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Redefining the British Decorative Arts

Edited by Iris Moon



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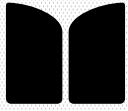
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Iris Moon, "Unhomely: Redefining the British Decorative Arts", *British Art Studies*, Issue 21, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-21/imoon>



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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