the institution? Or do you speak from lived experience? The responses gathered here adopt multiple formats. Some are accompanied by commentary, while others appear simply with the changes tracked. There are many different ways of thinking about what—and what doesn't—end up going onto a label. Revealed too are the variety of different visitors that each curator imagines addressing as the reader of their text.



Figure 1.

Charger made in Jingdezhen, China, 1740–1760, hard-paste porcelain, 35.56 cm. Collection of the Reeves Museum of Ceramics, Washington and Lee University, Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by Herbert McKay (2012.5.1). Digital image courtesy of Reeves Museum of Ceramics, Washington and Lee University (all rights reserved).

Label written in 2014 by Ronald W. Fuchs II, Senior Curator, Reeves Museum of Ceramics, Washington and Lee University

Charger

Made in Jingdezhen, China, 1740-1760

Made of Hard-Paste Porcelain

14" diameter

**Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by Herbert McKay
(2012.5.1)**

The nutmeg, cloves, and pineapple painted on this dish are copied from Pierre Pomet's *A Compleat History of Druggs*, published in London in 1712.

Fragments of a similar plate were found in a Philadelphia privy associated with the sea captain William and Patience Annis, who lived at the site from 1729 to 1748. Other examples were recovered from the wreck of the *Griffin*, an English ship that sank in 1761, on its return voyage from China.

Label rewritten by Ronald W. Fuchs II

Large Dish

Made in Jingdezhen, China, 1740-1760

Made of Hard-Paste Porcelain

14" diameter

**Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by Herbert McKay
(2012.5.1)**

The pineapple, nutmeg, and clove plants on this dish are just a few of the new foodstuffs that transformed European diets in the 1600s and 1700s. All came from places conquered by Europeans and were cultivated by enslaved labor; pineapples from the Caribbean, and nutmeg and cloves from Indonesia.

The pattern, inspired by illustrations in Pierre Pomet's *Compleat History of Druggs* (1712), proved popular in Britain and her colonies, perhaps because it reflected the power, wealth, and exotic flavors made possible by colonization and trade.

Rationale for Rewriting

by Ronald W. Fuchs II

When this plate was first acquired in 2012, I saw it as fitting within our group of Chinese export porcelain whose decoration was inspired by European prints, and in fact some of the initial curatorial research conducted on it was by a Washington and Lee University student taking the course *Art History 288: Chinese Porcelain and the China Trade*, which had as a strong focus the influence of European design on Chinese export porcelain.

I was also frankly excited by the discovery of pieces excavated in Philadelphia and from the wreck of the *Griffin*, which helped not only to date the pattern but also to document that they were likely intended for the British market, and I wanted to share that information.

Re-imagining the label in 2021, I am placing greater emphasis on what it can say about global trade and the movement of products, plants, animals, and people around the world, and the influences they had on different cultures, which has become an increasingly important part of the interpretation of our Chinese export porcelain collection. The tolls and legacies of global trade and colonization, and especially slavery as central to both, have also become an important part of our interpretation, as has our desire to expand the types of stories we tell and the range of people we talk about with our objects.

In rewriting the label, I sacrificed the specifics about where examples of the pattern have been found to make space for more interpretation of the plants and their larger cultural context. As the label is relatively long for a museum display context, I would consider cutting the reference to the design source if needed.



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 2.

Mortlake Tapestry Manufactory, *News of the Stag* from the series known as *The Hunters' Chase*, circa 1645–1675, wool tapestry, 347.3 × 463.6 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Amory S. Carhart, 1957 (57.127). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, (public domain).

Label written in 2012 by Elizabeth Cleland, Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

News of The Stag from the series known as The Hunters' Chase

Wool

Designed after Bernard van Orley (ca. 1492–1541/42), ca. 1540

Woven at the Mortlake Tapestry Manufactory (1619–1703), ca. 1645–75

This tapestry is one from a nine-piece series known as the *Hunters' Chase*. Curiously enough, given its secular subject-matter, the original edition was commissioned by the Dutch Church in London, in 1645. Francis Clein designed four of the pieces in the series from scratch; the other five, including *News of the Stag*, were based on existing tapestry designs by the great 16th-century artist Bernard van Orley for his influential, Brussels-woven *Hunts of Maximilian*. *Hunters' Chase* proved incredibly popular for Mortlake, resulting in much-needed commissions for the floundering manufactory: at

least 8 different re-editions were woven during the following decades, including that of which this *News of the Stag* was part.

Gift of Amory S. Carhart, 1957
57.127

Label rewritten by Elizabeth Cleland

Remembering with Advantages

In a world shaken by ongoing civil war, this tapestry was made by and for immigrants. Nostalgic for a bygone age in the country they had left behind, it looks Brussels-made from the 1540s, a period of Netherlandish prosperity and relative peace. In fact, it was woven a century later, using 100-year-old designs, in England—at that time, a sanctuary for European refugee Protestants. It was commissioned by London's Dutch Church from weavers at Mortlake. These weavers were immigrant Flemings, recently fleeing persecution by the Catholic authorities, some having left under cover of darkness, bringing only the possessions they could carry on their backs.

News of the Stag from the series known as The Hunters' Chase

Designed after Bernard van Orley (Netherlandish, ca. 1492–1541/42), ca. 1540

Woven at the Mortlake Tapestry Manufactory (1619–1703)

British (Mortlake), ca. 1645–1675

Dyed wool on undyed woolen warp

Gift of Amory S. Carhart, 1957 (57.127)



Figure 3.

Giuseppe Gricci, Pair of candlesticks, circa 1750, soft-paste porcelain, 14 cm, Capodimonte porcelain factory. Collection of The British Museum (Franks.508). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Label written in 2018 by Patricia F. Ferguson, Project Curator in the Britain, Europe and Prehistory Department at the British Museum from 2017 to 2020

Pair of candlesticks

Italian, Naples, Capodimonte factory, about 1745-50

Soft-paste porcelain, enamels, gilt

Mark: fleur-de-lys in blue

British Museum, Given by Sir A.W. Franks, 1897, Franks Cat. 508

These candlesticks, modelled by Giuseppe Gricci, depict Africans supporting conch shells on shell-like rockwork, known as Rocailles, with coral branches. They may have been part of a marine-themed table service.

Label rewritten by Patricia F. Ferguson

Pair of candlesticks

Italian, Naples, Capodimonte factory, about 1745-50

Soft-paste porcelain, enamels, gilt

Mark: fleur-de-lys in blue

British Museum, Given by Sir A.W. Franks, 1897, Franks Cat. 508

The presence of kneeling Afro-European figures struggling under enormous shells normalised enslaved labor. Such humiliating ornamental images of forced servitude increased with the rise of the transatlantic slave trade.



Figure 4.

Unknown manufacturer, Plate with William Parry's Ships Hecla and Griper at Melville Sound, circa 1840, earthenware with blue transfer print from the "Arctic Scenery" series, 3 x 27.6 cm, inspired by William Parry (1790-1855), *Journal of a Voyage of Discovery a Northwest Passage*, 1821. Collection of Gardiner Museum, Toronto, The Barbara and James Moscovich Collection of Canadian Historical China (G13.15.45). Digital image courtesy of Gardiner Museum, Toronto (all rights reserved).

A New Lens on Canadiana

by Sequoia Miller, Chief Curator, Gardiner Museum

The permanent collection of Gardiner Museum includes a group of nineteenth-century British ceramics made for the Canadian market, conventionally known as Canadiana. The forms are mostly tableware and have transfer-printed imagery of Canadian scenes derived from print sources, including William Parry's *Journal of a Voyage of Discovery a Northwest Passage* (1821) and William Henry Bartlett's multi-volume *Canadian Scenery Illustrated* (beginning in 1840).

Many of the images include representations of Indigenous people and lifeways. While the current gallery interpretation, on view since 2015, notes the scenes as “romanticized”, it does not address specifically the representation of Indigeneity, which was central to European understandings of Canada as a place and as a colony.

See, for example, this single object label (for the plate on the previous slide):

Plate with William Parry’s Ships *Hecla* and *Griper* at Melville Sound

Unknown manufacturer, c. 1840

Earthenware with blue transfer print from the “Arctic Scenery” series, inspired by William Parry (1790–1855), *Journal of a Voyage of Discovery a Northwest Passage*, 1821

Mark: Transfer printed *Arctic Scenery* on an igloo against a glacier, flanked by harpoons and a standing figure

The Barbara and James Moscovich Collection of Canadian Historical China G13.15.45

The exploits of Sir William Parry (1790–1855) on his two expeditions to the Arctic were popular on both sides of the Atlantic after the publication of his *Journal of a Voyage of Discovery of a North-West Passage* in 1821 and 1824. Here we see the ships *Hecla* and *Griper* in the ice at Melville Sound. A border of tropical animals encircles the scene, perhaps because Parry was seeking a viable northern route to China and India.

In addition to the two ships, the plate shows a group of people in the foreground on a sled being pulled by dogs. With the standing figures in the middle ground in European dress, we can identify those in the foreground as Inuit. This scene is a deliberate reworking of two separate prints from Parry’s book, one showing the *Hecla* and *Griper*, and a second showing a group of Inuit people on a sled. Perhaps the two images were combined to locate the scene more clearly in Canada (in the absence of an accompanying narrative), or just to generate more interest.

Melville Sound, also known as Viscount Melville Sound, is a body of water in the Canadian Arctic that forms part of the Northwest Passage. Its first European navigator was Parry, who gave Melville Sound its name. Locating the scene at Melville Sound in the title of the print and the plate, then, is a colonizing gesture in itself rather than a neutral description. In a sense, the *Hecla*, *Griper*, and standing sailors are on Melville Sound, while the sledding party is on Tariyunnuaq, the traditional name of the body of water. In 2012, the Geographical Names Board of Canada re-designated the sound as Tariyunnuaq.

Overlooking people of colour depicted in artworks is a well-known occurrence. The many historical European paintings portraying enslaved people are only now being retitled and reconsidered with their presence acknowledged. In this case, the Inuit sledding party is perhaps omitted because the presumed audience for the transferware is non-Indigenous. Both at the time of the production and in the museum, the “Canadian market” observes Indigeneity rather than constitutes it. The presence of Indigenous people helps to locate the scene, yet subjecthood rests not with them but with the ships, as avatars of European exploration and accomplishment.

Interpreting these scenes depicting Indigenous life felt like too big of a job for a label rewrite. Our curatorial team decided instead to begin by commissioning an Indigenous artist, Mary Anne Barkhouse, to intervene in the case as a whole, both the objects and existing didactics. Barkhouse is at work on the project now and we are just starting to talk about how to approach writing new labels together.

Rewriting labels can often productively update the interpretation of historical decorative arts. It is important, however, to recognize and cultivate opportunities where a stronger shift in the interpretive lens is needed. We hope we are doing this at the Gardiner.



Figure 5.

Chinoiserie case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021.

Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

Label written in 2019–2020 by Iris Moon, Assistant Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Rewritten with tracked changes by Iris Moon

Where is East? ~~The Near and Far East~~

Chinoiserie is often pointed to as a striking example of the West's fascination *obsession* with Asia. In the eighteenth century, the term referred to an ensemble of imports from different places across the region, including China, India, and Japan, and to their overall aesthetic effect. Chinoiserie also encompassed the copies made by Western manufacturers.

~~Curiosity about~~ *The elite's desire to possess* the rare initially drove the *luxury* market for Asian goods. As global trade brought the East closer to the British, the number of imported goods entering households ~~increased~~ *proliferated*. Red-and-gold lacquer furniture, colorful wallpaper, and richly patterned porcelain vases filled elegant country houses. Outdoors, George III's architect William Chambers, who had traveled to Canton with the Swedish East India Company in the 1740s, reimagined Kew Gardens by adding a multistoried pagoda tower.

The exquisite quality and diversity of objects shipped from Asia provided domestic makers with new standards to emulate. As ~~more affordable~~ *cheaper* Asian imports arrived in Britain, domestic porcelain factories began to sell wares with Asian motifs. Over time, imitation turned into invention. Under the guise of the "Chinese taste," makers developed fantastical figures, some of which may appear grotesque, bizarre, or offensive to modern eyes. ~~To eighteenth-century viewers, however, chinoiserie stood for colorful flights of the imagination—a stark contrast to the gray fog of the British Isles. Objects of curiosity and repulsion, the harmful after-effects of Chinoiserie can be found lingering in the cultural stereotypes of the Other deployed today.~~



Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage

Glenn Adamson

Authors

Curator, Writer, and Historian

Cite as

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Introduction by

Iris Moon, Assistant Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Introduction

How can the past be reshaped in the hands of contemporary artists? This feature highlights and archives the work of participants in the exhibition, *Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage*, presenting an introduction to the exhibition written by its guest curator Glenn Adamson, and the recordings of two virtual events (the second forthcoming in spring 2022) in which the artists reflect on their contributions.¹ The crossing of the *Mayflower* in 1620 has been enshrined as a founding myth of American history, one that is eloquently questioned through the revival of seventeenth-century British and Indigenous artisanal practices by a range of contemporary artists. Weaving, firing, and carving are used to reshape the triumphalist language that has typically been used to talk about this historical moment of encounter. In other ways, the artistic techniques shown here raise questions about the tensions between craft and the decorative arts. As the transatlantic context explored in *Another Crossing* makes clear, the British decorative arts were shaped in untold ways by Indigenous practices and a history of colonization and appropriation, but also by the possibilities of bartering, exchange, and mutuality.



Figure 1.

Installation view showing works by Allison Smith, Katie Schwab, and Jonathan James-Perry (Aquinnah Wampanoag), *Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage*, Fuller Craft Museum, 2 May-20 September 2020. Digital image courtesy of the artists and Fuller Craft Museum.



Figure 2.

Installation view showing works by Michelle Erickson, Katie Schwab, Annette Bellamy, and Jasleen Kaur, *Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage*, Fuller Craft Museum, 2 May-20 September 2020. Digital image courtesy of the artists and Fuller Craft Museum.



Figure 3.

Annette Bellamy, Lena Amason-Berns, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Tommy Joseph, Da-Ka-Xeen Mehner, Rebecca Lyon, and Heidi Senungetuk, *Wood, Water, and Distance*, 2020, various materials, various dimensions. Digital image courtesy of the artists and Fuller Craft Museum.



Figure 4.

Jasleen Kaur, *Re-rites*, 2020, charred oak wood and electronics, various dimensions, fabricated in collaboration with Eleanor Lakelin. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Fuller Craft Museum.



Figure 5. Jeffrey Gibson (Mississippi Choctaw-Cherokee), Masks 1, 2, and 3, from *The Past As Future Artifact*, various materials, various dimensions. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Fuller Craft Museum.



Figure 6.

Sonya Clark, *Power Tools: press / text / land / language* (detail), 2020, hot metal type, linen paper, earth from Plymouth, MA, various dimensions, fabricated in collaboration with Ed Rayher of Swamp Press, Mary Hark of HARK! Handmade Paper, and Bo Peng. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Fuller Craft Museum.

Response by

Glenn Adamson, Independent curator and author based in New York

Another Crossing

On 6 September 1620, the *Mayflower* embarked from Plymouth, England, with a crew and 102 passengers. Many were English non-conformists, leaving their homelands for fear that their separatist religious communities would otherwise perish. These self-described “saints” sighted land some two months later. They established a settlement, naming it after the last place they had seen in Europe. Within a year, half were dead. The survivors were among the first to build a permanent home in what seemed to them a “new world”.

But of course, this site was already long inhabited. The Wampanoag people lived in the region, which to them was Patuxet. Many stories have been handed down about this population and its interactions with European settlers—some about mutual reliance, some about conflict. The long-term consequences, however, are not in debate: for the settlers, increasing political dominance; for the Indigenous population, widespread disease, death, and displacement.

The implications of the *Mayflower* crossing are so far-reaching that they are difficult to comprehend in retrospect. From one point of view, by far the dominant one in American culture, the voyage is a national origin story. For Indigenous peoples, it is just one event within a long and tragic history, its anniversary an occasion for mourning. There is common ground here in the very act of remembrance. But, in 2020, four hundred years after the *Mayflower* set sail, the distance between those two perspectives could feel vast indeed, more difficult to navigate than an ocean in a wooden boat.

Another Crossing charts a course through this abyss nonetheless. The project is itself a transatlantic collaboration—organized by the Plymouth College of Art and The Box in Plymouth, England, and Fuller Craft Museum, which is in Plymouth County, Massachusetts. During the exhibition’s development, the artists traveled to both sites to better understand the historical context by visiting key locations, and meeting historians, academics, and museum curators. The premise of the show is this: each participating artist has created work in response to the *Mayflower’s* anniversary, utilizing only technology that existed in 1620. Every work was realized with tools, materials, and processes that were available in the early seventeenth century.

There were several reasons behind this rather demanding parameter. First, it highlights the sophisticated practices that were in use in 1620, like beadwork, joinery, metalsmithing, leatherwork, and pottery. In some ways, people then possessed a greater material intelligence than we tend to today. This is particularly true of Wampanoag and other Native peoples, who possessed complex arrays of artisanal knowledge and artistic *métiers*. The colonists, too, embarked on their voyage with an extensive range of skills in hand, among them textile crafts and printing.

There is also a more metaphorical intention behind the exhibition's craft-based time travel: another kind of crossing. Each work in the exhibition simultaneously inhabits two moments—1620 and 2020—or at any rate, vibrates resonantly across that period of four centuries. One cannot fully inhabit a prior moment in time, any more than one can assume another person's perspective. Each artist had to make their own separate peace with this fact, deciding where and how to draw the boundaries around their project's period-specificity.

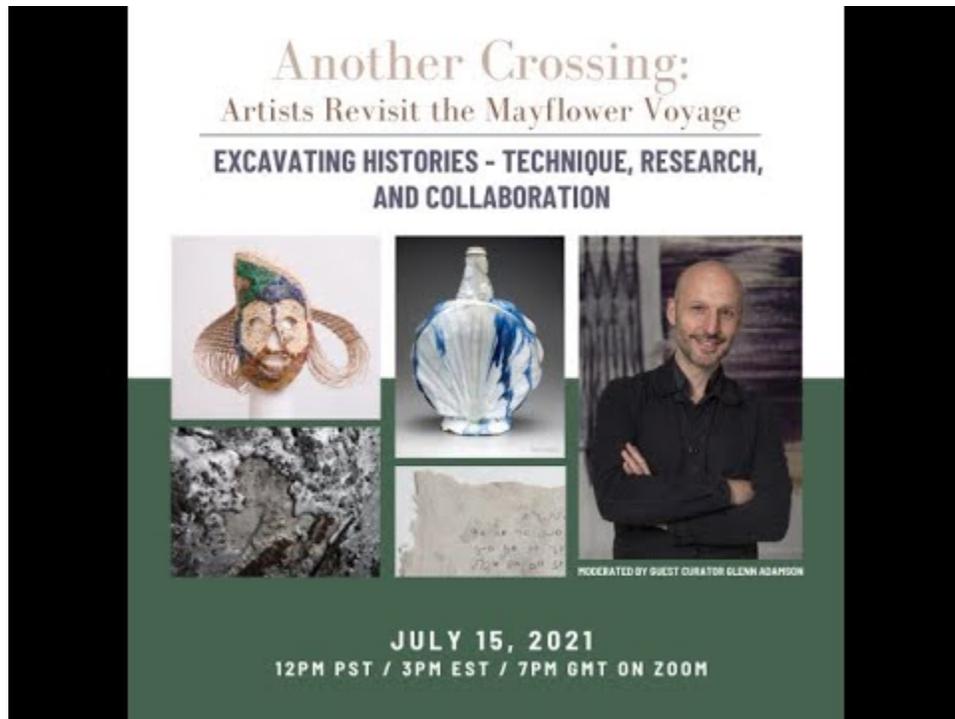
In the exhibition, visitors encounter ten artists, joined together in a collective journey of discovery. The works that they have created are by turns introspective, outraged, sad, funny, surprising, and humane. Each offers its own complex commentary, a bit of wisdom that may help us traverse this anniversary year.

It has been four hundred years since the *Mayflower* sailed across the Atlantic, to an uncertain future; four hundred years since the Wampanoag witnessed strangers arriving on shore. We are just beginning to understand what happened next. Hopefully, this project makes a modest contribution in that direction.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 7.

Virtual tour, Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage, Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, MA, from 2 May to 20 September 2020. Digital image courtesy of Dave Clough Photography.



[Watch Video](#)

Figure 8.

Glenn Adamson, Sonya Clark, Jeffrey Gibson, Elizabeth James-Perry, Jasleen Kaur, Christien Meindertsma, and Allison Smith, *Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage. Excavating Histories—Technique, Research, and Collaboration*, Fuller Craft Museum, première on 15 July 2021, live event recording, 1:43:01. Digital image courtesy of Fuller Craft Museum (all rights reserved).

Footnotes

- 1 *Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage* was exhibited at Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, MA, from 2 May to 20 September 2020. The show will be exhibited in Plymouth, England in spring 2022.



In Sparkling Company:
Presenting Eighteenth-Century
Britain in Western New York State

Christopher Maxwell

Authors

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Presenting Eighteenth-Century
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In May 2021, The Corning Museum of Glass, located in Western New York State, opened the exhibition *In Sparkling Company: Glass and the Costs of Social Life in Britain during the 1700s*. Its aim, through a lens of glass, was to introduce visitors to what it meant to be “modern” during the eighteenth century, and the social and economic costs of modernity both for the consumers and producers of luxury during this period. This feature considers the role of gallery design in engaging visitors with displays of often small-scale, colourless glass, while simultaneously supporting the exhibition’s narratives of technical innovation, design, and elite sociability against a backdrop of colonial expansion and exploitation.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

The Corning Museum of Glass, *In Sparkling Company* Exhibition at The Corning Museum of Glass, 2021, 1:30. Digital file courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY.

Introduction

The eighteenth century was a golden age for the production of English and Irish lead glass (also known as “lead crystal”). The formula was perfected in the closing decades of the seventeenth century and coincided with Britain’s political transformation into a constitutional monarchy with parliamentary representation, the diversification of its economy through international trade, imperial expansion and manufacturing, and the attendant flourishing of British cultural life within country “power houses”, the metropole, and expanding colonial centres. Glass became embedded within the rituals of sociability that facilitated and defined Britain’s political, economic and cultural identities, and the advancement of British colonial interests. The production of blown lead glass was accompanied by parallel developments in plate glass and lens technologies, and this modern, distinctively “English” (since Irish productions were heavily restricted until the 1780s) product enjoyed international markets and resonated deeply with the British cultural ideals of politeness. In many ways, glass became a metaphor for British modernity.



Figure 2.

Possibly the glasshouse of the Duke of Buckingham, London, England, thinly blown Venetian-style vessels, 1670-1680. Collection of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (CMoG 2014.2.1-4). Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 3.

Lead glass drinking vessels, England, circa 1700-1740. Collection of The Corning Museum of Glass (CMoG 54.2.9; 79.2.118, bequest of Jerome Strauss; 63.2.2; 79.2.122, bequest of Jerome Strauss; 55.2.3; 2005.2.8; 79.2.77, gift of The Ruth Bryan Strauss Memorial Foundation; 79.2.129, gift of The Ruth Bryan Strauss Memorial Foundation). Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Located in Western New York State, the museum holds the world's most comprehensive collection of glass, which spans antiquity to contemporary art and design. Eighteenth-century English and Irish lead glass has been part of the museum's collection since it was founded by Corning Glass Works (now Corning Incorporated) in 1951. Tableware, mainly in the form of drinking vessels, constitutes the main part of the collection in this area. Alongside items from the museum's holdings, the exhibition brought in objects from ten loaning institutions (five in the U.S. and five in the U.K.) to present a more comprehensive, critical, and trenchant survey of the many innovations, functions, and meanings of glass, beyond its utility on the dining table, in Britain during this transformative century.

Audiences at Corning

Short-term special exhibitions such as this present opportunities for museum curators to consider ways in which design might amplify and support specific themes around a chosen subject. Under such circumstances, design can be more creative, experimental, and responsive to the moment than more conventional "permanent" displays. In normal years, Corning receives just under half a million visitors a year, making it one of New York State's most

popular attractions outside Manhattan. The term “attraction” is an important one, for visitors to the museum campus are presented with numerous opportunities to engage with glass beyond the traditional collections-focused museum experience. These include the 100,000 sq. ft., light-filled Contemporary Art and Design Wing; the interactive Science and Innovation Center; the Hot Glass Show amphitheatre, along with several other glassworking demonstration areas; and the Studio, a world-renowned glassmaking school where visitors can participate in their own glassmaking experiences.

Visitor interest in glassmaking has grown significantly in recent years thanks to the success of the Netflix series *Blown Away*, which many visitors cite as a primary reason for their trip. Consequently, families and regional tourists comprise a significant portion of the museum’s visitors, further drawn to the city by household glass brand names such as Pyrex, Corelle, and Steuben, all of which were (or remain) Corning products. The great opportunity (and challenge) for the museum, its curators, and educators, is to harness this enthusiasm and introduce visitors to the world’s most comprehensive collection of glass, and its many histories, through accessible and informative displays and exhibitions.

Modernity as a Curatorial and Design Theme

In considering the design brief for *In Sparkling Company*, the exhibition’s core team (comprising of the Curator, the Director of Collections, the Director of Education and Interpretation, the Exhibitions Manager, and the Curatorial Assistant) attempted to identify an essence of eighteenth-century Britain that would resonate with twenty-first-century visitors in Western New York State. While theatre, novelty, and ephemeral entertainment presented appealing opportunities for immediate visual delight, well suited to a temporary exhibition, we decided that this aspect of elite British culture would detract from the more serious narratives of the exhibition and potentially obscure the objects themselves. The concept of “modernity” emerged as the driving motif; the self-conscious awareness of which was a key tenet of eighteenth-century cultural life. Throughout the century, the British glass industry and its innovative products grew to become the most successful in Europe. The material qualities of lead crystal, its heft, clarity, smoothness, and polish, perfectly embodied prevailing British cultural ideals of politeness. In short, British glass was a unique and modern material like no other. Consequently, we determined that a recognizably “modern”, or rather a “contemporary”, flavour to the exhibition design would not only support the relevance of the interpretive threads, such as colonization, enslavement, exploitation, and political division, but would also preserve the visual

primacy of the glass itself, allowing the arrangement and positioning of the objects to carry the tension between the beauty of the displays and the subtle and critical turns of the exhibition narratives.

Architectural Design

Selldorf Architects were appointed designers in the summer of 2019. *In Sparkling Company* was their third project in the museum's special exhibition space, located within a biomorphic modernist wing of the campus, designed by Gunnar Birkerts in 1976. The firm's familiarity with the comparatively small but complex exhibition space and, crucially, the challenges of displaying glass were invaluable. We were also impressed by the firm's work at the Clark Institute in 2014, in which the European applied arts were redisplayed against backdrops of subtle, yet effective (and somewhat unexpected), wall colours and simplified architectural details which gives precedence to the objects while offering a gently evocative environment in which to view them.

A highlight of the exhibition, and a major sightline from the entrance, were the surviving architectural panels from the glass drawing room designed by Robert Adam for Northumberland House, London, in the early 1770s, on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum and accompanied by the original design drawings, on loan from Sir John Soane's Museum.



Figure 4.

Installation view showing wall panels from the glass drawing room at Northumberland House, on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).



Figure 5.

Installation view showing Robert Adam's designs for the glass drawing room at Northumberland House, on loan from Sir John Soane's Museum, London (SM adam, volume 39/7, 39/5, 39/6), In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

It was vital that the exhibition design did not compete with, or obscure, these remarkable architectural elements (the loan of which had taken five years of preparation), but instead invited an effortless visual connection between the drawings, the panels, and a groundbreaking virtual reality reconstruction of this now-lost interior.

Inspired by the eight cast plate looking glasses ordered from Saint-Gobain, which Adam had originally set between the reverse-spangled panels of red glass which clad the room between dado and architrave, Selldorf proposed a run of mirrored wall cases with cut-out windows for presenting smaller objects. This reference to the idiom of the baroque hall of mirrors referenced the transformative effects of improvements in plate glass manufacture during the long eighteenth century, and its impact on architecture and interiors. At a time when a middling family in England had an annual income of around £200, the Duke of Northumberland spent £1,465 on the room's eight French cast looking glasses, paying a further 75 percent in import tax.



Figure 6.

Installation view showing mirrored walls, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

Installation view of the main room, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).



Figure 8.

Thomas Gainsborough, Mary Little, later Lady Carr, circa 1765, oil on canvas, 127 × 101.6 cm. Collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Bequest of Mrs. Harry Payne Bingham (B1987.6.2). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art (public domain).



Figure 9.

Pompeo Batoni, James Caulfield, Fourth Viscount Charlemont (Later first Earl of Charlemont), circa 1753-1756, oil on canvas, 97.8 × 73.7 cm. Collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1974.3.26). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art (public domain).

Colour

Complementing the pinkish-red and green of the reverse-spangled glass panels designed by Robert Adam for the drawing room at Northumberland House, and harmonizing with the colour of Mary Little's gown in the portrait by Thomas Gainsborough on loan from the Yale Center for British Art, the selected paint colours, donated by Farrow & Ball, were Calamine and Chappell Green. These colours were also an homage to an eye-catching combination that found favour in the mid-eighteenth century. They can be seen on Sèvres porcelain of the late 1750s and also in the portrait *James Caulfield, 4th Viscount Charlemont* by Pompeo Batoni painted between 1753 and 1756. Batoni was the leading portrait painter of British Grand Tourists in

Rome, and this striking colour combination was an example of “macaroni” taste, a concept also addressed within the exhibition through the interpretation of a glass-embroidered court coat and two small swords with paste-encrusted hilts.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 10.

Animated projection, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Based on Johann Sebastian Müller (after Canaletto), *A View of the Temple of Comus &c in Vauxhall Gardens*, 1751, coloured engraving. Digital image courtesy of David Coke and The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Glass and Sociability at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens

Using design to evoke an impression of eighteenth-century British sociability was another key aim. As visitors approached the exhibition entrance, they first arrived in an immersive “bower” evoking Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. Renowned during the eighteenth century as a place of fashionable resort on the south side of the Thames, all those who could afford the modest entrance fee (one to two shillings, compared to the five shilling weekly salary of a glass worker) could enjoy art installations, architectural novelties, music, fireworks, outdoor dining, celebrity spotting, and sexual encounters—in short, social activities that remain recognizable in the twenty-first century. Vauxhall was well known for spectacle and dazzling illuminations, which often included the use of ephemeral architecture and “transparencies”. Transparencies were scenes painted onto a translucent substrate—most commonly large sheets of canvas—and lit from behind. As a nod to this, and other amusing spectacles such as magic lanterns, a print of Vauxhall, dated 1749, from the collection of David Coke was projected against a curved wall and slightly animated with gently swaying branches, wafting fans, and inclining heads, with birdsong to enliven the space during quiet moments.



Figure 11.

Installation view of title wall with neon sign by FagSigns, Brooklyn, NY, and window view to dessert table, In *Sparkling Company*, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

An adjacent wall was filled with a full-size graphic of a print after Thomas Rowlandson's *Vaux-Hall* (circa 1784) including a depiction of a supper box, which was cut out and fitted with a window to reveal the exhibition space beyond and a "dessert table" laden with confectionery based on eighteenth-century recipes and made from glass by the museum's Hot Glass team (sugar and glass actually behave similarly in their molten states). Above this hung a ten-arm chandelier fitted with candles. iPads inside the exhibition guided visitors through the various forms of dessert tableware and identified the sweetmeats with accompanying recipes from Hannah Glasse's guide, *The Complete Confectioner: Or the Whole Art of Confectionary Made Plain and Easy* (circa 1760).



Figure 12.

Glass sweetmeats, created by the Hot Glass Team at The Corning Museum of Glass. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY.

Vauxhall Gardens also happened to be located in proximity to some of London's glasshouses, which supplied it with the necessary stream of tableware, looking glasses and—most famous of all—lanterns. Thousands of glass lanterns were strung along the walkways of the gardens. Fuelled by whale oil, their wicks were connected to one another by a single fuse dipped in flammable saltpetre, which was a key ingredient to both gunpowder and lead glass, as well as other industrial processes. At a certain point in the evening, a signal was given and attendants emerged with lit tapers, which, upon contact with the fuse, ignited all the lanterns within just a couple of minutes. This daily feature remained a highlight of Vauxhall well into the nineteenth century, and was remarked upon by Londoners and tourists alike, including Benjamin Franklin.

Vauxhall's famous glass lanterns are clearly visible in Rowlandson's print, above the heads of the celebrity revellers gathered to hear a performance by the singer Frederika Weichsel. Against this, the exhibition title was fixed as a hot pink neon sign, made for the exhibition and donated by FagSigns, a Brooklyn studio founded by glass artist Matthew Day Perez. Neon is currently enjoying a surge of interest among glassmakers and collectors and it seemed a fitting twenty-first century equivalent to Vauxhall's lanterns, conjuring a sense of "modern" urban sociability, visual delight, creativity, and perhaps still a hint of seediness. In hot pink, it was also fittingly camp and perfectly aligns with Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (1964), which locate the origins of camp taste in the eighteenth century, with its love of surface effect, instant visual gratification, innovation, and effortlessly concealed self-consciousness.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 13.

The Corning Museum of Glass, Neon Collaboration with FagSigns and Corning Museum of Glass, In Sparkling Company, 2021, 4:50. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Reflections in the Soundscape

Visits to Corning are markedly seasonal, with peak attendance coinciding with the summer months and the autumn colours. While the galleries are often filled to capacity during this time, winter visitors have a very different experience, and it was important that the exhibition design helped suggest the idea of glass and sociability even when there were few visitors to fill the space. Consequently, a soundscape was developed by Undertone Music. Zoned speakers directed specially composed music in three different areas of the gallery. The composition featured the flute, oboe, clarinet, and banjo. It was important to include an original composition in support of the theme of innovation and modernity by avoiding the historicizing, and therefore potentially distancing, effects of a familiar eighteenth-century composition. In so doing, Tom Hambleton of Undertone Music sought also to incorporate the spirit of the exhibition and its glassy content. The result was typical of the eighteenth-century British style of composition. Its construction of crossing and weaving melodic lines gave the music a complex yet refined and essentially unadorned quality.

In the words of Hambleton:

It does not indulge in the lavish ornamentation or even 'balletic' dalliances of the eighteenth-century French style. It eschews the operatic sweep of the eighteenth-century Italian style. Nor does it veer toward the Empfindsamkeit (sentimental style) of many of the German composers who were trying to express 'true' human feelings as opposed to older Baroque Affektenlehre (doctrine of affections). Therefore, in keeping with the British style, rather than find 'sparkle' in trills and other ornaments, I found 'reflections' in melodies that are repeated or 'reflected' back as a melody or theme repeated by a different instrument than that which first stated the theme. It is a reflection in structure rather than one of gimmicks.

[mul]

Glass, Sugar, and Slavery

By the dessert table, the musical composition was overlaid with a “walla”—soundbites mixed to mimic the background murmur of a crowd—which we recorded with Madeleine Pelling, an art historian at the University of York and Caroline McCaffrey-Howarth, a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, reading and discussing extracts from works by eighteenth-century diarists, writers, and etiquette manuals. It is barely decipherable when the gallery is full, but throughout the exhibition, wherever possible, we wanted to introduce likenesses, names, and words of real people to encourage more personal connections with visitors.

The instruments heard in the audioscape varied slightly across the three “zones” of the gallery and here, by the dessert table, the banjo could be heard in Undertone’s composition. Suggested by Cheyney McKnight, founder and director of Not Your Momma’s History, and an interpretive consultant to the exhibition, we included a banjo because the consumption of confectionery, and its impact on the design of glass tableware and social life, was directly dependent upon the exploitation of enslaved labour in Britain’s most profitable North American colonies: those of the West Indies, and Jamaica in particular. As James Delbourgo has observed, it was in Jamaica that Hans Sloane acquired a banjo, which was then illustrated in his *Natural History* (1707), as well as a sample of African music complete with pidgin/Creole lyrics. The influence of Africa on European culture extended beyond the luxury products of enslaved labour, as Amelia Rauser has written, and permeated other aspects of fashionable life, such as costume, dress and the emergence of Creole culture more broadly.

Although the objects on display in the exhibition largely related to the lives of an elite that comprised little more than five percent of the population, the economies of slavery that underpinned the diversification of the British economy during the eighteenth century were recognized throughout, and addressed through objects such as abolitionist medallions, engraved goblets, trade beads, an illustrated log book kept by the captain of a slave ship, and a “deed of sale” for a sixteen-year-old enslaved girl named Geney. While the tableware, filled with glass sweetmeats, and presided over by the portrait of Mary Little, offered a delightful vignette, the banjo, the spectral shadow of the chandelier, the proximity of the deed of sale and a goblet enamelled by William Beilby with a toast to “The Success of the African Trade of Whitehaven”, presented visitors with the opportunity to reconsider the *mise en scène* in a more critical way.



Figure 14.

Installation view of dessert table, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021-2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Trade with Asia

Trade with Asia through the British East India Company played a significant part in the nation's economy and international presence. Two displays considered the connections between glass and British trade with China. The emergence of the Chinese taste, later known as chinoiserie, was represented by a large lead glass goblet engraved with a landscape and figures in the Chinese taste, after an engraving by Johann Nilson. Recent revisionist theories of chinoiserie challenge the notion that the Chinese taste was purely decorative, derivative, and fanciful, and propose that, in fact, design references to China supplied British consumers with a lexicon of motifs by which to project alternative notions of respectability, besides those associated with Europe's classical past in ancient Greece and Rome.¹ This

sentiment was expressed by the botanist and President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks, who in 1792 observed: “The great inventions which actually [sic] serve as the basis of our present state of Civilization were all known to the Chinese long before they were either reinvented or stolen from them by us”.

It has been well established that the East India trade had an enormous impact on British material culture of the period. Asian goods were so eagerly received by British markets that they, or imitations of them, became naturalized (tea, porcelain, silk, lacquer). To reflect this, the engraved decoration on the museum’s goblet was photographed, enlarged, and applied to the plinths supporting a toilette set and the dessert tableware to suggest a damask pattern. These graphics also amplify the centrality of glass to the exhibition’s narratives, and especially celebrate the particular compositional qualities of lead glass that allowed it to withstand complex engraving and therefore become so responsive to the cultural moment.

Experiencing Reverse Painted Pictures

The exhibition also featured two Chinese reverse-painted pictures. The technique of painting behind glass was introduced to China by European merchants in the late seventeenth century and, by the eighteenth century, Chinese artists skilled in the graphic arts of ink painting and painting on porcelain had become so accomplished at reverse painting on imported European plate glass that their products were appreciated back in Europe.² The success of the painting depended as much upon the quality of plate glass as it did on the skill of the artist, and the remarkable journey of the glass from Europe to China, and back again, entailed significant financial investment and personal networks. The novel, experiential qualities of reverse-painted pictures, especially when applied to looking glasses, are perhaps difficult to appreciate in the twenty-first century but the colourful, glimmering, reflective, and almost interactive surfaces would have allowed viewers to imagine themselves as part of the painted scenes. As Lihong Liu has written, the Chinese seem also to have appreciated the psychological and aesthetic potential of reflective glass surfaces.³ Viewing such scenes through a plate glass vitrine detaches present-day viewers from this experience, but it was revived in the exhibition by the addition of a graphic frame around the case, emulating that of the reverse-painted looking glass inside, so visitors might appreciate how they were actively looking into a scene beyond the plane of vitrine glass or, conversely, imagining themselves inside such a scene looking out.



Figure 15.

Toilette service with the arms of William Bentinck, 1st Earl of Portland (1649–1790), on loan from a Private Collection, installed in *In Sparkling Company*, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Reflections

The object checklist for *In Sparkling Company* was finalized by summer 2019 and the label text had been signed off by March 2020, in preparation for a May opening. Then came the pandemic, the closure of the museum, the murder of George Floyd, and the powerful messaging of the Black Lives Matter movement. Around the globe, governments, museums, and the public engaged in heated discussion about colonial pasts, histories of enslavement, and their enduringly pernicious legacies. In the world of entertainment, *Bridgerton* drew large audiences as the latest popular point of reference for the long eighteenth century. In short, the major themes of the exhibition, namely elite sociability and histories of imperial expansion, suddenly became prominent and rapidly moving topics of mainstream discussion.

The question was posed: did the exhibition still strike the right note? Remarkably, despite the closure of lending institutions during the first year of the pandemic, the object list remained unaffected, with only one exception: a glazed Bow porcelain figure representing Africa, probably intended for display on a dessert table, which we had planned to use as the “opening object” at the start of the exhibition. Its absence allowed us to re-centre the story of lead glass as a modern British technical innovation. Whether this

ultimately made the narratives of empire and exploitation more subtle, or contributed to the unexpected tension of their emergence elsewhere in the exhibition, is still being assessed through formal visitor evaluation.

Our intention for the exhibition design was that it should play a subtle yet supportive role in generating an atmosphere that would connect visitors to the objects on display, and the contexts in which they were produced and consumed. In avoiding any attempt to historicize the gallery space, our aim was to support the contemporary relevance of the narratives, while enhancing intellectual and physical accessibility, and evoking such concepts and tensions that, for various reasons, could not be represented by objects or simply defied effective written description. Far from transporting visitors back in time, we hope to have brought attention to the legacies of this period in the twenty-first century, and drawn attention to a remarkable material that is all too often overlooked in studies of eighteenth-century culture.

Glass and the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World

On 8 and 9 October 2021, the museum presented its 59th Annual Seminar on Glass, the first ever in a virtual format. The first day was titled “Staging the 18th Century” and featured three panel discussions, in which museum staff and external collaborators considered approaches to the interpretation, design, and digital components of the exhibition.

The second day was titled “Glass and the 18th-century Atlantic World”. A series of pre-recorded papers, made available a week before the event, informed three live panel discussions relating to the many contexts, meanings, functions, and innovations of glass within cultures and communities throughout the Atlantic world during the long eighteenth century (about 1680–1820). The day ended with a state-of-the-field discussion considering the achievements of, and possibilities for, glass scholarship and eighteenth-century studies.

Recordings for all sessions and links to the pre-recorded papers can be found here: <https://whatson.cmog.org/events-programs/lectures-seminars/annual-seminar-glass>.



Figure 16. Installation view showing Chinoiserie vases, sugar caster, wine glasses, and a reverse-painted looking glass, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Footnotes

- 1 See David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2010) and Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2017).
- 2 For a recent study on Chinese reverse-painted pictures see Thierry Audric, *Chinese Reverse Glass Painting, 1720–1820* (Peter Lang, 2020).
- 3 Lihong Liu, "Vitreous Views: Materiality and Mediality of Glass in Qing China through a Transcultural Prism", *Getty Research Journal*, no. 8 (2016): 17–38.

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