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Getty Research Journal

The *Getty Research Journal* presents peer-reviewed articles on the visual arts of all cultures, regions, and time periods. Topics often relate to Getty collections, initiatives, and broad research interests. The journal welcomes a diversity of perspectives and methodological approaches, and seeks to include work that expands narratives on global culture.

Information for Scholars

The manuscripts in this issue were peer reviewed through a double-masked process in which the identities of the authors and reviewers remained anonymous. "The Getty Peacock Fresco: Unraveling Its History Through Technical and Historical Investigations" by Kenneth Lapatin, Marie Svoboda, Sierra Schiano, Monica Ganio, and Karen Trentelman, and "Becoming Simone Forti: California, 1970–72" by Megan Metcalf received single-anonymous review. "'This Show Is So Metal': The Curators of *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light* in Conversation" received editorial review.

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Cover

David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos* (Tropical America oppressed and destroyed by imperialism) (detail), 1932, fresco applied with Arium on cement, 5.5 × 25 m. Los Angeles, Italian Hall, El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument. Art © 2026 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City. Photograph courtesy Thomas Hartman, IQ Magic; photo composite: James Jackson.

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Editor's Note

Doris Chon

The cover image of issue twenty-one of the *Getty Research Journal* features a detail of a Los Angeles landmark from 1932: *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos* (Tropical America oppressed and destroyed by imperialism) by Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974). Painted on the second-story exterior wall of the Italian Hall along Olvera Street in El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument, *América tropical*, at eighty feet wide by eighteen feet tall, remains the artist and activist's only extant in-situ mural in the United States. Against the backdrop of Mesoamerican architectural ruins and sculptures overtaken by rapacious vines and roots, the crucified Indigenous peasant emerges from the painting's center. An imperial eagle, head in profile and wings outspread, perches menacingly at the head of the cross above the laborer's slumped body. From the distant top-right corner of the composition, two crouching sharpshooters take aim at the enduring symbol of American colonial dominance.

Siqueiros's audacious imagery is a far cry from the idyllic tropical landscape he was commissioned to depict. The intended mural was but one part of a broader civic campaign of Mission Revivalism that sought to sanitize the Spanish colonial past and gloss over the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican Americans from Los Angeles and other US cities in the early 1930s. Refusing city officials' persistent disavowals of colonial genocide and ethnic cleansing, Siqueiros's mural puts the violence front and center. It came as no surprise that the work was censored within months of its completion in October 1932—city authorities wasted no time whitewashing *América tropical* in phases. As author in this issue Jonah Gray elaborates in his essay "Worldwide Emotion: Interhemispheric Dialogue in David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos*," the two revolutionary riflemen in the far corner were the first to be withdrawn from view. For despite their seemingly marginal location and their diminished shock value compared to the crucified central figure, Siqueiros positioned the sharpshooters strategically. As the only figures visible from street level, the armed revolutionaries personified the potential to inspire, empower, and, ultimately, recruit the laboring class to the ongoing cause of resistance.

By 1942 the mural was painted over in its entirety and largely forgotten until the 1960s, when the emerging Chicano art movement reignited interest in the buried histories of Mexican immigrants. Pioneering historian of Latin American art Shifra Goldman was pivotal to the literal uncovering of *América tropical*. After learning of the mural's existence directly from Siqueiros in Mexico City in 1968, she joined countless Chicano artists and activists to lead a campaign for its preservation. A partnership between the City of Los Angeles and the nascent Getty Conservation Institute (founded in 1985) was established in 1988 to conserve and protect the mural, beginning what would be a twenty-four-year collaboration. During this period, *América tropical* was studied and digitally documented, a meticulous condition survey was conducted, and the mural was stabilized. In 2012, eighty years after it was first shown, *América tropical* was finally reopened to the public with a protective canopy shelter, a viewing platform, and an interpretative center.

Siqueiros's mural is no less resonant in 2026, when the current US presidential administration continues to enact and enforce new campaigns of ethnic cleansing and xenophobic policy across this stolen land and support similar campaigns by other governments abroad. We witness the latest catastrophic episodes of scapegoating by a ruling party as the 250th anniversary of this nation approaches with much fanfare. Collective grief and despair rise daily as heart-wrenching news from around the globe accumulates. But in these dark times we develop resilience. Renewing our commitments to care for our friends, neighbors, and strangers, and embracing kinship across differences, we strengthen our local communities to overcome together. As our predecessors have done many times before us, we build strategic resistance, remembering that it is, as Siqueiros's Los Angeles mural reminds us, a collective effort.

We offer this latest issue of the journal to our readers as an invitation to practice slowing down and remaining open. We hope that the *Getty Research Journal* can be a shared platform for reading closely and listening generously, connecting voices and narratives that challenge us to consider other values and hold opposing ideas together in thought. Through close attention to the works of visual culture, varieties of intellectual labor, and reflections of cultural workers contained in the pages that follow, we hope that our readers might be nourished and inspired in some small way for the ongoing struggle toward social justice, equity, and mutual care.

Issue twenty-one contains seven full-length research articles, two shorter notices, and the second installment of the journal's new Conversation series. In "The Getty Peacock Fresco: Unraveling Its History Through Technical and Historical Investigations" by Kenneth Lapatin, Maria Svoboda, Sierra Schiano, Monica Ganio, and Karen Trentelman, a curator, a conservator, a former Getty Graduate Intern, and two conservation scientists join forces to uncover the unlikely provenance of the Getty Villa's iconic peacock fresco fragment. In "Adding Works to Words: A Letter about Qing Court Painter Jean-Denis Attiret, S.J. (1702–68) in the Getty Research Institute," Kristina Kleutghen addresses the transcultural life and work of French Jesuit artist Jean-Denis Attiret, court painter to the Qianlong emperor in China. Patricia J. Yu considers the

extended afterlives of bronze sculptures from the looted Qing-era Yuanmingyuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness) in her essay “Fragmented Bodies, Substitute Bodies: Zodiac Heads from the Garden of Perfect Brightness and the Translation of Cultural Heritage.” In “The Global System of the Arts at the End of the Nineteenth Century and the Commissioning of a Sepulchral Monument in Santiago, Chile,” Fernando Guzmán offers insight into the complex negotiations at play in the process of commemorating the late archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso (1804–78) in sculptural form. Roger Fayet’s essay “Flaunting the Unfinished: *Non finito* as a Classicist Gesture in the Work of Ferdinand Hodler” analyzes the traces of technical tools in the work of the famed Swiss painter of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Lexington Davis’s interpretation of a series of Los Angeles performances by a feminist art collective in “Cleaning Up in Public: Mother Art’s Domestic Labor Performances, 1973–78” highlights the historically gendered, classed, and raced dimensions of socially reproductive work. With “Primed to See: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe’s *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*,” Emilie Chesnutt Boone advances a timely rewriting of photographic history and its canon. Richly contextualized by Boone, Moutoussamy-Ashe’s pioneering text on Black women photographers is “foundational—not only historically significant but still impactful today, inspiring scholarship and spurring inquiry,” in the words of *Getty Research Journal* Editorial Advisory Committee member Mazie Harris, who recently organized the J. Paul Getty Museum iteration of *Photography and the Black Arts Movement, 1955–1985*, an exhibition originating at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, where it was curated by Philip Brookman and Deborah Willis. Writing in the first person in “Becoming Simone Forti: California, 1970–72,” Megan Metcalf pursues the material traces of performance in the archive of multidisciplinary artist Simone Forti. In her diaristic text, Metcalf reflects on the unique affordances and losses inherent to both dance and archival research as embodied practices. Finally, in this issue’s Conversation, we listen in as Kristen Collins, Glenn Phillips, and Nancy K. Turner, the cocurators of *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, take us behind the scenes of making an ambitious exhibition at the Getty Museum that explored how Muslim, Christian, and Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages and contemporary artists of our time make sense of light, vision, and astronomy. *Lumen* was just one of about seventy exhibitions across Southern California that formed the third edition of the region-wide PST ART, whose 2024–25 theme was Art and Science Collide.

To promote transparency and reflect evolving open practices in the field, a dedicated peer-review drop-down field accompanies each article in the online issue to indicate the type of review that each manuscript received. Double-anonymous peer review, in which an author’s identity is masked from the reviewer and vice versa, has long been the standard in academic publishing due to the belief that it reduces bias. Following from this, many tenure-granting institutions still require faculty going up for promotion to publish following this benchmark. As authors and reviewers become more readily identifiable with their subfields of expertise and institutions, the double-anonymous standard has become increasingly challenging to maintain. It is also the

case that more authors today are inclined to write from the vantage point of their own uniquely embodied subjectivity, implicitly or explicitly disclosing their identities in the process. Aspiring to respond nimbly to this changing landscape, the *Getty Research Journal* now facilitates, where relevant, single-anonymous review, in which an author's identity is known by the reviewer, and fully transparent review. Proponents of the latter make the compelling case that removing the proverbial "mask" of anonymity has the potential to reduce even more bias and gatekeeping. Additionally, in exceptional cases where external peer review is not required, an article or conversation will undergo internal editorial review by the journal editors. While double-anonymous review remains our central procedure to support the needs of scholars and their work, we offer this wider range of review types to advance scholarly collaboration and accountability, accommodating those who may prefer to engage in unmasked and possibly longer-term dialogue. We would also like to acknowledge the behind-the-scenes labor of our reviewers, whose contributions made this issue immeasurably stronger. Effective with the preceding issue (number twenty), each research article and shorter notice in the *Getty Research Journal* is evaluated by a minimum of two expert reviewers.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge new and departing members of the journal's Editorial Advisory Committee. In August 2025, we bid farewell to David Saunders, former associate curator of antiquities at the Getty Museum, who, having been part of the journal's previous Editorial Board for more than a decade, was among the journal's longest-serving members. David brought continuity of vision and rigor—and no small measure of wit and levity—to our committee, and David's deep insight and pleasant company will be missed. David has headed back across the Atlantic Ocean to London, where he has assumed the role of curator of the Greek World at the British Museum. Last summer, we welcomed Jens Daehner, curator of antiquities at the Getty Museum, to the journal's Editorial Advisory Committee. Trained in classical archaeology at the Freie Universität in Berlin and a seasoned curator at the Getty Villa Museum, Jens has organized exhibitions on Hellenistic sculpture, Roman imperial portraits and their modern copies, and the role of ancient art in twentieth-century modernism. The Getty Museum's catalog of Roman sculpture and the reinstallation of the Villa's permanent collection galleries are among Jens's current projects. This past spring, we also said goodbye for now to Editorial Advisory Committee member Kristin Juarez, who was previously senior research specialist for the African American Art History Initiative at the Getty Research Institute. A generous collaborator and inspiring visionary, Kristin helped us reimagine and realize the new chapter of the *Getty Research Journal*, which continues to take shape as an institutional endeavor fueled by a small, committed team of individuals. We wish Kristin the best as head of collections at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles and look forward to future collaborations across this complex city that many of us call home.

Los Angeles, June 2026

The Getty Peacock Fresco: Unraveling Its History Through Technical and Historical Investigations

Kenneth Lapatin, Marie Svoboda, Sierra Schiano, Monica
Ganio, and Karen Trentelman

Introduction

On 30 October 1968, at an extraordinary meeting presided over by J. Paul Getty himself, the Trustees of the J. Paul Getty Museum voted unanimously to acquire a mosaic representing the taking of Briseis from Achilles (an episode from the Trojan War described in Homer's *Iliad*) and a "Roman fresco from Pompei depicting a peacock standing on a fence" (fig. 1).¹ The meeting was notable for two reasons: first, it was held via telephone, rather than in person; second, the acquisition of these objects represented Getty's first purchase of antiquities from the London-based dealer Spink & Son, Ltd, after a hiatus of more than a decade.

J. Paul Getty had a long relationship with the seller. He bought many antiquities (and pseudo-antiquities) from them in the late 1940s and early to middle 1950s. Spink & Son also served as the go-between in Getty's purchase of the Lansdowne Herakles in 1951, which he subsequently donated to his museum.² We do not know when Mr. Getty, who had resided at Sutton Place in Surrey since 1960, first saw the fresco, nor what representations about its origin Spink may have made to him. Also unknown is when precisely the fresco arrived in Southern California, and it does not appear to have been displayed publicly until the opening of the Getty Villa on 16 January 1974, when it was likely installed with other frescoed panels in one of the cubicula off the atrium (today designated Galleries 101C-F).³

In preparation for the opening of the new museum (now called the Getty Villa Museum), the fresco was published in the catalog authored by architectural historian Norman Neuerburg and curator of classical art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Cornelius Vermeule, *Catalogue of the Ancient Art in the J. Paul Getty Museum: The Larger Statuary, Wall Paintings and Mosaics* (1973).⁴ There it is described as follows:

Getty Research Journal, no. 21 (2026): 5–24 © J. Paul Getty Trust and Sierra Schiano



FIG. 1. — Wall fragment with a peacock, pigment and plaster, 40 × 24.8 × 3.2 cm. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa collection, 68.AG.13.

108. Fragment of a Wall Painting with a Peacock

About 70 A.D.

40 × 24.8 cm (15 3/4 × 9 3/4 in.)

Provenance: Purchased by the Museum in 1968 (68AG13)

An architectural frame of dark red contains a peacock standing on a dark red “union jack” fence. The bird is blue and black on the breast and neck, while the body and top-knot are red; the beak and legs are brown. A pink shield with red ribbons hangs above from behind the drooping lintel. The piece is composed of several fragments and is set in cement, but there are no areas of repaint. It closely resembles a detail from the upper register of a room in the House of Siricus in Pompeii,ⁱ the only difference being that the fence is in three sections rather than two. In fact, the similarity is close enough to suggest the same painter. The rather odd tonality of the colors, which seem chemically changed, resembles a circumstance occurring in Pompeii and Herculaneum; this also suggests a provenance from the same zone. At any rate the fragment belongs to the so-called fourth style and should date around 70 A.D.

- i. R. A. Briggs, *Pompeian Decorations*, London, 1911, unnumbered plate. No trace of this painting now remains.

As will be seen, the reference to Briggs’s publication is a significant clue in the story of the peacock fresco. Robert Alexander Briggs (1858–1916) was a British architect who traveled to the Continent in the 1880s but did not publish his observations of paintings preserved at Pompeii until 1911: “Owing to the absence of any process that could faithfully reproduce the drawings, no book has hitherto been published, which shows with fidelity the beautiful and gorgeous colouring of the Mural Decorations at Pompeii.”⁵ The aim of his publication was “to illustrate, at a moderate cost, what the Pompeian Decorations are really like.”⁶ His color rendering of the peacock fresco is one of two illustrations in his book of his own watercolor reproductions of wall paintings from the House of Siricus (VII.1.47), which was excavated between 1851 and 1872 (fig. 2). By the time of his publication in 1911, Briggs notes, “The friezes have become very faint in color, having been exposed so long to the air.”⁷ Earlier, nineteenth-century archaeologists had noted, but did not illustrate, frescoes with birds, including a peacock, in two rooms near one of the entrances to the house on the Vicolo del Lupanare.⁸ Autopsy in November 2022 by Kenneth Lapatin confirmed Briggs’s observation that nothing remains of the peacock wall painting at Pompeii.

Peacocks are frequently depicted in ancient Roman art in various guises.⁹ Similarly, Roman lattice (“Union Jack”) balustrades, shields, and suspended fillets are also common in ancient Roman art. However, there are no published parallels for a peacock standing on a Union Jack balustrade other than the now-lost fresco from the

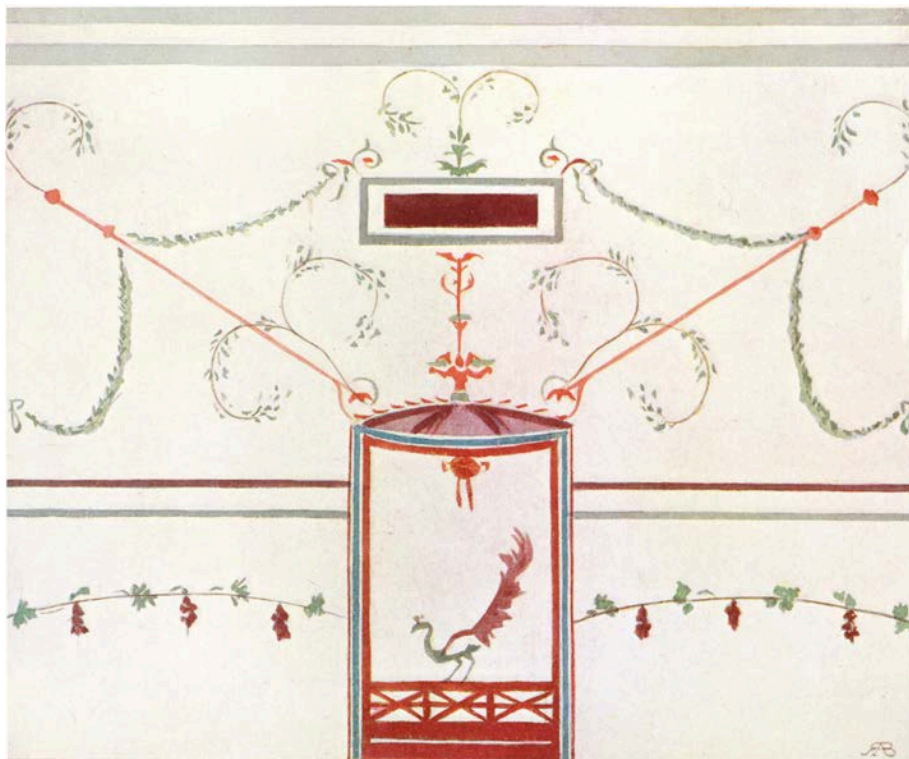


FIG. 2. — Robert Alexander Briggs (British, 1858–1916). Reproduction of a watercolor of a lost ancient Roman fresco from the House of Siricus, Pompeii, from Robert Alexander Briggs, *Pompeian Decorations* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1911), unnumbered plate. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 84-B30541.

House of Siricus.¹⁰ In any case, for more than half a century, the Getty Peacock has gone largely unremarked upon by scholars but has been a perennial favorite of visitors. It has appeared on the cover of a blank, spiral-bound yearly planner retailed at the Museum store in 1981 titled the *J. Paul Getty Museum Appointment Calendar*, on the cover and front jacket flap of Matthew Kneale's book *Rome: A History in Seven Sackings* (2017), in the *L.A. Zoo Review* (1985/1986) and a Latin textbook (2020), and in a few other publications intended for the general public.¹¹ It has also featured prominently on postcards, shopping bags, coasters, refrigerator magnets, pendants, and scarves sold in the Getty Museum Store over many years, and even as a graphic on the exterior of the shop during the course of our research (figs. 3a, 3b).

The closure of the Getty Villa during the pandemic provided an opportunity to survey the collection of frescoes and catalog the use of Egyptian Blue, a synthetically produced pigment commonly found in Roman wall paintings. Egyptian Blue can be easily detected using visible-induced infrared luminescence (VIL) imaging, a method in which the diagnostic response of certain pigments is captured using an infrared camera.¹² Eleven of the twelve wall paintings on display exhibited the characteristic luminescence of Egyptian Blue, but the peacock, with its blue head, neck, and breast,



FIG. 3A. — Merchandise featuring the Getty Peacock (magnet, postcard, appointment calendar, and necklace) for sale at the Getty Museum Store, 1981–2022.



FIG. 3B. — The Getty Museum Store at the Villa featuring window graphics of the Getty Peacock, May 2022.

did not. This surprising result inspired a technical study into the peacock fresco by a multidisciplinary team to characterize the pigments and materials used in the creation of the painting and identify the source of the blue color. This study, employing nondestructive and minimally invasive technical imaging and scientific analyses, coupled with an in-depth historical investigation, has led to a new interpretation and a better understanding of the Getty Peacock.

The Fresco: Pigments and Other Material Considerations

The Getty Peacock is composed of eleven joined fresco fragments set in concrete (see fig. 1). Prior to its acquisition, the perimeter was filled with a commercial spackling compound that was painted black in the 1990s. Today the fresco is enclosed within a rectangular aluminum frame that normalizes its irregular shape. The painting has a very thin, smooth, off-white painted calcitic intonaco layer.¹³ Thus, it is not a true fresco, which would consist of paint applied directly on a smooth, wet lime-plaster surface where the pigments are bound into the wet or setting plaster.

The peacock itself (painted in red, blue, green, and black) as well as the balustrade, shield, ribbons, and border that enclose the scene (painted in shades of red), are superficially applied, indicating a fresco-secco technique in which the pigments are mixed with an organic binder or limewater painted on top of a dried lime-plaster surface. However, for simplicity, throughout this paper, the Getty Peacock will be referred to as either a fresco or wall painting. The execution of the work is very painterly, with visible, deliberate brush strokes, unlike many other Roman frescoes characterized by a sketchier application of paint. Gray surface accretions are visible, mostly along the breaks and at the edges, and the entire front surface is glossy with visible brush strokes suggesting that it has received a modern coating.

The Painted Surface

To identify the materials in the peacock wall painting and help elucidate how and when it was created, a suite of analytical methods was employed. Noninvasive imaging techniques—ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence (UVF), infrared reflectography (IRR), X-radiography, and macro X-ray fluorescence (MA-XRF) scanning—provided information about the distribution of materials and guided the choice of sampling sites. Analyses of small amounts of removed material—by Raman spectroscopy, gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS), Fourier transform-infrared (FT-IR) spectroscopy, X-ray diffraction (XRD), and scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopic (SEM-EDS) analysis—provided more specific identifications of the pigments and the other materials present.

Under UV radiation, the object displayed an overall pale-blue fluorescence with additional intensity in areas with accretions and within break joins, possibly indicating the presence of synthetic materials such as an adhesive and/or a coating (fig. 4).¹⁴ Analysis of a sample from one of the highly fluorescing areas identified the presence of pentaerythritol and phthalic anhydride, suggesting the use of a drying oil alkyd resin.¹⁵ Invented in the 1950s, this synthetic resin was commonly used in the production of paints and water-resistant materials.¹⁶ It was also used in the second half of the twentieth century to consolidate, saturate, and protect the surfaces of wall paintings.¹⁷

IRR revealed the use of sketch lines and, more puzzling, highlighted the presence of pounce marks, which are also visible to the naked eye throughout the composition, particularly along the edges of the red border and the ribbons hanging from the shield at the top, the beams of the Roman lattice balustrade (fig. 5), and the peacock itself.¹⁸ Such



FIG. 4. — Ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence (UVF) image of the Getty Peacock.

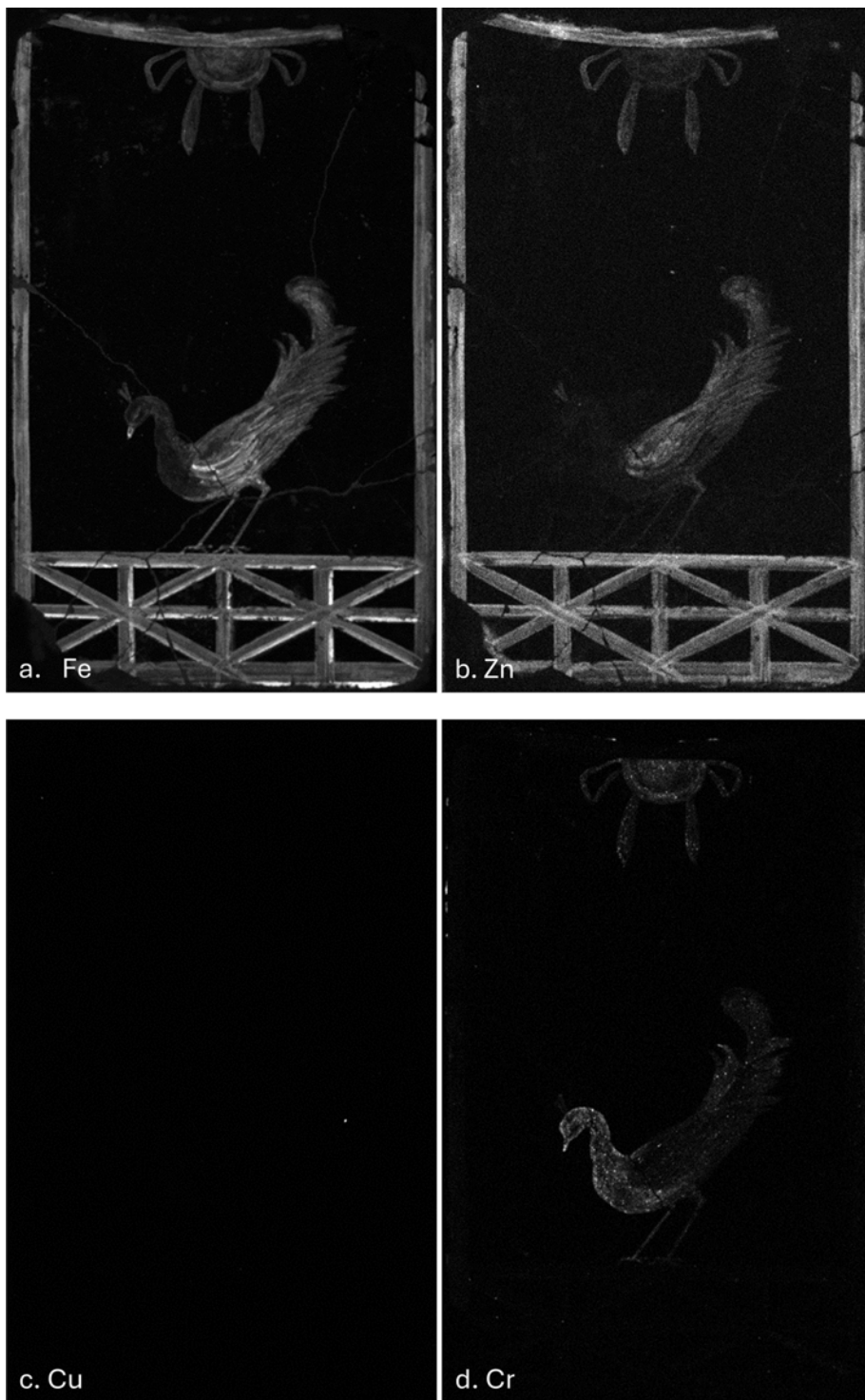
pounce marks are evidence of *spolvero*, a technique in which a preparatory drawing on paper (or similar substrate) is transferred onto the final surface by dusting (*spolverare*) chalk or carbon black through the pounce holes in a preparatory drawing that are punched along the contours of its features. This technique was documented as early as the tenth century in China and first described in Europe around 1390.¹⁹ During the Renaissance, it was a common method for transferring sketches to frescoes perfected by artists such as Michelangelo Buonarroti, Cennino Cennini, and Raffaello Sanzio.²⁰ The presence of pounce marks, a technique otherwise unattested in ancient Roman painting, on an artifact thought to date to circa 70 CE challenged our understanding of the fresco.



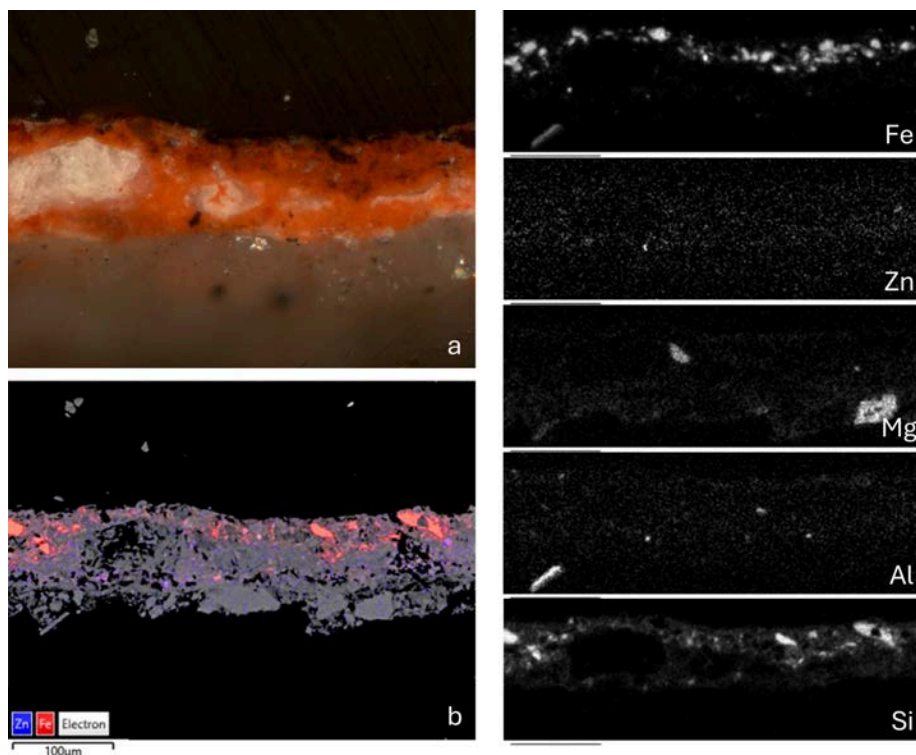
FIG. 5. — Detail of the Roman lattice balustrade of the Getty Peacock showing pounce marks and pronounced, superficial brushwork.

Spatially resolved MA-XRF scanning produced distribution maps of individual chemical elements across the surface of the object.²¹ Most significant for the understanding of the palette used to paint the work were the maps of iron (Fe), zinc (Zn), copper (Cu), and chromium (Cr) (figs. 6a–d). The iron map shows a strong correlation to the many shades of red observed on the surface, suggesting the use of iron-earth pigments (see fig. 6a). These red areas also were found to contain variable amounts of impurities, most notably zinc (see fig. 6b). A cross section of a sample from the balustrade shows the painting's stratigraphy: a superficial (organic) coating, under which is a dark-red pigment layer, then a light-red pigment layer, followed by the intonaco (figs. 7a, 7b). SEM-EDS analysis confirmed that both the dark- and light-red layers contain iron, and Raman analysis identified the presence of hematite (Fe_2O_3) in both layers.²² The dark-red layer did not show the presence of zinc. By contrast, the light-red layer contained grains rich in zinc along with iron, sodium, and oxygen (as shown by SEM-EDS). This suggests the use of two different iron-earth pigments, one with zinc impurities and one without. Zinc oxide, employed in the nineteenth-century pigment zinc white, if present, would have been detected by Raman spectroscopy or SEM-EDS. No indication of zinc white—in other words, grains containing only zinc and oxygen with no impurities—was found.

Egyptian Blue and azurite, both copper based, are the two most common blue pigments found in antiquity and are likely the only ones used in ancient Roman wall paintings.²³ Initial VIL imaging indicated that Egyptian Blue was not used in the peacock, and the absence of copper in these areas as evidenced by MA-XRF scans (see fig. 6c) suggests that azurite was also not the source of the blue. Surprisingly, the blue in the peacock's body was found to contain chromium, which was also found in the



FIGS. 6A–D. — MA-XRF element-distribution maps of the Getty Peacock indicating the presence of (a) iron (Fe), (b) zinc (Zn), (c) copper (Cu), and (d) chromium (Cr).



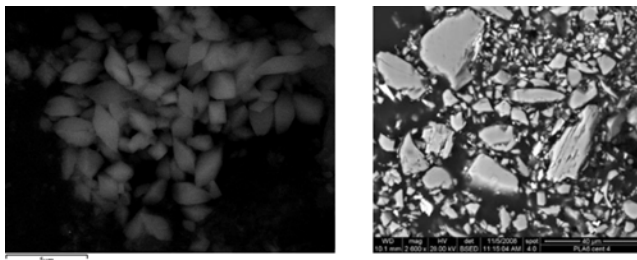
FIGS. 7A, 7B. — Images of a cross-sectioned sample from the balustrade of the Getty Peacock under (a) visible light and (b) backscattered electron (BSE) imaging overlaid with energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (SEM-EDS) element-distribution maps of iron (Fe, in red) and zinc (Zn, in blue); at right are shown the individual SEM-EDS element-distribution maps of iron, zinc, magnesium (Mg), aluminum (Al), and silicon (Si).



FIGS. 8A, 8B. — Detail of the Getty Peacock showing (a) MA-XRF element-distribution map of chromium (Cr) showing sparse globular aggregates of a chromium-containing material throughout the peacock's head and neck, and (b) visible image in which green pigment can be seen extending beyond the tip of the peacock's beak, corresponding to a bright spot in the Cr map.

red feathers, with a higher concentration in the tail (see fig. 6d). The distribution of chromium is not homogenous (see, for comparison, the iron map, fig. 6a) but is present in sparse globular aggregates, or dots (figs. 8a, 8b).

Examination of the surface under magnification revealed that the areas painted blue contained a mixture of blue and green particles. The use of a pure green pigment



FIGS 9A, 9B. — Backscattered electron (BSE) image of (a) a sample of blue pigment taken from the peacock's breast showing uniformly small grains with rounded edges, characteristic of synthetically produced ultramarine pigment; and (b) BSE image of natural ultramarine pigment extracted from lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, showing the variety of sizes and sharp edges characteristic of a ground, natural-mineral pigment, from M. Favaro et al., "Characterization of Lapis Lazuli and Corresponding Purified Pigments for a Provenance Study of Ultramarine Pigments Used in Works of Art," *Analytical and Bioanalytical Chemistry* 402, no. 6 (2012): 2202.

was also observed as a discrete underlayer in areas such as the peacock's beak (see fig. 8b). Traces of chromium have been identified in natural green earth minerals (celadonite or glauconite) sourced from Italy and identified on ancient wall paintings.²⁴ However, Raman analysis, conducted directly on the painting surface and on removed microsamples, identified the presence of chrome oxide green (Cr_2O_3), a modern pigment first introduced into the artist's palette in 1862.²⁵

Raman analysis also identified the presence of lazurite, the mineral responsible for the blue color in lapis lazuli.²⁶ Lapis, and the corresponding pigment ultramarine blue, is an uncommon finding on an ancient Roman wall painting, where the use of lapis lazuli in its ground form is not attested.²⁷ SEM imaging of a sample of blue pigment from the peacock's breast revealed uniformly small (approximately 1–2 micrometers [μm] in diameter), particles with rounded edges characteristic of a synthetically produced pigment (figs. 9a, 9b). First manufactured in 1826, synthetic ultramarine blue is chemically identical to natural lazurite.²⁸ The uniform shape of the blue particles found in the peacock, together with the absence of accessory minerals typically found in natural lapis, strongly suggests the use of synthetic ultramarine blue. While the presence of pounce marks and the notably refined quality of the painting cast doubt on the ancient origin of the Getty Peacock, the identification of two modern pigments—chrome oxide green and synthetic ultramarine blue—provides definitive evidence that the painting, at least, is not ancient in origin.

The Underlying Structure

Typically, paintings removed from walls are reinforced with a concrete backing, and the peacock fresco is no different. X-radiographs show the presence of chicken wire with a mesh width of approximately 1 1/4 inches embedded within the concrete backing (fig. 10). Invented in 1844, chicken wire is commonly used not only for containing poultry but also for providing structural support in construction materials, such as ferro-cement, a type of reinforced concrete. To further investigate the concrete backing,

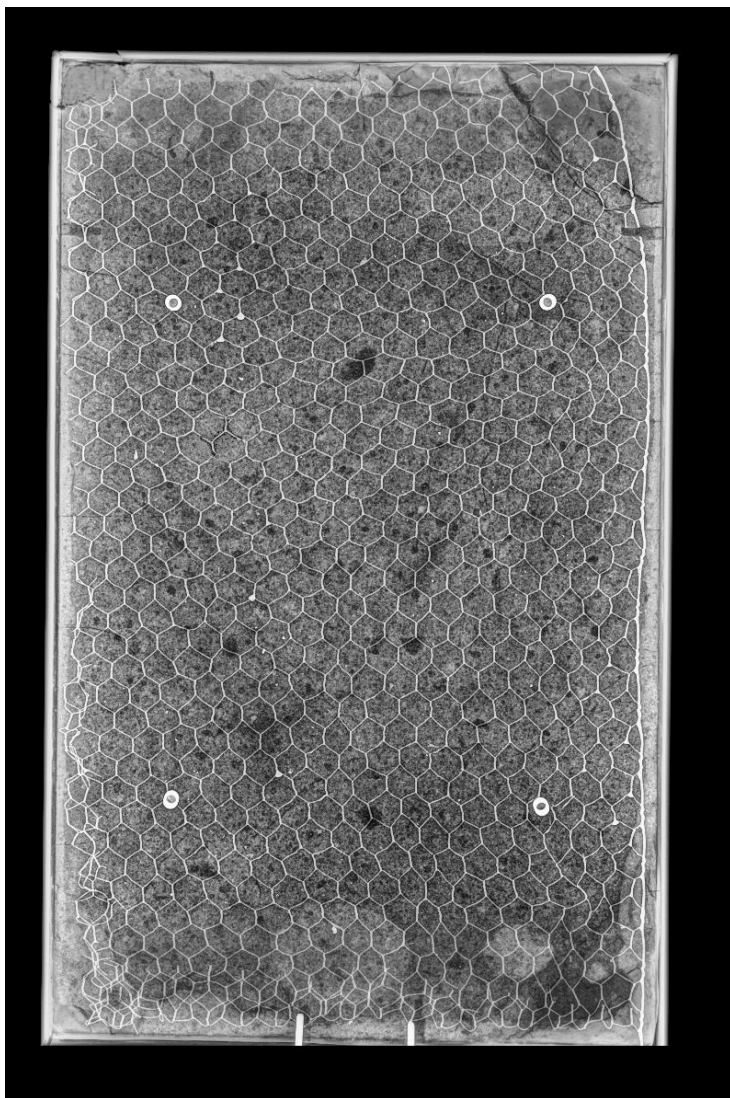


FIG. 10. — X-radiograph of the Getty Peacock revealing the presence of chicken wire within.

a sample was extracted for petrographic and compositional analysis.²⁹ In brief, the findings indicate a composite mixture of aggregate particles containing oxides of silicon, aluminum, calcium, and iron in a carbonated Portland cement-based matrix.³⁰ Portland cement was invented and patented in 1824 in Leeds, England, and soon became the most common ingredient in the production of concrete.³¹ Composed of crystalline hydraulic calcium silicates, Portland cement served as a strong and durable binder, making it ideal for construction applications. By the twentieth century its use had spread worldwide. Although not an unusual discovery, the identification of Portland cement with embedded chicken wire helps provide a timeline for when the fresco was backed.

Taken together, the visual and material investigations into the Getty Peacock constitute a strong case for the painting having been created no earlier than the mid-nineteenth century as a wall painting that was subsequently removed and backed for individual display. This sets the stage for the last phase of our collaborative investigation, tracing the history of the object back to its source.

If Not Ancient, What?

As stated above, no parallels to the Getty Peacock have been found elsewhere in wall paintings from Campania apart from the now-lost painting of a peacock in the House of Siricus mentioned by nineteenth-century scholars and reproduced by Briggs, whose publication of 1911, *Pompeian Decorations*, was intended to provide sources of inspiration for contemporary architects. The author, however, was widely known not for classical forms but for his designs of English country homes. Nicknamed “Bungalow” Briggs, he published five editions of *Bungalows and Country Residences* between 1891 and 1901 containing designs for aspirational and built structures. While most of Briggs’s designs in these volumes follow the Arts and Crafts style popular at the turn of the century, one particular design for a “free Greek style” bungalow stands out (fig. 11). Here, it is perhaps significant that in the preface to *Pompeian Decorations*, Briggs states: “The trend of Architectural thought is now towards the Greco-Roman style, and the archaic Greek forms, treated in a free way, are engaging the attention of many Architects and Decorators of the present day, to whom, it is hoped, the examples in this volume should prove sources of inspiration.”³² With its unconventional Doric colonnade, Briggs’s bungalow appears to be inspired by the Greco-Roman decorative motifs he observed in Pompeii. The drawing room illustrated in plate XV from the first edition of *Bungalows and Country Residences*, moreover, includes Ionic columns, hanging Roman lamps, and a shelf modeled after a Pompeian lararium (fig. 12).³³ Most notable in the context of our investigation, however, is the pattern lining the top of the drawing room wall, which features a peacock depicted within a bordered frame standing on a Roman lattice balustrade; its composition is startlingly similar to the lost peacock from the House of Siricus and to the Getty wall painting itself.

Briggs’s designs strongly support the hypothesis that the peacock fresco was created by or for the English architect. Two publications from the early twentieth century announced the construction of a house in 1912 following Briggs’s plans for a “free Greek style” bungalow on Furze Hill in Banstead/Burgh Heath in Surrey, England, the same county where J. Paul Getty would reside from 1959 until the end of his life.³⁴ Photographs of the exterior of the structure, aptly named “Doric House,” appear in Charles Massin’s publication *Villas Normandes & Anglaises* (Norman and English villas) of 1913, demonstrating that the facade and floorplan of the realized building were faithful to Briggs’s designs (fig. 13).³⁵ Unfortunately, only one photograph of the interior of the home has been found to date, in Massin’s book *Intérieurs Anglais* (English interiors) from 1927. It depicts an entrance hall with Ionic columns, suggesting that the “free Greek

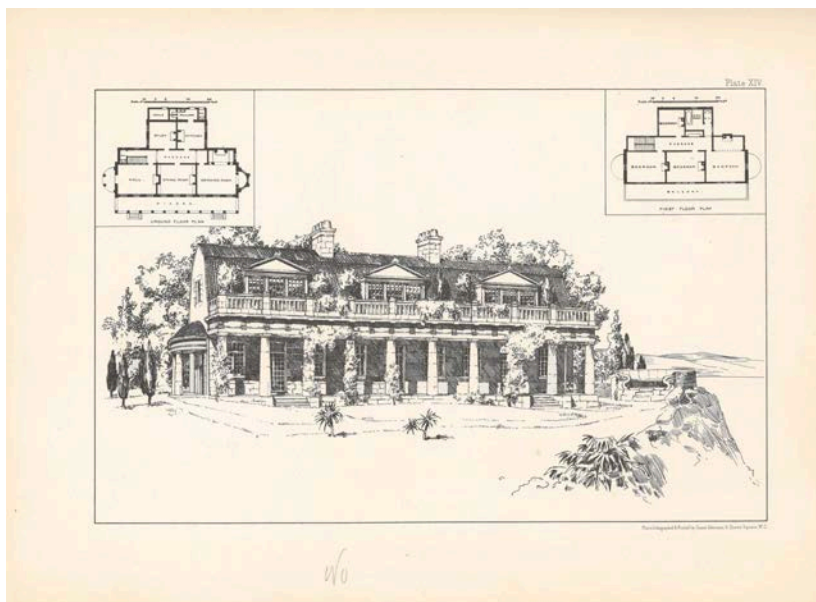


FIG. 11. — Robert Alexander Briggs (British, 1858–1916). Exterior of a proposed “free Greek style” bungalow, from R. A. Briggs, *Bungalows and Country Residences*, 1st ed. (London: B. T. Batsford, 1891), pl. XIV. Photolithograph by James Akerman. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2625-511.



FIG. 12. — Robert Alexander Briggs (British 1858–1916). Drawing room of a proposed “free Greek style” bungalow, from R. A. Briggs, *Bungalows and Country Residences*, 1st ed. (London: B. T. Batsford, 1891), plate XV. Photolithograph by James Akerman. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2625-511.

style” decoration likely continued in other rooms throughout the building.³⁶ Sadly, no photographic documentation of the adornment of the drawing room has yet to be located.



FIG. 13. — “Doric House,” Furze Hill, Surrey, constructed in 1912, from Charles Massin, *Villas Normandes & Anglaises* (Paris: s.n., 1913), pl. 2.

Ordnance Surveys of Surrey from 1911 to 1955 confirm, through its distinctive, irregular shape, that the structure on Furze Hill, often labeled in the documentation as Doric House, matched Briggs’s floorplans.³⁷ The building was also recorded in an aerial photo of Furze Hill in 1947.³⁸ Local land registries, district records, and electoral registers confirm that the house was built for Lester Bellingham, who is listed as a subscriber to Briggs’s *Pompeian Decorations*.³⁹ Bellingham likely commissioned the house from Briggs in anticipation and celebration of his marriage to Gladys Muriel Selby in 1912 and their honeymoon in Italy.⁴⁰

Although photographic proof is lacking, Briggs’s designs in the first four editions of *Bungalows and Country Residences* suggest that the drawing room of Doric House in Surrey was painted with a series of peacocks standing on Roman lattices (see fig. 12). It seems likely that one of these peacocks was at a later date removed and accidentally or intentionally mistaken for an authentic Roman fresco and sold to J. Paul Getty. The presence of pounce marks on the Getty fragment further supports the hypothesis that it originated in Doric House, as this technique was frequently employed to reproduce repeated images and decorative motifs.

Perhaps the answer to how the Getty fresco could have traveled from a country home in Surrey to Spink & Son in London and, finally, to an art museum in California lies in the later history of Doric House. By 1919, the original owners, the Bellinghams, had moved out, and the house was purchased by the nearby St. Monica’s School for

Girls.⁴¹ Records suggest that Doric House was used as a residential space for the school's teachers, domestic staff, and visitors, including early feminist and pacifist Vera Brittain.⁴²

In 1939, Legal and General Assurance Society Ltd. acquired St. Monica's School and converted the campus buildings to rehouse their London office.⁴³ While this move was intended to escape the aerial bombardment of London during World War II, an oil-based incendiary bomb landed just north of Doric House in 1940, reportedly causing no serious damage.⁴⁴ Legal and General Assurance Society appear to have used Doric House to accommodate its staff; local resident David Goodger, the son of two Legal and General employees, attested to living in the bungalow as a child from 1951 to 1965.⁴⁵ Although he did not recall any peacock wall paintings, Goodger revealed that Doric House had been stripped out and converted into two flats, one upstairs and one downstairs. In 1973, Legal and General conveyed the land where Doric House stood to House Developments Ltd. By 1976, the bungalow had been entirely demolished, and several new homes were built in its place on the nostalgically named Doric Drive.⁴⁶

If a peacock wall painting matching Briggs's design in *Bungalows and Country Residences* was part of the original decoration of Doric House, it had to have been removed from the building before 1968 in order to be the same peacock fresco sold to J. Paul Getty by Spink & Son. Renovations and redesigns resulting in the removal of the peacock fresco could have occurred at any point in the house's history, perhaps owing to undocumented damage from the 1940 bombing or during Legal and General's acquisition and the building's subsequent conversion into two separate flats. Until additional evidence emerges, the precise circumstances remain unknown.

The evidence so far compiled presents a compelling story: Inspired by his travels in the late nineteenth century, Briggs designed a bungalow decorated with Pompeian motifs from the House of Siricus, which he had carefully recorded in watercolor. In the early twentieth century, Briggs had the opportunity to make his vision a reality for a young couple who shared his appreciation for antiquity. As the whimsical Doric House aged, one of its peacocks was removed and misidentified or misrepresented as a genuine antiquity. It eventually traveled across the Atlantic to its current home in the Getty Villa, where its status as an ancient Roman artifact stood unquestioned for decades.

In 2006, in conjunction with the reopening of the Getty Villa after a major renovation, the Getty Peacock was given its own stop on a new gallery audio guide intended for families.⁴⁷ Opening with mellifluous flutes and punctuated by squawking birds, the script describes some of the various contexts in which peacocks appeared in ancient Roman society. Our recent investigations, employing modern imaging technologies, however, have demonstrated that the Getty fresco can no longer be considered reliable evidence of ancient Roman painting. In any case, just as the ancient Romans depicted peacocks on the walls of their homes to invoke the high culture of ancient Persia (as well as Juno, the Queen of the Gods), late Victorians evidently drew upon the same imagery, invoking ancient Roman luxury to advance their own cultural aspirations.

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Notes

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1. Minutes of the meeting are housed in the files of the Department of the Registrar of the J. Paul Getty Museum. Mosaic floor with Achilles and Briseis, Roman, possibly Antioch, Syria (present-day Antakya, Turkey), 100–300 CE, stone mosaic and glass tesserae, J. Paul Getty Museum, 68.AH.12, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103SPQ>; and Homer, *The Iliad*, 1.327–48.

2. Statue of Hercules (Lansdowne Herakles), Roman, ca. 125 CE, marble, J. Paul Getty Museum, 70.AA.109, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103QSP>.

3. *The J. Paul Getty Museum*, visitor guide, 1974, 11. On the masthead, the guide states: “This is a temporary guide for the assistance of visitors during the period immediately after the opening of the new Museum.” Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 87-B7598.

4. Cornelius Vermeule and Norman Neuerburg, *Catalogue of the Ancient Art in the J. Paul Getty Museum: The Larger Statuary, Wall Paintings and Mosaics* (J. Paul Getty Museum, 1973), 50, no. 108.

5. Robert Alexander Briggs, preface to *Pompeian Decorations* (B. T. Batsford, 1911), n.p.

6. Briggs, preface to *Pompeian Decorations*, n.p.

7. “Two Friezes,” text preceding two unnumbered plates from the House of Siricus, in Briggs, *Pompeian Decorations*, n.p.

8. These rooms are alternately numbered 3, 5 and 2, 11. See Fausto Niccolini and Felice Niccolini, *Le case ed i monumenti di Pompei*,

disegnati et descritti, vol. 1 (Naples, 1854), 2: “Sono nel mezzo taluni simboli delle principali Deità, il pavone sacro a Giunone, l’aquila ed il globo di Giove, la cerva con la faretra di Diana, un grifo rimpetto alla lira d’Apollo, la mistica cista ed il sistro d’Iside presso una sfinge, l’uccello di Minerva, ecc.” (In the middle are some symbols of the principal deities, the peacock sacred to Juno, the eagle and the globe of Jupiter, the doe with the quiver of Diana, a griffin in front of the lyre of Apollo, the mystical cista and the sistrum of Isis near a sphinx, the bird of Minerva, etc.)

Translation of the quotation from the Italian by the present authors; and Johannes Overbeck, *Pompeji in seinen Gebäuden, Alterthümern und Kunstwerken* (Leipzig, 1875), 285–86: “das auf weißen Wänden mit leichten Ornamenten und kleinen Landschaften und mit einer interessanten Folge von Götterattributen (Adler, Blitz und globus für Zeus, Pfau und Wollkorb für Hera, Greif und Kithara für Apollon u. s. w.) decorirt ist.” (which is decorated on white walls with light ornaments and small landscapes and with an interesting sequence of attributes of the gods [eagle, lightning and globe for Zeus, peacock and wool basket for Hera, griffin and kithara for Apollo, etc.]) Translation of the quotation from the German by the present authors. Very similar text appears in Johannes Overbeck, *Pompeji in seinen Gebäuden, Alterthümern und Kunstwerke*, 4th ed. (Leipzig, 1884), 322–23.

9. For peacocks in ancient art and thought, see, for example, J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in*

Roman Life and Art (Cornell University Press, 1973), esp. 250–53; John Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (Thames & Hudson, 1977), esp. 91–93; and W. Geoffrey Arnott, *Birds in the Ancient World from A to Z* (Routledge, 2007), 342–45, s.vv. “Tahōs, Taōs, Taōn.”

10. Peacocks depicted in profile with upward curving tails do, however, appear perched on silver basins and a thin vegetal garland in the House of the Vettii at Pompeii (VI.15.1).

11. See the Bibliography section of the object page for Wall fragment with a peacock, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 68.AG.13, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103SPR?tab=bibliography>.

12. Ruth Siddall, “Not a Day Without a Line Drawn: Pigments and Painting Techniques of Roman Artists,” *infocus Magazine*, June 2006, 18–23, 24; and Giovanni Verri, “The Spatial Characterization of Egyptian Blue, Han Blue and Han Purple by Photo-Induced Luminescence Digital Imaging,” *Analytical and Bioanalytical Chemistry* 394 (2009): 1011–21.

13. Calcite was identified by X-ray diffraction (XRD); no other components were detected. XRD patterns were collected using a Rigaku MiniFlex 600 benchtop X-ray diffractometer equipped with a copper (Cu) tube operating at 40 kilovolts (kV)/15 milliamps (mA), with a 0.03-millimeter (mm) nickel (Ni) filter, and a D/teX Ultra2 silicon strip detector. Randomly oriented powder was scanned in spin mode from 2° to 80° 2θ, with a 0.01° 2θ step size and counting time of 2 degrees per second (deg/s). Data analysis was carried out using Rigaku PDXL 2 software and Profex. See Nicola Doebelein and Reinhard Kleeberg, “Profex: A Graphical User Interface for the Rietveld Refinement Program BGMN,” *Journal of Applied Crystallography* 48, no. 5 (2015): 1573–80.

14. UVF imaging captures diagnostic responses of materials when excited by UV radiation, allowing pigments to be characterized and ancient or modern surface interventions to be revealed. Imaging was performed using a modified Canon 80D 24.2-megapixel camera with UV-VIS-IR functionality, equipped with a Zeiss Milvus 50 mm macro lens and optical filters (Max Max CCI and 918) along with a Kodak 2E gel filter, and a Wildfire Long Throw Series ultraviolet source (365 nanometers [nm]). Coatings can mask the fluorescence response from the pictorial layer, thus interfering with the observation of any characteristic emissions associated with ancient materials, such as madder lake or lime plaster.

15. Analysis was carried out using an Agilent 7890A/5975C GC-MS system equipped with a thermal separation probe (TSP) and a ZebronTM ZB-5HT Inferno column (30 m × 0.25 mm × 0.10 μm) from Phenomenex. FT-IR spectroscopy was conducted using a Bruker Hyperion 3000 FT-IR microscope.

16. Kass Peter and Zeno W. Wicks, “Alkyd Resins,” US Patent 2,577,770, 11 December 1951, <https://patents.google.com/patent/US2577770A/en>. Harriet A. L. Standeven, *House Paints, 1900–1960: History and Use* (Getty Conservation Institute, 2011), 4–5, 72, 76, 121–22.

17. Shuya Wei et al., “Scientific Investigation of the Materials in a Chinese Ming Dynasty Wall Painting,” *International Journal of Conservation Science* 1, no. 2 (2010): 108; and Kirsten Travers et al., “Pemulen Case Study: Holy Innocents Mural Project,” *WAAC Newsletter* 32, no. 3 (2010): 13.

18. IRR imaging can reveal the presence of underdrawings produced with infrared-absorbing materials. IRR images were created using a modified Canon 80D 24.2-megapixel camera with UV-VIS-IR functionality, a Zeiss Milvus 50 mm macro lens, and an 830 nm filter. See Molly Faries, “Techniques and Applications—Analytical Capabilities of Infrared Reflectography: An Art Historian’s Perspective,” in National Academy of Sciences, *Scientific Examination of Art: Modern Techniques in Conservation and Analysis* (National Academies Press, 2005), 87–88.

19. Sarah E. Fraser, “Regimes of Production: The Use of Pounces in Temple Construction,” *Orientations*, November 1996, 60; and Kim Beil, “In Pursuit of the Hole,” *Aeon*, 7 Jan 2022, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-history-of-holes-tells-a-story-of-power-and-potential>.

20. Carmen Bambach Cappel, “A Substitute Cartoon for Raphael’s *Disputa*,” *Master Drawings* 30, no. 1 (1992): 11; Carmen Bambach Cappel, “Michelangelo’s Cartoon for the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* Reconsidered,” *Master Drawings* 25, no. 2 (1987): 135; and Cennino d’Andrea Cennini, *The Craftsman’s Handbook: “Il Libro dell’Arte,”* trans. Daniel V. Thompson Jr., 2nd. ed. (Dover, 1954), 87.

21. MA-XRF spectroscopy was performed using a Bruker M6 Jetstream spectrometer equipped with a 30 W rhodium (Rh) tube and polycapillary focusing optics. The scans were carried out using the following parameters: 530 micrometers (μm) spot size, 530 μm step size, and 30 milliseconds (ms) dwell time per pixel. The X-ray tube was operated at 50 kV and 600 microamps (μA). Spectra were collected over a 40 kiloelectron volts (keV) energy range and 130

kilocounts per second (kcps) throughput. The raw map data were calibrated, fit, and mosaicked using PyMca and Datamuncher software suites. See V. A. Solé et al., “A Multiplatform Code for the Analysis of Energy-Dispersive X-Ray Fluorescence Spectra,” *Spectrochimica Acta Part B: Atomic Spectroscopy* 62, no. 1 (2007): 62, 63–68; M. Alfeld and K. Janssens, “Strategies for Processing Mega-Pixel X-Ray Fluorescence Hyperspectral Data: A Case Study on a Version of Caravaggio’s Painting *Supper at Emmaus*,” *Journal of Analytical Atomic Spectrometry* 30, no. 3 (2015): 30, 777–89; and T. Wolff et al., “A New Fundamental Parameter Based Calibration Procedure for Micro X-Ray Fluorescence Spectrometers,” *Spectrochimica Acta Part B: Atomic Spectroscopy* 66, no. 2 (2011), 66, 170–78.

22. Raman spectroscopy was performed using a Renishaw InVia Raman microscope using 785 nm laser excitation and a Leica 50× objective lens. Laser power and other collection parameters varied between measurements to optimize the signal while avoiding sample degradation.

23. Hamdallah Bearat, “Quelle est la gamme exacte des pigments romains? Confrontation des résultats d’analyse et des textes de Vitruve et de Plin,” in *Roman Wall Painting: Materials Techniques, Analysis and Conservation*, ed. H. Bearat (Fribourg: Institute of Mineralogy and Petrography, 1997), 24; and Jose Luise Perez-Rodriguez et al., “Green Pigments of Roman Mural Paintings from Seville Alcazar,” *Applied Clay Science* (2015): 212, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clay.2015.03.016>.

24. E. M. Molacek et al., “Re-Discovering a Roman Wall Painting at Harvard: New Research on a Fragment from the Villa at Boscotrecase,” *Studies in Conservation* 65, no. 5 (2020): 306.

25. Richard Newman, “Chromium Oxide Greens,” in *Artists Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. 3, ed. Elisabeth West FitzHugh (Oxford University Press, 1997), 274.

26. The elements in lazurite (sodium [Na], calcium [Ca], aluminum [Al], silicon [Si], sulfur [S], and oxygen [O]) are not easily detectable by XRF. However, potassium (K) can serve as a surrogate marker for the presence of natural lapis lazuli, where it is often present as an impurity (M. Favaro et al., “Characterization of Lapis Lazuli and Corresponding Purified Pigments for a Provenance Study of Ultramarine Pigments Used in Works of Art,” *Analytical and Bioanalytical Chemistry* 402, no. 6 [2012]: 2195–208). The K map for the Getty Peacock showed weak intensity across the entire

painted surface but was insufficient to attribute it to lapis lazuli.

27. Joyce Plesters, “Ultramarine Blue, Natural and Artificial,” in *Artists Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. 2, ed. A. Roy (Oxford University Press, 1993), 37–61.

28. See Plesters, “Ultramarine Blue,” 37–61.

29. Testing was performed by consulting engineers of Sandberg LLP on 30 March 2023. Chemical analyses of the aggregates and matrix of the concrete core were carried out using an Oxford Instruments INCA energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) microanalysis system calibrated with certified mineral standards.

30. The sample includes particles of just over 3 millimeters in diameter and consists of a mixture of angular and subrounded ash particles lacking the texture typically associated with ash of geological origin, such as pumice, together with siliceous sand particles. Reported by Sandberg LLP, 30 March 2023.

31. Joseph Aspdin, “An Improvement in the Modes of Producing an Artificial Stone,” British Patent BP 5022, 21 October 1824, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Aspdin-BP_5022_1.jpg.

32. Briggs, preface to *Pompeian Decorations*, n.p.

33. Specifically, a lararium from the House of M. Epidi Sabini (IX.1.22). The lararium is also illustrated by Briggs in *Pompeian Decorations*, n.p.

34. Monochrome drawing of a “House at Furze Hill, Burgh Heath, Surrey,” from *The Academy Architecture and Architectural Review*, December 1912, 143; and “House, Furze Hill, Burgh Heath,” *The Architect and Contract Reporter*, 18 July 1913, 52.

35. Charles Massin, *Villas Normandes & Anglaises* (s.n., 1913), pls. 2, 3.

36. Charles Massin, *Intérieurs Anglais* (s.n., 1927), pl. 37.

37. Surrey sheet XIX.15, revised 1911, published 1913, Ordnance Survey Maps, 25 inch England and Wales, 1841–1952, National Library of Scotland (NLS), <https://maps.nls.uk/view/103315153>; Surrey sheet XIX.SE, revised 1911, published 1914, Ordnance Survey Maps, Six-inch England and Wales, 1842–1952, NLS, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/101436943>; Surrey sheet XIX.15, revised 1933, published 1935, NLS, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/103315150>; sheet TQ2457 – A, revised 1954–55, published 1956, Ordnance Survey National Grid maps, 1944–1974, NLS, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/103028352>; and sheet TQ25NW – A, surveyed / revised 1866–1961, published 1961,

National Grid Maps, NLS, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/189259061>.

38. Photograph, taken in flight 11 April 1947, Historic England Archive, Aerial Photo Explorer, Aerial Photo - RAF_CPE_UK_1982_FP_1145, https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/raf_cpe_uk_1982_fp_1145.

39. Title Register for 3 Doric Drive, Tadworth (KT20 6HH) (Freehold), title number SY453808, HM Land Registry, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/land-registry>. Epsom Rural District Council Building Plan application no. 909, submitted 31 May 1911 and approved 7 June 1911, Woking, England, Surrey History Centre Archives. All Census & Electoral Rolls, "Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1832–1962," Surrey Electoral Register, Polling District of Banstead, 1913, s.v. "Bellingham, Lester," accessed on ancestry.co.uk.

40. England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837–1915, Marriages Registered in July, August, and September 1912, s.v. "Bellingham, Lester," ancestry.co.uk; and All UK and Ireland, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890–1960, s.v. "Gladys Bellingham," departure date 1 July 1913, ancestry.co.uk.

41. Register of Electors, Autumn 1919, Reigate Parliamentary Division of the County of Surrey, Polling District of Mickleham, s.vv. "22 Bellingham, Lester" and "23 Bellingham, Gladys Muriel"; and Register of Electors, Autumn 1919,

Reigate Parliamentary Division of the County of Surrey, Polling District of Banstead (Tadworth Only), s.v. "511 Parker, William," accessed on ancestry.co.uk.

42. Winifred Holtby, *Letters to a Friend* (Collins Clear-Type Press, 1937), 206–59; and 1921 Census of England, s.vv. "Florence, Bervon," and "Surrey"; Bervon is listed as the co-headmistress of St. Monica's School and as the person responsible for returning the census form. The postal address is listed as Doric House, Burgh Heath, Tadworth, Surrey. A teacher, a housekeeper, and sixteen pupils are listed as residents. London, United Kingdom National Archives, accessed on findmypast.co.uk.

43. Legal & General, *Pensioner's Memories 1836 to 1986*, vol. 1 (Legal & General, 1988), 48–49, London Archives, CLC/B/144/MS36331A.

44. Surrey World War Two Bomb Incident Map, Banstead_103, 18 October 1940, Surrey History Centre, www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/bombsites/.

45. David Goodger, personal e-mail interview by Lewis Wood, Banstead History, 30 August 2022, shared with the authors via e-mail by Wood on 16 January 2024.

46. Title Register for 3 Doric Drive.

47. "Fresco Fragment with Peacock (Family)," audio, 58 sec., wall fragment with peacock, 68.AG.13, Museum Collection, Related Media, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103SPR#full-artwork-details>.

Adding Works to Words: A Letter About Qing Court Painter Jean-Denis Attiret, S.J. (1702–68) in the Getty Research Institute

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On the first of March 1769, Jean Joseph Marie Amiot, S.J. (1718–93, Ch. Qian Deming 錢德明), the head of the French Jesuit mission in China, penned a long letter to sculptor Claude François Attiret (1728–1804) about his cousin, recently deceased French Jesuit painter Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–68, Ch. Wang Zhicheng 王致誠). One copy was deposited in the Bibliothèque du Roi in Paris in 1775, which enabled the letter’s republication in the original French several times since the eighteenth century.¹ The Getty Research Institute holds the second known copy, which is now fully digitized and available online.² The sixty-four-page handwritten letter describes Attiret’s European training and work before and after joining the Society of Jesus. It relates some of his experiences as a court painter to the Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1736–95), quotes Attiret’s own letters about painting at the imperial Mountain Retreat for Escaping Summer Heat (*Bishushanzhuang* 避暑山莊) in summer 1754, and concludes with the artist’s last days in Beijing at the eighteenth-century height of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). It is the single most comprehensive written source on the life and work of this artist. Yet despite more than thirty years in Beijing painting for Qianlong, Attiret remains known less for his art than for his letter of 1743 describing the Qing imperial gardens, which had a profound influence on Chinese taste in eighteenth-century European garden design.³

Attiret’s paintings and personal artistic style remain elusive for several reasons. First, thanks to a longer career in China and more extant signed work, Italian painter Giuseppe Castiglione, S.J. (1688–1766; Ch. Lang Shining 郎世寧) has overshadowed the art historical record of all other European artists serving the Qing court.⁴ Second, European artists served Qianlong’s aesthetic preferences at the expense of their own individual styles, which poses challenges to reading Attiret’s work in China within Jesuit accommodation practices.⁵ In the Qing court workshop system, any painting not meeting imperial expectations was returned for revision or remaking. Third, few extant works bear Attiret’s signature, and collaboratively produced court workshop paintings were typically unsigned. Each artist painted the components for which they were the

most skilled, and the archives of the Qing imperial court workshop (*Zaobanchu* 造辦處) rarely identify which artist painted which elements.⁶ Finally, while Amiot's letter is the most detailed source on Attiret, Amiot does not provide a catalogue raisonné of Attiret's paintings, explaining that doing so would be difficult for him and tedious for the reader because the majority of them depicted Chinese subjects demanding significant explanation.⁷ Amiot also admits that Attiret's best work is inaccessible inside the palace and therefore only describes the few paintings that he had personally seen but does not include either examples or illustrations of Attiret's work.⁸

Father Amiot is an essential figure in the history of Sino-French relations because of his writing about China and his decades of experience there (fig. 1). Born in Toulon, Amiot joined the Jesuit novitiate at Avignon in September 1737 and was ordained as a priest in 1746.⁹ He requested to serve overseas and in August 1751 arrived in Beijing, where he gained command of both Chinese and Manchu, the two key languages of the Qing court. These linguistic skills not only earned him Qianlong's respect and favor but also enabled him to send original research on Chinese topics as well as translations of Sunzi's *The Art of War*, imperial poems, and musical treatises to France for publication.¹⁰ His work contributing information on China to France did not cease after the Parlement of Paris expelled the Jesuits in 1762 and King Louis XV (r. 1715–73) abolished the Society of Jesus in France in 1764. Quite the opposite: Louis recognized the Jesuit mission's significance as the key French source of insight into China, and in 1765 sent two Chinese Christian converts, Aloïs Ko and Étienne Yang, from France back to China to serve as informants.¹¹ Perhaps counterintuitively, the period from 1765 to 1792, enduring through Pope Clement XIV's formal suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, marked "Amiot's most fruitful period as a writer" as well as the time in which he produced "the greatest volume of correspondence in the history of the French mission."¹² Father Amiot was the most influential contributor to French statesman Henri-Léonard Jean-Baptiste Bertin's (1720–92) major publication projects intended to satisfy the French demand for empirical observations and in-depth knowledge about China. Art historian John Finlay has demonstrated that Bertin believed words without accompanying illustrations to be insufficient for understanding China, so Amiot sent many images of China produced by Ko and Yang as well as Chinese prints and paintings that later appeared in Bertin's publications.¹³ Consequently, it is surprising that none of Attiret's work seems to have accompanied Amiot's necrology for the artist, especially during the precarious period when the Beijing Jesuits were under pressure to demonstrate their continued relevance by providing firsthand experience of and information about China.

Amiot's reliance on written words rather than Attiret's own works established a pattern that persists in modern scholarship in which Attiret is considered predominantly through written descriptions in European missionary letters or factual records from the Qing imperial workshop archives.¹⁴ The sole Western-language monograph on Attiret uses only European-language sources, omitting Chinese records entirely, and therefore also leaves out several paintings not held in European collections.¹⁵ Scholarship that seeks to balance writing about Attiret with his own



FIG. 1. — Attributed to Giuseppe Panzi (Italian, active in China, 1734–1812). *Le Père Joseph-Marie Amiot, jésuite français missionnaire à Pékin au XVIII^e siècle* (Father Joseph-Marie Amiot, French Jesuit missionary in Beijing during the eighteenth century), before 1789, oil on Korean paper, 63 × 47 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, N-4. Image © BnF, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

paintings is the exception rather than the rule. Curator Anne Dary's 2004 exhibition catalog and scholar Ming Xiaoyan's article of 2005 stand out for their efforts to include Attiret's works, but each of these uses only scholarship and primary sources available in either French or Chinese, respectively, not both.¹⁶

As a contribution to the significant body of scholarship that now exists on art history of the global eighteenth century and on Sino-French relations during that period, this essay asks what can be learned about Attiret when his art is reintegrated with Amiot's letter as well as with primary textual sources in French and Chinese. Paintings that were either signed by Attiret or paintings for which we have documentary evidence that firmly demonstrates his authorship provide a clear sense of a painter meeting the very different demands of the Catholic Church and the Qing court. Recovering Attiret's works of art not only follows the period practice of gleaning knowledge directly from the source but also helps us to understand the evolution of Attiret's painting before and after his arrival in Beijing. By reincorporating the French and Chinese visual and material evidence of these moments of transcultural exchange alongside written records in both languages, the essay follows the French

Enlightenment mode in which Amiot wrote the letter as well as Attiret's own experience of working across French and Qing cultures.

Attiret's Life and Work Before China

Attiret was baptized on 31 July 1702 as the son of Claude-Françoise Guinard (life dates unknown) and Jean-Claude Attiret (1669–1733), a painter and master carpenter active in Dole.¹⁷ Born into an influential family of artists, artisans, and architects, Attiret was educated in Jean-Claude's studio, after which his father's patron, Claude-Joseph Froissard (1657–1750), the marquis of Broissia, helped finance several years of professional training in Rome. Although Amiot refuses to discuss most work that Attiret completed prior to joining the novitiate, he mentions a few portraits of area notables. Several surviving paintings dateable to the early 1730s include monumental history paintings depicting Old Testament subjects such as *Yaël and Sisera* (fig. 2), *Judith and Holofernes*, and *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, all likely intended for church decoration.¹⁸ The combination of personal portraits and large-scale figure paintings for building decoration laid the foundation for some of the genres that Qianlong would later demand of Attiret, even if the finished works differed dramatically.



FIG. 2. — Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68). *Yaël and Sisera*, 1730, signed and dated on reverse: “Attiret pingebat Dola 1730,” oil on canvas, 170 × 235 cm. Dole, Musée de Beaux-Arts, inv. 389. Black-and-white image © Jean-Loup Mathieu (Eurêka), used by permission; studio Chechillot; Catherine Scheck.

Attiret entered the Jesuit novitiate in Dole on 31 July 1735, not long after one last intimate encounter with the secular world: In February 1736, Attiret formally recognized his illegitimate son, Jean-Claude, born to one Claude Perciot (life dates unknown).¹⁹ Whether he told Amiot about his son is unknown, but Attiret never mentions either

the boy or his mother in surviving letters, and Amiot's inclusion of such a detail in the necrology would not have supported Jesuit goals. While Amiot offers no specific insight into what prompted Attiret to join the church at age thirty-three, he differentiates Attiret from other novices because of his age and maturity as well as for the willing sacrifice of his established artistic talents and future worldly fortune. Yet Amiot explicitly links two events that ultimately resulted in both Attiret's return to painting and his China posting. Writing from Beijing, Fathers Dominique Parrenin (1665–1741, Ch. Ba Duoming 巴多明; fig. 3) and Valentin Chaliér (1693–1747, Ch. Sha Ruyu 沙如玉) noted the Qing emperor's artistic regard for Castiglione, and thus for the Portuguese mission in China, to which the Italian artist was attached. The two Jesuit missions in eighteenth-century China—French and Portuguese—competed actively for imperial attention and resources. Consequently, Amiot reported, the French mission requested that a French Jesuit painter be sent to Beijing to increase French influence at the Qing court.²⁰ Simultaneously, Amiot reported that the Jesuit Novitiate Church of Saint-Louis in Avignon was negotiating with a local artist to paint their early seventeenth-century chapel. The artist questioned why the Jesuits wished to employ an outsider when they already possessed a talented painter in Attiret, who would also save them the cost of a commission from outside the order. "It was like this," Amiot wrote in the necrology, "on the word of a great artist and for similar motivations, that the Jesuits in Rome were once willing to consent to the famous Pozzo giving the first evidence of a talent which has immortalized his name."²¹ By invoking the name of painter Andrea Pozzo, S.J. (1642–1709) and his famed illusionistic ceiling in the Jesuit church of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in Rome, which was established by the Society of Jesus founder of the same name, Amiot compares Attiret not only with the famed Pozzo but also implicitly with Castiglione, who had claimed to follow Pozzo's example in painting similar illusions for Beijing churches.²²

In the former Jesuit chapel in Avignon, Attiret's frescoes on the pendentives depict the Four Evangelists and their symbols.²³ His Saint Luke, patron saint of artists, is depicted as a white-haired, vigorous man absorbed in sketching on a board gripped in one muscular hand, forearm bulging from the effort (fig. 4). Amiot notes that during Attiret's two years as a novice he also painted episodes from the life of Christ, described as both grisaille and chiaroscuro, which, together with the pendentives, made the novitiate church a sightseeing stop for travelers passing through Avignon.²⁴ By increasing church visitation even during Attiret's lifetime, Attiret's talents helped support the Jesuits and the faith both at home and abroad. The chapel is now part of the Hotel Cloître Saint-Louis, and the pendentive paintings are mentioned in tourist guides for the city of Avignon.²⁵



FIG. 3. — Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68). *Portrait of Father Dominique Parrenin (1665–1741)*, engraving from *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*, 2nd ed., vol. 19 (Paris, 1781), opposite p. 257. Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, Boston College Libraries.



FIG. 4. — Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68). *Saint Luke pendantive*, ca. 1735–37. Avignon, Chapelle Saint-Louis. Photograph by Studio Ohlala.

During the two years of his novitiate, Attiret continued to paint for the Society of Jesus, dedicating himself to portraiture and history paintings. In the autumn of 1737 Amiot and Attiret overlapped briefly at Avignon, where Amiot began his novitiate in September, a few months before Attiret departed France forever for Beijing on 8 January 1738. But the two men would meet again in 1751, when Amiot arrived in Beijing, and they would work closely together at the small French mission there for the rest of Attiret's life.

Painting for the Qing Emperor

Attiret landed in Macao on 7 August 1738 and received the order to travel to Beijing on December 2, finally reaching the capital on 13 June 1739 in the company of other newly arrived Jesuits serving either the French or Portuguese missions. Attiret was formally introduced at court with the Chinese name Wang Zhicheng, the first name Zhicheng 致誠 connoting the meaning of “conveying sincerity” or “genuinely devoted” (in the sense of dedicating efforts to a task). The identity of Attiret's namer is unrecorded, but Father Parrenin and his Beijing mission colleagues Antoine Gaubil (1689–1759, Ch. Song Junrong 宋君榮) and Joseph-Anne-Marie de Moyriac de Mailla (1669–1748, Ch. Feng Bingzheng 馮秉正) were all skilled Chinese speakers who were well-read in Confucian classics, easily capable of creating a meaningful and appropriate Chinese name. Describing an introduction at court that he did not observe firsthand, Amiot reports that Attiret presented Qianlong with a painting depicting the Adoration of the Magi, which is an appropriate subject for a Christian ruler but a bold choice for a foreign emperor notably uninterested in Christianity.²⁶ Likely unaware of (or at least unconcerned by) the symbolism, Qianlong accepted the painting into the palace and the artist into imperial service, which marked the start of both Attiret's decades of court success as well as the bearing of “his pains and his crosses” that made the position challenging both personally and professionally.²⁷

Attiret's Chinese name first appears in the Imperial Workshop (*Zaobanchu*) archives on 30 August 1739 in an order sent to the Wish-Fulfilling Studio (*Ruyiguan* 如意館), which housed Qianlong's best painters and artisans, including Castiglione. Attiret was ordered to produce oil paintings of an unspecified subject on a set of hanging scrolls for the Hall of Universal Peace (*Wanfang anhe* 萬方安和), one of the named scenic areas within the imperial Garden of Perfect Brightness (*Yuanmingyuan* 圓明園).²⁸ Work such as this, conducted deep inside the Yuanmingyuan where the Wish-Fulfilling Studio was also located, led to Attiret's familiarity with the imperial garden and therefore his famous letter describing its design. But this first imperial order for oil paintings in the hanging-scroll format also epitomizes the difficulty that Attiret faced in painting across cultures. As he discovered after presenting the emperor with his first work produced as a Qing court painter, Qianlong required certain elements be added or removed and appreciated neither “the shine of oil paints” nor “shadows, particularly when they were a little strong, which seemed to him like stains.”²⁹ Nevertheless, the

workshop archives record numerous orders for Attiret to produce oil paintings (*youhua* 油畫), including oil on glass and mirrors, which historian Tang Kaijian has identified in the *Zaobanchu* archives as one of several major categories of imperial orders for Attiret that distinguished “oil paintings” of many different subjects in addition to the genres of animals, figures, “beautiful women paintings” (*meirenhua* 美人畫), and “scenic illusion paintings” (*tongjinghua* 通景畫).³⁰ This range aligns with the genres Amiot lists for much of Attiret’s Chinese work: landscapes, battles, flowers, animals, architecture, and interior decoration.³¹ While most modern scholarship in English, French, and German treats Attiret as a portraitist, Chinese-language Imperial Workshop archives reveal that most of his work for Qianlong was in other genres.

Amiot spends several pages of his letter recounting how Attiret learned to successfully paint Chinese and Manchu women, a genre known as “beautiful women painting” that depicted a feminine type more than individualized portraits and which was typically only subtly erotic in its court manifestations but could be quite sexualized in other contexts.³² Attiret completed a work depicting Chinese women and their attendants in a landscape, but Qianlong ordered the artist to either change or repaint the figures because they looked like European women wearing Chinese dress rather than Chinese women. Later, a senior court painter explained that elite women and ladies of quality must be differentiated from servants by their visible “modesty, timidity, [and] sweetness” but particularly by their pink hands, slender fingers, and long pink-and-white fingernails with the pinky fingernail longer than the rest.³³ If Attiret wanted the emperor to appreciate this painting, then he was advised by his colleague to “cover the necks of these women up to the chin and their arms up to the wrists; a collar and long sleeves will get you out of trouble for the present; soften the colors of these faces; weaken their brightness through half tones that allow barely any flush to be seen; for we have a maxim that a woman who has a glowing face is addicted to wine.”³⁴ The colleague concluded with the assessment that Attiret would likely be more comfortable painting either foreign or Manchu women, as Manchu women only slowly adopted Chinese habits, implying that Attiret’s representations of the Chinese and Manchu women were not sufficiently delicate or reserved enough to comply with Chinese taste. Yet Attiret absorbed this advice so successfully that the Wish-Fulfilling Studio archives include imperial orders for at least sixty paintings of “beautiful women” between 1747 and 1767—more than any other genre requested of Attiret.³⁵

Two rare draft sketches for “beautiful women paintings” testify to his abilities, depicting dainty young women in high-collared, long-sleeved, Chinese-style robes engaging the viewer from behind curtained doorways (figs. 5a, 5b). Wider foreheads and pointed chins create heart-shaped faces with delicate eyebrows and small mouths through ink line rather than color or wash. The same treatment of the faces and similar framing of the women within interior architecture are also found in a work signed by Attiret and his Wish-Fulfilling Studio colleague Zhang Tingyan 張廷彥 (1735–94) that bears three of Qianlong’s seals (fig. 6).³⁶ Just over 1.7 meters tall, this painting

depicts a court woman gazing downward with a knowing smile as she stands behind the chair of another, while the seated woman looks up dreamily from her ladylike occupation of embroidering flowers and butterflies, together a symbol for heterosexual romantic love. As in the sketches, these women are viewed as if through an aperture, a common treatment suggesting that the viewer is observing the women while remaining unobserved himself. I believe that Attiret most likely painted these women's faces because of his talent for figures over other subjects as well as the fact that Qianlong's European artists regularly painted faces in larger collaborative works, where their distinctive volumetric, brush-concealing style is juxtaposed with the visible Chinese brushwork surrounding those faces.³⁷ The same contrast is found in this painting, where the women's faces are rendered in much finer, paler, and less conspicuous brushwork than the dark ink lines of their clothing and the boldly calligraphic strokes representing textile folds. Zhang was known for landscape, architecture, and figures, but his paintings of women's faces retain firm, perceptible ink lines more consistent with those used for their clothing.³⁸ Furthermore, in this painting and Attiret's sketches, all four women's faces share the same wider forehead and pointed chin, and the eyebrow positioning, gaze direction, and subtle mouth movement in otherwise unmodeled faces indicate thought and emotion. Attiret may have been responsible for other areas of the painting created with Zhang, but the faces are more likely than not his work.



FIGS. 5A, 5B. — Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68). Draft sketches of young Chinese women for scenic illusion paintings, dateable to 1759, ink on paper, 19.7 × 9.9 cm (each image). From *Recueil de pièces diverses, rangées chronologiquement de 1408 à 1845*, compiled 1892, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, NAF 5371, fols. 56–57. Images: BnF.



FIG. 6. — Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68) and Zhang Tingyan (Chinese, 1735–94). *Beautiful Women*, mid-18th century, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 172.8 × 83.8 cm. Private collection. From *Catalogue for The Imperial Sale*, auction cat., Christie's Hong Kong, 30 May 2005, lot 1217.

Both sketches bear yellow imperial paper slips (*huangtiao* 黃條) stating that the finished paintings were to be installed in the Clear View Pavilion (*Chengguan'ge* 澄觀閣) in the Eternal Spring Garden (*Changchunyuan* 長春園), next to the Yuanmingyuan (see figs. 5a, 5b).³⁹ These slips, together with workshop records, help identify the nonextant, final paintings for which the sketches were destined as “scenic illusion paintings” (*tongjinghua*), or monumental illusionistic works in color on silk. Such works were produced by the Qing Wish-Fulfilling Studio artists, who incorporated linear perspective and volumetric representation to create life-size works mounted on walls and ceilings, and were intended to deceive the viewer, through placement and representational techniques, into thinking that the painting subject and the space depicted were real.⁴⁰ Amiot describes one such painting by Attiret: approximately five *pieds* (likely referring to *pieds du roi*, “royal feet”) by three-and-a-half *pieds* wide (slightly more than 1.6 meters tall by 1.1 meters wide), it depicted a woman adjusting a flower in her hair in front of a mirror. While the subject falls squarely within the genre of “beautiful women paintings,” Amiot’s description of the size and deceptively realistic depiction of the space identifies it as a scenic illusion painting: “The mirror is what is most surprising in this painting. One would take it for a real mirror, in which one recognizes everything in the apartment that is within reach of being represented. The illusion is perfect; art cannot go further.”⁴¹ Attiret is specifically named in at least eleven sets of orders for scenic illusion paintings.⁴² But as an artist serving in the Wish-Fulfilling Studio, he was likely involved in many more, confirming that beautiful women and scenic illusions were both major categories of Attiret’s Qing court oeuvre.

Portraits

Although court workshop archives record few specific orders for Attiret to paint portraits, Amiot estimates that Attiret painted more than two hundred oil portraits of sitters including but not limited to “Manchus, Mongols, Tartars, Chinese, men, women, children, emperors, princes, magistrates, [and] warriors,” often as bust portraits.⁴³ Ten or twelve portraits, Amiot notes, were life-size and depicted the sitter in formal dress; sitters included the emperor, a Tibetan lama, an unnamed princess, and Qianlong’s brother, the fifth prince (likely referring to Hongyan 弘瞻, the Prince Guo 果, 1733–65). Curiously, Amiot omitted a very significant portrait from his list: On 29 May 1753 Attiret received an imperial order to paint the visiting Portuguese ambassador, Francisco Xavier Assis Pacheco de Sampaio; he would later produce two unofficial versions of this portrait, including one for the French mission.⁴⁴ In September 1754 Qianlong ordered that Pacheco’s portrait be attached to a nine-panel screen in the Palace of Harmonious Delights (*Xieqiqu* 諧奇趣) within the recently constructed European Palaces (*Xiyanglou* 西洋樓) precinct of the Yuanmingyuan.⁴⁵ The fact that the Frenchman Attiret completed the Portuguese ambassador’s portrait (rather than Castiglione, involved as he was with the Portuguese mission and the Pacheco embassy) was meaningful enough to the French Jesuits to earn a mention in the 1758 volume of the first edition of the

Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus (Edifying and curious letters, written from the foreign missions by some missionaries of the Society of Jesus), a thirty-four volume set of letters written by Jesuits serving in the French overseas missions and published in Paris between 1703 and 1776 for a broad audience.⁴⁶ The inclusion of this event in the *Lettres*, read widely both in France and across Europe, makes its omission from Amiot's necrology even more unexpected.

More than a dozen unsigned bust portraits in oil on Korean paper depicting important Qianlong court figures still exist. Korean paper (*Gaoli zhi* 高麗紙) is a thick, sturdy paper made of mulberry bark and heavily sized to minimize absorption, which made it an ideal surface for oils.⁴⁷ Until very recently, all were attributed to Attiret: two of Qing court princes sold at Bonhams London on 7 November 2024; eight of Mongol leaders held in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin; one of a consort in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dole; and, in the Musée Guimet, Paris, a bust portrait of Qianlong (fig. 7) along with one of a consort.⁴⁸ All the portraits indicate trained European Jesuit hands—either Attiret, Castiglione, or their colleague Ignatius Sichelbarth, S.J. (1708–80, Ch. Ai Qimeng 艾啟蒙)—through confident use of color, highlighting, and subtle shading (rather than Chinese-style visible linework and brushwork) to create individualized faces with mass and volume. More concrete attributions are difficult, due in part to the fact that some (such as the Mongol leaders) were painted outside of the palace workshops at other imperial sites away from Beijing. Palace Museum researcher Wang Youmin and Rijksmuseum curator Wang Ching-ling have used various court documents other than workshop archives to argue for reattributing the portraits' collective authorship away from Attiret, instead dividing it among the three Jesuit painters serving the court at that time.⁴⁹ Epitomized by the Musée Guimet portrait of Qianlong wearing ceremonial armor, these paintings consistently position the sitters frontally in the traditional poses of formal Chinese portraiture, which emphasize the face for insight into the person and use costume to mark status. However, all are set against blue or gray backgrounds, a more European treatment than unpainted grounds. Attiret took the same approach to his portrait of Father Parrenin published in the second edition of the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (1780–83), only slightly angling the French mission-leader's body and face but retaining the bust length, dark ground, and formal Chinese attire (see fig. 3). Attiret seems to have inaugurated this approach, which other missionary artists continued, such as in the portrait attributed to Giuseppe Panzi, S.J. (Ch. Pan Tingzhang 潘廷章) of Father Amiot circa 1789 (see fig. 1).⁵⁰

Attiret's only signed portraits depict horses, which Qianlong regularly received as tribute gifts. Bearing the signature "Respectfully painted by the court servitor Jean-Denis Attiret" (*Chen Wang Zhicheng gong hui* 臣王志誠恭繪, using a variant of the character *zhi*), Attiret's album *Ten Fine Horses* (*Shi junma tu* 十駿馬圖) is the only work bearing his signature that is both documented in the former imperial painting collection and still held in the Palace Museum in Beijing.⁵¹ Each painting in the album is inscribed



FIG. 7. — Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68). *Portrait of the Qianlong Emperor*, mid-18th century, oil on Korean paper, 119 × 91.5 cm. Paris, Musée National des Arts Asiatiques–Guimet, MG 26504. Photograph by Ghislain Vanneste, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

with the horse's name in Manchu and paired with a leaf of Qianlong's Chinese calligraphy praising the creature. The horses are depicted in landscapes but exist with greater solidity than their surrounding environments, which often include a view into the distance created by a curving path or body of water. In *The Fine Horse Myriad Auspiciousness* (*Wan Ji Shuang* 萬吉驪), the bend in the path repeats the curve of the horse's turned head, strengthening the connection between the animal and its setting (fig. 8). The path extends vertically up the right side of the composition, along an uptilted ground plane in the traditional Chinese mode of representing distance, rather



FIG. 8. — Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68). *The Fine Horse Myriad Auspiciousness* (Wan Ji Shuang 萬吉驪), ink and color on paper, 24.2 × 29.1 cm, from the album of paintings *Ten Fine Horses* (Shi junma tuce 十駿馬圖冊), dateable to 1743. Beijing, Palace Museum, 新 00146057. Image provided by the Palace Museum.

than with the low horizon line and vanishing point of European geometric linear perspective in which Attiret was originally trained. The horses in this album do not cast shadows on the ground. Yet the very subtle shading on their bodies, and slightly more visible shading and highlighting on their hooves, reveals that they were painted as if lit by a single light source. Their muscles are visible through their coats, and the discernible detail of the underlying anatomy combined with invisible brushwork adds to the animals' solidity in a landscape shaped using Chinese texture strokes. This combination of European and Chinese painting styles reveals not only how Attiret's skills expanded in court service but also the distinctly Qing transcultural painting style that Qianlong expected of his artists.

Each leaf is impressed with one or several of Qianlong's seals, which articulate and reiterate the emperor's pleasure in viewing and reviewing the works. His seal "Treasure of the Retired Emperor" (*Taishang huangdi zhibao* 太上皇帝之寶) is impressed across the top of the written and painted leaves, permanently marking his presence and approval. According to the third chapter (*juan* 卷) of the *Precious Collection of the Stone Moat Second Series* (*Shiqu baoji xubian* 石渠寶笈續編), part of the cataloging project for the secular works in Qianlong's imperial painting collection, the album was stored in the Forbidden City's Palace of Tranquil Longevity (*Ningshougong* 寧壽宮) where Qianlong originally planned to retire.⁵² This further identifies the work's significance as well as its persistent appeal to the emperor over his lifetime.

Attiret at the Mountain Retreat for Escaping Summer Heat

The third section of Amiot's letter focuses on events that occurred between 1753 and 1760, which he describes as the height of Qianlong's reign for the return of various

Mongol tribes to the Qing fold and imperial military victories in Central Asia.⁵³ Future generations, Amiot predicts, will be equally impressed by what occurred during this period as by “what painting will put before our eyes,” implying Attiret’s role in that success.⁵⁴ This period is also when Attiret received the most concentrated imperial favor and attention, beginning on 26 June 1754, when Qianlong ordered him to travel to the Mountain Retreat for Escaping Summer Heat to record the celebrations surrounding the submission of several thousand Dörbet Mongols and their leaders.⁵⁵ Attiret then spent two frenetic months painting at the Qing imperial retreat in Hebei province, approximately 150 miles away from the capital and north of the Great Wall, writing to Amiot about his experiences in letters both excerpted in the necrology and published in France.⁵⁶

Although Attiret was not originally part of the entourage that left Beijing, while en route Qianlong sent for him to join the imperial progress, which arrived at the Retreat on 2 July.⁵⁷ On 4 July 1754, Attiret recounted that a minister arrived at 11 p.m. with an order to paint the next day’s Great Banquet (*Da Yanyan* 大筵宴). Under orders to produce a draft sketch for imperial inspection before the banquet even occurred, Attiret chose the moment of the emperor’s arrival at the ceremony, drafted the image that same day as requested, and received imperial approval to proceed with the painting. Although the draft has been lost, the monumental finished work based on Attiret’s sketch, *Imperial Banquet in the Garden of Ten Thousand Trees* (*Wanshuyuan ciyan tu* 萬樹園賜宴圖) was completed the next year with the assistance of Castiglione and Sichelbarth (fig. 9).⁵⁸ Scholars often praise the painting’s ability to communicate imperial authority and a sense of truthful representation through its blend of European linear perspective and Chinese isometric perspective for the main scene and the surrounding landscape as well as its identifiable portraits of the Mongol leaders and the individualized faces of the major court officials.⁵⁹ These portraits are connected with those in Berlin, but far more important for Attiret at the time was the fact that he painted the emperor’s portrait as part of the banquet scene. Continuing the system of imperial approvals practiced in the Beijing palace workshops even while away from the capital, upon inspection of the draft, Qianlong found that his figure was leaning too far backward in his seat. To help Attiret correct the problem, Qianlong posed for him. Due to the extreme heat combined with Attiret’s persistent illness while at the Mountain Retreat, the emperor not only allowed the artist to remove his hat but also to sit. Attiret noted, “one is always on his knees when one does something in the presence of His Majesty,” marking these permissions as acts of extraordinary favor.⁶⁰

Qianlong’s satisfaction with this portrait led to an order to depict him practicing archery at the Retreat, which Attiret painted in oil on Korean paper (fig. 10).⁶¹ The emperor stands flanked by servants and officials while preparing to release an arrow toward a suspended target. Large rockeries, a stream, and a pavilion wall measure the significant distance between the emperor and the target, while colorful foliage in a mountainous setting identify the space as the Mountain Retreat. On the back of the painting, an imperial yellow slip reading “As-You-Like-It Island, Double-Pine Study”



FIG. 9. — Giuseppe Castiglione (Italian, active in Italy and China 1688–1766), Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68), and Ignatius Sichelbarth (German-Bohemian, active China 1708–80). *Imperial Banquet in the Garden of Ten Thousand Trees* (*Wanshuyuan ciyan tu* 萬樹園賜宴圖), 1755, hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 221.2 × 419.6 cm. Beijing, Palace Museum, 故00006275. Image provided by the Palace Museum.



FIG. 10. — Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68). *Qianlong Practicing Archery* (*Qianlong shejian tu* 乾隆射箭圖), dateable to 1754, oil on Korean paper, 95 × 213.7 cm. Beijing, Palace Museum, 故00008760. Image provided by the Palace Museum.

(*Ruyizhou Shuangsong shuju* 如意洲雙松書屋) identifies where in the Mountain Retreat it originally hung.⁶² Attiret reported that Qianlong assessed his work as “very good,” pairing a transliteration of the emperor’s “hen hao” (很好) with its French translation “très bien” in a rare use of the Chinese language, with which Attiret struggled. Depicting the emperor in action meant representing both his imperial visage and skill in an activity essential to his Manchu cultural and ethnic heritage. Attiret retained the blue sky, atmospheric perspective, figural modeling with highlights, and oil paints of his French training. Yet the uptilted ground plane, landscape texture strokes, and complete

lack of cast shadows reflect his successful absorption of Qianlong's preference for blended European and Chinese techniques.

Amiot only briefly mentions the events and characters that led to Qianlong's 1755–59 military campaigns in Xinjiang but describes in detail the triumphal procession into Beijing in 1760 that he observed.⁶³ That same year, Jesuits Attiret, Castiglione, and Sichelbarth, together with the Augustinian Qing court painter Giovanni Damasceno Salusti (1727–81, Ch. An Deyi 安德意), produced monumental paintings of the battles and the victory celebrations; these were installed in the Pavilion of Purple Splendor (*Ziguangge* 紫光閣), west of the Forbidden City.⁶⁴ Only fragments of the paintings survive today, but the images are better known through *Les conquêtes de l'empereur de la Chine* (The conquests of the emperor of China), a series engraved and printed in France in 1774 based on designs by European artists. Attiret contributed three designs: *Le combat d'Arcul* (The battle of Arcul), *La victoire de Khorgos* (The victory of Khorgos) (fig. 11), and *On offre les prisonniers de la pacification des tribus musulmanes* (Presenting the prisoners of the pacification of the Muslim tribes).⁶⁵ Researcher Niklas Leverenz argues that a group of draft sketches held in the Tenri Central Library of Tenri University in Japan are the preparatory images for these lost paintings, one depicting the Qing victory at Khorgos with an imperial yellow paper label identifying it as Castiglione's work, and another depicting the battle at Arcul that has lost its yellow labels.⁶⁶ Attiret is named as the designer for both of these images in the engraved series, an incongruity that leads Leverenz to suggest that Castiglione may have designed the original painting while Attiret prepared the drawing sent for engraving. Amiot does not mention Attiret's designs for the prints in his necrology; the sketches were only sent abroad the year before his death and returned a decade later, so Amiot could not have predicted the profound impact they would have on both Paris and Beijing in the later eighteenth century.

Attiret's last Wish-Fulfilling Studio order, dated 14 May 1768, was for a figure painting to be placed on the wall of a palace building.⁶⁷ He died shortly thereafter, on 8 December 1768, and was buried in Beijing's French Jesuit cemetery (*Zhengfusi* 正副寺), which was destroyed during the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901).⁶⁸ Qianlong provided two hundred silver taels for Attiret's funeral, equivalent to one thousand five hundred livres in Amiot's estimation.⁶⁹ This was such a mark of honor that the imperial donation was recorded in Latin and Chinese on his tombstone, now held in the Beijing Stone Carving Art Museum.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Using the language of art, Amiot describes his letter as a portrait, but admits that it is “embellished by the colors of friendship rather than traced lightly by the simple pencil of truth.”⁷¹ He justifies its length as a means of conveying some of Attiret's thoughts on Chinese painting, which the painter had hoped to publish as a text useful to artists and interesting to curious Europeans. This emphasis on accurate empirical



FIG. 11. — Jacques Philippe Le Bas (French, 1707–83), engraver; Jean-Denis Attiret (French, active in France and China, 1702–68), designer; and Charles-Nicolas Cochin II (French, 1715–90), printer. *La victoire de Khorgos* (The victory of Khorgos), etching and engraving, 100.7 × 65.4 cm (sheet), from the series *Les conquêtes de l'empereur de la Chine* (The conquests of the emperor of China), 1774. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 45.100.4, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1945.

observation and the suggestion of Attiret's unfulfilled publication aspirations reflect period European approaches for firsthand information about China. But as the head of the French mission in China in the precarious years immediately after the Society of Jesus was abolished in and expelled from France, Amiot would also have intended that this letter's publication would fuel eighteenth-century French fascination with China and demonstrate the continued relevance of the Jesuit mission in Beijing. By returning images of Attiret's works to the necrology, we not only fill in the visual gaps but also meet the expectations of the letter's own time.

When Attiret's work in France and China is considered holistically, it is clear that his paintings differed dramatically depending on country, patron, and audience. While those differences complicate efforts to pinpoint his style, the flexibility revealed by the paintings is also the marker of his success. Specifically, the ability to adapt European styles and materials to Qing imperial demands was essential to his continued court service and therefore his usefulness to the Jesuit mission and to France. Read against Attiret's extant oeuvre, Amiot's letter acquires additional value for what it omits as much as for what it reveals. With the Society officially dissolved at home, Amiot's necrology for Attiret navigates a balance between information about China and the Jesuit painter's biography and experiences. Amiot may have described only paintings that he personally had seen, but in doing so he epitomizes the eighteenth-century French intellectual trend of empirical observation. When we reintegrate extant paintings and Chinese archival sources with Amiot's letter, Attiret's life and work

contribute meaningfully to the material and textual evidence of eighteenth-century Sino-French cultural interactions.

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Notes

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1. “Extrait d’une lettre de père Amiot du 1 mars 1769, de Péking, content l’éloge du Frère Attiret,” *Journal de sçavans* (June 1771): 406–20; “Jean Denis Attiret, peintre et missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus. Lettre inédite du Père Amyot,” in *Collections de précis historiques, littéraires, scientifiques* (Brussels, 1856), 437–53, 461–77, 485–500; Henri Bernard, S.J., “Le Frère Attiret au service de K’ien-long (1739–1768): Sa première biographie,” *Bulletin de l’Université l’Aurore* 4, no. 1 (1943): 30–82; and Henri Bernard, S.J., “Le Frère Attiret au service de K’ien-long (1739–1768): Sa première biographie (Suite),” *Bulletin de l’Université l’Aurore* 4, no. 2 (1943): 435–74.

2. Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot, letter to Claude-François Attiret regarding Jean-Denis Attiret, 1 March 1769, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI), 2013.M.13, <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/2013m13>.

3. Jean-Denis Attiret, “Lettre du Père Attiret, peintre au service d l’empereur de la Chine, à M. d’Assaut, à Pékin, le 1er novembre 1743,” in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* [. . .], vol. 27 (Paris, 1749), 1–61; and Jean-Denis Attiret, *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China’s Gardens near Peking* [. . .], trans. Sir Harry Beaumont (London, 1752).

4. Marco Musillo, *The Shining Inheritance: Italian Painters at the Qing Court, 1699–1812* (Getty Research Institute, 2016); and Marco Musillo, “Reconciling Two Careers: The Jesuit Memoir of Giuseppe Castiglione, Lay Brother and Qing Imperial Painter,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 1 (2008): 45–59.

5. Jeffrey Muller, “My Eyes and Taste Are Grown a Little Chinese’: Jean-Denis Attiret, SJ, Recognizes the Equal Value of European and Chinese Art,” in *From Rome to Beijing: Sacred Spaces*

in *Dialogue*, ed. Daniel M. Greenberg and Mari Yoko Hara (Brill, 2024), 135–55; and Jeffrey Muller, “The Jesuit Strategy of Accommodation,” in *Jesuit Image Theory*, ed. Wietse de Boer, Karl A. E. Enenkel, and Walter S. Melion (Brill, 2016), 461–92.

6. *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang’anguan* 中国第一历史档案馆 First Historical Archives, *Qinggong zaobanchu dang’an zonghui* 清宮造辦處檔案總會, 55 vols. (Beijing Renmin Chubanshe, 2005).

7. Amiot, letter to Claude-François Attiret, GRI, 36.

8. Amiot, letter, GRI, 58.

9. For biographies of Amiot, see “Le P. Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot,” in *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l’ancienne Mission de Chine 1552–1773*, by Louis Pfister, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1932), 837–60; Yun Long 龙云, *Qian Deming: Shiba shiji Zhong-Fa jian de wenhua shizhe* 钱德明: 18世纪中法间的文化使者 (Beijing Daxue chubanshe, 2015); and Michel Hermans, “Appendix 2: Amiot’s Life,” in *The Mandate of Heaven: Strategy, Revolution, and the First European Translation of Sunzi’s Art of War (1772)*, by Adam Parr (Brill, 2020), 224–74.

10. Yoko Nii, “The Jesuit Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot and Chinese Music in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Europe and China: Science and the Arts in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Luís Saraiva (World Scientific, 2013), 81–92; Kee Il Choi, “Father Amiot’s Cup: A Qing Imperial Porcelain Sent to the Court of Louis XV,” in *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 33–41; Parr, *The Mandate of Heaven*; Xuan Fang and Dorothee Schaab-Hanke, “Circulation That Had Its Price: Roussier and His Role as an Early Recipient and

Disseminator of Amiot's Knowledge about Chinese Music," *Journal of Asian History* 56, nos. 1–2 (2022): 159–86; and Peter Revers, *Jean-Joseph Marie Amiot in Beijing: Entdeckung und Erforschung chinesischer Musik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Sächsische Landesbibliothek; Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden, 2023).

11. John R. Finlay, "Ko and Yang and the Mission Française de Pékin," chap. 1 in *Henri Bertin and the Representation of China in Eighteenth-Century France* (Routledge, 2020), 8–39.

12. Hermans, "Appendix 2," 254.

13. Finlay, *Henri Bertin*.

14. George Gazier, "Un artiste comtois a la cour de Chine au XVIIIe siècle, le frère Attiret (1702–1768)," *Mémoires de la société d'émulation du Doubs* 6 (1911): 2–40; Jean Hézard, "Jean-Denis Attiret, missionnaire comtois, Premier peintre d'un Empereur de Chine (1702–1768)," *Nouvelle revue franc-comtoise* 4 (1954): 219–26; Jean Hézard, "Jean-Denis Attiret, missionnaire comtois, Premier peintre d'un Empereur de Chine (1702–1768)," *Nouvelle revue franc-comtoise* 5 (1955): 29–38; Deborah Sommer, "A Letter from a Jesuit Painter in Qianlong's Court at Chengde," in *New Qing Imperial History: The Making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde*, ed. James Millward (Routledge Curzon, 2004), 171–84; Wei Yu 韋羽, "Qinggong huajia Faguo chuanjiaoshi Wang Zhicheng (Jean-Denis Attiret) 清宮畫家法國傳教士王致誠 (Jean-Denis Attiret)," *Aomen lishi yanjiu* 澳門歷史研究 4, no. 12 (2005): 72–82; Léo Keller, "Un pinceau utile pour la bien de la religion: Jean Denis Attiret (1702–1768), dit Wang Zhicheng, peintre jésuite à la cour de Chine," in *La chair et le verbe: Les jésuites de France au XVIIIe siècle et l'image*, ed. Édith Flamarion (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2008), 47–74; Tang Kaijian 湯開建, "Qinggong huajia Faguo yesuishi Wang Zhicheng zai Hua huodong kaoshu 清宮畫家法國耶穌會士王致誠在華活動考述," *Aomen ligong xuebao* 澳門理工學報 4 (2011): 190–201; George R. Loehr, "Der Künstler Jean-Denis Attiret und der Einfluss seiner Beschreibung der kaiserlichen Gärten," in *George Robert Loehr Jr. (1892–1974) und die forschung über die Peking jesuitenkünstler*, ed. Hartmut Walravens (Books on Demand, 2019), 207–20; and Muller, "My Eyes and Taste."

15. Violette Fris-Larrouy, *D'un soleil à l'autre: Jean-Denis Attiret, missionnaire jésuite peintre de l'Empereur de Chine* (Éditions de la Bisquine, 2017).

16. Anne Dary, ed., *Jean-Denis Attiret: Un docteur du XVIIIe siècle à la cour de l'empereur de Chine* (Dole: Musée des beaux-arts, 2004); and Ming Xiaoyan 明曉豔, "Qinggong Yang huajia

Wang Zhicheng 清宮洋畫家王致誠," *Wenhua zazhi* 文化雜誌 (*Revista de Cultura*) 57 (2005): 165–82.

17. Bénédicte Gaulard, "Une famille de peintres et de menuisiers: Les Attiret à Dole de la fin du XVIIe siècle au milieu du XVIIIe siècle," in Dary, *Jean-Denis Attiret*, 18–19.

18. Catherine Scheck and Jacques Thuillier, *Musée des beaux-arts de Dole: XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles; Peintures françaises* (Dole: Le Musée, 1995), 76–77. The reproduced image of *Yaël and Sisera* from the Dole collection is the best available; the work is in very poor condition and cannot be rephotographed (author's personal correspondence with Samuel Monier, July 2025).

19. Archives municipales de Dole, GG 89 Dole B.M.S. 1734–1737, cited in Anne Dary, "De Jean-Denis Attiret à Wang Zhicheng," in Dary, *Jean-Denis Attiret*, 8.

20. Amiot, letter, GRI, 9–10.

21. Amiot, letter, GRI, 10.

22. On Pozzo's ceiling and Castiglione's claim to follow this model, see Kristina Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces* (University of Washington Press, 2015), 78–82. On the Beijing churches, see Shin Ik-Cheol, "The Experiences of Visiting Catholic Churches in Beijing and the Recognition of Western Learning: Reflection in the Journals of Travel to Beijing," *The Review of Korean Studies* 9, no. 4 (December 2006): 11–31; Anthony E. Clark, *China Gothic: The Bishop of Beijing and His Cathedral* (University of Washington Press, 2019), 73–96; and Alan Richard Sweeten, *China's Old Churches: The History, Architecture, and Legacy of Catholic Sacred Structures in Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei Province* (Brill, 2020), 71–147.

23. Writing in the nineteenth century, Augustan Canron suggested that Attiret painted only Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and that a M. Mariotty fils painted John. Augustin Canron, *Guide de l'étranger dans la ville d'Avignon et ses environs* (Avignon, 1858), 75.

24. Amiot, letter, GRI, 11.

25. Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, *Journées européennes patrimoine 17–18 Septembre 2016: Patrimoine et citoyenneté* (Studio Muchir Descloids, 2016), 32, <https://www.calameo.com/books/002622573dec6cb2c412e>.

26. Amiot, letter, GRI, 21.

27. Amiot, letter, GRI, 21.

28. *Ruyiguan* 如意館 QL 4/7/27 (30 August 1739), in First Historical Archives, *Qinggong zaobanchu dang'an zonghui*, vol. 9 [1739–41], 171–72. This site is the thirteenth depicted in *Forty*

Scenes of the Yuanmingyuan (Yuanmingyuan sishijing 圓明園四十景; 1744), album of forty paired leaves of calligraphy and painting, ink and color on silk, painted by Shen Yuan 沈源 (act. eighteenth century) and Tangdai 唐岱 (1673–1752?), and now held in the Bibliothèque National de France, Département des Estampes et Photographie, RESERVE FT 6-B-9, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b550083263>.

29. Amiot, letter, GRI, 22.

30. Tang, “Qing Gong huajia,” 194, 197.

31. Amiot, letter, GRI, 21.

32. Amiot, letter, GRI, 29–35; and James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (University of California Press, 2010).

33. Amiot, letter, GRI, 33.

34. Amiot, letter, GRI, 33–34.

35. These commissions are summarized in Tang, “Qing Gong huajia,” 194, 197.

36. “Treasure of the Qianlong emperor” (*Qianlong yulan zhi bao* 乾隆御覽之寶), “Precious Collection of the Stone Moat” (*Shiqu baoji* 石渠寶笈), and “Treasure of the Painting and Calligraphy Room” (*Shuhuafang jianchang bao* 書畫房鑒藏寶).

37. For example, Castiglione painted only Qianlong’s face in the series of *thangkas* depicting him as the Mañjuśrī emperor. See Patricia Ann Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 54–61.

38. Cf. *The Goddesses Qingnü and Su’e* (*Qingnü Su’e* 青女素娥), mid-late eighteenth century, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, National Palace Museum, Taipei, acc. no. 中畫00018300000, <https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Collection/Detail/1753?dep=P>.

39. Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions*, 263–66, 338n87, 339n89.

40. Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions* 3–22.

41. Amiot, letter, GRI, 59.

42. Tang, “Qing Gong huajia,” 194, 197.

43. Amiot, letter, GRI, 42.

44. Jean Sylvain de Neuville, *Relação da jornada, que fez ao Imperio da China, e summaria noticia da embaixada que deo na Corte de Pekim em o primeiro de Mayo de 1753, o Senhor Francisco Xavier Assiz Pacheco e Sampaio* (Lisbon, 1754), n.p. On the embassy, see Antonio Vilhena de Carvalho, “In a Different World: Pacheco de Sampaio in Qing’s China (1752–1753),” in *Three European Embassies to China*, ed. Maria Manuela d’Olivera Martins et al. (Fundação Oriente, 2018).

45. *Ruyiguan*, QL 19/7/23 (9 September 1754), in First Historical Archives, *Qing Gong zaobanchu dang’an zonghui*, vol. 20 [1753–54], 378.

46. L. Patouillet, “Épître aux Jésuites de France,” in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* [...], vol. 28 (Paris, 1758), vii–viii.

47. Kee Il Choi, “Portraits of Virtue: Henri-Léonard Bertin, Joseph Amiot and the ‘Great Man’ of China,” *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 80 (2015): 55n27; and Camille Schmitt, *La médecine de l’art: Conservation des calligraphies et peintures chinoises en rouleaux à partir des textes de la dynastie Ming, 1368–1644* (Éditions Philippe Picquier; Centre de Conservation du Livre, Arles, 2011), 52–53.

48. “Fine Chinese Art,” auction, Bonhams London, New Bond Street, 7 November 2024, lots 141–42; Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 22156, 22228, 22229, 22230, 22242, 24356, 31805; Dole Musée de Beaux-Arts 2001.5.1; and Paris, Musée Guimet, MG 26504, 26588. For the eighth Berlin picture, see Wang Youmin 王幼敏, “Deguo Bolin cang Qingdai Zhunga’er Menggu zu buluo shouling youhua xiang yanjiu 德国柏林藏清代准噶尔蒙古部落首领油画像研究,” *Gugong xuekan* 故宫学刊 20 (2019): 293–310. See also Dary, *Jean-Denis Attiret*; and Martyn Gregory Gallery, *In the Wake of the Indian: Historical Pictures by Chinese and Western Artists 1770–1870* (London: Martyn Gregory Gallery, 2000).

49. Wang, “Deguo Bolin”; and Wang Ching-Ling 王靜靈, “Bolin shoucang de Ziguangge gongchen xiang jiqi xiangguan zuopin xin lun 柏林收藏的紫光閣功臣像及其相關作品新論,” *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 34, no. 1 (2016): 153–214.

50. Choi, “Portraits of Virtue,” 55, 57n33.

51. Nie Chongzheng 聂崇正, “Wang Zhicheng de ‘Shi Junma Tu’ ce 王致誠的《十駿馬圖》冊,” *Zijincheng* 紫禁城 6 (1981): 38.

52. On the Tranquil Longevity Palace within the larger Qianlong Garden of the Forbidden City, see Nancy Berliner, ed., *The Emperor’s Private Paradise: Treasures from the Forbidden City*, exh. cat. (Peabody Essex Museum, 2010).

53. Amiot, letter, GRI, 44–58; and James Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

54. Amiot, letter, GRI, 44.

55. The *Ruyiguan* order on QL 19/7/23 (9 September 1754) dates the order dispatching Attiret to the Mountain Retreat as QL 19/5/7 (26

June 1754), in First Historical Archives, *Qinggong zaobanchu dang'an zonghui*, 20:377.

56. Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot, "Lettre du père Amiot, missionnaire à la Chine, au père de la Tour, de la meme Compagnie, 17 October 1754," in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* [...], vol. 23 (Paris, 1781), 302–68; see also the partial translation in Sommer, "A Letter."

57. Amiot, "Lettre du père Amiot . . . au père de la Tour," 315.

58. Yang Boda 杨伯达, "'Wanshuyuan ciyantu' kaoxi '万树园赐宴图' 考析," *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宫博物院院刊 4 (1982): 3–21.

59. Lucia Tripodes, "Painting and Diplomacy at the Qianlong Court: A Commemorative Picture by Wang Zhicheng (Jean-Denis Attiret)," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 35 (Spring 1999): 185–200.

60. Amiot, letter, GRI, 54.

61. *Ruyiguan* records for 3 June 1755 (QL 20/4/24) date the order for the painting's creation to 1 August 1754 (QL 19/6/13); Attiret's letter quoted by Amiot dates it to 29 July (Amiot, letter, GRI, 54–55). First Historical Archives, *Qinggong zaobanchu dang'an zonghui*, vol. 21 (1755–56), 301–2.

62. Yang Boda 杨伯达, "'Qianlong shejian youhua guaping' shu kao «乾隆射箭油画挂屏» 述考," *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宫博物院院刊 1 (1991): 26–38. The workshop archives document cited in this essay, note 61, also records that the painting was hung at the Mountain Retreat.

63. Amiot, letter, GRI, 44–48.

64. Niklas Leverenz, "From Painting to Print: *The Battle of Qurman* from 1760," *Orientations*, May

2010, 48–53; and Camille Schmitt, "*The Battle of Qurman*: Restoration and Remounting of a Qing Imperial Wall Painting," *Orientations*, May 2010, 53–54.

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66. Niklas Leverenz, "Drawings, Proofs, and Prints from the Qianlong Emperor's East Turkestan Copperplate Engravings," *Arts Asiatiques* 68 (2013): 41.

67. *Ruyiguan* QL 33/3/28 in First Historical Archives, *Qinggong zaobanchu dang'an zonghui*, vol. 31 (1767–68), 773.

68. Ming Xiaoyan 明曉豔 and Jean-Paul Wiest, *Lishi yizong: Zhengfusi Tianzhujiao mudi* 歷史遺踪: 正福寺天主教墓地 (Wenwu Chubanshe, 2007).

69. Amiot, letter, GRI, 53.

70. Discussed and illustrated in Ming, "Qinggong Yang huajia Wang Zhicheng," 176–82.

71. Amiot, letter, GRI, 1.

Fragmented Bodies, Substitute Bodies: Zodiac Heads from the Garden of Perfect Brightness and the Translation of Cultural Heritage

Patricia J. Yu

On 28 December 2015, the National Palace Museum in Taiwan celebrated the opening of its Southern Branch in Chiayi. During the opening ceremony, Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou and Hong Kong superstar Jackie Chan unveiled the movie star's donation to the museum: bronze heads of twelve zodiac animals, each installed atop its own rectangular concrete pillar in the museum's central courtyard. Two days later, a pair of Taiwanese student activists upended cans of red paint over the heads of the Dragon and the Horse (fig. 1). Then they spray-painted the words "cultural united front" (*wenhua tongzhan* 文化統戰) over the concrete pedestals, transforming the sculptural installation into steles of protest. They posted the photographic evidence of their vandalism to social media; the publicly accessible post denounced the new museum's supposed abandonment of its founding principles and condemned its complicity in the marginalization and subordination of native Taiwanese culture to the cultural imperialism of mainland China.¹

These seemingly innocuous animal sculptures may appear to be an odd target for a protest against warming cross-strait relations. The sculptures, however, were not simply generic zodiac animals; they were directly based on the bronze zodiac heads from the Yuanmingyuan 圓明園 (Garden of Perfect Clarity, or Garden of Perfect Brightness), an imperial garden of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) near Beijing that was looted and burned in 1860 by British and French forces during the Second Opium War (1856–60). The act of vandalism against its copies in the central courtyard of the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan is but one development in the long biography of the Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads and their afterlives.

This essay will situate the heads within the history of the Yuanmingyuan, trace their reappearance on the auction market, and address the negotiation of their value as Chinese cultural heritage in contemporary cultural heritage discourse. It will ask the question: Of all the objects taken from the Yuanmingyuan, why has this particular set of zodiac heads become the most potent representative of looted Chinese cultural heritage,

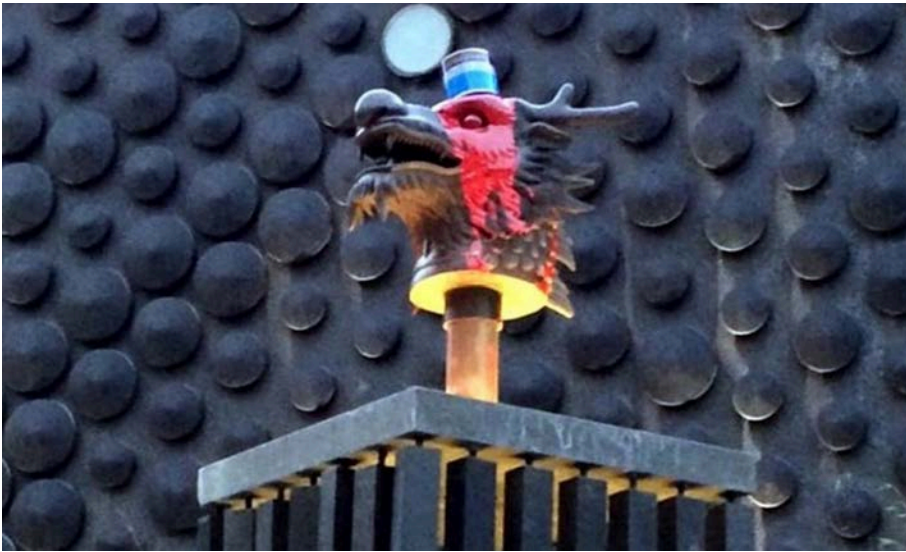


FIG. 1. — Vandalized bronze head of the Dragon produced and donated by Jackie Chan, installed in the central courtyard of the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum, Chiayi, Taiwan, 2015. Photographer unknown.

inspiring fervent calls for repatriation? I argue that it is in their sculptural forms as fragmented bodies, specifically as decapitated heads, that they serve as substitute bodies that continuously revive the trauma of national humiliation in national memory. The saga of the zodiac heads does not end with their repatriation but continues through their multivalent sculptural reproductions, in which contemporary makers, including Ai Weiwei have given the heads new physical form and revived them for new audiences. Because these reproductions are not exact copies, I argue that these acts of artistic reproduction can be considered acts of translation. As “translations,” the new heads move the conversation about cultural heritage into site-specific contexts and give voice to questions about heritage, identity, tradition, and global justice. These acts of translation can elevate the originals, satirize them, challenge them, and take on their own lives.

Looting and Vandalism at the Yuanmingyuan

Located about five kilometers northwest from the Forbidden City, the Yuanmingyuan occupies about 3.4 square kilometers and measures a rough rectangle of about 2,415 meters by 1,890 meters.² Most of its grounds follow Chinese principles of garden design, featuring pavilions set alongside winding brooks and connected by zigzagging paths and bridges. In a letter to a friend in France, Jesuit missionary Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–68) celebrated the garden’s grandeur and beauty and its cultivated resemblance to nature.³ At the same time as European aristocrats delighted in what the French termed *les jardins anglo-chinois* (Anglo-Chinese gardens), the polyglot Qianlong emperor (1711–99, r. 1735–96) also indulged in “Européennerie” and ordered the court

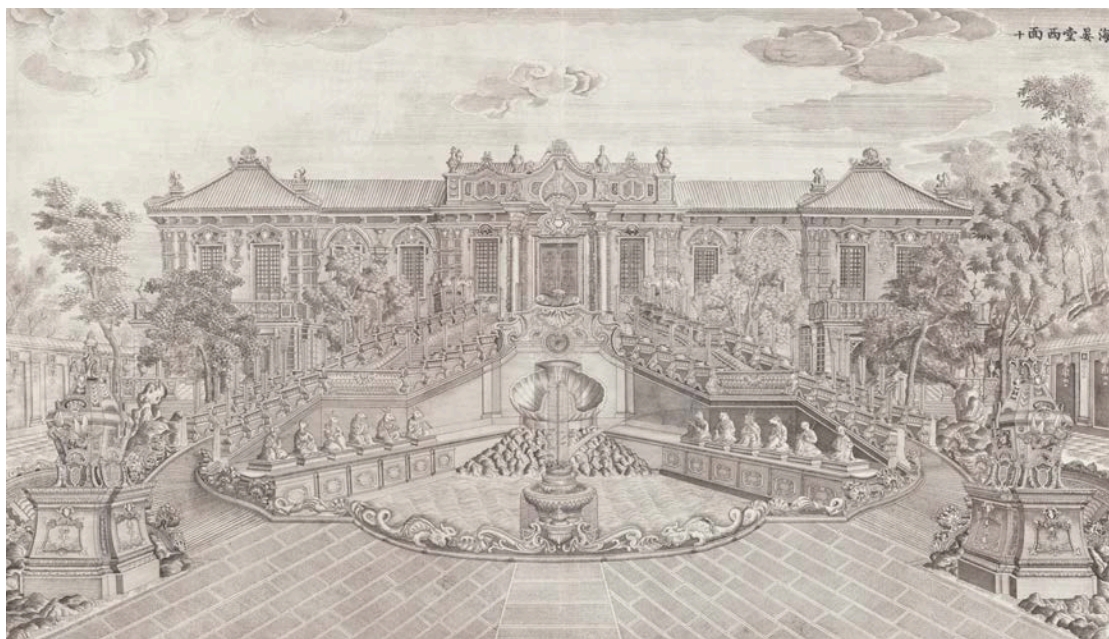


FIG. 2. — Yilantai (Manchu, active 1749–86). West facade of the Hall of Calm Seas, engraving, 50 × 87.5 cm. From *The European Pavilions at the Garden of Perfect Clarity*, portfolio of engravings, 1783–86. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B26695.

Jesuits, Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) and Michel Benoist (1715–74) to construct the European Pavilions (*Xiyanglou* 西洋樓).⁴ From 1747 to 1783, a series of Sino-Baroque pavilions with white marble facades and tiled Chinese roofs were erected on a 750-meter-long strip in the northeast corner of the garden.⁵

Although the site currently lies in ruins, the architectural facades of the European Pavilions were translated into a set of twenty copperplate engravings by Manchu court artist Yilantai (active 1749–86) in 1781. The bronze zodiac heads are found in the tenth print, which depicts the western facade of the Hall of Calm Seas (*Haiyantang* 海晏堂) (fig. 2). Here, the animal heads still have berobed human bodies. Arranged within a large fountain, the zoocephalic sculptures were literally fountainheads: every two hours, a different animal took its turn spouting a stream of water from its open mouth; at noon, all the animals spouted together. The animals that embodied the astronomical cycle of the years also served to embody the cycle of the daily hours.

In October 1860, in the closing days of the Second Opium War, Anglo-French troops under the command of James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin, occupied the Yuanmingyuan, which the Xianfeng emperor had hastily abandoned days prior. The British and French troops engaged in several days of looting and destruction, culminating in Elgin's order to set fire to the entire complex. The destruction of a site long known as one of artistic and cultural achievement was greeted with ambivalence in Europe. French writer Victor Hugo, who was already invested in the salvage of French cultural heritage and national identity, lamented its destruction and elevated the Yuanmingyuan into the company

of the greatest monuments of classical and medieval antiquity: “People spoke of the Parthenon in Greece, the pyramids in Egypt, the Coliseum in Rome, Notre-Dame in Paris, the Summer Palace in the Orient. . . . This wonder has disappeared. One day two bandits entered the Summer Palace. One plundered, the other burned.”⁶ Hugo explicitly connected the looting of the Yuanmingyuan with the earlier despoiling of the Parthenon by the elder Elgin: “Mixed up in all this is the name of Elgin, which inevitably calls to mind the Parthenon. What was done to the Parthenon was done to the Summer Palace. . . . We Europeans are the civilized ones, and for us, the Chinese are the barbarians. This is what civilization has done to barbarism.”⁷ Although Hugo’s letter concludes with a call for repatriation, it is likely that he also purchased Chinese silks looted from the Yuanmingyuan for his Chinese rooms at Hauteville House.⁸

In Elgin’s eyes, however, it was the Qing government that had failed to abide by still-uncodified standards of wartime conduct and treatment of captives. As the Anglo-French troops neared Beijing, thirty-nine of their civilian negotiators and soldiers had been seized after a negotiating session in September. By the time they were returned, on 9 October, the Anglo-French forces were already stationed at the Yuanmingyuan. Of those captured, only eighteen came back alive, and the living testified to the indignities of starvation, beatings, and neglect during captivity.⁹ Elgin thus perceived that a “great crime” had been committed and that the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan would be a “solemn act of retribution.”¹⁰ General James Hope Grant justified Elgin’s decision in a letter to their superiors: “First . . . the prisoners were treated with such barbarity, being bound hand and foot together for three days, with nothing to eat or drink; and secondly, because the English nation will not be satisfied unless more lasting marks of our sense of the barbarous manner in which they have violated the laws of nations be inflicted on the Chinese government.”¹¹

To Elgin, the violations upon the bodies of his men were a criminal act in need of retribution. In the absence of the emperor, the Yuanmingyuan had to serve as a substitute. In a letter to his wife on 27 October 1860, Sir Harry Parkes explained to her that “considering that Yuen Ming Yuen was the scene of the atrocities committed on our countrymen, I consider that it was the proper one of the two [the other being Beijing] to make a monumental ruin of.”¹² Parkes’s biographer, Stanley Lane-Poole, offered further commentary: “From an artistic point of view it was an act of vandalism; from that of sound policy it was statesmanlike.”¹³

In the decades that followed, the remains of the garden fell into greater and greater disrepair. The wooden pavilions of the garden’s Chinese side had been consumed in the flames; the stone and brick of the European Pavilions, on the contrary, remained partially standing. Chinese-language histories of the Yuanmingyuan emphasize its ruins as a memorial to national humiliation, as witness to a moment when imperialist forces committed an act of hypocritical barbarism in the name of civilization.¹⁴

It is within this discourse of national humiliation that the historian Xiang Da describes the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan as “vandalism” in his Chinese-language

article in *Zhongguo yingzao xueshe huikan* [Journal of the Chinese Architecture Society] of 1931:

Destroyed by Western vandalism [*xi yang fan da zhu yi* 西洋番達主義], this is a great loss to Chinese culture, and it is the first of that which our fellow countrymen must never forget. . . . Since the time of Sino-Western encounter and exchange, Western vandalism has brought disaster upon China [*xi yang Vandalism zhi wei huo yu Zhongguo* / 西洋Vandalism之為禍於中國], of which this campaign was the first and greatest.¹⁵

Vandalism is not translated into Chinese but is directly printed into the text in English and as a transliteration, pointing to its origins as an imported foreign concept. By using the English, Xiang Da constructs the act itself as something foreign. By characterizing the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan as *vandalism*, the author implicitly harks back to the origins of the term in the sacking of Rome by the Vandals, drawing historic parallels to a centuries-old civilization whose decline was hastened by the invasion of foreign barbarians.¹⁶

Where the term does appear in Chinese characters in the article, it's technically a transliteration, where it is put into Chinese pronunciation: 番達 *fan da*. But the transliteration can also be read as a hidden play on words: the character for *fan* can mean “foreigner,” and the character for *da* can mean “to arrive,” and thus *vandalism* is defined as what happens when foreigners arrive.

The author also calls out the international community for inconsistent application of their own principles. He points out, “When Germany invaded Belgium in 1914 and bombed the Leuven Library, this act was condemned by all nations.”¹⁷ He compares the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan to the bombing of the Leuven Library, and calls on “those adherents of international law from Western civilized nations” to acknowledge the parallels.¹⁸ Writing in 1931, the same year as the Athens Conference (First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments) that called for the preservation of historic sites, he was surely aware of the frustrating contradiction in the rhetoric of historic preservation arising decades too late for the Yuanmingyuan.

The interpretation of the significance of the Yuanmingyuan was thus transformed from a private Qing imperial space to a Chinese national site of the collective memory of national humiliation. Proponents of its restoration argued for a new identity as a site celebrating the genius of Chinese landscape gardening and design.¹⁹ The revival of the Yuanmingyuan since the 1980s forms part of a larger conversation about national memory of the past and how that past should inform the direction of the future.

The zodiac heads are a key part of that conversation. Between 1860 and 2000, however, they have almost no history. In the nineteenth century, the looted objects that garnered the most attention in Europe were the items symbolic of Qing sovereignty and military paraphernalia. An exhibition of French loot in April 1861 at the Tuileries



FIG. 3. — “Fine and Rare Bronze Head of a Monkey, circa 1750” and “Fine and Rare Bronze Head of a Boar, circa 1750,” lots 134 and 135 in *Fine Chinese Decorative Works of Art*, auction cat., Sotheby’s New York, 9–10 October 1987. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 87-P18570.

Palace featured the ceremonial armor of the emperor flanked by ranks of spears and halberds.²⁰ The bronze animal heads, which appear neither Chinese nor European, received no mention. Between 1860 and 1987, they disappear. They don’t appear again until the late 1980s.

Heads on the Auction Blocks

The first two heads to emerge from obscurity were the Monkey and the Pig as lots 134 and 135 in Sotheby’s New York auction of “Fine Chinese Decorative Works of Art” on 9 and 10 October 1987 (fig. 3). The Pig sold to a private US American collector for US\$104,500 and the Monkey sold for US\$165,000 to Taiwanese collector and dealer Cai Zhennan, the founder of the antique dealership My Humble House (*Hanshe* 寒舍) in Taipei, who was born in the year of the monkey.²¹

In June 1989, Sotheby’s London featured the head of the Tiger on its catalog cover for the sale of “Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art” (fig. 4). The auction also included the heads of the Ox and Horse, and My Humble House acquired all three: the Ox for £148,500 (US\$240,570), the Tiger for £137,500 (US\$222,750), and the Horse for £181,500 (US\$294,030).²² At this point, four heads were in a Taiwanese collection. My Humble House would make one hundred full-scale replicas of the Monkey head in bronze to sell

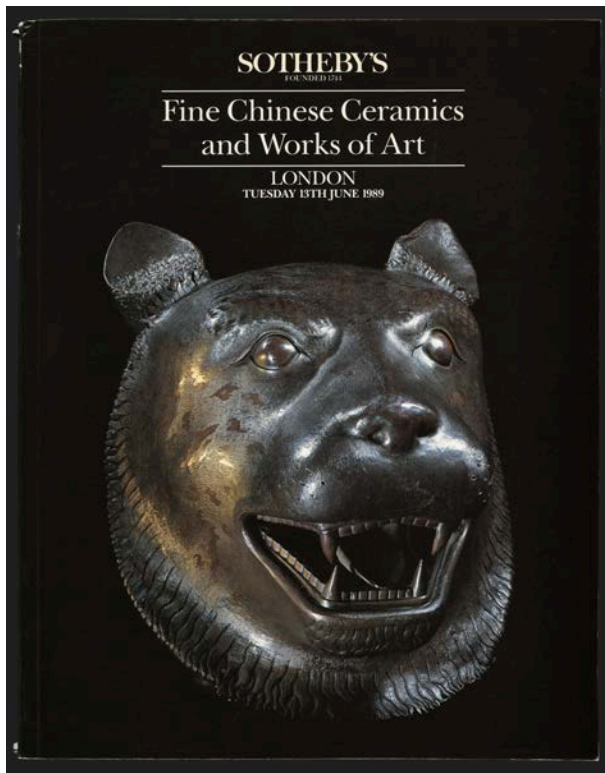


FIG. 4. — Cover of the auction catalog for *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, Sotheby's London, 13 June 1989, featuring lot 68, "An Important Bronze Zodiac Tiger's Head, Qianlong." Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 89-P5233.

as collectors' items.²³ It does not appear that the dealer made replicas of the other heads in his possession, and he soon put the Tiger back up for auction at Christie's Swire in Hong Kong in October 1991; it sold for US\$429,000.²⁴

In the spring of 2000, the Monkey, Ox, and Tiger returned to the auction block in back-to-back sales by Christie's and Sotheby's Hong Kong.²⁵ The sales from 1987 to 1991 had proceeded quietly, but in Hong Kong in 2000 the Chinese government and pro-Beijing groups lobbied to have the sales halted. Protestors stormed the Sotheby's salesroom at the Island Shangri-La Hotel, ironically located by the hotel restaurant named the "Summer Palace."²⁶ Rather than resorting to legal action, the Chinese state recovered the three heads (Monkey, Ox, Tiger) by delegating the Poly Art Group—a spin-off of the People's Liberation Army—to win them back at auction. Exceeding all estimates, the Poly Art Group successfully acquired the heads by spending about one million US dollars each on the Ox and Monkey and nearly two million on the Tiger.²⁷ Rather than relying upon diplomatic pressure or legal channels, the Chinese state recovered the heads by outspending rival bidders.

At the intersection between patriotism, repatriation, and strategic business dealing, in 2003, the "Gambling King of Macao" Stanley Ho purchased the Pig from a private collector in New York for US\$770,000 and donated it to the Poly Art Museum



FIG. 5. — “An Exceptionally Rare and Magnificent Bronze Horse Head Made for the Zodiac Fountain of the Summer Palace, Qing Dynasty, Qianlong Period,” lot 1321 in *Yuanmingyuan: The Garden of Absolute Clarity*, auction cat., Sotheby’s Hong Kong, 9 October 2007. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2771-007.

in Beijing.²⁸ In October 2007, Sotheby’s Hong Kong featured the Horse head as the centerpiece of its special sale, “Yuanmingyuan: The Garden of Absolute Clarity” (fig. 5).²⁹ To avoid public outcry, Sotheby’s ultimately facilitated the acquisition of the Horse head by Ho as a private transaction between him and the consigner. Ho acquired the Horse, estimated at HK\$60 million (US\$7.7 million), for US\$8.9 million and expressed his intention to donate the Horse head back to the nation. The State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China lauded Ho’s “patriotic act.”³⁰ Presumably, his business ventures, now that Macao itself had been repatriated to China in 1999, also benefited from this act of patriotism.

Following Ho’s acquisition of the Horse, it was exhibited in the Sotheby’s Hong Kong autumn sales preview so that the public could “appreciate this national treasure.”³¹ Following its exhibition in Hong Kong, the Horse was subsequently displayed in the lobby of Ho’s newest Macao endeavor, the Hotel Grand Lisboa.³² Chinese state media celebrated the homecoming of the Horse, but its actual location in a hotel casino within the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Macao raises the question of what might be considered “home” for repatriated objects. On the one hand, the Horse was not back at the Yuanmingyuan; nor was it in the collection of a state museum. On Macao, it resided just barely within the borders of the nation-state that

claims it as its cultural heritage. On the other, if “China is not a country but an idea which was reformulated in the twentieth century to fit with the hegemonic world nation-state system,” where all artifacts from within its current borders are “recast as ‘national cultural heritage,’” then the Horse’s spatial distance from the Yuanmingyuan does not matter.³³ If anything, its presence within the Grand Lisboa also served to anchor the peripheral SARs to the central state.

In 2009, the Rat and Rabbit head came up at a Christie’s Paris auction from the estate of Yves Saint-Laurent.³⁴ The Chinese government lodged a protest and demanded their repatriation; a group of Chinese lawyers also attempted to halt the sale, but they were refused by the French courts. Sino-French tensions were already high due to President Nicolas Sarkozy’s criticism of China’s human rights violations in Tibet.³⁵ The international drama reached a climax when Xiamen-based businessman and collector, Cai Mingchao, won the bid at US\$18 million for each head but then refused to pay, casting himself as a patriot and claiming that the heads were illegally removed from China and should be repatriated.³⁶ Instead, the heads remained with Pierre Bergé, the partner of Saint-Laurent, who then stated that he would return the heads when China addressed human rights violations in Tibet. In another demonstration of the intersection between cultural heritage, global politics, and economy, French luxury-business magnate François-Henri Pinault, who had acquired the Rat and Rabbit from Bergé after the failed Christie’s auction in 2009, donated the heads back to China during a diplomatic trip to broaden trade relations between the two countries in 2013.³⁷

In November 2019, during the seventieth anniversary year of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Ho officially presented the Horse head to the National Museum of China and the Ministry of Culture.³⁸ In late November 2020, the Horse was transferred to the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park where it was displayed to mark the 160th anniversary of the burning of the Yuanmingyuan.³⁹

Fragmented Bodies

The zodiac animal heads have served as case studies on the repatriation of cultural relics in contemporary China.⁴⁰ Scholars have argued that repatriation operates at the intersection of art, politics, and the economy; political scientist Richard Kraus characterized the zodiac heads as objects that are “prized as ‘national’ treasures for political, not aesthetic reasons.”⁴¹ On the international stage, the repatriation efforts are a form of global competition in which China-as-nation-state competes against other nation-states in the fields of “civilizational antiquity” and “unbroken continuity.”⁴² Other scholars have argued that the zodiac heads are situated “within a history of shifting values” that closely links them “to the development of two intersecting discourses, national humiliation and world cultural heritage.”⁴³ In the post-Tiananmen Square period, the narrative of national humiliation was revived to bolster nationalism among the youth who had no living memory of the actual events of national humiliation. Concurrently, the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park was formally established in the early 1980s

and opened to the public in 1988. In 1994, the park was designated a Patriotic Education Base; it was also a site of celebration in 1997 with the repatriation of Hong Kong.⁴⁴ By the mid-1990s, the ruins of the European Pavilions had been cleaned up, and they came to be metonymic with the Yuanmingyuan as a whole—the logo of the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park takes the form of the ruined archway of the Grand Fountain in the European Pavilions.

There have been many suggestions to explain the elevated attention on the zodiac heads (versus the other looted objects from the Yuanmingyuan) and why they suddenly mattered around the year 2000. The heads are immediately identifiable as objects from the Yuanmingyuan, and the bronzes are legible as animals and relatable as personal zodiac signs, even to audiences who know little about the Yuanmingyuan. The earlier auction at Christie's London on 13 June 1989 had been overshadowed by the Tiananmen Square massacre occurring just days earlier on June 4. Although the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park opened in 1988, excavation of the European Pavilions was not completed until 1992, so the most well-known images of the ruins were not disseminated until the late 1990s. At the time of the Hong Kong sales in 2000, the repatriation of the former British colony of Hong Kong in 1997 was still cause for celebration and had turned thoughts toward the repatriation of other ceded territories or looted objects from the Opium Wars. And, in the wake of China's ratification of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention in 1985, the rhetoric of "cultural heritage" had been used increasingly in Yuanmingyuan-related materials.⁴⁵

To add to the above insights, I would also emphasize that medium, size, and number matter. The zodiac heads are similar in scale to many surviving examples of ritual bronze vessels. As art historian Kristina Kleutghen has pointed out, the zodiac heads are contemporary counterparts to the legendary nine bronze tripods from Chinese antiquity that granted political legitimacy to their possessors.⁴⁶ Just as the divine tripods form a numbered set of nine, the bronze heads form a closed set of twelve figures, each one a part of a widely recognized zodiac sequence and possessed of an individual identity. As a closed set, the gaps in the sequence are all the more obvious: Until the heads of the Dragon, Snake, Ram, Rooster, and Dog reappear, the Yuanmingyuan zodiac set is incomplete, signaling the incomplete project of China's recovery from national humiliation.

I propose addressing the heads as a fragmented set of literally fragmented bodies in the form of decapitated heads. Other objects looted from the Yuanmingyuan, such as porcelain and cloisonné vessels, were originally produced in multiples and often moved around the imperial residences. In contrast, the zodiac heads were made specifically for the clock fountain at the Hall of Calm Seas; as sculptural fountainheads, they are inextricably tied to their location in the European Pavilions.

Although no records specify how the heads were removed from the grounds of the Yuanmingyuan, their forms create an imagined moment of decapitation, of deliberate bodily fragmentation. Appearing on the auction block as heads on pedestals, they resemble trophy heads taken by enemy forces whose mutilated forms evince the victor's

barbarity and the victim's humiliation.⁴⁷ As heads, the zodiac sculptures also attest to the imposition of imperialism disguised as justice. After all, Lord Elgin ordered the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan as an act of retributive justice against the mistreatment of English prisoners. Before the heads appeared on the auction block, it is easy to imagine that Elgin put them on the executioner's block.

In the collective memory of Chinese citizens today, the occupation and looting of the Yuanmingyuan by the Anglo-French in 1860 is often conflated with the invasion and looting of the Forbidden City by the Eight Powers Expeditionary Force in 1900 when they aimed to subdue the Boxer Rebellion. The foreign occupation of the Forbidden City was punctuated by public executions of suspected Boxer rebels, whose beheaded bodies served as silent witnesses to the imposition of foreign justice and civilizing violence.⁴⁸ Images of fallen Chinese bodies, imprisoned bodies, subjugated bodies, and decapitated heads circulated in sensationalist journalism and souvenir photo albums of the China campaign that reinforced Orientalist tropes of cruelty and punishment (fig. 6).⁴⁹ In the twentieth-century Chinese imagination, decapitation formed the "primal scene" of national and personal trauma.⁵⁰ Late Qing and Republican Chinese intellectuals seized upon the imagery of the brutalized Chinese body to call for urgently needed reform, often couched in the terms of a strengthened national body.⁵¹

The narrative of national humiliation that frames the period from the Opium Wars to World War II as a century of humiliation continues to conflate distinct historical moments into one singular moment. The display that opens the permanent exhibition *Road of Rejuvenation* in the National Museum of China continues to draw visual equivalence between foreign aggression, looted object bodies, and despoiled Chinese bodies. The repatriated Rat and Rabbit heads occupy a case positioned under



FIG. 6. — William Saunders (English, 1832–92). *Hinrichtung* (Execution) from *Views from the Ilitis in China*, album of photographs, compiled ca. 1919. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2003.R.2.



FIG. 7. — Bronze heads of the Rat and Rabbit, ca. 1750, displayed in the permanent exhibition *Road of Rejuvenation* in the National Museum of China, Beijing, 2014. Photograph by the author.

photographs of Japanese soldiers beheading Chinese soldiers during the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894, as well as photographs of foreign soldiers of the Eight Powers Expeditionary Force seated upon the imperial throne after marching into Beijing (fig. 7). In their display, the zodiac heads serve as physical manifestations of a mutilated national body, ones that must be repatriated and made complete to heal the national wound.

The zodiac heads remain a broken, fragmented set; therefore, it is only in acts of reproduction that the broken set can be made whole again. In the following section, I address two examples of reproduction that are not exact copies or, to use a biological metaphor, “cloned substitutes” that could be mistaken for the originals. The original heads as a “parent” set bore multiple “offspring” sets who share characteristics with their progenitors but speak in their own voice. To put it a different way, the sculptural reproductions of the zodiac heads are acts of cultural translation; they not only fill in the lacunae of the missing heads through acts of artistic creation but also imbue the heads with additional layers of meaning that address contemporary concerns about the negotiation of cultural heritage in the twenty-first century.

Ai Weiwei's Circle of Animals

The publicity of the Christie's auction in 2009 sparked near-simultaneous projects: artist-activist-provocateur Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals* and martial-art superstar Jackie Chan's movie *Chinese Zodiac* (2012) and accompanying sculptural set.

The works of Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) have questioned the value of Chinese cultural heritage; he has painted over Neolithic pottery, dropped a Han dynasty vase, and contorted Ming furniture into nonfunctional forms. In 2009, Ai lambasted the Chinese media attention given to the Rat and Rabbit heads at the Christie's auction. He condemned corrupt Chinese officials for expressing concern over the bronze heads when they paid no attention to the dead children crushed under the debris of collapsing schoolhouses. He denied the value of the heads and called out the hypocrisy of cultural heritage in China: "The rabbit and rat bronzes from the Old Summer Palace are not Chinese culture, and they have no artistic value. Patriotism is not a love of the Aisin Gioro [Qing ruling house] family name, and twelve playthings manufactured in the West are not the quintessence of Chinese culture. . . . Over the first few decades of a New China, in the name of the revolution and during the Cultural Revolution, across the entire nation and in Tibet, you destroyed countless cultural relics."⁵² When the auction occurred, Ai Weiwei was already in discussions with Larry Warsh, the director of AW Asia, to create a work of public sculpture.⁵³ The controversy over the heads inspired his monumental sculptural project *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads*, which reproduced the Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads as monumental bronzes.

As an act of artistic translation, Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals* cannot truly be referred to as a set of copies or replicas. In general, it does follow the original forms and material of the zodiac heads. But the heads have been enlarged to a monumental scale, measuring about four to five feet across, each head mounted on a much thinner column of bronze that elevated the looming heads ten feet high over the viewer (fig. 8). To make a complete set, Ai and his team of artists creatively devised the appearance of the five missing animals. With the artistic freedom to break away from the established form of the extant heads, Ai and his team imbued their interpretation of the five missing heads with a greater degree of liveliness and character than the other heads, taking the liberty to completely redesign the Tiger into a fierce, snarling beast. Ai's version of the zodiac heads does not quite retain their original function as fountainheads that track time. In his sculpture, the open mouths of the animals are not filled with streams of water, leaving them free to "speak" on their own terms.

In the catalog for the traveling installation of *Circle of Animals*, arts journalist Susan Delson describes the thin pillars of bronze as jets of water buoying up the heads in a "spirit of playfulness," referencing their original position as fountainheads.⁵⁴ Roberta Smith for the *New York Times* spies a suggestion of "an abstracted lotus stem and leaves," again drawing a connection to water and fountains.⁵⁵ Seen in another light, however, the columns gain a sinister cast. Their knobbed and gnarled striations suggest not so much a jet of water but bloodied wooden stakes impaling the results of a grisly hunt. Is this a condemnation of the looting of the Yuanmingyuan, despite Ai's vehement disavowal of



FIG. 8. — Ai Weiwei (b. 1957, Beijing, China). *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads*, 2010, twelve bronze sculptures, dimensions variable (h: between 300 and 340 cm). Installation view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 20 December 2024. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Budi Tek and the Yuz Foundation, M.2020.95.1-12. Art © Ai Weiwei. Photograph by the author.

their heritage value? Or is this a skewering (pun intended) of the supposed value of the heads as national cultural heritage?

Although the heads directly reference the Yuanmingyuan zodiac set, they also offer a flexibility of interpretation that moves beyond the specific context of the Yuanmingyuan. Most prominently, the arrest and detainment of Ai Weiwei by Beijing authorities on 3 April 2011 overshadowed the subsequent world tour of *Circle of Animals*. Exhibition reviews focused almost exclusively on the absent body of the artist and condemned Chinese authorities for political oppression and restricting free speech. As heads, the sculptures appeared to speak for their silenced maker; they acted as substitute bodies for the artist, who remained in Beijing under a travel ban. Ai Weiwei's passport was not returned until July 2015; he is now working outside of China.

As *Circle of Animals* toured the world, each exhibition venue opened up new interpretative possibilities. The sheer physicality of the monumental bronzes emphasized their occupation of any given site. In physical form, *Circle of Animals* both copies and transforms the original zodiac heads; as an edition of six sculptural sets, Ai Weiwei's heads also replicate each other. The six sets moved independently of each other, resulting in concurrent and overlapping exhibitions of *Circle of Animals* around the world. Each installation location opened up different possible interpretive frames, whose multiplicity I will briefly explore.⁵⁶

In May 2011, *Circle of Animals* served as the inaugural outdoor exhibition of the courtyard of Somerset House in London. The former parking lot for government bureaucrats had just been renovated into a space for public art programming. The unveiling of Ai Weiwei's sculptures proclaimed a new relationship between the hulking historic building and the twenty-first century British public. The mood was dampened, however, by the conspicuous absence of the artist. Media discussion around the sculptural installation focused on the arrest and detainment of Ai Weiwei and the suppression of artistic freedom by the Chinese government.⁵⁷ The presence of the monumental zodiac heads gestured toward two injustices: the ongoing one of the artist's absent and traumatized body and the historical injustice of the British empire. Somerset House is a site of layered histories. As the seat of the British Admiralty in the nineteenth century, it architecturally reframes Ai Weiwei's sculptural animals as a parodic scene of Yuanmingyuan loot on display, as if they were trophy heads proudly displayed in a perverse celebration of British victory in the Second Opium War.

Arrayed in front of the Fountain of Freedom of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs from 2012 to 2017, the heads connect issues of looted cultural heritage, human rights, and international politics. In the summer heat, however, teenagers and school children splash in the water, paying the heads little notice. The heads, denied of their referent to an agonized past of imperialist encounter and national humiliation, are relegated to a playful backdrop for childhood innocence (fig. 9).

From 2013 to 2014, standing in the courtyards of encyclopedic art museums such as the Cleveland Museum of Art, the heads are pivoted toward multiple areas of museum collecting. They stand in celebration of a famous contemporary artist's new creation and continue in the lineage of sculptural portrait busts in the European galleries. Simultaneously, their bodiless heads also echo the broken forms of fragmented Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, whose headless bodies and disembodied heads raise difficult questions about the provenance and acquisition history of Asian art in US American collections.⁵⁸

In 2015, at the National Museum of Wildlife Art, Wyoming, the zoological aspect of the sculptures is emphasized, and the conversation shifts from cultural heritage to the conservation of the natural world. The larger-than-life sculptures hark back to the extinct megafauna of previous geological ages, offering a warning of the calamitous consequences of climate change. Ai Weiwei's own activism provides the bridge for his sculptures to address environmental justice and human rights.

In front of Chicago's Adler Planetarium, the heads revert to their identity as zodiac animals keeping track of the movement of the heavens and the cyclical passage of time. During the installation in September 2014, the Adler covered the heads with stark white cloths to express solidarity with Ai Weiwei, silenced and under house arrest (fig. 10).⁵⁹ The muzzled and blinded animals thus called attention to the violation of their maker's rights to free speech and free movement.



FIG. 9. — Ai Weiwei (b. 1957, Beijing, China). *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads*, 2010, twelve bronze sculptures, dimensions variable (h: between 300 and 340 cm). Installation view at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 16 July 2015. Private collection. Art © Ai Weiwei. Photograph by the author.

After receiving his passport back in 2015, Ai was finally able to personally unveil the zodiac heads when they were exhibited at the National Gallery of Prague. There, he explicitly associated the heads with his other artworks that call attention to the Syrian refugee crisis by wrapping each head in the same protective gold foil used by the Syrian refugees as emergency blankets.⁶⁰ In this case, the animals were no longer Ai Weiwei's substitute body but the substitute bodies of refugees.

Images of Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals* continue to appear in his more recent art, including as large mosaic portraits made from Lego bricks, a medium that the artist first used in portraits of political prisoners. Their images adorn the cover of his illustrated memoir, *Zodiac: A Graphic Novel* (2024), where Ai Weiwei further removes the zodiac heads from their original referents in the Yuanmingyuan and regrafts them onto his artistic and autobiographical body.

Vandalizing Jackie Chan's Zodiac Heads

Since the auctions of the zodiac heads in Hong Kong in 2009, the martial arts movie star Jackie Chan (b. 1954) has been vocal in his support for the repatriation of looted artifacts from China. Playing to his own strengths, he responded to the controversial auction of the Rat and Rabbit head at Christie's in 2009 by writing, directing, and starring in an action adventure movie, *Chinese Zodiac* (十二生肖), released in 2012. Chan



FIG. 10. — Ai Weiwei (b. 1957, Beijing, China). *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads*, 2010, twelve bronze sculptures, dimensions variable (h: between 300 and 340 cm). Installation view at the Adler Planetarium, Chicago, IL, September 2014. Art © Ai Weiwei. Photograph courtesy AW Asia, NY.

plays a globe-trotting mercenary who is hired to locate and retrieve the missing zodiac heads by an unscrupulous French auction company. The movie positions Chinese and French student protestors as the everyday heroes who lobby against the sale of looted artifacts. The movie props of the heads have also acquired a second life, as Chan's production company created additional sets to raise awareness of the zodiac heads as lost cultural relics (fig. 11). Sets have been gifted to the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park and to the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, but it was in Taiwan—in the courtyard of the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum—that they inspired an act of vandalism.⁶¹

Whereas Ai Weiwei criticized the original zodiac heads for being “not Chinese,” in the context of a museum space in central Taiwan, Chan's reproduction heads were perceived as “too Chinese.” The student activists saw the imposition of these icons in the central space of the new museum as a form of cultural imperialism. In a public post on social media, they argued that the Southern Branch was constructed “to connect the native people of Taiwan, to educate Taiwanese on the cultural diversity of Asia, and to create some separation from the National Palace Museum in Taipei.” The acceptance of the heads, therefore, constituted a “cultural invasion and colonization” by China that was not to be borne by Taiwanese who refuse to be “culturally Chinese.”⁶²

The Southern Branch was constructed as a counterbalance to the main branch in Taipei. The initial founding of the National Palace Museum in 1925 allocated the



FIG. 11. — 12 Zodiac Sculptures (Dragon), 2012, bronze, 30.5 × 31.6 × 28 cm. Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Gift of Mr. Jackie Chan, 2013-00331.

treasures of the Qing imperial house to the body politic of Nationalist China. When the Nationalist government moved to Taiwan in 1949, they moved the collection of the National Palace Museum with them; the museum collection serves as political legitimizer of the Nationalist government on Taiwan as the inheritors of the Chinese state.⁶³ In recent years, however, more voices are advocating for Taiwanese independence and arguing for a uniquely Taiwanese identity set apart from ties to mainland Chinese identity.⁶⁴ The Southern Branch was founded as a pan-Asian museum whose mission is to feature the cultural exchanges across Asia as well as highlight the Indigenous and native cultures of Taiwan.⁶⁵ In the catalog that introduces the new museum's architecture, grounds, and permanent exhibitions, the Southern Branch omits the connection between the zodiac-head sculptural installation and the Yuanmingyuan. Instead, the museum presented the twelve animals of the zodiac as a cultural tradition shared across Asia whose presence would help communicate the institutional mission of "respecting cultural relics and protecting the universal value of humanity's cultural heritage."⁶⁶

Objects and images, however, are rarely neutral representatives of cultural heritage. In particular, art of the Qing imperium in relation to Taiwan often testifies to a history of conquest from the mainland. The Qianlong emperor, who commissioned copperplate prints to commemorate the military victories over the Dzungars in Xinjiang

and, later, the completion of the Yuanmingyuan's European Pavilions, also utilized the copperplate medium to celebrate the campaign against Taiwan to quell the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion of 1787–88.⁶⁷ When military commander Fukang'an (d. 1796) led the Qing navy across the Taiwan Strait, he was bestowed a Qing ritual object: a rare, right-spiraling conch shell that would guarantee the fleet's safe passage across the sea. In late 2015, the first object seen in the Southern Branch's inaugural exhibition on the local history of Chiayi was the Qing imperial conch shell.⁶⁸

Immediately after the official unveiling of Chan's sculptural reproductions, the Taiwanese newspaper *Liberty Times* (*Ziyou shibao*) ran an article criticizing the zodiac-head donation on two fronts: It questioned first that, as a world-class museum, what was the National Palace Museum doing by accepting reproductions (and headlined the article "Even fakes are accepted" [*lian yanpin ye shou* 連贗品也收]). Second, and more importantly, how could the museum not see that this was a ploy by Mainland China to wage cultural warfare against Taiwan?⁶⁹ It is likely that this article inspired the act of vandalism by the student activists, who were previous participants in the Sunflower Movement of 2014 protesting Ma Ying-jeou's policies that strengthened political and economic ties between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. Vandalizing Jackie Chan's animal heads is a continuation of the sentiments expressed in the Sunflower protests. The red-drenched heads pillory the president while simultaneously evoking the bloodied heads of protestors asserting their national identity as Taiwanese in the face of growing rapprochement with China (see fig. 1).

The vandalism created a visual rebus that furthers the answer to the question of why these heads and not other objects. In Chinese, "animal heads" is pronounced "獸首 *shou shou*." Taiwanese commentators picked up on its homophonic relationship to another phrase, also pronounced "授首 *shou shou*" but meaning "to surrender, to be killed," and most tellingly, "to be decapitated," used historically in reference to subduing rebels and robbers.⁷⁰ "To accept" is also "收受 *shou shou*," and so the form of the heads creates a chain of homophonic equivalences wherein "to accept animal heads" is "to accept decapitation." The linguistic play on words is reinforced by the physical form of the zodiac animals as "heads" mounted for display in public space.

As the *Liberty Times* article speculated, President Ma and Mr. Chan, whose Chinese names include the characters for "horse" and "dragon," had hoped that their combined presence would invoke the idiom "the spirit of the dragon and the horse," generally used to describe a person advanced in age who is still full of life, or in this case, an ancient nation or a museum of ancient artifacts that still has vitality. So when the article derided the zodiac installation by calling it "peeling paint" (落漆 *luoqi*), a local colloquialism meaning a loss of face, the student activists instantiated all the puns by literally throwing paint over the heads of the Dragon and Horse.⁷¹

Physically, the vandalism did little damage: The paint was easily removed.⁷² But the discussions that followed ultimately led the Southern Branch to issue a statement in September 2016 saying that they were removing the heads from the courtyard and that

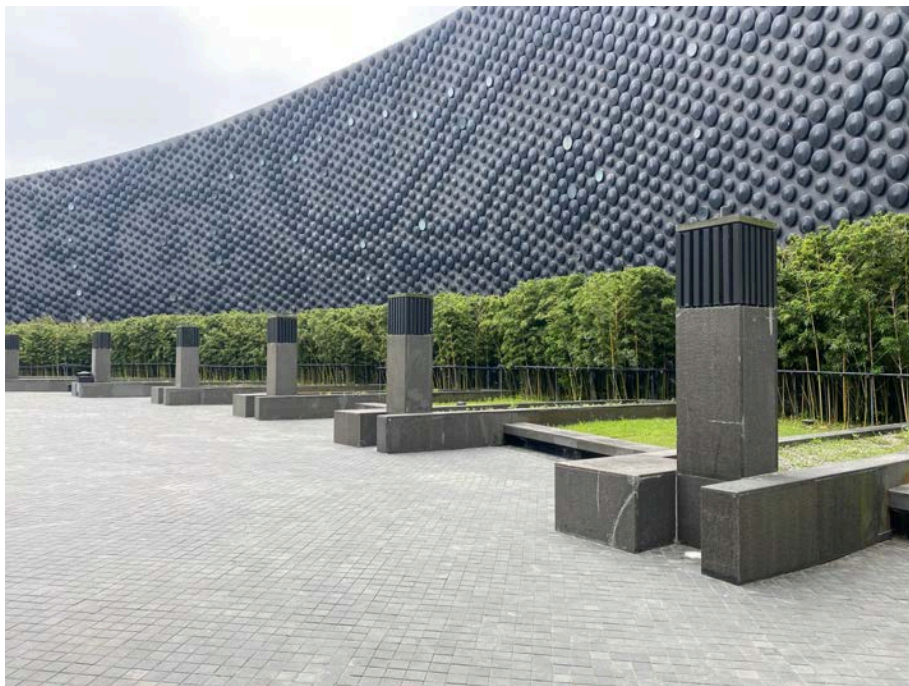


FIG. 12. — The central courtyard of the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum, Chiayi, Taiwan, after the removal of the replica zodiac animal heads donated by Jackie Chan, 29 March 2025. Photograph by the author.

the space would display local art instead.⁷³ The bronze heads are now deinstalled, but the concrete pedestals remain. The material remnants of the installation stand like silent steles to the proxy battle over cultural claims and national identities (fig. 12).

Copies are never neutral, and neither are the spaces that they inhabit. The copy, as an act of translation, responds to the original referent and is also made to respond to its own particular moment. The original Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads became the iconic representatives of looted Chinese cultural heritage by sharing in the visual rhetoric of decapitated bodies; their repatriation aims to be an endpoint to the wounds of national humiliation. In their replicated afterlives, the zodiac heads also serve as a multitude of substitute bodies: detained artistic bodies, looted bodies, embattled political and national bodies. Within each site-specific frame of display, they give new voice to contestations over cultural heritage, identity, and global justice.

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Notes

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The pinyin system for romanizing Chinese characters is used here, except for personal names where the individual uses a different system. Translations from the Chinese are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

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The Global System of the Arts at the End of the Nineteenth Century and the Commissioning of a Sepulchral Monument in Santiago, Chile

Fernando Guzmán

Introduction

In 1887, Monsignor Mariano Casanova, archbishop of Santiago, Chile, gave impetus to the project of constructing a sepulchral monument destined for the Catedral de Santiago (Santiago Cathedral) to honor the memory of his late predecessor in the government of the archdiocese, Monsignor Rafael Valentín Valdivieso (1804–78). Funding difficulties and the complexity of the decisions to be made delayed the development of the work, which was completed in 1898 (fig. 1).¹ The abundance of documentation in the Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de Santiago (Historical Archive of the Archbishopric of Santiago) related to the commission of the monument illuminates key mechanisms of the global system of the arts in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This essay considers the nature of the artistic choices that were made, paying special attention to the selection of materials, authors, and stylistic solutions. At the same time, the essay unveils the logic of the iconographic program of the monument, reflecting on the historical implications of its ultimate configuration.

Without a doubt, Valdivieso's tomb is part of a broader process. During the nineteenth century, the Chilean art scene underwent significant changes. Some of the circumstances driving the renewal were the founding of Chile's Academia de Pintura (Academy of Painting) in 1849, the arrival of foreign artists and architects to Santiago of Chile, and the importation of European paintings and sculptures.² During the inauguration of the Academia de Pintura, its first director, Neapolitan painter Alessandro Ciccarelli, expressed his clear intention to bring Chilean art to the international stage.³ At the same time, churches began to dispense with their Baroque ornamentation and acquire contemporary religious art. From 1857 on, Archbishop Valdivieso instigated a profound transformation of the cathedral in Santiago.⁴ The original altarpieces, sculptures, and colonial paintings were replaced by marble altars and works commissioned from Italian, French, or Chilean artists trained at the



FIG. 1. — Emilio Doyère (French, 1847–1918), architect. Sepulchral monument for the late Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, 1898, marble, bronze, stained glass, and mosaic, 820 × 723 × 185 cm. Santiago, Chile, Santiago Cathedral. Photograph by Ulises Nilo, 27 July 2024.

Academia.⁵ The erection of the funerary monument can be viewed in this broader trajectory of change and incorporation into the global arts arena.

In January 1887 Casanova became archbishop of the diocese of Santiago. That same year he published a circular in which he proposed the construction of a new tomb for the remains of Monsignor Valdivieso, defining the characteristics it should have.⁶ The urgency of the initiative indicates that this was an aspiration that had germinated in his mind long before his consecration. “The posthumous glorification of great men is a duty of gratitude and a powerful stimulus for posterity,” the circular states, especially when “they have consecrated a life sown with virtues to the service of the Church and of souls.”⁷ The text notes the existence of previous initiatives aimed at the same end that

did not prosper due to the difficulties imposed by the war with Peru and Bolivia and, later, the cholera epidemic that began in 1886.⁸

The circular anticipates the objections that some might raise, such as the high cost or the inappropriateness of the exaggerated tenor of the homage. Reminding the current generation of ecclesiastical authorities of their duty to glorify great men of the church and present the lives of those figures to society as an example for new generations, the text points out, “It is not necessary to have merited being raised to the honor of the altars for the Church to decree their posthumous glorification.”⁹ Casanova gives an example of the tombs of the noncanonized pontiffs preserved in the Eternal City. In this way, he justifies the work and anticipates possible objections to dedicating resources to the project of honoring the archbishop in this way by interposing an authoritative argument.¹⁰

The text of the circular instructs that a “monumental sepulchre should be erected to keep the ashes of our illustrious predecessor in a dignified manner.”¹¹ In other words, Casanova was thinking of the impact of the work’s characteristics on its observers. At the same time, the circular contextualizes such a monument’s materiality: “Public monuments perpetuate in bronze or marble the memory of those who have exalted the people.”¹² Reference to these materials was commonplace in the nineteenth century; however, in the context of the circular, it can be understood as the expression of a precise will: The tomb of Archbishop Valdivieso was to be erected in marble and bronze, as indeed it was. A preferred location was also established: the last arch of the north aisle. But Casanova’s guidelines were not restricted to monumentality, materiality, and location. There seems to have been a certain artistic and architectural program from the outset, ideas that made it possible for Casanova to commission preliminary designs, referred to in the circular as “various plans that we have received from Rome.”¹³ These plans have not been preserved, but they must have been drawn up in accordance with Casanova’s instructions.

For review, all of Casanova’s instructions were given to a board, of which José Ramón Astorga, a priest who was a member of Santiago Cathedral’s Ecclesiastical Chapter and general vicar of the archdiocese, was appointed president.¹⁴ Astorga had participated in the opposition to Casanova’s nomination as archbishop. After the death of Valdivieso in 1878, the liberal government appointed Francisco de Paula Taforó as archbishop. The state of Chile was considered heir to the royal patronage of the Spanish monarchy, a legal status that allowed it, among other things, to appoint bishops. Almost all the priests close to the late Archbishop Valdivieso considered Taforó to be ignorant of theology, impious, and a friend of the liberals. In light of the negative reports coming from Chile, the Holy See never ratified him. After eight years of the seat’s vacancy and acute tensions, the government appointed the priest Mariano Casanova as the new archbishop, an appointment that was ratified by the Holy See. Nevertheless, Astorga and other priests considered the new archbishop to be unreliable.¹⁵ In this light, the construction of a monumental tomb for Valdivieso, along with the appointment of Astorga to the presidency of the board that directed the works, can be interpreted as a

gesture by Casanova aimed at rebuilding trust and closing a bitter chapter in the history of the Catholic Church in Chile.

The file of the extant documentation on the sepulchral monument cataloged in the Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de Santiago reveals a long silence of nearly six years between the circular's publication in 1887 and the first plans, dated 1893.¹⁶ It is very likely that this time was spent collecting funds, a process about which no written record is preserved. What is certain is that from 1893 onward, resources were available and steps were taken to commission the design and execution of the monument.

Progress of the Project and the Iconographic Program

The first plans for the new tomb as well as a document with technical instructions were commissioned from Eduardo Isenring, a German architect based in Chile.¹⁷ Both documents were intended to establish general guidelines on the basis of which more detailed proposals from other architects and artists would be requested (fig. 2). The plan legends and the text of the instructions were written in French, thus facilitating the search for European architects or artists to direct the work. The first design by Isenring differs greatly from what was ultimately executed, but it seems to contain a number of decisions that had an impact on the final work. First, he proposed to use the entire space of one of the chapels in the side aisles. Then, from an iconographic point of view, he introduced the idea of representing the allegories of Knowledge and Religion, and the sculpture of a lion—a funerary symbol with a long tradition—was incorporated. Other features of this first proposal were not carried out, such as the representations of the praying archbishop and the angel offering a laurel branch, or the particularly invasive idea of opening up the wall to build an apse to house the ensemble.

For the sculptures of Religion and Wisdom, the instructions state: “In the center, the archbishop in a praying attitude is accompanied by his virtues: on the left, religion, and on the right, human knowledge.”¹⁸ The aim was to represent the virtues that those who commissioned the monument wanted to emphasize as belonging to the deceased. Casanova, in his first pastoral letter, published in 1887, highlights the legacy of Archbishop Valdivieso. He refers to “his firm and wise hand,” as well as his authority, exercised from “the ascendancy of character and the superiority of knowledge.”¹⁹ But, as well as highlighting the attributes of the late archbishop, the completed sculptures seem to embody one of Monsignor Casanova's policies. In the same document he outlines a program to articulate human knowledge and religion, one of the premises of which is that “science is light and all light leads us to God.”²⁰ To this he adds the desire that all human progress “should be matured by the sun of faith.”²¹ The dialogue between science and religion was a central concern of the government of Casanova, the main manifestation of which was the foundation, in 1888, of the Universidad Católica de Chile (Catholic University). This harmony between human and divine knowledge was expressed in the iconographic program of the chapel of the archbishop's palace, whose works were under the direct supervision of Casanova. The paintings, created during

One of the issues raised in the correspondence is that of the direction of the work. For Astorga, whose views in this area were influenced by the archbishop's opinions, the overall conception and coordination of the work was to be entrusted to an architect. In one of the first letters he wrote to Subercaseaux, he pointed out that it would be desirable not to make any changes to Isenring's plan, given that "it is a very great advantage if the architect who drew up the plan is the one who carries out the work."²⁵ Astorga implied that what was expected of the European workshops was the manufacture of the components according to the specifications sent from Chile. Subercaseaux, on the other hand, held that "the sculptural part is so important that the artist who undertakes it cannot be forced to adhere rigorously to the lines specified."²⁶ He further proposed that the general conception of the monument be given to sculptor Justin-Chrysostome Sanson: "In the event of his [Sanson's] proposal being accepted, the detailed plans would be drawn, in agreement with him, by M. Nenot," a French architect.²⁷ As such, the Chilean diplomat conceived that the work should be designed and executed by a sculptor. As was customary in the nineteenth century, architectural works were subordinate to sculptural ones.²⁸ Astorga's stance could likely be explained by the usual practice of commissioning an architect for altars. In a letter at the end of 1893, Astorga pointed out to Subercaseaux that the French sculptor ultimately hired would not be "obliged to submit to the lines drawn on the plan," recognizing a degree of freedom but not acquiescing that the sculptor could undertake the direction of the creation of the the monument.²⁹

A second aspect discussed in their epistolary exchange is the decision about where in Europe the monument should be produced. Both agreed that in order to ensure good-quality marble work it was necessary to commission the work in Paris. While Astorga points out, "At present better works in marble are done in France than in Italy," Subercaseaux adds that the execution of the works in Paris would not imply an increase in costs, since "what is cheap in Italy is the cheap stuff."³⁰ Both considered that Italy had lost its status as a supplier of high-quality artistic works, including marble work. Astorga complemented the conversation on this matter by adding that the possibility of the cathedral undergoing a complete artistic renovation, which would indeed happen a few years later, was an additional reason for not commissioning "a shoddy work sent to Switzerland or Italy."³¹ However, Sanson himself recommended to Subercaseaux that the architectural part be executed in the city of Carrara in order to reduce costs.³²

A final interesting point is Astorga's concern about the resemblance that the sculpture of Archbishop Valdivieso should bear to his real appearance—a particularly sensitive matter considering that many of those who knew him could judge how well the sculpture resembled the man. In a letter sent to Subercaseaux in August 1893, Astorga gave an account of the precautions he had taken to resolve this point. "In addition to the photographs I can send, I have a plaster death mask of Sr. Valdivieso's face taken from his corpse shortly after his death and which is exactly as we knew it. The only defect is that his eyes are closed."³³ It was common practice during the second half of the nineteenth century to give photographs to painters or sculptors who were to

make a portrait of the deceased. The making of death masks, for its part, had gained particular popularity during the nineteenth century as another means, complementary to photography, of remembering the departed.³⁴ In this case, those in charge of the monument showed a special concern for preserving Valdivieso's likeness.

At the end of 1893 it seemed clear that the decision would be to award the commission for the sepulchral monument to the sculptor Sanson and the architect Henri-Paul Nenot. However, in January 1894, Isenring and Chilean sculptor Virginio Arias proposed to take charge of the work, for which they would make a sketch that would later be used to commission its execution in Paris. The work was attractive to both of them as a project with available funding and a very high profile. Isenring's long association with the initiative, together with Arias's prestige, supported the reception of the proposal.³⁵ Arias had won prizes at the Paris salons and had carried out outstanding projects in Chile.³⁶ Astorga immediately wrote to Subercaseaux, informing him of the offer that the two had made. The board, faced with equivalent offers, preferred "the sculptor Arias for two reasons: 1, because he is Chilean and it is natural that he should wish to be accredited in his country, doing work of merit; 2, because, according to what he has discussed with me, he accepts to be paid here in Chilean currency."³⁷ Payment in local currency made it possible to avoid exchange-rate losses. Subercaseaux endorsed the board's decision, believing that "the choice of the sculptor Arias was the right one, as he is undoubtedly a talented artist," expressing, however, his annoyance at the inappropriateness of the change: "What I regret is that they didn't decide this earlier, so as to save the artists from doing useless work."³⁸ In the end, the negotiations with Arias were not successful for financial reasons, as Astorga explains in a letter of June 1895.³⁹ During that year, the exchange rate became favorable to the Chilean currency, and the decision was made to give a final push to the project. Astorga insists to Subercaseaux that he should trust in Isenring's judgment to direct the work, and announces the sending of a bill of exchange in his name for the sum of seventy thousand francs. Subercaseaux's response to the board's insistence is not preserved in the archive, but subsequent events seem to indicate that Subercaseaux did not continue to collaborate on the monument. The circumstances likely reflect local tensions about how to promote artistic development in Chile.⁴⁰

The Final Contract

In April 1896 the junta sent Casanova a plan of the sepulchral monument drawn up by Emilio Doyère, a French architect living in Chile. In the letter attached to the designs, the junta stated that it would "gladly see this monument executed in accordance with the said plan."⁴¹ There is no record of the reasons why Isenring was removed from the project, even though he had been involved in its development for years. Doyère, for his part, collaborated in various works of the archbishopric and was in close contact with Casanova. Among other responsibilities, he oversaw the interior ornamentation of the *Basílica del Salvador*.⁴² On 11 May 1896 a contract was signed between Doyère and the

Arzobispado de Santiago (Archbishopric of Santiago) to regulate the execution of the sepulchral monument.⁴³ Although the plans for the monument are not preserved, it is clear that the contract refers to the sepulcher that was actually built. The work involved the coordination of specialists in marble, sculpture, stained glass, and mosaics.

Doyère had trained at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and had participated in the restoration of the Cathédrale Sainte-Marie de Bayonne (Bayonne Cathedral) in France.⁴⁴ He arrived in Chile in 1890, joining the Escuela de Arquitectura (School of Architecture) at the Universidad de Chile.⁴⁵ The French architect's project for the sepulchral monument retained some of the elements designed by Isenring, such as the large round arch enclosing the monument, the representation of the lion, and the presence of the sculptures of *Faith* and *Science*. However, the architectural concept and the sculptural proposal were significantly different. Doyère's imprint can be seen in four decisive features. The first is the removal of the apse, an intervention that would have involved knocking down part of the stone wall. He then structured the work around a large round arch containing a second arch with the main iconography and two niches to contain the complementary sculptures of *Faith* and *Science* (see fig. 1). This solution forms a simulated building that frames and contains the repertoire of images, subordinating the various elements to the architecture. A third feature is the use of different techniques and materials, transforming the work through the presence of marble, bronze, stained glass, and mosaic into a veritable showcase of visual languages. The monument can be seen as a letter of introduction to the ornamentalist architect Doyère. It should be noted that he was also interested in taking charge of the general transformation of the cathedral, a job that was finally entrusted to Ignazio Cemonesi.

Doyère's input is also reflected in the chromatic richness obtained by the incorporation of stained glass and mosaic, as well as by the use of marble of different colors and veins. Nineteenth-century funerary monuments were usually made of white or gray marble.⁴⁶ However, examples of chromaticism can be found in the funerary field, in some French episcopal tombs of the nineteenth century, through both the use of different marbles and the incorporation of other elements, such as bronze applications. Some examples are the tombs of the archbishops of Paris Jean-Baptiste du Belloy and Hyacinthe-Louis de Quélen, the former erected in 1818 by Louis-Pierre Deseine and the latter in 1852 by Adolphe-Victor Geoffroy-Dechaume.⁴⁷

The Splendor of the Marbles

The choice of marble, described in detail in the contract, merits a close look.⁴⁸ The great arch and the pilasters supporting it are made of breccia marble in their centers and Rosso Levanto (often marketed at the time as Polcevera) marble at their edges, with large rosettes of green and ocher marbles spaced within. The inner arch is done in paonazzo marble, and the niches in veined Carrara. The three sculptures are in white Carrara, while the coffin is in portoro. The base of the monument is in flowered bardiglio, with black marble from Belgium used for the inscriptions and portoro for the



FIG. 3. — Detail of the marble of the outer arch of the sepulchral monument for the late Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, 1898. Santiago, Chile, Santiago Cathedral. Photograph by Ulises Nilo, 12 December 2025.

base molding (fig. 3). This is an extensive repertoire that adds color and grandeur to the work. The diversity of marble links the tomb to the most prestigious monuments of Roman antiquity as well as to the wealth of materials of the Heavenly Jerusalem as described in the Revelation of Saint John.⁴⁹ It is quite likely that the desire to produce a lavish work stemmed from Doyère. All the marbles had to be transported from Europe to Chile, and some of them, such as portoro and Polcevera, were scarce and expensive. The appreciation of marble had begun to take root in Chile during the eighteenth century with the new production of ecclesiastical furniture in high-quality imitation marble.⁵⁰ During the nineteenth century, the import of marble elements for churches gradually increased.⁵¹ In this trajectory, the marble splendor achieved with the funerary monument can be seen as the crowning achievement of a long sequence of events.

The management of the marbles was entrusted to the Sociedad Juan Ceppi y Hermano (Juan Ceppi and Brother) (fig. 4). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Juan Ceppi y Hermano's marble factory had a workshop in Santiago, about two hundred hired workers, and a network of contacts in Italy that afforded it a privileged position in the production and sale of the material in Chile. The company was the continuation of a workshop initially set up by Benedetto Rossetti, the uncle of the Ceppi brothers, in Santiago in the middle of the century.⁵² Importing companies such as Juan Ceppi y

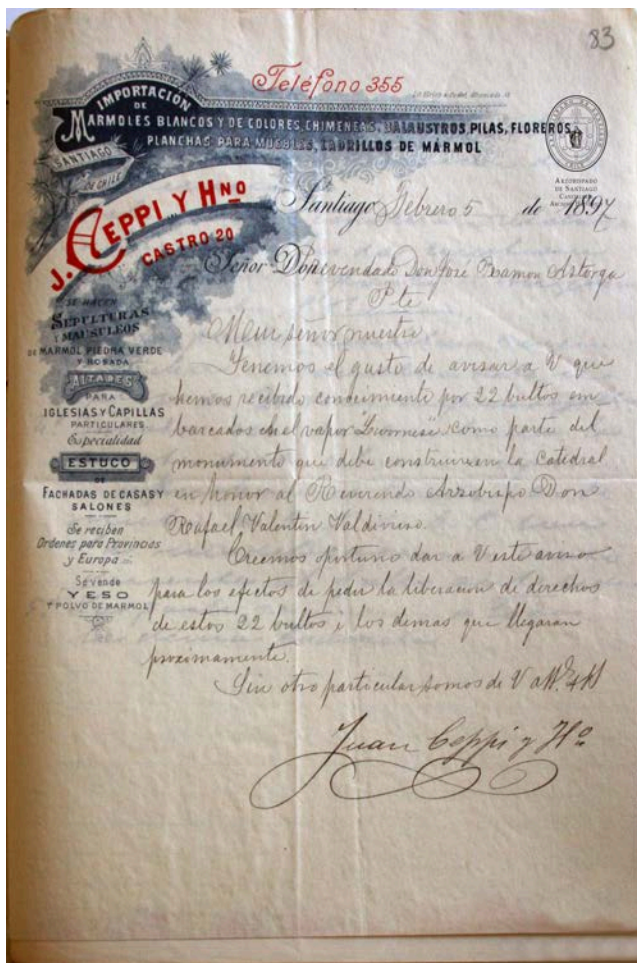


FIG. 4. — Invoice from Juan Ceppi y Hermano, 5 February 1897. Santiago, Chile, Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago. Image courtesy of the Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de Santiago.

Hermano prospered due to the scarce and intermittent extraction of marble locally. The Ceppi marble factory, represented by Giacomo Ceppi, appeared at the signing of the contract on 11 May with the Arzobispado.⁵³ In practice, Doyère and the Ceppi company were jointly responsible for the correct execution of the works. The marble company not only executed a central part of the funerary monument but also provided its financial guarantee and its networks to manage the elements that would be commissioned from other workshops, such as the stained glass, the mosaics, and the sculptural works.

Enrico Butti's Sculptures

One of the aspects on which Juan Ceppi y Hermano had a decisive influence was the decision to entrust Enrico Butti with the sculptural works. Butti was born in 1847 in the Lombard town of Viggiù, known for its stone quarries. He was a student and, later, teacher at the Accademia di Brera (Brera Academy) in Milan. His work of 1887,

Il Minatore (The miner), a plaster project for a sepulchral monument in Montevideo, Uruguay, cast in bronze a few years later and exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle, solidified the fame of the Lombard sculptor.⁵⁴ The contract for the tomb of Valdivieso mentions as one of Butti's masterpieces the *Cristo crocifisso* (Christ crucified), completed in 1894, the plaster model for which is kept in the Musei Civici Viggiutesi in Lombardy and the two bronze versions in the Cimitero Vecchio di Viggiù (Old Cemetery of Viggiù) and the Cimitero Monumentale di Milano (Monumental Cemetery of Milan). In light of these works, the choice of Butti seems quite natural, as he was a sculptor who was well known at the end of the nineteenth century and who had specialized in funerary works. In addition, the Ceppi family's home village, Morbio Superiore in Switzerland, is just over twelve kilometers from Viggiù and less than sixty kilometers from Milan. The elder brother, Pietro, had moved to Chile in 1896, the same year of the contract's signing.⁵⁵ It seems reasonable that the Ceppi Rossettis maintained links with Viggiù and Milan, and the mention in the contract of the *Cristo crocifisso* shows that someone in Chile was closely following the sculptor's career. This connection with the Italian art scene was already preceded by important milestones, such as the arrival of the Neapolitan painter Ciccarelli in 1848 and the acquisition of Roman religious paintings and sculptures for churches in Santiago since the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁶ The commission awarded to Butti was not an isolated event.

In the completed sculptures, *Science* and *Faith* are represented by standing female figures looking and pointing upward. *Science* holds an open book faced outward in her hand at waist level, while *Faith* carries, at the same height, a closed book showing a chalice and a host on its cover (figs. 5, 6). At the center of the monument, the archbishop is shown wearing an alb and a pluvial cloak as well as the miter and crosier, the distinctive signs of his episcopal status (fig. 7). His recumbent posture, common in many funerary sculptures, eloquently expresses that he has reached eternal rest. Below him, a reclining bronze lion gazes at the viewer who stops in front of the monument (fig. 8). The lion has a long tradition in the iconography of death, but in this case seems to embody the virtue of fortitude.⁵⁷ The decisiveness with which Valdivieso confronted tensions with the state and the internal ecclesiastical crises during his episcopacy would have made him worthy of this symbolic relationship with the lion. It is worth mentioning that during the nineteenth century, the figure of the lion was rejected in Latin America due to its symbolic link with Spain.⁵⁸ However, a decade after Valdivieso's tomb was completed, two public monuments bearing the image of the lion were erected to mark the centenary of Chilean independence.⁵⁹ There is no evidence that this iconography in the tomb caused any controversy; therefore, it is likely that the lion was interpreted as a funerary and symbolic reference.



FIG. 5. — Enrico Butti (Italian, 1847–1932). *Science*, ca. 1895, Carrara marble, 220 × 90 × 55 cm. From the sepulchral monument for the late Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, Santiago, Chile, Santiago Cathedral, 1898. Photograph by Ulises Nilo, 27 July 2024.



FIG. 6. — Enrico Butti (Italian, 1847–1932). *Faith* (detail), ca. 1895, Carrara marble, 220 × 55 × 60 cm. From the sepulchral monument for the late Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, Santiago, Chile, Santiago Cathedral, 1898. Photograph by Ulises Nilo, 27 July 2024.



FIG. 7. — Enrico Butti (Italian, 1847–1932). *Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso Recumbent* (detail), ca. 1895, Carrara marble, 120 × 55 × 87 cm. From the sepulchral monument for the late Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, Santiago, Chile, Santiago Cathedral, 1898. Photograph by Ulises Nilo, 27 July 2024.



FIG. 8. — Enrico Butti (Italian, 1847–1932). *Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso Recumbent with Lion Below*, ca. 1895, Carrara marble, 120 × 55 × 87 cm. From the sepulchral monument for the late Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, Santiago, Chile, Santiago Cathedral, 1898. Photograph by Ulises Nilo, 12 December 2025.



FIG. 9. — Detail of mosaic drapery by an unknown Florentine workshop behind Enrico Butti's marble sculpture of recumbent Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, ca. 1895. Santiago, Chile, Santiago Cathedral. Photograph by Ulises Nilo, 12 December 2025.

The Florentine Mosaics

Another of the decisions recorded in the contract was to cover the panels of the back, sides, and ceilings of the monument with mosaics. The contract specifies that the plans contain the chosen ornamental forms, which will be executed “by giving them the appropriate colors on a gold background.”⁶⁰ The contract stipulates that the mosaics are to be made “in the House of Florence where they are specialists in this branch of art.”⁶¹ It is difficult to know if this refers to a specific workshop or whether it is just a generic reference to ensure that the work was made by Florentine craftspeople. The *Opificio delle Pietre Dure*, a grand ducal workshop for inlaid stonework founded by the Medici family in the sixteenth century, was a state institution of recognized prestige that could have been approached for the work. However, it is important to note that during the second half of the nineteenth century, numerous private mosaic workshops were newly established in Florence, some of them with sales branches in London, Paris, or New York. What is certain is that Doyère, with the intermediation of the Ceppi family, selected the specialists who would produce these ornamental panels in a city where the art of mosaic was flourishing at the time.⁶² The shapes and colors provided by the mosaics emphasize the architectural forms of the monument and highlight the sculptures, particularly the recumbent archbishop, whose white marble figure contrasts with the red, blue, and gold mosaic materials that were inlaid to simulate fine drapery (fig. 9).

The Symbolic and Aesthetic Keys of the Stained-Glass Window

At the center of the monument's colorful marbles and mosaics is the stained-glass window. The incorporation of stained glass in funerary buildings was a common practice; an early case in Chile can be found in the mausoleum of Francisco Garín in the Cementerio General (General Cemetery) of Santiago, whose stained-glass windows were made in Paris in 1871.⁶³ The contract for the tomb of Valdivieso specifies that the stained glass was to be made in the "workshops of Mayer in Munich" based on a design exclusively for this work.⁶⁴ Shortly before work began on the sepulchral monument, the Iglesia de San Pedro de Alcántara (Church of San Pedro de Alcántara) on Mac Iver street, built by Doyère between 1890 and 1896, received a set of stained-glass windows from the workshops founded by Joseph Gabriel Mayer (1808–83).⁶⁵ The French architect had experience with incorporating this type of element into an architectural project as well as the corresponding contacts with the Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt (Mayer's Court Art Institute, or Franz Mayer Company). The choice of the German workshops was not coincidental; the Bavarian house had begun producing stained glass and mosaics in 1847, and by the end of the century, it enjoyed solid prestige and sold work globally.⁶⁶ From a stylistic point of view, most of the leading stained-glass artists of the second half of the nineteenth century were academically trained, so they conceived their work in glass as monumental paintings.⁶⁷

The sketch for the stained glass of the tomb monument of Valdivieso is preserved in the archives of the Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt in Munich.⁶⁸ The sketch shows the pictorial concept of the work, onto which is added the grid that would have allowed the image to be transferred from paper to glass (fig. 10). This project must have been directed by Franz Borgias Mayer (1848–1926), the founder's son, who had received his training in England. Most of the stained-glass windows produced in Germany during the last quarter of the nineteenth century are linked to the aesthetics of the Nazarenes, an early nineteenth-century group of German Romantic painters who emphasized Christian themes and medieval styles; the works of the Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt were no exception.⁶⁹ The stained-glass window made for Santiago Cathedral shares the pictorial eclecticism of this group of artists. The saturation of its colors, the play of light and shadow, and the majestic character of the figure of Christ echo the postulates of the Nazarenes.⁷⁰

The stained-glass window made in Munich contains a central depiction of Christ in Majesty surrounded by angels (fig. 11). He is giving a blessing with his right hand; in the other, he is holding a book in which alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, are inscribed. Above his head is the figure of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. At the foot of the theophany are Saint Peter's Basilica and Bernini's Colonnade in stained glass. This monumental, translucent image is meant to be read in relation to the recumbent figure of the archbishop below it (see fig. 8). The ecclesiological message is clear: The vertical axis links Valdivieso to the pope, and the pope to Christ. The image alludes to Valdivieso's time as archbishop, during which historical circumstances and his own convictions led him to emphasize the link with Rome.⁷¹ At the same time, this



FIG. 10. — Workshop of the Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt (German). Sketch for the stained-glass window of the sepulchral monument for Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, ca. 1895, watercolor on paper, 13,5 × 27,5. Photograph courtesy Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt, Munich. Image may not be used in any form without the written consent of Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt GmbH/Mayer of Munich. The photograph is protected by copyright, and commercial use for reconstructions or restorations of historic windows is not permitted without the prior written consent of the rights holders.

iconography is in harmony with the views of Casanova expressed in the pastoral letter that he published on the day of his consecration.⁷²



FIG. 11. — Workshop of the Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt (German). *The Holy Spirit and Christ over Saint Peter's Basilica*, ca. 1895, stained glass, 400 × 202 cm. From the sepulchral monument for the late Archbishop Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, Santiago, Chile, Santiago Cathedral, 1898. Photograph by Ulises Nilo, 27 July 2024.

Valdivieso's Burial and the Reception of the Monument

While work on the monument was in progress, a committee was appointed to exhume the remains of Archbishop Valdivieso. On 23 July 1897 the coffin was removed from the side altar dedicated to Saint John the Evangelist in Santiago Cathedral and placed in one of the rooms off the courtyard. The metal coffin was immediately opened so that the committee could examine its contents. The minutes from that gathering record the state of the archbishop's remains upon inspection: "His features, although disfigured by death and time, proved to be the remains of the Most Illustrious Prelate."⁷³ The coffin remained in this provisional location for ten months, until the inauguration of the monument and the transfer of the remains on 23 May 1898.

In 1904 conservative politician Rafael Errázuriz Urmeneta published an article in the *Revista católica* (Catholic journal) titled "Monumento sepulcral del Ilmo. Y Rmo. Sr. Valdivieso" (Tomb of the Illustrious and Most Reverend Mr. Valdivieso). The text was part of a dossier to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the late archbishop. Errázuriz Urmeneta provided historical background for the mausoleum and offered aesthetic judgments on its final presentation. He is emphatic in highlighting

the excellence of the marble, the Florentine mosaics, and the Bavarian stained glass as well as the sculptures.

Toward the end of his article, Errázuriz points out that it is an ensemble “in which sculpture and architecture compete in rich profusion, or rather, combine in pleasant harmony, bringing out each other’s beauty.”⁷⁴ Delicately, he expresses concern about a certain excess in the combination of elements, noting that, in the monument, “more than the art itself, the dazzling effect of its materials” predominates.⁷⁵ For Errázuriz, the quality of the execution is exquisite, but the result is too heterogeneous and saturated. He goes on to explain that the configuration of the sepulcher departs from classical moderation due to the taste of its authors, citing the interest of the commissioners in “erecting a monument that would stand out above all for its luxury, brilliance and richness.”⁷⁶ His analysis goes on to emphasize the architectural rather than sculptural character of the ensemble, endorsing the same tension between sculpture and architecture disclosed by the correspondence between Subercaseaux and Astorga. As a result of the monument’s architecture, it is impossible to appreciate the quality of the recumbent archbishop’s sculptural representation due to the height at which it was placed. Errázuriz’s text ends with a brief testimony about his personal contact with Valdivieso. Of his character and way of life, Errázuriz emphasizes his extreme sobriety, in the last lines highlighting the evident contrast between “such a splendid burial” and the “extraordinary humility of his character and soul,”⁷⁷ evoking for his reader the inconsistency between the buried man and his mausoleum.

Final Considerations

A first argument emerges clearly from the reflection on this documentation, which is that the tomb of Archbishop Valdivieso was a means used by his successor to solve ecclesiastical problems and to emphasize his own doctrinal views. It allowed Casanova to rebuild trust with the priests close to the late prelate who were suspicious of his arrival at the helm of the diocese. The monument itself contained two central elements of Casanova’s discourse: on the one hand, the harmony between rational knowledge and religious faith; on the other, the need for the local Catholic Church to cultivate a strong link with Rome.

Another dimension that emerges from the analysis of the documentation on the tomb’s conception is the consistency of the discussion about the processes of artistic creation and the nature of aesthetic quality. A significant throughline is the difficulty in establishing whether architecture should be subordinate to sculpture or vice versa. This difficulty is reflected in the tenor and content of the correspondence around various monument designs. Other themes that arise are artistic freedom, the expected character of a funerary monument, and the need for sumptuous materials.

Finally, the process described above shows the global reach of the commission. The available documentation reveals that those involved in Chile perceived Europe as an artistic emporium in which it was possible to choose from a wide repertoire of technical

specialities from every region of the continent. At the same time, the commissioners considered the participation of architects and sculptors who were active in Chile to be necessary for the viability of the project. In this way, the sepulchral monument could be a work in which local skills and the choice talents of Europe were brought together to honor the late archbishop.

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Notes

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1. Rodolfo Vergara Antúnez, *Vida i obras del ilustrísimo y reverendísimo señor doctor don Rafael Valentín Valdivieso*, vol. 2 (Imprenta Nacional, 1906), 339; Víctor Barahona, "Las tumbas de la Catedral de Santiago de Chile," *Boletín de la Academia Chilena de la Historia* 12, no. 32 (1945): 69–78; and Alejandro Huneeus, *La catedral de la arquidiócesis de Santiago de Chile: Sus principales objetos sagrados y recuerdos* (Imprenta San José, 1968), 12.

2. Marcela Drien, "Júzguese por las copias: El conocimiento y circulación de la pintura europea en Chile," *Imagem: Revista de História da Arte* 1, no. 1 (2022): 361–80; Marcela Drien and Katherine Vyhmeister, "The 1875 Palacio de la Exposición in Santiago: A Cosmopolitan Arena for Positioning the Nation," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 43, no. 1 (2021): 97–116; Juan Manuel Martínez, "Francisco Javier Mandiola y la construcción de relato visual en el sistema de las artes en Chile," in *Monvoisin en América*, ed. Gloria Cortés and Jaime Cuevas (Subdirección de Patrimonio, 2023), 56; Fernando Guzmán et al., "Roma y la renovación de la imagen y el espacio sacro en Chile durante el siglo XIX," *Historia* 54, no. 2 (2021): 585–617; and Amari Peliowski, "Arquitectura, civilización y barbarie: Brunet Debaines como comentador social a mediados del siglo XIX en Chile," *Revista* 180, no. 42 (2018): 76–87.

3. Josefina de la Maza, "Sobre la fundación de la Academia de Pintura, estudio introductorio," in *La inauguración de la Academia* (Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2013), 11–12.

4. María Angélica del Piano, "Dos arzobispos creativos que perduran en la historia," in *Iconografía, identidad nacional y cambio de siglo (XIX–XX)*, ed. Gloria Cortés et al. (Ril, 2003), 63–75.

5. Fernando Guzmán, *De la madera al mármol: Arte religioso en Chile, siglos XVIII y XIX* (Silvana, 2023), 79–99.

6. On the role of public sculptures in nation building in Chile, see Gloria Cortés, "Monumento al roto . . . piojento: La construcción oligárquica de la identidad nacional en Chile," *Arbor: Ciencia, pensamiento y cultura* 185, no. 740 (2009): 1231–41; Pedro Zamorano, "Escultura en Hispanoamérica durante el siglo XIX: El caso chileno," *Archivo Español de Arte* 84, no. 333 (2011): 25–40; and Liisa Flora Voionmaa Tanner, *Escultura pública: Del monumento conmemorativo a la escultura urbana; Santiago 1792–2004*, vol. 1 (Ocho Libros, 2004), 128–55.

7. Mariano Casanova, *Circular sobre la necesidad de erijir en la Iglesia Metropolitana un monumento sepulcral en honor del Illmo. I Rmo. Señor Dr. D. Rafael Valentín Valdivieso* (Santiago, 1887), 4. Translations from this source are by Fernando Guzmán and Sylvia Glover.

8. Enrique Laval, "El cólera en Chile (1886–1888)," *Revista chilena de infectología* 20 (2003): 86–88.

9. Casanova, *Circular sobre la necesidad de erijir* [. . .] *un monumento sepulcral*, 5.

10. Casanova had seen the tombs during a trip to Europe when he was a priest in his early thirties. Julio Retamal Avila, *Monseñor Mariano Casanova Casanova 1886–1908, tercer arzobispo de Santiago* (Editorial Salesiana, 1981), 12.

11. Casanova, *Circular sobre la necesidad de erijir* [. . .] *un monumento sepulcral*, 6.

12. Casanova, *Circular sobre la necesidad de erijir* [. . .] *un monumento sepulcral*, 4.

13. Casanova, *Circular sobre la necesidad de erijir* [. . .] *un monumento sepulcral*, 7.

14. Ignacio Ducasse, *Servidores del Evangelio: Los obispos de Chile 1561–2007* (Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, 2008), 90–91.

15. Crescente Errázuriz, *Algo de lo que he visto* (Editorial Nascimento, 1934), 371–81.

16. Santiago, Chile, Archivo Histórico Arzobispado de Santiago (AHAS), Monseñor Valdivieso, Monumento sepulcral, 1887–1899, legajo 59, expediente 28. Hereafter Monumento sepulcral. All AHAS documents cited below are part of this archival file; most of the documents are numbered.

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18. “Instructions pour la demande,” 11.

19. Mariano Casanova, *Pastoral del Illmo. Y Rvmo. Señor arzobispo don Mariano Casanova en el día de su consagración episcopal* (Santiago, 1887) 4, 5.

20. Casanova, *Pastoral* [. . .] *en el día de su consagración episcopal*, 10.

21. Casanova, *Pastoral* [. . .] *en el día de su consagración episcopal*, 11.

22. Macarena Ibarra, “Palacio arzobispal: El edificio, el conjunto y la ciudad,” in *Ofrenda y gracia: Proyecto de conservación y restauración capilla sede arzobispal*, ed. Cecilia Beas and Elena Losón (Arzobispado de Santiago, 2013), 43; and Daniela Lara, “Análisis iconográfico de las imágenes,” in Beas and Losón, *Ofrenda y gracia*, 73–84.

23. Ramón Subercaseaux, *Memorias de 50 años* (Imprenta y Litografía Barcelona, 1908), 433–531.

24. For reflection on art in Chile, see Pedro Zamorano et al., “Jose Miguel Blanco: Escritos de bellas artes,” *Alpha*, no. 37 (2012): 149–62.

25. José Ramón Astorga, letter to Ramón Subercaseaux, 10 August 1893, 15, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

26. Subercaseaux, letter to Astorga, 14 September 1893, 17, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

27. Subercaseaux, letter to Astorga, 28 September 1893, 19v, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

28. Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Monumento conmemorativo y espacio público en Iberoamérica* (Cátedra, 2004), 36–66; and María José Redondo Cantera, “Aproximación a la escultura funeraria española del siglo XIX,” in *El arte del siglo XIX: II Congreso Nacional de Historia del Arte*, vol. 1 (Comité Español de Historia del Arte, 1978), 121–24.

29. Astorga, letter to Subercaseaux, 13 November 1893, 22v, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

30. Astorga, letter to Subercaseaux, 10 August 1893, 15v, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral; and Subercaseaux, letter to Astorga, 14 September 1893, 18, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

31. Subercaseaux, letter to Astorga, 28 September 1893, 20, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

32. Subercaseaux, letter to Astorga, 28 September 1893, 19, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

33. Astorga, letter to Subercaseaux, 10 August 1893, 15v, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

34. Gorka López, “Una genealogía de la máscara mortuoria: Tiempo, imagen, presencia” (PhD. diss., Universidad de Barcelona, 2016), 237–50.

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36. Enrique Solanich, *Escultura en Chile: Otra mirada para su estudio* (Ril, 2017), 31–32.

37. Astorga, letter to Subercaseaux, 26 January 1894, 26v, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

38. Subercaseaux, letter to Astorga, 25 March 1894, 28, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

39. Astorga, official letter to Subercaseaux, 28 June 1895, 33, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

40. Josefina de la Maza, “Por un arte nacional: Pintura y esfera pública en el siglo XIX chileno,” in *Ciencia-Mundo: Orden republicano, arte y nación en América*, ed. Rafael Sagredo (Editorial Universitaria, 2010), 304–6; and Josefina de la Maza and Sandra Accatino, “De espacios marginales y obras en tránsito: Una lectura de interior del Louvre de Alfredo Valenzuela Puelma,” *Intus-Legere Historia* 16, no. 2 (2021): 393–96.

41. Junta, official letter to Mariano Casanova, 14 April 1896, 39, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

42. Emilio Doyère, letter to Mariano Casanova, undated (probably mid 1890), AHAS, Fondo de Gobierno, vol 164.

43. “Contrato de construcción,” 11 May 1896, AHAS, Monumento sepulcral.

44. Mirtha Pallares, “La arquitectura religiosa en Santiago de Chile 1850–1950: Razones de las reminiscencias góticas” (PhD. diss., Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, 2015), 136.

45. María Paz Valenzuela, “La enseñanza de la arquitectura en Chile,” *Revista de arquitectura* 20, no. 29 (2014): 54–55.

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48. “Contrato de construcción,” 66–67.
49. Fabio Barry, *Painting in Stone: Architecture and the Poetics of Marble from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Yale University Press, 2020), 289–301.
50. Guzmán, *De la madera al mármol*, 21–57.
51. Guzmán, *De la madera al mármol*, 79–99.
52. Enrique Ceppi de Lecco Lazo, *Cuatro constructores suizos en Chile: Los hermanos Ceppi Rossetti (1852–1942)* (pub. by author, 2021), 73–90.
53. “Contrato de construcción,” 70v.
54. Cristina Casero, “Viggiù terra di scultori: Enrico Butti e altre personalità di rilievo nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento,” in *Storia dell'arte a Varese e nel suo territorio*, ed. Maria Luisa Gatti Perer, vol. 2 (Insubria University Press, 2011), 387. The later marble version, dated 1910, is in the tomb of Juan Nicola in the Cementerio Central (Central Cemetery) of Montevideo. A bronze copy is kept in the Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Milano. The original plaster model is kept in the Musei Civici Viggiutesi in Viggiù, Italy.
55. Ceppi de Lecco Lazo, *Cuatro constructores suizos en Chile*, 68.
56. Capitelli, *Mecenatismo pontificio e borbónico*, 158–74.
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58. Ramón Gutiérrez and Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *América y España, imágenes para una historia: Independencias e identidad (1805–1925)* (Fundació MAPFRE, 2006), 15, 98–99.
59. Voionmaa Tanner, *Escultura pública*, 154–55.
60. “Contrato de construcción,” 66v.
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68. Andrea Nilo and Elizabeth Stephens, “Puesta en valor del Monumento Sepulcral Monseñor Rafael Valentín Valdivieso,” in *XX Encuentro Iberoamericano de Valorización y Gestión de Cementerios Patrimoniales*, ed. Francisco José Rodríguez Marín (Universidad de Málaga, 2019), 19. Much of the historical documentation of the Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt in Munich was destroyed during the Second World War. This particular sketch is preserved in *Skizzenbuch II* within the institution's archival collection.
69. Shirley Ann Brown, “The Influence of German Religious Stained Glass in Canada 1880–1941,” *RACAR* 21, nos. 1–2 (1994): 23.
70. Similar characteristics can be seen in the paintings *Die klugen und die törichten Jungfrauen* (The parable of the wise and foolish virgins; 1813–16) by Peter von Cornelius and *Der Ostermorgen* (Easter morning; 1818) by Johann Frederick Overbeck.
71. Sol Serrano, *¿Qué hacer con Dios en la República? Política y secularización en Chile (1845–1885)* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008), 192–99.
72. Casanova, *Pastoral* [...] *en el día de su consagración episcopal*, 9.
73. “Traslación de los restos del señor arzobispo Valdivieso,” *Boletín Eclesiástico*, no. 13 (1895–97): 771.
74. Rafael Errázuriz Urmeneta, “Monumento sepulcral del Ilmo. Y Rmo. Sr. Valdivieso,” *Revista católica* 7, no. 79 (1904): 457.
75. Errázuriz Urmeneta, “Monumento sepulcral,” 457.
76. Errázuriz Urmeneta, “Monumento sepulcral,” 458.
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Flaunting the Unfinished: *Non finito* as a Classicist Gesture in the Work of Ferdinand Hodler

Roger Fayet

In the oeuvre of Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918) there is an unusual phenomenon. In several of his completed works, including some of his most important pieces, Hodler ostentatiously displayed lines resulting from the use of sighting and transfer grids as well as traces of other technical tools.¹ While other artists of Hodler's time considered the use of traditional devices such as the sighting grid or the Dürer pane to indicate deficient artistic ability, Hodler unashamedly admitted to using them and proudly showed them to visitors in his studio. Even more surprising, given the artist's perfectionism, is that he left traces of their use visible in some of his finished paintings. This article attributes Hodler's idiosyncratic flaunting of technical processes to his enthusiasm for Renaissance art, as revealed by numerous sources, including previously unpublished letters and accounts from his contemporaries. The central argument contends that Hodler used the traces of instruments that were particularly prevalent in the early modern period and the resulting impression of *non finito* to position himself in the tradition of the European Renaissance canon. Therefore, Hodler's work can be seen anew as an attempt at a modern form of classicism that has freed itself from narrative and anecdotal elements.

Hodler's Use of Technical Devices

Around 1900, Hodler was the most influential figure in Swiss painting. His art, which ranges from landscapes and portraits to large-format figurative paintings, was initially characterized by realism before he turned to symbolism in his later years. At the same time as Hodler was transitioning from realism to symbolism, he developed his concept of "parallelism," a specific compositional approach based on symmetry and repetition, with which the artist sought not only to enhance the impact of his works but also to reflect an inherent law of nature.

Whatever genre Hodler adopted, the use of technical aids distinguished his painting process. One common tool of the trade was the sighting grid, which served to capture the contours of a landscape or a sitter. Hodler himself wrote about his approach in a notebook from 1898: "One places the model directly behind the net, as close as

possible. . . . One must give the squares 10, 15, or 20 centimeters for whole figures. If you make them too small, there will be too many of them and the large number of squares will confuse the view. . . . One places oneself at the desired distance, which also depends on one's eyesight."² Hodler used the sighting grid not only in drawing but also in painting; thus, net-frame lines could be traced on portraits and figure or landscape paintings.

Another device Hodler regularly used was the glass panel—the so-called Dürer pane. He notes to his first biographer, Carl Albert Loosli:

One has occasionally admired the depth perspective of my pictures of Lake Geneva from Chexbres and Caux. It was in fact no more difficult to depict them correctly than any other distant perspective. For one thing, I got into the habit of seeing flat; for another, I used the Dürer pane on every occasion; it offers unmistakable, incorruptible fixed points and bases for this purpose. With the wide surface perspectives of large plains or steeply rising mountains, it is no different. The draftsman and the painter do not need more than the Dürer pane can give them.³

In addition to this, Hodler used devices such as a straightedge, plumb line, triangle, ruler, and compass as well as a rack made especially for him, with which he could measure a model to the precise centimeter in height and width.⁴ The artist applied compasses to trace certain measurements directly on the sitter's face; he then transferred them to the picture, which could lead to visible construction lines on the painting. Hodler's student Stéphanie Guerzoni reports that he told her: "Use the compass to measure the length of the nose, the width of the forehead, the distance between the eyes."⁵ Particularly relevant are the lines that emerged as a result of transfers. Hodler often applied the square grid to transmit a preparatory drawing or study to a painting as well as to enlarge or reduce the subject—a very common technique in the production of large-format paintings in European art.

Making Visible the Traces of Technical Tools

There is nothing unusual about harnessing technical tools to survey an object or to transfer a sketch onto a canvas. What is unusual, however, is how openly Hodler talked about using these devices and how much pride he seemed to take in their deployment at a time when many successful artists were celebrating more informal, loose gestures. As a student, he had written down his "Ten Commandments," declaring in the eighth, "The means to achieving precision are observation, comparison, and measurement." In the tenth commandment, he states: "To determine the exact measures, the human eye is not enough, and wherever there is the opportunity, the artist is well advised to make use of the mathematical instruments of measurement, namely the compasses, the straightedge, the triangle, the plumb line, and the ruler."⁶ This credo, declared in 1874, corresponds to a self-portrait from approximately the same year that shows the young painter with a striking pageboy haircut, a reference to the hair fashion of the sixteenth

century and thus to the Renaissance forebears.⁷ The student's right hand is raised to swear; in his left, he holds a triangle and a plumb line.

In later years, Hodler continued to insist on the importance of measurement when talking with colleagues about his methods. Guerzoni reports that one of his instructions was to "always measure, never rely on your eyes!"⁸ Loosli remarks that the artist's "everlasting commandment" was the dictum "observe, measure, compare!"⁹ German scholar Adolf Frey claims that Hodler drew his figures from the model "to the last square centimeter or even square millimeter."¹⁰ Other painters tended to regard a tool such as the sighting grid as an aid for the beginner or amateur. Hodler, in contrast, happily advertised his reliance on such equipment and even posed for photographs near it.¹¹

Even more surprising than Hodler's verbal endorsements of technical aids is that he sometimes left visible traces of these techniques in his finished figure paintings and portraits. The compositions sometimes reveal lines that were drawn when the artist applied the sighting grid or transferred cartoons to the canvas. Grid lines and transfer lines are often visible on paintings that originated as studies and only later were signed by Hodler as artworks in their own right. Lines visible to the naked eye appear in works from around 1890 and gradually increase from around 1910 onward. In an oil sketch for *View into the Infinite*, signed and dated 1916, Hodler seems to have intensified the lines at the end of the painting process without any functional reason for the reinforcement (fig. 1). The presence of auxiliary lines in works that originated as studies or preliminary drawings is, of course, expected in artistic practice of this period and can therefore hardly come as a surprise—although it would have been easy enough for the artist to paint over them when he allowed the painting to become a stand-alone work.

By contrast, it is highly unusual for such lines to be visible in works intended as final products from the outset. In Hodler's work, lines are visible to the unaided eye—for example, in the two versions of his large-scale composition *The Admired Young Man* from 1903, both of which were later revised by the artist. In the version revised in 1904, lines are discernible mainly near the young male figure, one of which runs horizontally through his navel (fig. 2). Horizontal and vertical transfer lines are also present in the monumental version of *Unanimity* from 1912–13, held in the collection of the Kunsthhaus Zürich, across the entire width of the picture (fig. 3); lines are seen in the two versions of *View into the Infinite* now in the collections of the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Kunsthhaus Zürich—especially in the latter, where they are pronounced next to the figure at the right edge of the picture (fig. 4).¹² Lines have a striking presence in the depiction of Hodler's deceased lover, Valentine Godé-Darel, from 1915. For months, Hodler had recorded the progression of her illness as she suffered from cancer, and eventually, her death, in countless drawings, oil sketches, and paintings.¹³ Of the three works that show Godé-Darel in overall view on her deathbed, the one that today belongs to the Kunstmuseum Solothurn most clearly shows a grid of lines, especially on the side of the mattress.



FIG. 1. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). Oil study for *View into the Infinite*, 1916, oil on canvas, 83 × 41.5 cm. CR no. 1649. Zurich, Kunsthhaus. Image: Kunsthhaus Zürich.

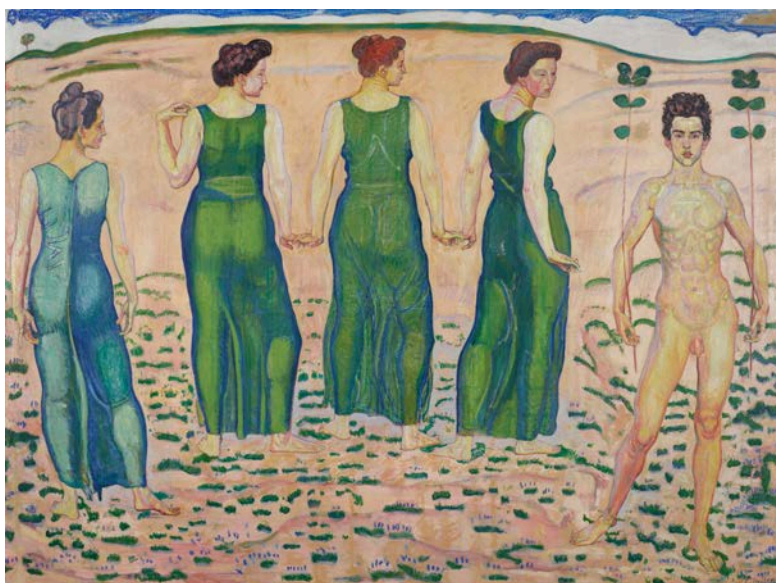


FIG. 2. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *The Admired Young Man*, 1903, revised 1904, oil and oil crayon on canvas, 213.5 × 288 cm. CR no. 1348. Zurich, Kunsthhaus. Image: Kunsthhaus Zürich.



FIG. 3. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *Unanimity*, 1912–13, oil on canvas, 3.3 × 10 m. CR no. 1496. Zurich, Kunsthhaus. Image: Kunsthhaus Zürich.



FIG. 4. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *View into the Infinite*, 1916, oil on canvas, 343 × 723 cm. CR no. 1594. Zurich, Kunsthhaus. Image: Kunsthhaus Zürich.

In some cases, auxiliary lines clear to the eye can also be found in portraits. For example, in the portrait of literary and art critic Josef Viktor Widmann from 1898, there are transfer and sighting grid lines (fig. 5). The work was described by the sitter's son, Fritz Widmann, as “not having reached its completion,”¹⁴ but his comment did not pertain to the visible lines. Rather, he was of the opinion that the portrait's resemblance to the sitter was not yet completely established. In a portrait of Hodler's wife, Berthe Hodler-Jacques, from the same year, a line of construction lies on the vertical central axis of the face, while two perpendicular construction lines extend across the eyes and mouth; faintly visible, a grid of transfer lines marks the background (fig. 6).

Overall, auxiliary lines are ostentatiously displayed only on a good handful of important figure paintings, an equal number of portraits, and several dozen oil studies that Hodler signed, elevating them to completion; there are many more paintings in which lines are faintly visible. In the vast majority of his paintings, however, Hodler made the lines disappear under new layers of paint; in his landscapes, they are invisible throughout, even though they often played a role in the painting process. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that lines should have such a strong presence in some of the artist's



FIG. 5. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *Portrait of Josef Viktor Widmann*, 1898, oil on canvas, 55 × 38.5 cm. CR no. 798. Bern, Kunstmuseum, bequest of Ch. Edm. von Steiger-Pinson. Image: Kunstmuseum Bern.



FIG. 6. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *Portrait of Berthe Hodler-Jacques*, 1898, oil on canvas, 40 × 27 cm. CR no. 801. Private collection. Image: SIK-ISEA, Zurich.



FIG. 7. — Cuno Amiet (Swiss, 1868–1961). *Portrait of Ferdinand Hodler*, 1898, tempera and oil on canvas, 76 × 52.5 cm. CR no. 1898.04. Private collection. Image: SIK-ISEA, Zurich, © D. Thalmann, Aarau, Switzerland.

most important works. And although Hodler's auxiliary lines only appear in a small number of finished paintings, their presence was noticeable and unusual to Hodler's contemporaries. Art historian Artur Weese remarks in 1918, "From now on, i.e., from the transition of the eighties to the nineties, there is probably no picture by Hodler's hand on which the space would not be structured by an ordering of fields, visibly or veiled, overtly or as a secret network."¹⁵

In 1898, Hodler's friend Cuno Amiet painted a portrait of the artist standing in front of a cartoon for the mural commissioned to depict Swiss history in the armory hall of in the Swiss National Museum (fig. 7). Amiet's portrait of Hodler is the only one of Amiet's approximately 450 known portraits to show a visible grid of lines. Amiet kept this work and exhibited it at the VIII Internationale Kunstausstellung (International Art Exhibition) in Munich and at the XII. *Wiener Secession* (Vienna Secession) in 1901. In 1902, collector Oscar Miller, to whom Amiet had sold a second version of the portrait, this time without the grid, asked to exchange his painting for the one with the grid.¹⁶ Furthermore, Swiss painter Giovanni Giacometti sent a postcard to their mutual friend Amiet in 1907, in which a small sketch shows Hodler painting a series of landscapes, each covered with vertical lines (fig. 8).¹⁷ The gentle criticism that it echoes is aimed at the artist's large output of landscape paintings, but at the same time, it seems to make fun of his excessive use of auxiliary lines.

It is difficult to judge whether the visibility of lines and grids was just a remarkable element for Hodler's contemporaries or whether it disturbed them. Collectors



FIG. 8. — Giovanni Giacometti (Swiss, 1868–1933). Postcard to Cuno Amiet in Oschwand, 19 September 1907. Oschwand, Archiv Amiet; Zurich, Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA). Image: SIK-ISEA, Zurich.

repeatedly perceived Hodler's paintings as unfinished, but it remains unclear whether this had anything to do with the presence of the grids. A letter to the collector Carl Reininghaus, for example, reveals that Reininghaus had urged Hodler to "finish" the version of *The Admired Young Man* that Reininghaus had recently acquired (see fig. 2). Hodler wrote to Reininghaus on 14 February 1905: "As for the retouching, I did what you wanted, point by point. I don't want to list everything I retouched. It would be impossible for me to go beyond that without acting against the painting's interest. I would point out that all these retouches alter the character of the execution, of the ductus. The better, as you know, is often the enemy of the good. . . . For me, the painting is very finished. . . . I already found it sufficient in Vienna."¹⁸ Here, as in other cases, it is obvious that the client's idea of what a finished painting should look like differed from the artist's. But there isn't any evidence that explicitly shows that the visibility of the grid was the reason for dissatisfaction on the part of the clients.

The Question of Why

How do we explain the intriguing presence of the grids and auxiliary lines in Hodler's paintings? It is tempting to interpret their visibility for technical reasons. Restorer and Hodler specialist Karoline Beltinger argues that the overpainting of dark lines in sections that show a loose or spotted application of paint would have altered the character of these areas.¹⁹ This explanation is undeniably convincing for many of his oil sketches, even though in numerous cases, Hodler did not hesitate to cover the grids. However, this argument seems difficult to apply to artworks that were intended to be

autonomous from the outset, for the simple reason that Hodler evidently had no trouble painting over the grids and lines in almost all of those cases. As mentioned above, he obscured them in all of his landscape paintings, and in the vast number of his figure paintings and portraits. Even where they remained visible, they only showed in certain parts, and Hodler's decisions as to where the lines were left had nothing to do with the nature of the paint application in the corresponding areas. To put it simply: If Hodler wanted to cover the technical lines, which was usually the case, he had no trouble doing so. Conversely, if he left them visible, it seems that he wanted them to be seen.

Considering the significance of parallel and symmetrical structures in Hodler's work overall, the act of leaving the technical lines visible could further illustrate the principle of parallelism that the artist valued so highly. From the beginning, the literature on Hodler has delineated the artist's own interest in the philosophical-aesthetic construct of parallelism; Hodler himself did everything he could to ensure the connection, repeatedly commenting on what he saw as the paramount principle of his art and jealously passing parallelism off as his own discovery.²⁰ Hodler's parallelism is based on the observation that repetitions of form can be found in nature in the most diverse ways, be it in rows or symmetrical reflections around an axis. According to Hodler, this outward sameness of beings of all kinds—trees, flowers, leaves, humans—manifests an inner sameness that connects living beings and demands their unification in a society that reflects this equality.²¹ Loosli quotes Hodler as follows: "The distinguishing features that separate us from one another are thus infinitesimal compared to the similarities that unite and unify us. The whole of human solidarity, our generic sense of belonging together, is nothing other than an application of parallelist cognition."²² The artist's task, for Hodler, is to make visible the law of parallelism that prevails in the cosmos, through parallel and symmetrical structures in the composition. At the same time, parallelist repetition also enhances the effect of a motif, thus becoming a crucial principle of composition.²³ In his lecture "La mission de l'artiste" ("The Mission of the Artist") of 1897, Hodler states: "In all these cases, it is easy to perceive the common principle and to understand that the parallelism of these subjects from life is also a decorative parallelism. . . . To aim for unity, a strong and powerful unity, is to exalt something above everything else, to express this something strongly, be it a subject characterized by grace or by strength."²⁴

It may be a trivial observation that the transfer lines, or those resulting from the application of the sighting grid, form parallels—yet without any intrinsic reference to the subject. It seems that in some pictures the technical parallels take on the role of representing a parallelist structure where other motifs do not. For example, the depiction of Godé-Darel on her deathbed shows a network of transfer lines on the white mattress (fig. 9). Of the three full-figure versions, only this version in the Kunstmuseum Solothurn has transfer lines visible to the unaided eye. The other two versions, by contrast, show other forms of repetition: The painting in the Aargauer Kunsthauus displays a pattern of stylized roses on the wallpaper behind the deathbed (fig. 10), while the version in the Kunstmuseum Basel shows three parallel horizontal stripes at the top

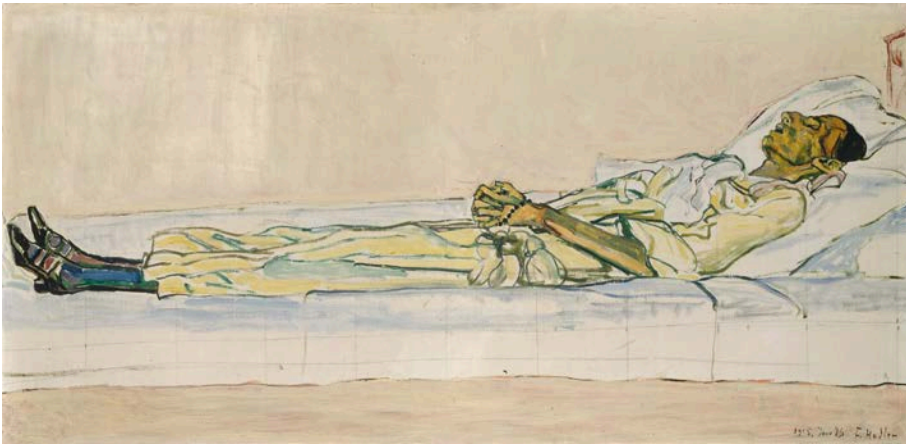


FIG. 9. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *The Dead Valentine Godé-Darel*, 1915, oil on canvas, 60 × 124 cm. CR no. 935. Solothurn, Kunstmuseum. Image: SIK-ISEA, Zurich.

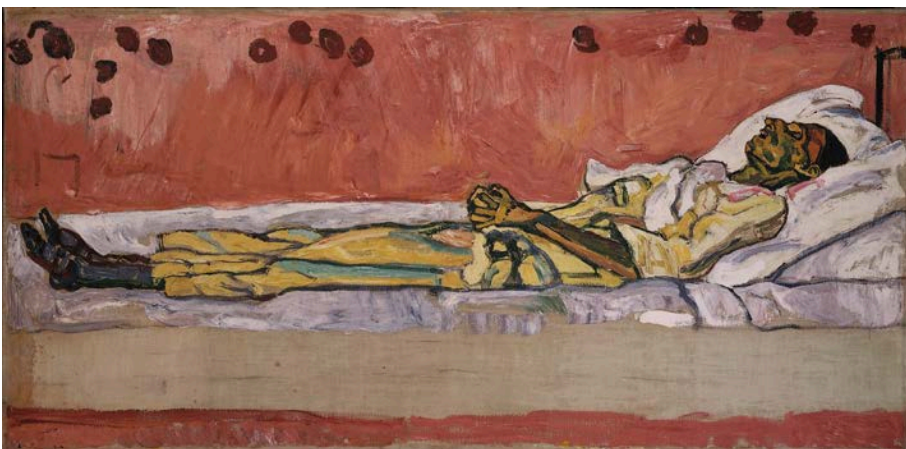


FIG. 10. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *The Dead Valentine Godé-Darel*, 1915, oil on canvas, 60.5 × 124.5 cm. CR no. 934. Aarau, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Collection Werner Coninx. Image: Werner Coninx Stiftung, Zurich.

of the composition that mirror the three horizontal layers of the bed structure and float above two vertical, slightly displaced parallels of the bedposts.²⁵ Seen in comparison with the other two versions, the Solothurn painting gives the impression that the technically conditioned grid of lines becomes an inherent part of the motif, a folded structure of the sheet, not unlike the folded grid that characterizes the tablecloth in Hodler's much earlier *Banquet of the Gymnasts* (1877/78), where the tablecloth is structured by a square, folded pattern.²⁶ Therefore, it may be that auxiliary lines take on the task of representing the parallelist principles of repetition, sequence, and symmetry where content-related motives do not. In exceptional cases, even the reverse seems possible, in which a thematic motif of parallelism can arise from the technical structure of a grid. In an oil study for *View into the Infinite*, Hodler placed some of the stylized flowers on the auxiliary lines (fig. 11).



FIG. 11. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). Oil study for *View into the Infinite*, 1913, oil on canvas, 120.7 × 60.3 cm. CR no. 1598. Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire. Image: Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Ville de Genève.

Although the visibility of the technical lines may sometimes represent parallel principles, this alone does not offer a sufficient explanation. Auxiliary lines can also be found in pictures where the pictorial motifs already convey a strong sense of parallelism, such as in the Zurich version of *Unanimity* (see fig. 3). When the depicted figures are already organized in parallel, there is no need to introduce additional parallel structures through visible lines. As an explanation, the principle of *non finito* appears to be, in my mind, the most convincing possibility, an option that Beltinger also considers in her technical study.²⁷ This is all the more so when we take into account that Hodler's works show several other forms of the “unfinished,” such as the very spontaneous, expressive execution of certain sections, the visibility of pentimenti or, in rare cases, even the lack of coloration in some areas.

The concept of *non finito* encompasses different forms and origins of the unfinished: The term is used for works that remained unfinished due to external circumstances—for example, because an artist died before completion, the commissioner withdrew, or perhaps the artist and commissioner experienced disagreements. Further, the notion of *non finito* can also include the idea that the artist gave up on the work after becoming dissatisfied with the preliminary result and no longer believed in a successful completion. Another form of *non finito* emerges through the deliberate expression of the

unfinished in works that the artist considers undoubtedly to be finished—resulting in the peculiar paradox of the “finished unfinished” work of art. Notions of the *non finito* are not all the same, and even if the beholder may appreciate similar aesthetic qualities in such works, different reasons for and uses of the *non finito* lead to different viewing experiences.

The works by Hodler considered here were not left unfinished due to external circumstances; nor did their condition result from artistic challenges. Rather, these works show deliberately chosen indicators of the unfinished. They are, as Hodler told collector Reininghaus regarding *The Admired Young Man*, “very finished.”²⁸ At the time, a sketchy execution or the loose gesture were widely accepted and sought-after techniques.²⁹ Seen in this light, Hodler’s suggestive approach to pictorial motifs, the sketchiness of certain areas of his compositions, and the visibility of pentimenti, together with his enterprising, almost excessive selling of oil studies as such, seem to express an artistic attitude shaped by Romanticism and impressionism that satisfied the corresponding preferences of contemporary collectors. However, what collides with this view is the fact that the presence of strict patterns of technical lines seems to contradict the idea of the artist guided by intuitive technique. Hodler’s almost pedantic fixation on measuring, his use of the sighting grid and the Dürer pane, and his application of transfer lines are the opposite of the spontaneous and the intuitive.

Hodler was very aware of the artistic tendencies surrounding him and defended Edouard Manet, for example, against critics in his circle.³⁰ Even so, he was far more interested in the old masters of the Italian and German Renaissance than in his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. If we take the primary sources, especially his letters, as a point of reference, we see that he felt much more fascinated by the works of artists such as Raphael, Paolo Veronese, Titian, Albrecht Dürer, and later, Giotto, than by the impressionists. For example, Hodler wrote to his friend and former student Marc Odier from Madrid in 1878 about his visits to the Museo Nacional del Prado: “At the museum, it was Raphael that I liked the best. . . . Titian, Veronese, Ribera, and Velazquez were my next favorites. But only Raphael’s paintings really touched me.”³¹ And a few days later, “One painter I always like enormously is Veronese. His figures are well built, well placed, and richly colored. . . . There is a small painting by Mantegna which is magnificent, with a beautifully styled drawing and magnificent drapery. It’s one of the things I’ve admired most. . . . I think the painter I’d like above all others is Giotto, but I’ll have to go to Italy to see him.”³² Five years later, in 1883, Hodler visited the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and wrote again to Odier: “It’s from the latter [Alte Pinakothek] that I speak enthusiastically of Dürer’s *The Four Apostles*, Perugino, Raphael, in a word the early Italian and German schools.”³³ By contrast, he thought little of recent German art, as he expressed in a letter to Bernese singer Jenny Studer: “I prefer not to talk about the Neue Pinakothek [,] something inferior [,] the highly praised modern German art. The art of Kaulbach or Piloty.”³⁴ In 1904 he noted, in a text written about his artistic principle and the artist Gustav Klimt, “My favorite artists are Dürer and the early Italians.”³⁵ Daniel Baud-Bovy, then curator at the Musée Rath and later director of the École des

Beaux-Arts in Geneva, recorded in his diary in 1905 that Hodler had told him, “Today, Giotto is my man. I saw him recently in Italy. That’s nature! Michelangelo is beautiful, too, his strength and curved lines. But after him, it’s all over.”³⁶

In his book *Erinnerungen an Ferdinand Hodler* (1918; Memories about Ferdinand Hodler), painter Fritz Widmann recounts an incident that took place in 1898 when the artist came to the Widmann house to paint the aforementioned portrait of Fritz’s father, Josef Viktor Widmann (see fig. 5):

Once, at the end of the session, I took Hodler through my parents’ bedroom so that he could wash out his brushes in a neighboring room. On that occasion, he unexpectedly saw an old oil print after Raphael’s *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*. He was strongly moved. He stood in front of it for a long time, at first without a word; then gradually collecting himself, he told me in an excited voice: “This is perhaps the most beautiful composition ever created by an artist. And even in this moderate reprint, far removed from the original, the divine beauty so overwhelmed me at the unexpected sight of it that I struggled with emotion.” In the conversation that followed on the way to his workplace, he proved to be a close connoisseur and admirer of the great Renaissance art.³⁷

Hodler’s enthusiasm for the art of the Renaissance and his obvious desire to see his own work in its tradition opens up a new perspective on Hodler’s *non finito*, namely, as a sign itself of artistic reference to the Renaissance.

The Concept of non finito and Hodler’s Classicism

There is no need to elaborate too extensively on the fact that the notion of *non finito* occupied an important place in Renaissance art. There was a high number of unfinished works by such outstanding figures as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.³⁸ In Titian’s late work, a very loose style of painting, at least close to the *non finito*, comes to feature prominently in his oeuvre.³⁹ That which was unfinished received attention and appreciation in art theory of the time, not least through the authority and judgment of Pliny, who in numerous places in book thirty-five of his *Natural History* praises the quality of the unfinished and warns of the danger of too much perfection.⁴⁰ Giorgio Vasari, in turn, repeatedly comments on the quality of the spontaneous and the danger of the overly finished, including in a comparison the two marble pulpits in the cathedral in Florence, one by Luca della Robbia and the other by Donatello.⁴¹

Hodler must have been aware of the appreciation of the unfinished during the Renaissance period. From contemporaries such as Loosli, we know that Hodler had read the treatises of the early modern period.⁴² There was one aspect of *non finito* that he must have felt had much to do with his own working method: the visible presence of the working process. The participation of the beholder in the creative process is one of the effects of the *non finito* mentioned by Pliny when the ancient thinker states, “It is also a very unusual and memorable fact that the last works of artists and their unfinished

pictures . . . are more admired than those which they finished because in them are seen the preliminary drawings left visible and the artist's actual thoughts."⁴³ Furthermore, the visibility of the artist's approach is instructive for other artists, as it gives them a direct insight into the methods of a virtuoso in their field.⁴⁴

The unfinished as the presence of working methods, which allows the beholder to participate in the creative process and the apprentice painter to absorb a teaching example—this is a concept that Hodler could certainly identify with. It corresponds with his willingness to provide information about his techniques and equipment, and it fits with a large number of surviving statements and anecdotes, all of which show that Hodler was inclined to reveal how he worked and even had a certain missionary attitude about the techniques he used. Not least, it fits with his self-portrayal as a craftsman, which he maintained even in the years of his greatest success. The visibility of traces of the working process in important Renaissance works of art and the appreciation of the unfinished in the art theory of the time must have confirmed his own ideas and applied procedures. It is not a stretch to assume that his encounters with Renaissance *non finito* encouraged Hodler all the more to leave the traces of his techniques visible. Moreover, the display of the unfinished in this sense may also have become one of the means by which Hodler placed himself explicitly in the tradition.

To understand the flaunting of the unfinished as a reference to Renaissance art is supported by the fact that it is above all the genre of the allegorical figure painting—that is, a classical genre of the early modern period—in which Hodler makes use of the *non finito* and in which he shows the traces of technical tools particularly popular during the Renaissance. In contrast, his landscape paintings, which represent a completely modern concept, free from allegorical and staffage figures, show no signs of *non finito*, even though he used the same tools.

More generally, these observations on the use of *non finito* and its relation to Renaissance art can reframe the understanding of Hodler's oeuvre as a manifestation of a modern classicism. There is no question that his early work fits into the intellectual world and visual language of realism, that his figure paintings from the 1890s onward would be inconceivable without their connection to the contemporary currents of symbolism and the Lebensreform movement, and that his late landscapes in particular show clear tendencies toward abstraction. Nor shall it be denied that Hodler was the strongest innovative force in the environment of artistic creation around 1900 in Switzerland, which also led to his dominant position there. But it is equally difficult to overlook the fact that, especially in his figure paintings, he adopted aims and procedures that can only reasonably be described as classical or classicist. Hodler's important works from the middle and later periods typically depict transcendent ideas by portraying nude or barefoot figures in an undetermined natural setting. These figures express the represented ideas through their postures, gestures, and positions (see figs. 2–4). The pronounced visual hierarchy between the figures that fill the composition, sometimes appearing statuesque, and their rather unspecific environment can be seen as a reference to the relationship between figure and landscape in works such as those

of Leonardo, Raphael, or Michelangelo, where humans are presented as central, full-format motifs in an often universal landscape.

It may be both accurate and productive to understand Hodler's practice as one that revolved around finding a contemporary form of classicism—a perception that I assume was only reluctantly made a subject of discussion until now because of the fear that such a label as "classicist" would exclude Hodler from the canonical lines of modern art's development. However, Hodler's contribution to artistic innovation around 1900 consists precisely of a new kind of classicism, namely, one that broke completely with the iconography of antiquity. Unlike the classicism of French painter Pierre Henri Puvis de Chavannes or Swiss painters Arnold Böcklin and Félix Vallotton, Hodler's work rejects everything narrative and makes no use of ancient or Christian mythologies. This explains the artist's ambivalent attitude toward artists such as Böcklin: "Böcklin is very great, but a little too literary for my taste."⁴⁵ In Hodler's oeuvre, classicism can only refer to certain visual strategies, such as the visualization of ideas through figures removed from any specific temporal or geographic location, or a relationship between figure and space that gives the former clear primacy in nearly monumental appearance. The visibility of technical lines and grids may have been a further way for Hodler to express a contemporary classicism.

Hodler only left auxiliary lines in works where he expected their presence to be accepted, those intended for collectors, art museums, art-critic friends, and students—essentially, a well-informed art historical public. For example, he left lines visible on the two versions of *View into the Infinite* and on the second, monumental version of *Unanimity*, which Hodler had hoped to place in the Kunstmuseum Bern and which is now in the Kunsthaus Zürich (see figs. 3–4).⁴⁶ In contrast, the first version, which was created for the Hannover, Germany, town hall, has no visible lines; nor do the two studies that Hodler submitted to Hannover's commissioners. Among the portraits, those of his son Hector from 1912 (who was probably involved in the execution of the painting), Odier, and Widmann present a large, clearly visible grid of lines (fig. 12, see fig. 5).⁴⁷ A faintly translucent grid, which in one place becomes a striking motif, as a kind of ornament on the wall, is also found on one of the two portraits of Swedish art historian Fredrik Robert Martin, a great admirer of Hodler.⁴⁸ Thus, the artist seems to have been aware that an informed audience would appreciate or at least accept the lines as consciously placed signs rather than purely technical remnants.



FIG. 12. — Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918). *Portrait of Marc Odier*, 1892, oil on canvas, 100.5 × 79.5 cm. CR no. 780. Basel, Kunstmuseum, donation by Amerbach-Stiftung. Image: Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler.

The ultimate reasons for the visibility of technical lines in Hodler's paintings cannot be definitively determined. Nevertheless, this issue leads to the center of Hodler's artistic intentions. I interpret the visible lines as deliberate indicators of the unfinished, through which Hodler presents himself as an artist in the tradition of the Renaissance. There may also be cases in which the parallel structure of the technical lines replaces parallelistic motifs or assumes such a motif itself. Nonetheless, Hodler seems to have left the technical lines visible only when he assumed the public was informed enough to appreciate this somewhat extravagant *non finito*.

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Notes

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Note on the artwork titles: Apart from a few exceptions, Hodler did not assign titles to his works and often considered them unimportant. Even during his lifetime, several titles often circulated for one and the same work. For this reason, English-language artwork titles are used in the essay and the captions. The numbers given in the captions ("CR no.") refer to the catalogue raisonné: Oskar Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler: Catalogue raisonné der Gemälde*, vols. 2 and 3 (SIK-ISEA; Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008–2018), <https://www.ferdinand-hodler.ch/>.

1. What follows is only possible thanks to the research conducted by my colleagues at the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA), particularly Karoline Beltinger and Danièle Gros in the field of technology and Oskar Bätschmann, Paul Müller, and others who wrote the catalogue raisonné. See Karoline Beltinger et al., *Kunsttechnologische Forschungen zur Malerei von Ferdinand Hodler* (SIK-ISEA, 2007); Karoline Beltinger et al., *Hodler malt: Neue kunsttechnologische Forschungen zu Ferdinand Hodler* (SIK-ISEA; Scheidegger & Spiess, 2019); and Oskar Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler: Catalogue raisonné der Gemälde*, 4 vols. (SIK-ISEA; Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008–2018), <https://www.ferdinand-hodler.ch/>. Moreover, we should not forget that our research stands on the shoulders of a previous generation of scholars. For example, see Carl Albert Loosli, *Aus der Werkstatt Ferdinand Hodlers* (Birkhäuser, 1938).

2. Ferdinand Hodler, *Carnet 1898 b*, 14, transcribed by Jura Brüscheweiler, quoted in Beltinger et al., *Hodler malt*, 48.

3. Loosli, *Aus der Werkstatt Ferdinand Hodlers*, 101.

4. See Loosli, *Aus der Werkstatt Ferdinand Hodlers*, 85, 89.

5. Stéphanie Guerzoni, *Ferdinand Hodler: Sa vie, son oeuvre, son enseignement, souvenirs personnels* (Pierre Cailler, 1957), 98.

6. Ferdinand Hodler, "Les dix commandements du peintre F. Hodler," 1874, in Ferdinand Hodler, *Écrits esthétiques*, ed. Diana Blome and Niklaus Manuel Güdel (Archives Jura Brüscheweiler; Editions Notari, 2017), 39.

7. Ferdinand Hodler, *Self-portrait (The student)*, 1874, oil on canvas, 113 × 73 cm, Kunsthau Zürich, Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, cat. no. 635, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6005608/in/catalogues.hodler.band2/>.

8. Guerzoni, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 74.

9. Loosli, *Aus der Werkstatt Ferdinand Hodlers*, 66.

10. Adolf Frey, *Ferdinand Hodler* (Haessel, 1922), 12.

11. A photograph by his student and model Gertrud Müller shows the artist in his studio, sitting next to the Dürer pane. Gertrud Dübi-

Müller, *Ferdinand Hodler, with the Dürer Pane next to Him*, 1917, gelatin silver print, 30.2 × 35.7 cm, Winterthur, Fotostiftung Schweiz, <https://fotostiftung.zetcom.net/de/collection/item/87705/>.

12. According to the minutes of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, which commissioned the work, and its annual report of 1917, Hodler planned to rework the second figure from the left and the rightmost figure in the Zurich version after he had already handed the painting over to the Kunsthau—not an unusual approach for Hodler, who often made significant revisions, even to paintings he had already completed. It is possible that he would have reduced the visibility of the technical lines in the revision of the Kunsthau's painting; nevertheless, the lines were not the reason for the planned revision, which Hodler was unable to carry out for health reasons, but rather, it was his aforementioned dissatisfaction with the posture of the two figures. Minutes of board meeting of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, 29 November 1917, Kunsthau Zürich, Archives of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft. In the catalogue raisonné, Sabine Hügli-Vass comments, "At the end of 1916, CR 1594 was completed." Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 1, 481, cat. no. 1594. Also in view of the fact that the paintings *The Admired Young Man* and *Unanimity* in the Kunsthau Zürich have visible lines, it seems rather unlikely that Hodler would have removed them from *View into the Infinite*. (Additionally, Hodler drew attention to the finished state of *The Admired Young Man* in writing; see this essay, note 18.) The Basel version, originally intended for Zurich but deemed too large by the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, was reworked several times by Hodler. (Ferdinand Hodler, *View into the Infinite*, 1913–17, oil on canvas, 446 × 895 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel. Bätschmann et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 2, cat. no. 1593, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6007360/in/catalogues.hodler:exp/>.) After a final revision, it was exhibited at the Kunsthalle Basel and the Kunsthau Zürich in 1917 and acquired by the Basler Kunstverein in the same year. There is no evidence that Hodler planned further revisions of this version. See Mitg. (unidentified abbreviation), "Eröffnung der Hodler-Ausstellung in der

Kunsthalle,” in *National-Zeitung*, no. 115, midday edition, 15 February 1917, 5: “The glass-roofed room offered Hodler such an excellent opportunity to hang his work that he came to Basel himself and spent several days putting the finishing touches to the painting ‘View into the Infinite.’” See also Sabine Hügli-Vass’s comment in Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, 479, vol. 3, pt. 2, cat. no. 1593: “[Hodler] only completed the work with the last corrections when the painting was exhibited at the Kunsthalle Basel in February 1917.” By contrast, the version acquired by collector Emma Schmidt-Müller and now in the Kunstmuseum Solothurn is definitely unfinished. See Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 2, 484–85, cat. no. 1597.

13. Visible technical lines only appear in works from this cycle after Godé-Darel’s death.

14. Fritz Widmann, *Erinnerungen an Ferdinand Hodler* (Rascher, 1918), 61.

15. Artur Weese, *Aus der Welt Ferdinand Hodlers* (Francke, 1918), 24.

16. See the comments by Franz Müller on the two versions of Amiet’s portrait of Hodler in Franz Müller and Viola Radlach, *Cuno Amiet: Die Gemälde 1883–1919* (SIK-ISEA; Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014), vol. 1, 166–69, cat. nos. 1898.04, 1898.05.

17. See Oskar Bächtli, *Ferdinand Hodler: Bilder der Alpen* (Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), 3–4.

18. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Carl Reininghaus, 14 February 1905, written by Berthe Hodler-Jacques on behalf of Ferdinand Hodler, with additions by Ferdinand Hodler, Bibliothèque de Genève, quoted in Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 1, 327, cat. no. 1348. The painting was exhibited at the nineteenth Secession exhibition in Vienna in 1904.

19. Beltinger et al., *Hodler malt*, 56.

20. For example, Carl Albert Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler: Leben, Werk und Nachlass*, vol. 1 (R. Suter, 1921), 75–87. For a more recent discussion of Hodler’s parallelism, see Laurence Madeleine, ed., *Hodler // Parallelismus* (Kunstmuseum Bern; Musée d’Art et d’Histoire Genève, 2018), therein esp. Oskar Bächtli, “Hodler’s Parallelism,” 155–66; and Paul Müller, “Obsession Parallelismus,” 167–76. See also Paul Müller, “‘Parallelismus’: Hodler’s programmatischer Anspruch,” in *Ferdinand Hodler, Die Forschung, die Anfänge, die Arbeit, der Erfolg, der Kontext*, ed. Oskar Bächtli et al. (SIK-ISEA, 2009), 107–20. According to Loosli, Hodler commented on his “authorship” of parallelism as

follows: “It is my merit, which no one can rob me of, to have formulated parallelism, to have been the first to apply it consciously and practically. Of course, now that I have demonstrated it, everyone is in a position to do so; now everyone wants to have been the clever one, but it is not true; they owe parallelism to me.” Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:75.

21. Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:79–81.

22. Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:80.

23. Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:81–87.

24. Ferdinand Hodler, “The Mission of the Artist” (1897), trans. Henri Dorra, in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (University of California Press, 1994), 251. See also Ferdinand Hodler, “La mission de l’artiste,” in *Écrits esthétiques*, 177.

25. Ferdinand Hodler, *The Dead Valentine Godé-Darel*, 1915, oil on canvas, 65.5 × 81 cm, Basel, Kunstmuseum, Collection Rudolf Staechelin. Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, 279, cat. no. 936, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6006305/in/catalogues.hodler.band2:exp/>.

26. Ferdinand Hodler, *Banquet of the Gymnasts*, 1877/1878, oil on canvas, 228 × 355 cm, Zurich, Kunsthau. Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, 108–10, cat. no. 1066, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6006494/in/catalogues.hodler:exp/>.

27. Beltinger et al., *Hodler malt*, 56.

28. See this essay, note 18.

29. See Asher Ethan Miller, “Finish/Finished: French Painting from Romanticism to Impressionism,” in *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*, ed. Andrea Bayer et al. (Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2016), 132–39, esp. 133, 136.

30. See Matthias Fischer, *Ferdinand Hodler in Karikatur und Satire / Ferdinand Hodler par la caricature et la satire* (Benteli, 2012), 17.

31. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Marc Odier, 16 November 1878, in Ferdinand Hodler, *Correspondance. 1874–1904*, ed. Diana Blome and Niklaus M. Güdel (Notari, forthcoming), letter no. 15.

32. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Marc Odier, 21 November 1878, in Hodler, *Correspondance*, letter no. 17.

33. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Marc Odier, 29 July 1883, in Hodler, *Correspondance*, letter no. 72.

34. Ferdinand Hodler, letter to Jenny Studer, 3 August 1883, in Hodler, *Correspondance*, letter no. 74.

35. Ferdinand Hodler, "Über mein Kunstprinzip und über Klimt. 1904," in *Écrits esthétiques*, 359.

36. Unpublished diary by Daniel Baud-Bovy, 30 May 1905, 31, archives of the Institut Ferdinand Hodler, Geneva, BB-2010-0004. On Hodler and Giotto, see Niklaus Manuel Güdel, "Réception moderne de Giotto: L'artiste et l'exégèse, d'Ingres à Rothko," *Sociétés et représentations*, no. 51 (2021): 27–28.

37. Widmann, *Erinnerungen an Ferdinand Hodler*, 62–63.

38. See Carmen C. Bambach, "Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Notions of the Unfinished in Art," in Bayer et al., *Unfinished*, 30.

39. See Andrea Bayer, "Renaissance Views of the Unfinished," in Bayer et al., *Unfinished*, 26–28.

40. Pliny, the Elder, *Natural History*, book 35, trans. Harris Rackham (Harvard University Press, 2014), 17, 19, 313, 321, 329, 367.

41. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects* (1568), vol. 2, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere (The Medici Society; Philip Lee Warner, 1912–15), 121.

42. "When he [Hodler] came to Geneva and then to Menn, the latter soon realized what Hodler was interested in and what he was missing. He therefore played Vitruvius, Leonardo, and Dürer into his hands. Hodler threw himself into these books with his characteristic zeal, examined them and rewrote them for his own use." Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler*, 1:23.

43. Pliny, *Natural History*, book 35, 367.

44. See Pliny, *Natural History*, book 35, 313.

45. Hodler, "Über mein Kunstprinzip und über Klimt," 359.

46. About the version of *Unanimity* which is now in the Kunsthaus Zürich, Hodler wrote to collector Willy Russ-Young in 1915: "I hope that one day I will be able to place this picture in the museum in Bern." Archives Hodler of Carl Albert Loosli, deposit at SIK-ISEA, Zurich, HA 22.3, fascicle no. 112. The Kunstmuseum Bern didn't purchase the painting; instead Hodler only managed to sell it in 1917 to private collector Alfred Rüttschi, who made it available to the Kunsthaus Zürich and converted the deposit into a donation in 1919. See Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 3, pt. 2, 437–39, cat. no. 1496. On *View into the Infinite*, see this essay, note 12. The archival evidence indicates that Hodler had intended to revise the second version, now in the Kunsthaus Zürich, but was unable to before his death; therefore, it is uncertain whether all the auxiliary lines would have remained in place in the final intended product.

47. Ferdinand Hodler, *Portrait of Hector Hodler*, 1912, oil on canvas, 123 × 64 cm, Kunsthaus Zürich. See Bernadette Walter, "Bildnis Hector Hodler," in Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, 265, cat. no. 913, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6006244/in/catalogues.hodler.band2:exp/>.

48. Ferdinand Hodler, *Portrait of Fredrik Robert Martin*, 1916/17, oil on canvas, 87.5 × 63.5 cm, private collection. Bächtli et al., *Ferdinand Hodler*, vol. 2, 315–16, cat. no. 988, <https://recherche.sik-isea.ch/sik:work-6006118/in/catalogues.hodler.band2:exp/>.

Cleaning Up in Public: Mother Art's Domestic Labor Performances, 1973–78

Lexington Davis

In a photograph taken in 1977, a baby wrapped in a white blanket lies on its stomach atop a mustard-colored laundry-folding table (fig. 1). Arms outstretched, head lifted, the child fixes his or her gaze on a gridded black-and-white photographic artwork hanging from a laundry line. The infant was among the audience members present at a performance from the series *Laundry Works*, which was staged in laundromats across Los Angeles that year by the collective Mother Art. Founded at the Los Angeles Woman's Building in 1973, Mother Art brought together a group of women artists struggling to balance the demands of parenting with artistic practice. Helen Million-Ruby, Suzanne Siegel, Laura Silagi, and Christine (Christie) Kruse were the founding members, but additional participants joined and departed over the course of two decades. During this time, Mother Art collaboratively produced installations, organized exhibitions, and staged performances that drew attention to the invisible labor of women and caregivers while engaging with issues surrounding public space and access.

Although their exuberant performances and site-specific artworks attracted local interest and attention from prominent critics such as Lucy Lippard, toward the end of the 1970s Mother Art became a scapegoat for politicians eager to cut public funding to the arts and other social services deemed wasteful. These heated reactions, which dominated the news across California, emerged in the wake of a landmark referendum in 1978 that lowered property taxes, thus decreasing state revenue. The strong response to *Laundry Works* and its reliance on a California Arts Council grant contributed to an impassioned, city- and state-wide debate about the value of art in public life. Staged during the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s, which catalyzed the dismantling of the postwar welfare state, *Laundry Works* and the events and performances that Mother Art organized in its aftermath raise urgent questions that resonate today in light of the Trump administration's recent attacks on funding for art, research, and education.¹ Among them: How do gendered social-value systems inform access to public resources, including support for art? How does state funding legitimize certain artistic practices and sites while marginalizing others? And how do feminist artistic methodologies contribute to shaping the welfare state?



FIG. 1. — **Mother Art (US American, founded 1973)**. Infant audience member at the performance *Laundry Works*, 1977, Los Angeles, color slide (detail), 5 × 5 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60. Photograph by Mother Art.

In this article, I reconstruct Mother Art's most famous project, *Laundry Works*, and the backlash that it faced for its use of public funding. I argue that by performing domestic labor in public spaces, Mother Art highlighted the interdependent relationship between private care and public infrastructure, revealing how both are fueled by women's unpaid and underpaid work. The collective's performances underscore capitalism's reliance on social reproduction—the labor involved in maintaining human life and social relations across generations—a responsibility that has historically fallen primarily on women.² My research builds on historian Michelle Moravec's narrative chronology of Mother Art's twenty years of operation and arts researcher Elena Cologni's recent interview with Mother Art, which explores the collective's experiences at the Woman's Building through the ethics of care.³ Like Moravec and Cologni, I draw from original and published interviews with the artists. However, my study is primarily rooted in archival materials donated by Mother Art to the Getty Research Institute alongside documents held in the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art and at Bishopsgate Institute in London. Through close analysis of these records—including photographs, printed ephemera, press clippings, and newsletters—I trace Mother Art's political commitments, artistic process, and the contemporaneous reception of their work, including the controversy it confronted. These documents situate Mother Art's work within a wider historical context in which the social and economic value of women's labor was hotly contested. The intense yet underexamined media furor surrounding *Laundry Works* illuminates how debates about

public resources, art, gender, and labor were intersecting during the period shortly preceding and following Ronald Reagan's presidential victory, an event that accelerated the neoliberalization of American life.

Laundry Works and the discussions that engulfed it reveal deeply gendered tensions between individualism and community and the challenges of making room for difference in the public sphere. While all of Mother Art's members were white, some came from working-class backgrounds, several were single mothers, and at least two identified as lesbians. These intersecting identities informed the way Mother Art experienced the art world, the urban environment, and its members' roles as caregivers and creative practitioners. In my analysis, I position Mother Art's output within a tradition of politicized second-wave feminist performance art exploring domestic work, which raised public awareness of how divisions of labor are gendered, classed, racialized, and informed by sexual orientation.⁴ Artists performing domestic labor sought to challenge social reproduction's marginality by rendering this work visible and material in public spaces. During the same period, feminists and labor activists were similarly contesting the devaluation of women's work, and thus I read Mother Art's performances in dialogue with the welfare rights movement and the International Wages for Housework Campaign. Placing the collective's work within this wider sociopolitical context discloses how feminist artworks intervened in debates about gendered labor and the social and economic value of reproductive work. With their emphasis on the interconnections between art, work, care, and citizenry, Mother Art's domestic labor performances illustrate the reverberant political impact of feminist art presented in public.

Making Space at the Woman's Building

Mother Art members met as participants in the first Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW), an extra-institutional educational program designed to train women artists in an environment free from male influence. Initiated in 1973, the FSW was a continuation of artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's Feminist Art Program, which ran from 1970 to 1971 at Fresno State College and from 1971 to 1975 at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).⁵ The Feminist Art Program was a groundbreaking experiment in offering a women-only curriculum in a higher-educational setting, and it yielded the landmark feminist installation *Womanhouse* (1972), created collectively by Chicago, Schapiro, and their students in a dilapidated East Hollywood Victorian mansion. However, Chicago soon grew disillusioned with the male-dominated environment at CalArts and sought an independent space where her program could operate autonomously. In partnership with graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and art historian Arlene Raven, Chicago cofounded the Woman's Building, a multifunctional center for feminist art initiatives, including educational workshops, galleries, and a bookstore. The organization operated from 1973 to 1991, occupying a warehouse in an industrial area near Chinatown for the majority of that period. In her study of gender and

neighborhood planning, historian Dolores Hayden enthusiastically describes the Woman's Building as a site "designed to create a political and cultural bridge between public and private life," thus complicating gendered divisions of labor.⁶ For artists working at the Woman's Building, this approach was foundational to feminist praxis, whose proponents heralded the slogan, "The personal is political." Many groups, including Mother Art, treated the organization as an operational center for a range of activities branching out into the city's urban sprawl.⁷

Although publicly accessible and open to new members, the Woman's Building was often viewed by outsiders as an enclave, and its focus on "women's culture" was fiercely contested by feminists into the 1980s, with certain factions arguing that such separatist projects sacrificed political action in favor of lifestyle.⁸ Nonetheless, the mission of the Woman's Building was rooted in the belief that ending patriarchy would not be possible without a feminist "cultural revolution," as Raven described it, with artistic production playing a key role.⁹ For organizers of the FSW, the curriculum presented an opportunity to fuse feminist politics with artistic methodology. Students met weekly in small consciousness-raising groups, where they learned to connect their personal experiences to societal systems of oppression.¹⁰ The effect of consciousness raising on students was twofold, according to instructor Ruth Iskin, who explains that group discussion "frees the women to do work and provides material from which work is made," thus becoming a "technique" of feminist artmaking.¹¹ For members of the Woman's Building, artistic practice and political action were inextricable, and creative self-expression represented a crucial channel for communicating women's experiences of oppression.

While many participants found the Woman's Building to be a transformative and generative space, Mother Art member Million-Ruby recalls feeling alienated by its dismissal of mothers and care work. She remembers a particularly painful critique with Chicago in which the artist told Million-Ruby that the only way in which the latter would succeed as an artist would be by abandoning her husband and children, moving to a loft downtown, and working on her own.¹² It is unclear whether Chicago's advice, as recalled by Million-Ruby, was intended as a personal instruction or a more general evaluation of the art world's professional realities. In any case, this recommendation reflects statements that Chicago has herself made about her own experience, including in her autobiography *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* of 1975, where she admits: "I felt convinced that the only way to make any progress in the art world was to remain unmarried, without children, live in a large loft, and present myself in such a way that I would have to be taken seriously."¹³ Here, Chicago echoes the era's prejudice that, unlike artmaking, motherhood could not be counted as a serious activity. This stereotype led many women to feel they had just two choices: forsake family life or drop out of the art world.

According to Mother Art, this binary mentality was reinforced at the Woman's Building, where they claim that children were not always welcome. Million-Ruby, Siegel, Silagi, and Kruse each remembered an FSW policy that permitted dogs in



FIG. 2. — **Mother Art (US American, founded 1973).** *Rainbow Playground*, 1974. Woman's Building, Los Angeles, color slide (detail), 5 × 5 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60. Photograph by Mother Art.

individual artist studios but not children, who were considered too disruptive.¹⁴ In response, Mother Art drew up plans for a playground in the abandoned lot facing the building. Working collectively with each other and their children, the artists used heavy machinery to fabricate a structure made of recycled wooden cable spools, on which they painted brightly colored circular patterns (fig. 2). The interactive installation, titled *Rainbow Playground* (1974), carved out physical space where artists and community members could gather with their families. Situated close to the Woman's Building yet noticeably separate from it, the monumental construction made visible in vibrant hues the exclusion of mothers from the art center. Within the Woman's Building, children were expected to follow a strict code of conduct, including not touching artworks. In contrast, outside of the building's imposing walls, *Rainbow Playground* invited visitors of all ages to interact with the installation, blurring the boundaries between artistic practice and care work, form and function, and intellectual pursuit and leisure.

The same lack of consideration for mothers and children shown by the Woman's Building has long characterized the urban design of Los Angeles and many other cities, as noted by feminist geographers including Hayden, Linda McDowell, Winifred Curran, and Leslie Kern, among others.¹⁵ Responsive at once to the Woman's Building and the city's larger urban context, *Rainbow Playground* was a utopian exercise in modeling the kind of support infrastructure Mother Art wished existed in Los Angeles and its arts institutions.¹⁶ The playground intervened into public space in an industrial warehouse

district near downtown Los Angeles, a part of the city that most would not have associated with childcare.

Film and photographic documentation shows that the production process was a collaborative effort involving the artists' children, who were present while their mothers operated the forklift, drilled cable spools together, and painted. In contrast to many works of site-specific sculpture created in early 1970s Los Angeles, *Rainbow Playground* was constructed according to the needs of an unconventional primary audience: young children. With its immediate utility, the installation diverged from male-dominated traditions of art in public space, which typically failed to challenge the gender inequalities built into the urban fabric.¹⁷ Reflecting on the spatial experiments of women artists in the latter half of the twentieth century, art historian Pamela Lee notes that images of Los Angeles "tend to repress or marginalize alternative visions of space produced by its female inhabitants conventionally left out of the official narratives of the city's history."¹⁸ Surrounded by concrete and fabricated from discarded materials, *Rainbow Playground* appears unmonumental, installed in a sand pit flanked by parking lots (see fig. 2). If the Woman's Building represented an infrastructural effort by feminists to challenge women's exclusion from the artistic profession, *Rainbow Playground* went further, questioning the very definition of the artist's purpose and identity as an urban citizen.

When they joined the FSW, Mother Art's members had hoped to find a space where care responsibilities and creative practice were intertwined, performed alongside one another rather than rigidly separated. In reality, they were faced with an arts center that ultimately differed little from the city's more established cultural institutions, which typically positioned artmaking as disconnected from the socially reproductive work integral to so many women's lives. The lack of inclusion that Mother Art members faced at traditional and alternative arts spaces led the collective to seek opportunities in the wider urban context beyond the gallery.

During the Wash and Dry Cycles

After producing *Rainbow Playground* and curating several motherhood-themed exhibitions at the Woman's Building, Mother Art embarked on a new project proposed by Million-Ruby: a series of public performances staged in laundromats across the city. Although Million-Ruby found washing clothes to be "the most boring thing in the world," dreading her visits to the laundromat, she recognized it as an important gathering space for women, particularly those from working-class backgrounds.¹⁹ Mother Art saw an opportunity to access wider audiences by situating their work in an overlooked space associated with women's household labor. They decided to align the content of their individual artworks with the site, focusing on cleaning and washing to "make the invisible traditional domestic tasks visible," as Silagi recalls.²⁰ Million-Ruby submitted a funding request to the California Arts Council, which granted the project \$700, and the collective began preparing.²¹

Between 3 November and 1 December 1977, the group mounted performances at five laundromats in lower- or mixed-income, ethnically diverse neighborhoods spread throughout Los Angeles.²² The artists selected laundromats that they regularly used in their own neighborhoods, seeking permission in advance from managers. This siting, across the city's urban sprawl, was rooted in the artists' intimate relationships with their own neighborhoods and activated what performance scholar Meiling Cheng describes as the "multicentric" character of Los Angeles. Analyzing the city's histories of performance art, Cheng argues: "The concept of multicentricity subverts the existing power structure, which takes for granted the boundary between the 'majority' and the 'minority,' between 'dominant' cultures and 'marginal' others. The multicentric paradigm consequently has the potential to become a resistant strategy for those who are involuntarily relegated to the margins by the existing power structure."²³ While the performance series certainly did not extend to the city's expansive boundaries, its dispersed unfolding reached some of the neighborhoods and communities often left out of the city's professional arts ecosystem. In this way, the work functioned as an exercise in remapping Los Angeles's creative hubs through spaces associated with menial—rather than artistic—labor.

To advertise the series, Mother Art listed the full schedule of performances on a black-and-white poster featuring a close-up photograph of a washing machine and basket of laundry on grassy terrain (fig. 3). The household apparatus installed at the center of a bucolic scene absent of evident power outlets is at once humorous and confounding. Dislocated from the domestic environment and all possibilities of functionality, the appliance becomes sculptural, recalling the industrial aesthetic of minimalist art. Hung up in public spaces around the city, the poster's unusual composition would have likely piqued the interest of passersby uncertain of what was being marketed. Mother Art members recall, however, that they primarily relied on friends, neighbors, and fellow artists to publicize the event by word of mouth.²⁴

On the day of each performance, the group showed up shortly before the official start time with artworks stashed in wicker laundry hampers. As performances were tied to the single wash and dry cycle, this limited the artists to a short window of time ranging from between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. When the Mother Art members arrived at the laundromat, they would start a load of wash, then jump onto the machines, string up the clothesline, hang their work, interact with visitors, and pass out their informational brochure before taking everything down again after the dry cycle ended. Often they remained at the laundromat following the performance to continue conversing with their audience, which sometimes numbered 150 people.²⁵

Due to these spatial and conceptual constraints, the artworks were modest in scale and easily transportable. Silagi printed photographs of the ocean on diaphanous white fabric, which she dipped in water and pinned up to dry in situ. Million-Ruby took photographs of women doing laundry and placed them alongside images of the objects laundered. Gesturing toward the repetitive and draining experience of washing laundry, Siegel created a portrait of herself as a washerwoman that she faded by

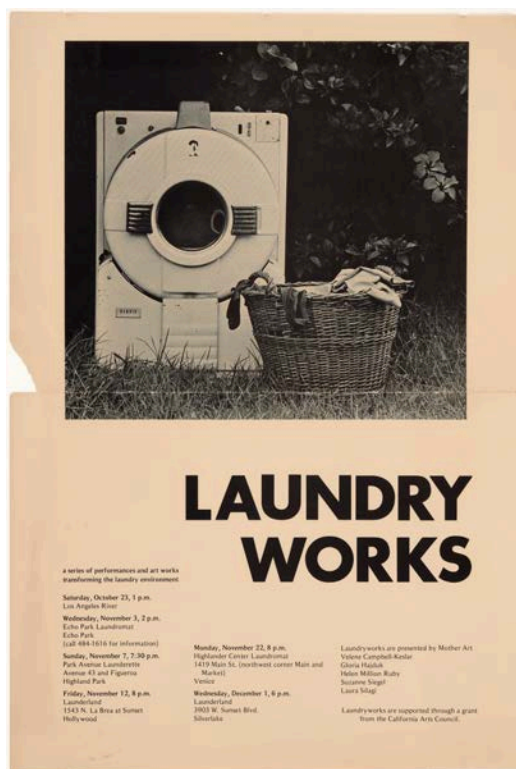


FIG. 3. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). Poster publicizing *Laundry Works*, 1977, 28 cm × 41.1 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

xeroxing it into oblivion. In a sculptural installation, member Gloria Hajduk juxtaposed towel collages with stuffed nylon stockings on which she printed clichéd sayings about women and cleaning. And writer and member Velene Campbell-Keslar stenciled lines of poetry onto pillowcases, which she allowed audience members to select and hang themselves, thereby producing unexpected combinations of text. Most of the works were designed to be pinned up along a clothesline that zigzagged across the laundromat, transforming the already compact space into a labyrinthine environment (fig. 4). Chaotic and improvisational, the performative installation rejected the organizational logic of the white-cube gallery space. Instead, *Laundry Works* fostered a dynamic, convivial atmosphere in which artists, audience members, and launderers orbited close to the art.

Formally, the works on view were intimate in scale. They were accumulative, individually created for the collective installation. Most of the artists began with objects associated with the domestic environment, including pillowcases, fabric sheets, towels, and nylon stockings. By employing textile materials, the artists created an immediate relation between the artistic form and the site of its reception. Contrasted with the industrial materials of minimalist sculpture, which often referenced blue-collar factory work, the objects produced by Mother Art incorporated the softer materials of domestic labor and the home.



FIG. 4. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). View of the performance *Laundry Works*, Highlander Center Laundromat, Los Angeles, 22 November 1977, color slide (detail), 5 × 5 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60. Photograph by Mother Art.

Similarly, the collective's artworks were not designed for a distanced, contemplative gaze but were handled like everyday household textiles. The artists pulled their work out of a laundry hamper, pinned the pieces up, took them down again, and folded them away in a process that mirrored the actual labor of laundering. The timing of the wash-and-dry cycle structured each performance with a kind of score attuned to the rhythms of housework. *Laundry Works* was staged at a time when artists, including many engaging with feminist politics, were producing performative artworks that experimented with duration, repetition, and boredom. This artistic centering of process has been widely understood as a reaction to the commodification of the art object in a postwar economy driven by consumer capitalism. Feminist artists such as Mother Art and their colleagues at the Woman's Building were exploring process through the lens of gendered temporal experiences and labor practices, such as performing household work.²⁶

In light of the public context in which *Laundry Works* was presented, Mother Art endeavored to make the series as accessible as possible to the laundromats' unsuspecting clientele. The artists produced a multipage brochure with a short introduction to the project in English and Spanish in which they described the performances as an exploration of "woman's role in the community."²⁷ The brochure's center spread featured concise individual statements from each of the artists, coupled with images playfully hung along a hand-drawn clothesline (fig. 5). While Siegel estimates that the majority of audience members were there specifically to witness the performance, at least a quarter of those present were just washing their clothes.²⁸

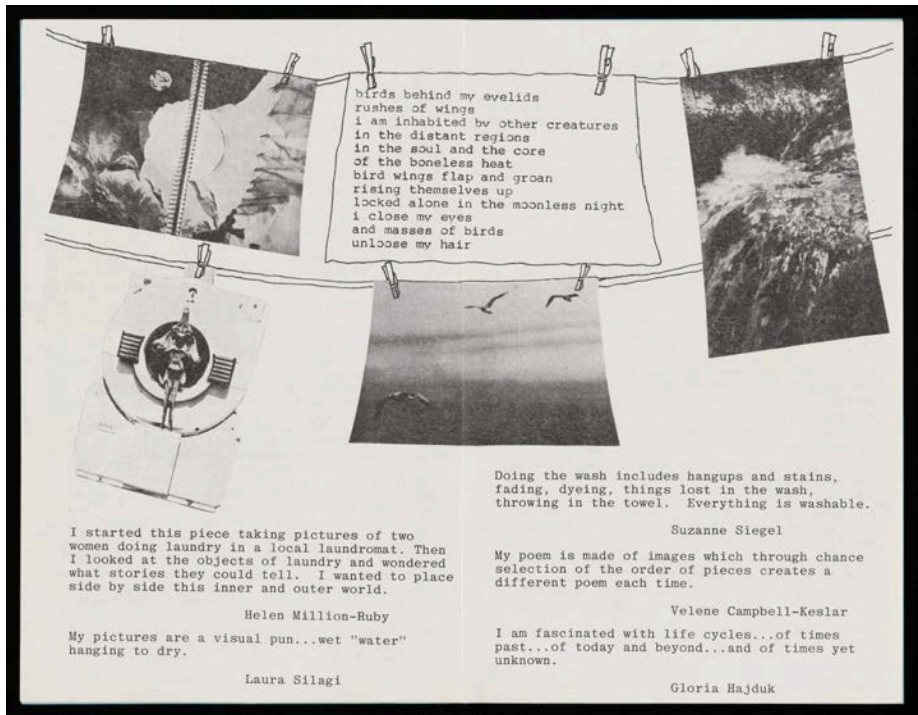


FIG. 5. — **Mother Art (US American, founded 1973).** Interior spread of the brochure from *Laundry Works*, 1977, 21.6 × 28 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

For those simply there to wash, the interpretive pamphlet helped contextualize the performance within a conversation about the forms of labor disproportionately performed by women and working-class people and everyday experience. Members of the collective handed out the texts themselves, as evidenced in photographs that capture Million-Ruby smiling and chatting with groups of individuals who hold pamphlets and bags of laundry.²⁹ These organic conversations, sparked by the artworks and the brochure, were integral to the performance, which sought to create discussion and solidarity.

Yet in a colorful review of the Venice performance, journalist Barry Brennan notes that “not everyone was impressed.”³⁰ He describes “a white robed swami” who ignored the performance and continued washing his clothes while “calling on his considerable powers of concentration to abstract himself from what had become, in effect, an art opening.”³¹ Brennan’s observation underlines the tension between the artists, the art-world audience, and the laundromat’s regular customers, particularly along lines of racialization and class. Although the performances took place in neighborhoods where the artists lived, the collective invited a predominantly white audience into spaces normally occupied by diverse community members, which sometimes resulted in misunderstandings. For example, the collective initially wore fantastical masks collaged with photographs of bones and clothespins (fig. 6). However, they retired the masks after patrons at the Echo Park Laundromat grew apprehensive, fearing the women were



FIG. 6. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). Mask worn during the performance of *Laundry Works*, Echo Park Laundromat, Los Angeles, 3 November 1977, black-and-white photograph, 28 × 35.5 cm. Photograph by Mother Art. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

planning to rob them. While the artists expressed a desire for wider public outreach and democratization of art, a power differential existed between them and the laundromat clientele that remained unresolved.

While most participants reported enjoying the lively atmosphere, the art objects were subject to criticism. In his review, Brennan expresses enthusiasm for Mother Art's intervention into public space but quickly clarifies that, "from a strictly esthetic point of view, 'Laundryworks' [sic] isn't impressive." He insists: "The imagery, while personal, doesn't rise above the derivative to achieve the universal."³² Brennan's review is, ironically, derivative itself, parroting one of the most repeated critiques of women's artwork during the 1970s: that it was lacking in quality. Like many male critics of the time, he offers no definition of the "the universal," a concept that women and artists of color were actively contesting for its normalization of a masculine, middle-class, European and US American worldview. Whose work is considered "universal" is deeply gendered, as art historian Anna Chave construes in her analysis of minimalist art and biography.³³ Chave argues that in the 1960s, the predominant critical paradigm shifted to deemphasize the artist as an individual—yet this only applied to men's work. In the rare instances that women artists received critical attention, their work was interpreted as autobiographical—the kind of "personal" content that critics such as Brennan considered lesser than, or "derivative."

In fact, Mother Art arguably did see their work as manifesting a kind of universality, although one arguably different from that espoused by Brennan and other formalist critics. In response to the survey question “What is feminist art?” that curators Iskin, Lippard, and Raven circulated to hundreds of women artists as part of their 1976 exhibition of the same name at the Woman’s Building, the collective wrote: “As Mother Art we remove the mask of invisibility, wipe away the strained smile of forced roles. . . . We insist upon the extraordinariness of the ordinary, the magic in the commonplace. We invent our own myths of motherhood which universally connect us to the past, the present and the future through birth, growth, and death.”³⁴

Even at the time, this mission statement would likely have elicited accusations of essentialism from members of the feminist art community who considered celebratory explorations of embodiment—including pregnancy and motherhood—regressive. While some feminist artists of the era were addressing female experience through the figure of the primordial fertility goddess, many others were deeply critical of embracing any concept of so-called universal experience or values, especially through figures and processes that rooted female identity in the biological sense.³⁵ As many feminists have pointed out, women and mothers are not interchangeable categories. Still, art historian Rosemary Betterton argues, “The maternal body is a symbolic construct with enormous cultural resonance, systematically shaped and produced through competing discourses and practices, yet at the same time curiously unacknowledged in terms of its visual history.”³⁶ For Mother Art, motherhood served as a site for problematizing the universal and exposing how this concept had been historically mobilized to normalize a masculine worldview. At the time of *Laundry Works*, definitions of motherhood would have necessarily excluded men. For this reason, the collective’s reference to the universal in their artist statement is provocative and perhaps laced with irony, revealing the limits of the claims to universality that critics such as Brennan employed as legitimizing discourse.

It is evident that Mother Art also considered motherhood a broadly accessible entry point for confronting systemic inequalities, including the devaluation of socially reproductive labor. As an experience shared by billions across the world and throughout history, motherhood presented an opportunity to produce affinities crossing boundaries of class, race, sexual orientation, and national identity. In *Laundry Works*, the artists and attendees met in the laundromat as fellow mothers but also as fellow workers. The artists emphasized this point in their brochure, which featured a questionnaire designed to spark conversation. The list ended with a question evocative of a workers’ inquiry or management survey, asking audience members: “Do you feel lonely, irritated, satisfied doing this job?”³⁷ Here, Mother Art encouraged their audience to view laundering, a household chore, as labor. This provocation reinforces arguments by social reproduction theorists such as International Wages for Housework Campaign cofounder Silvia Federici, who maintains that recognizing and valuing domestic labor as work—rather than as a selfless act of love—is a precondition for resisting exploitative conditions.³⁸ With *Laundry Works*, Mother Art insisted upon the arguably universal

truth that women's care work has always fueled the world, and, under capitalism, has been denied visibility as labor.³⁹ By siting their performances in locations connected to household work, Mother Art highlighted how the overlooked spaces of gendered labor are essential to the functioning of both public life and the private sector.

A “Boondoggle” in the State Budget

Nearly half a year after Mother Art closed their final performance of *Laundry Works*, the project became the focus of delayed public attention beyond any of the artists' expectations. In June 1978, California voters passed a referendum that promised to drastically cut property taxes, with enormous repercussions for the state budget. Widely considered one of the most influential US American referenda of the twentieth century, Proposition 13 won 65 percent of the vote in a seismic “tax revolt” that rippled across the country.⁴⁰ Political sociologist Isaac William Martin argues that the referendum's success was part of a larger social movement that portended Reagan's landslide victory in the 1980 presidential election, with effects felt to the present day.⁴¹ Although popular with the state's voting public, the proposition inspired intense debate, with opponents—including unions, teachers, the Democratic Party, and the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board—warning of devastating impacts on social services. Once the referendum passed, state legislators were forced to find ways to reduce spending, and Mother Art became a target.

A little over a week after Proposition 13 was approved, journalist W. B. Rood published an article in the *Los Angeles Times* describing the need to “cut fat” in the state budget. Rood lists a number of “wasteful” expenditures as examples, including *Laundry Works*, which he sneeringly describes as an attempt at “providing a little culture for housewives.”⁴² These condescending remarks are rooted in a longer history of discrediting mothers who claim public financial support, with attacks frequently articulated in classist and racist terms.⁴³ Rood's criticisms appeared at the same time as the stigmatizing “welfare queen” stereotype was gaining traction in the 1970s mass media. In response to these kinds of derogatory judgments, welfare recipients—especially women of color—publicly advocated for themselves, forming grassroots groups such as the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO).⁴⁴ One of its leaders was the Los Angeles-based former laundry worker Johnnie Tillmon, who compared welfare to an abusive, controlling marriage in an influential 1972 article published in the mainstream feminist movement's flagship magazine *Ms.*⁴⁵ Directing her message at the periodical's middle-class readership, Tillmon challenges the framing of welfare claimants as dependents of the state and instead situates their underappreciated, often invisible work inside and outside of the home as indispensable to the functioning of society. Tillmon makes the case for a system that might today be described as universal basic income, a proposition that later feminist campaigns such as International Wages for Housework would continue to develop.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in a newsletter of 1977, the Los Angeles Wages for Housework Committee (LAWFHC) expressed disapproval of

both higher property taxes and cuts to public infrastructure, arguing that the home is a workplace for women and, as such, should not be taxed at a higher rate than businesses. It contended: “The government is trying to make us pay—either through higher taxes or cuts in services or both. By dividing us into homeowners, renters, welfare mothers, suburban housewives and city housewives, it has divided our struggle and turned us against each other. While some of us are fighting to cut the budget, others of us fight to increase social services. We refuse to be divided against ourselves! We are all housewives.”⁴⁷

The LAWFHC considered the debate around Proposition 13 polarizing, splintering women as a political class. Instead, the group advocated for increased taxes on corporations, which they believed directly benefited from women’s work performed in the private home and the public sector. When Rood dismissed Mother Art and their audience as “housewives,” he ironically reinforced the LAWFHC’s subversive claim that “we are all housewives,” which the group treated as a feminist rallying cry. The LAWFHC considered the housewife a symbol of women’s oppression under capitalism, using the oft-belittled figure to advocate for a diverse coalition of women and working-class subjects united through the unpaid and underpaid domestic labor they perform with little recognition. *Laundry Works* sought to bring together this broad base of community in physical space through a performative intervention into the sphere of domestic labor, a project critics such as Rood deemed insignificant.

While feminists including Mother Art envisioned a united coalition of reproductive workers, they often overlooked issues related to race. This oversight led International Wages for Housework Campaign activists to form the subgroup Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWFWFH), which maintained close ties to the welfare rights movement. In her history of the Wages for Housework campaign, historian Emily Callaci argues that BWFWFH organizers considered their movement a continuation of the Black freedom struggle, with leader Wilmette Brown arguing that Black welfare mothers demanded wages for housework “as damages; as back pay for all the unpaid and unwaged work of plantation and domestic slavery; as reparations.”⁴⁸ As white women, Mother Art’s members would not have been the primary targets of the “welfare queen” stereotype and the state’s most violent and racialized policies, but they were nonetheless implicated in the demonization of women who deviated from the heterosexual nuclear family model, particularly the collective’s members who were queer and/or single parents. Mother Art members understood that an attack directed at *Laundry Works* was an attack leveled at all who performed low-status care and survival work.

The media scapegoating of Mother Art had longevity, and references to the group appear in news articles into the early 1980s. Art historian Larne Abse Gogarty argues that the backlash over *Laundry Works* illustrates how “the New Deal consensus over the necessity for welfare and public spending was largely diminished by the end of the 1970s, with art positioned as especially wasteful when it sought to address social need.”⁴⁹ The controversy arguably reached its zenith when former California Governor Reagan referenced Mother Art on a radio commentary titled “Waste” in late 1978.⁵⁰

Reagan apparently mentioned the collective again shortly following his presidential inauguration in 1981, according to an article by *Los Angeles Times* theater critic Dan Sullivan, who detailed a phone conversation he had had with Reagan. In the call, Sullivan recounts valiantly defending the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) while conceding that public funding of Mother Art represented a budgetary “boondoggle.”⁵¹ Sullivan refers to *Laundry Works* as “silly stuff” and “a flaky project” while printing factual errors about the work, including overstating the grant amount by more than double and failing to clarify that the project was supported by the California Arts Council (CAC), not the NEA.⁵² Alongside Reagan, Sullivan joins the chorus of ill-informed critics who made no effort to learn more about the work, instead quickly dismissing it as a “waste” of time and resources, not even worth properly researching.

While they represented a frequent target in the firestorm surrounding Proposition 13, the members of Mother Art were not the only artists affected by discussions around funding. In a state senate debate of 1978, Republican representative Dennis Carpenter ripped into the CAC for supporting artists whom he generalized as “the underbelly of society,” producers of “trash” that “normal people” would not consider art.⁵³ This kind of inflammatory language inspired Mother Art to join forces with a group of other artists and cultural leaders to co-organize an event they described as “an evening of open dialogue about the arts.”⁵⁴ On 27 August 1978 a group gathered in the courtyard of the Los Angeles City Hall for a convening called Art for Public Consumption, which included music, performances, a group dinner, and speeches by Million-Ruby and artists Judy Baca, Suzanne Jackson, Allan Kaprow, Leslie Labowitz, and John Outterbridge, among others (fig. 7). The flyer promised a “unique gastronomical and intellectual event” and featured a black-and-white graphic of a hand pointing up to touch the base of a heart and flanked on either side by a fork and a paintbrush, suggesting that art, like food, provides essential nourishment (fig. 8). The program was covered for the *Los Angeles Times* by Suzanne Muchnic, an art critic who was also listed in the program as a speaker. Muchnic describes a relaxed and convivial atmosphere, which is reflected in photographs of the event; she also recounts participants engaging in serious debate about art’s role in society.⁵⁵ According to Muchnic’s account, Kaprow entreated his fellow artists not to beg for handouts, which he considered “demeaning,” while critic Peter Plagens professed that, in artmaking, “public outcry is part of the territory,” instructing his audience not to compromise their artistic vision when faced with public pressure.⁵⁶ Presenting a slightly more optimistic perspective, Hugh Stevenson, aide to Councilman Joel Wachs, suggested that the uproar surrounding Proposition 13 could present a starting point for further discussion and encouraged artists to educate public officials about their work. Even when confronting the defamatory characterization of their work as waste, Los Angeles artists responded by bringing their community together in dialogue and solidarity. While legislators and critics in the press accused them of squandering public funds, Mother Art treated Art for Public Consumption as an opportunity to defend the social value of creative and reproductive labor while protesting the structural inequalities that underpin the distribution of public funds.



FIG. 7. — Documentation of Art for Public Consumption, an event co-organized by Mother Art, 27 August 1978, Los Angeles City Hall, black-and-white photograph, 12 × 9 cm. Photographer(s) not identified. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.



FIG. 8. — Flyer publicizing Art for Public Consumption, an event co-organized by Mother Art, Los Angeles City Hall, 27 August 1978, 22 × 35.6 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

Cleaning Up Real Waste

In addition to co-organizing Art for Public Consumption, Mother Art fired back at their critics through a 1978 performance work titled *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*, instigated in response to Proposition 13 and the publication of Rood's *Los Angeles Times* article. The performance was the second in a series; the first, titled *Mother Art Cleans Up the Banks*, was produced in connection with the College Art Association Conference of 1978 and involved Mother Art members cleaning the facades of two financial institutions along Wilshire Boulevard. The second performance took place at City Hall; Siegel, Silagi, and Hajduk recall that it was primarily done for the purpose of documentation.⁵⁷ As in the earlier performance, Mother Art members brought an assortment of cleaning supplies and proceeded to sweep, mop, dust, and scrub the building's stately exterior. The performance pointed out the hypocrisy involved in singling out a low-budget performance as waste when arts funding accounted for only a miniscule portion of federal, state, and local budgets. Real waste, Mother Art's piece suggested, is generated by corporate greed and the legislators who back business interests over communities.

The photographs that capture the event highlight the inefficiency of the artists' efforts. In one image, Silagi dusts the ground, while Million-Ruby attempts to wash the building's towering facade with a mop (fig. 9). The women are dwarfed by the vast expanse of wall surrounding them, emphasizing the impossibility of their task. Armed with meager feather dusters and tiny buckets, Mother Art members clearly lack the appropriate tools to tackle the job. The artists appear to acknowledge the absurdity of their situation; in one photograph, the three women slump at a bench, with Million-Ruby and Silagi slouching over the cleaning equipment while Siegel stretches back on the seat, perhaps accepting defeat and indulging in a moment of rest (fig. 10). For Mother Art, the futility of these repetitive gestures was meant as a metaphor, symbolizing "the lack of power women have to affect [sic] changes in institutions."⁵⁸ Their seemingly pointless actions may also have served as a humorous riposte to critics who accused the artists of frivolity and flakiness. While undoubtedly satirical, Mother Art insists that "these were critical gestures" pointing to urgent political issues.⁵⁹ The performance served as a powerful reminder that when public spending is cut, additional unpaid labor falls largely on women, who take on formerly state-supported, socially reproductive work without compensation (for example, by volunteering at understaffed schools). Art historian Andrea Liss argues the performance was "simultaneously creating commentary on real fiscal waste and articulating the powerful bonds between women's domestic and public spaces."⁶⁰



FIG. 9. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). View of the performance *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*, 1978, black-and-white photograph from contact sheet, 2.5 × 3.7 cm (image); 23.5 × 18 cm (sheet). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

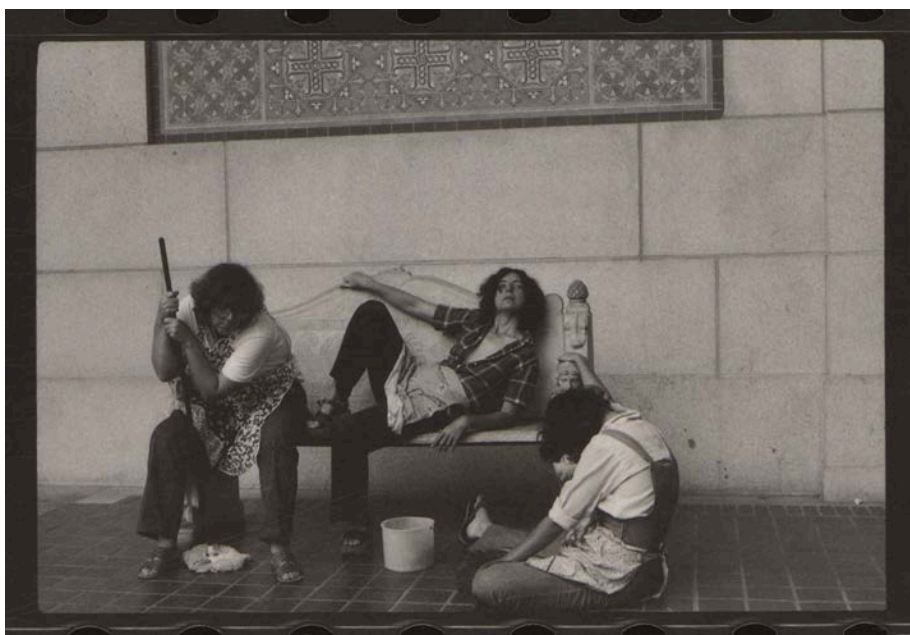


FIG. 10. — Mother Art (US American, founded 1973). View of the performance *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*, 1978, black-and-white photograph from contact sheet, 2.5 × 3.7 cm (image); 23.5 × 18 cm (sheet). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2017.M.60.

Driven by a desire to link labor performed in private and public spaces, Mother Art's work contributed to a larger movement of politicized feminist performance and institutional critique that challenged sexist value systems. In a fall 1978 issue of *High Performance*, the collective reflected on their *Cleans Up* performances, describing the series as "a verbal and a visual pun about the role of women as purifiers and domestic sanitation workers of the world."⁶¹ These comments situate Mother Art's engagement with local struggles within a broader, transnational context—or as the artists term it, the world. *Laundry Works* and the *Cleans Up* series align Mother Art with other second-wave feminist artists exploring gendered divisions of labor, including Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose landmark performances *Touch Sanitation* (1979–80) and *Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Outside* (1973) "address the unrecognized labor of domesticity and sanitation" (fig. 11).⁶² Ukeles is perhaps best known for coining the phrase "maintenance art" in a manifesto of 1969, in which she advocated an artistic practice eroding the binary split dividing productive and reproductive labor, or "development" and "maintenance," as she describes it, using the New York City Department of City Planning's terminology.⁶³



FIG. 11. — Mierle Laderman Ukeles (US American, b. 1939). *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, 1973, performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Part of Ukeles's Maintenance Art performance series, 1973–74. Image © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

The feminist political investments articulated in performances by Ukeles and Mother Art are reflected in numerous artworks produced by women artists across different parts of the world, demonstrating that Mother Art was not alone in probing issues related to domestic labor and care. In France, Argentine artist Lea Lublin installed a nursery at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (City of Paris Museum of Modern Art), where her performance *Mon fils* (My son; 1968) involved publicly caring for her infant son in the gallery.⁶⁴ In Poland, Anna Kutera dipped a broom in black paint and swept it across a white canvas laid out on the floor of her studio, a work she called *Feminist Painting* (1973). In Spain, the feminist collective Les Nyakes scrubbed the floors at the Primeres Jornades Catalanes de la Dona (First Catalan Women's Conference) in 1976, organized in Barcelona shortly after dictator Francisco Franco's death. In Brazil, artist Letícia Parente filmed herself lying face down on an ironing board while her maid ran an iron over her body, a performance for the camera titled *Tarefa I* (Assignment I; 1982). Although these artists were not always aware of each other's work, transnational and transcultural exchanges did occur. Mexican artist Mónica Mayer, a student at the FSW, wrote about Mother Art in her master's thesis in 1980.⁶⁵ Three years later, Mayer went on to cofound the collective Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder) with artist Maris Bustamante in Mexico City, where they staged performances exploring the labor of mothering, positioning domestic labor as a political issue.⁶⁶ Individually and, even more so, collectively, these groundbreaking performances challenge perspectives that consider social reproduction to be women's biological destiny rather than labor that supports capitalist production. Through performative artworks often presented in public spaces, feminist artists became agents of societal transformation, working toward the as-yet-unrealized goal of ending labor exploitation governed by patriarchal oppression.

When making *Laundry Works* and *Cleans Up*, Mother Art was guided by an interest in questioning the very meaning of public art, asking how the siting of artwork in spaces of common use can inspire radical change to everyday life. In his review of *Laundry Works*, Brennan reassured his readers that the artists were not "wild-eyed art revolutionaries," yet his evaluation is belied by statements that the artists made at the time as well as later, which suggest that they saw their project as transgressive. In a 2005 interview, Mother Art reflected: "There was something absolutely, wonderfully material about dealing with the sheer transformation of dirty clothes—wet, dry and the cycle, the literal revolution—and the metaphors are ripe for connections with social revolution, perhaps even something unimagined, perhaps utopian."⁶⁷ The seismic societal shifts Mother Art envisioned and sought to enact through their work gesture toward a future in which care and community are prioritized, a future yet to be determined.

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Notes

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1. David Harvey argues that the “neoliberal turn” was already in motion during the early 1970s but acknowledges 1978–80 as a “revolutionary turning point” in world history with the elections of Deng Xiaoping in China, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and Ronald Reagan in the United States, coinciding with US Federal Reserve Chair Paul Volcker’s influence on monetary policy in this period. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

2. For more on the history of social reproduction in feminist theory and practice, see Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (Pluto Press, 2019); and Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto Press, 2017).

3. Michelle Moravec, “Mother Art: Feminism, Art and Activism,” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 5, no. 1 (2003): 69–77; and Elena Cologni and Mother Art Collective, “Mother(ings): From the Home to the Planet. A Dialogue Between Mother Art Collective and Elena Cologni,” in *Art for the Sake of Care*, ed. Merel Visse and Elena Cologni special issue, *International Journal of Education and the Arts* 25, no. 1 (September 2024): <http://doi.org/10.26209/ije25si1.6>.

4. Here I build on art historical studies on the treatment of domestic labor in 1970s feminist performance, including Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (2000): 71–97; and Siona Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

5. When Chicago resigned from CalArts in 1973 to found the Woman’s Building, Schapiro continued the Feminist Art Program until she left the school in 1975.

6. Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (W. W. Norton, 1984), 223.

7. Feminist Studio Workshop faculty member Suzanne Lacy and artist Leslie Labowitz formed Ariadne: A Social Art Network, an activist feminist group that advocated to end violence against women. While at the Woman’s Building, Lacy and Labowitz produced performances

protesting rape and gender-based violence, including *Three Weeks in May* (1977) and *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977). The performance collective The Waitresses, founded in 1977 by artists Jerri Allyn and Anne Gauldin, used their experiences in food service as a starting point for addressing feminist issues around working-class women’s labor.

8. For more on the criticisms of “cultural feminism,” see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019); and Andrea Long Chu, “The Impossibility of Feminism,” *Differences* 30, no. 1 (2019): 63–81.

9. Arlene Raven, quoted in Ruth Iskin, “Feminist Education at the Feminist Studio Workshop,” in *Learning Our Way: Essays in Feminist Education*, ed. Charlotte Bunch and Sandra Pollack (The Crossing Press, 1983), 172.

10. For more on the influence of consciousness-raising on feminist artistic practice, see Amy Tobin, “I’ll Show You Mine, If You Show Me Yours: Collaboration, Consciousness-Raising and Feminist-Influenced Art in the 1970s,” *Tate Papers*, no. 25 (2016), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/25/i-show-you-mine-if-you-show-me-yours>.

11. Iskin, “Feminist Education,” 174.

12. Laura Silagi, Deborah Krall, and Suzanne Siegel, dirs., *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 40 minutes, 2012, Vimeo video, 3:10. Motherart.org, <https://motherart.org/mother-art-tells-her-story-video/>.

13. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (Anchor Books, 1975), 41.

14. Siegel, quoted in Moravec, “Mother Art,” 70; and Million-Ruby and Kruse, quoted in Laura Silagi, Deborah Krall, and Suzanne Siegel, script for *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 1–2, 2011–13, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI), Mother Art records, 1973–2017, 2017.M.60, box 1, folder 11. In an interview from 17 July 2024 conducted over e-mail with Siegel and Silagi, the artists confirmed their memories of this policy, which they state was collectively determined by women in the Feminist Studio Workshop, a majority of whom were younger and did not have children. Beyond the artists’ recollections, I have not located

documentation regarding specific rules about dogs or children at the FSW. In her memoir of the Woman's Building, artist Terry Wolverton describes debate erupting over male children being excluded from the building and dogs not being permitted in the dorms. Terry Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman's Building* (City Lights, 2002), 33.

15. See, for example, Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (MIT Press, 1982); Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Winifred Curran, *Gender and Gentrification* (Routledge, 2017); and Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (Verso, 2020).

16. Efforts to create care infrastructure in the urban environment echo earlier initiatives by US American women during the Progressive Era who saw the city as an extension of women's domain in the home. For more on this movement to improve public sanitation, health, and social welfare, which became known as municipal housekeeping, see Ann Oakley, *Women, Peace and Welfare: A Suppressed History of Social Reform, 1880–1920* (Policy Press, 2023).

17. See Rosalyn Deutsche's critique of urban geographers' universalizing analyses of the postmodern city and its visual representations: Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (MIT Press, 2002).

18. Pamela M. Lee, "Construction Sites: Women Artists in California and the Production of Space-Time," in *Art/Women/California, 1950–2000: Parallels and Intersections*, ed. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (University of California Press, 2002), 275.

19. Silagi, Krall, and Siegel, script for *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 7, Mother Art records, GRI.

20. Silagi, Krall, and Siegel, script for *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 7.

21. \$700 in 1977 would amount to approximately \$3,800 in 2024, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI (Consumer Price Index) Inflation Calculator, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

22. The series began on 23 October with a performance that involved washing clothing in the Los Angeles River, a 51-mile-long engineered waterway for storm runoff. The laundromat performances took place at Echo Park Laundromat (3 November), Park Avenue Launderette in Highland Park (7 November), Launderland in Hollywood (12 November),

Highlander Center Laundromat in Venice (22 November), and Launderland in Silverlake (1 December).

23. Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (University of California Press, 2002), 13.

24. Laura Silagi and Suzanne Siegel, e-mail interview with the author, 17 July 2024.

25. In his article for the *Evening Outlook*, Barry Brennan claims more than one hundred fifty people attended the Venice performance. Barry Brennan, "Cleaning Up in the Art World," *Evening Outlook*, 27 November 1976, 7A. In an unpublished letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* from 1978, Mother Art claims that one performance had an audience numbering two hundred. Gloria Hajduk et al., unpublished letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1978, Mother Art records, GRI, box 1, folder 5.

26. See Alexandra Juhasz, "A Process Archive: The Grand Circularity of Woman's Building Video," in *Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building*, ed. Meg Linton, Sue Maberry, and Elizabeth Pulsinelli (Ben Maltz Gallery; Otis College of Art and Design, 2012), 97–123.

27. Mother Art, *Laundry Works* brochure, 1977, n.p., Mother Art records, GRI, box 2, folder 7.

28. Silagi, Krall, and Siegel, script for *Mother Art Tells Her Story*, 9.

29. Still image in Silagi, Krall, and Siegel, *Mother Art Tells Her Story*.

30. Brennan, "Cleaning Up in the Art World," 7A.

31. Brennan, "Cleaning Up in the Art World," 7A.

32. Brennan, "Cleaning Up in the Art World," 7A.

33. Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (2000): 149–63.

34. Mother Art, response to "What is Feminist Art?," ca. 1976–77, Woman's Building records, 1970–1992, Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, digital ID: 12899, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/mother-art-response-to-what-feminist-art-12899>.

35. "The Great Goddess Debate" of the 1970s and 80s epitomized a perceived schism in the feminist art community between an essentialist and social-constructivist approach to gendered experience. However, numerous art historians have criticized this binary as an oversimplification of more nuanced perspectives. See Molesworth,

"House Work and Art Work"; and Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 248–63.

36. Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts* (Manchester University Press, 2014), 1.

37. Mother Art, *Laundry Works* brochure, n.p.

38. In her 1975 pamphlet *Wages Against Housework*, Federici writes: "They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work." Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Falling Wall Press, 1975), 1.

39. Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman, "Without Reserves," in Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 43.

40. See Arthur O'Sullivan et al., *Property Taxes and Tax Revolts: The Legacy of Proposition 13* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Isaac William Martin, *The Permanent Tax Revolt: How the Property Tax Transformed American Politics* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

41. Martin, *The Permanent Tax Revolt*, 50.

42. W. B. Rood, "Legislators Seek Ways to Cut Fat, Don't Have Far to Look," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June 1978.

43. Perhaps the most infamous denunciation of mothers receiving welfare was politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* of 1965, prepared for the US Department of Labor's Office of Policy Planning and Review, in which Moynihan argued that single mothers were responsible for poverty and crime in Black communities. Even though his analysis received intense criticism, it had lasting impact on the perception of women welfare recipients, particularly mothers of color.

44. For more detailed histories of the welfare rights movement, see Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (Routledge, 2004); and Priya Kandaswamy, *Domestic Contradictions: Race and Gendered Citizenship from Reconstruction to Welfare Reform* (Duke University Press, 2021).

45. Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare Is a Woman's Issue," *Ms.*, Spring 1972, 111–16.

46. In an interview in 2019, *Wages for Housework* leader Selma James explicitly credits the welfare rights movement with inspiring *Wages for Housework*. Ron Agustin, "Beyond Boundaries: Selma James Interviewed by Ron Agustin," *Monthly Review* 71, no. 4 (September 2019): 64.

47. Los Angeles *Wages for Housework* Committee, "A View from the Kitchen: Property Taxes," *Wages for Housework Newsletter: National*

Edition, spring 1977, 3, London, Bishopsgate Institute, *Wages for Housework* Campaign Archive, 1970–2022, box 7.

48. Wilmette Brown, *Roots: Black Ghetto Ecology* (Housewives in Dialogue, 1986), 14, cited in Emily Callaci, *Wages for Housework: The Feminist Fight Against Unpaid Labor* (Seal Press, 2025), 199.

49. Larne Abse Gogarty, *Usable Pasts: Social Practice and State Formation in American Art* (Haymarket Books, 2023), 112.

50. Ronald Reagan, "Reprint of a radio program titled 'Waste,'" n.p., 29 November 1978, KABC Radio, Mother Art records, GRI, box 1, folder 11.

51. Dan Sullivan, "A Call from the President," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1981, clipping from Mother Art records, GRI, box 2.

52. Sullivan, "A Call from the President."

53. Larry Stammer, "Arts Council Under Fire in State Senate," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 August 1978, B12. Carpenter does not name specific artists, at least not according to Stammer's report.

54. Mother Art, program for "Art for Public Consumption," 27 August 1978, Mother Art records, GRI, box 2, folder 10.

55. Suzanne Muchnic, "Artists Take a Political Step," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 August 1978, part 4, clipping from Mother Art records, GRI, box 2.

56. Muchnic, "Artists Take a Political Step."

57. Suzanne Siegel and Laura Silagi, e-mail to the author, 17 July 2024; and Gloria Hajduk, e-mail to the author, 25 August 2024.

58. Mother Art, "Mother Art," *High Performance* 1, no. 4 (December 1978): 32.

59. Hettie Judah, "Mother Art and Polvo de Gallina Negra in Conversation with Hettie Judah," *Luncheon*, no. 17 (2024): 133.

60. Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 2.

61. Mother Art, "Mother Art," 32.

62. Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Routledge, 2011), 78.

63. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition 'Care,'" in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (MIT Press, 2011), 144–49.

64. See Catherine Spencer, "Acts of Displacement: Lea Lublin's *Mon Fils*, May '68, and Feminist Psychosocial Revolt," *Oxford Art Journal* 40, no. 1 (2017): 65–83.

65. Mónica P. Mayer Lucido, "Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool" (master's thesis, Goddard College, 1980).

66. See Alberto McKelligan Hernandez, "Representing Motherhood and Political Violence in Mexico: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of *Más allá de la vanguardia: La transmaternidad*

(*Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity*)," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 5 (2021): 38–56.

67. Mother Art, interview by Andrea Liss, Los Angeles, 5 November 2005, quoted in Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, 2–3.

Primed to See: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*

Emilie Chesnutt Boone

A manila folder opens in an archive, and its photographic content delights its viewer and confirms her intuition. In the black-and-white photograph, a Black woman holds a Leica camera up to her face, directing her gaze toward the viewer through its lens in a self-portrait.¹ More photographs by this same individual are identified. The archive is the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the viewer is photographer Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, and the date is February 1983, a few years before Moutoussamy-Ashe would publish the book *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* of 1986.² This archival encounter between Moutoussamy-Ashe and a compelling body of photographs by Eslanda Good Robeson, who was an image maker previously unbeknown to Moutoussamy-Ashe, served as a moment of discovery that reinforced the need to narrate the long-standing history of Black women in photography.

When Moutoussamy-Ashe found Robeson in the archive, it became the impetus for her to urgently pursue what would become *Viewfinders*.³ By the time of her visit to Yale, Moutoussamy-Ashe intuitively knew that Black women were part and parcel of photography's history, but her assertions were supported by limited tangible evidence. Happening upon Robeson in the Beinecke Library reaffirmed the existence of other Black women photographers. This essay augments the origin story of *Viewfinders*—in which a moment in the archive spurred personal momentum—by asking what enabled Moutoussamy-Ashe to identify her archival encounter as one of significance in the first place. Arguably, she was primed and poised to see differently. I address how the author arrived at this moment of readiness and focus, in which being grounded in Black photographic life and its contours afforded her the possibility of rewriting history, and in which each encounter—with a bit of information, a newsletter, an exhibition, a juxtaposition of images, or a publication—became a rehearsal, building to the sort of generative discovery that Moutoussamy-Ashe made in the archive. This essay is about what primed Moutoussamy-Ashe to find Black women photographers in the archive; it is about how Moutoussamy-Ashe came to see.⁴ *Viewfinders*, as a result, both anticipates

and responds to other, contemporaneous efforts to normalize and celebrate Black women behind the camera.

Born to an interior designer mother and architect father, Moutoussamy-Ashe grew up in the segregated South Side of Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, and her family encouraged her pursuit of artistic interests from the time she was a child. Photographs fascinated her from an early age, especially those gracing the pages of Gordon Parks's striking photobooks.⁵ Moutoussamy-Ashe's formal training in photography at the Cooper Union, New York, where she obtained her BFA in 1975, enabled her to learn from street photographers Garry Winogrand and Tod Papageorge in addition to photography curator Anne Wilkes Tucker.⁶ From its inception in 1859, the then-radical Cooper Union educational model offered training in art, architecture, and engineering to students across the color line, men and women alike. Moutoussamy-Ashe is among several renowned Black artists, including Roy DeCarava, Paul Gardère, Palmer Hayden, Wangechi Mutu, Augusta Savage, and Jack Whitten, who attended the once tuition-free institution.

Moutoussamy-Ashe is the author of five books of photography, *Viewfinders* being the only publication to depart from her own body of photographic work, which consists primarily of landscapes, people and places, trees and nature, and experiments with abstraction. Her wide-ranging oeuvre includes arresting photographs such as a gelatin-silver-print portrait of Maya Angelou from 1993 (fig. 1). The topics of her publications vary, including photographs taken of daily life for the Gullah Geechee people on Daufuskie Island in South Carolina (*Daufuskie Island: A Photographic Essay*, 1982); an anthology of photographs that she took all over the world, including in South Africa and India, between 1973 and 2011 (*An Anthology: Faces, Places, and Spaces*, 2011); and two projects that offer visual meditations on flowers (*The African Flower: Singing of Angels*, 2001; *A Flower is a Lovesome Thing/Notables of Note*, 2011). Another photobook offers intimate views into her own family life and love for her daughter, Camera, and her late husband, tennis champion Arthur Ashe, whose shared values, and, later, his untimely death from AIDS in 1993, informed the course of Moutoussamy-Ashe's life. As an activist, she expressed her commitment to "instill(ing) in young people the kindred spirit of imagination and creativity."⁷ Moutoussamy-Ashe built a successful and hard-won career as both an artist, with exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, and as a photojournalist, contributing images on assignment to newspapers and magazines including *Life*, *Smithsonian*, *Ebony*, and *Sports Illustrated*. More recent attention to Moutoussamy-Ashe's work includes the exhibition *Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and the Last Gullah Islands* (2024–25) and related programming at the Whitney Museum of American Art.



FIG. 1. — Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe (US American, b. 1951). *Maya Angelou, Winston Salem, NC, 1993*, silver gelatin print, 25.4 × 26.7 cm. Image © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, courtesy of the artist, all rights reserved.

Moutoussamy-Ashe's book *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* offers a chronologically ordered account of individual Black women's engagement with the medium from the time following the storied announcements of photography's invention in 1839 to her own contemporary moment of the 1980s. Deborah Willis, now renowned as a photography historian and emerging as a significant curator at the time, served as an invaluable consultant, and a research assistant by the name of Kali Vertamae Grosvenor contributed tremendously to the project with visits to numerous archives in the US. Well received by reviewers and readers alike, the survey photobook notably went into a second printing just a few years later, in 1993, this time with Writers and Readers Publishing instead of the initial publisher, Dodd, Mead & Company.⁸ Both publishers released *Viewfinders* in soft- and hardcover. While the cover of the second edition features a still life of the author's flea-market collection of old photographs and cameras, an illustration of a four-by-five tripod camera of yesteryear graces the first (fig. 2).

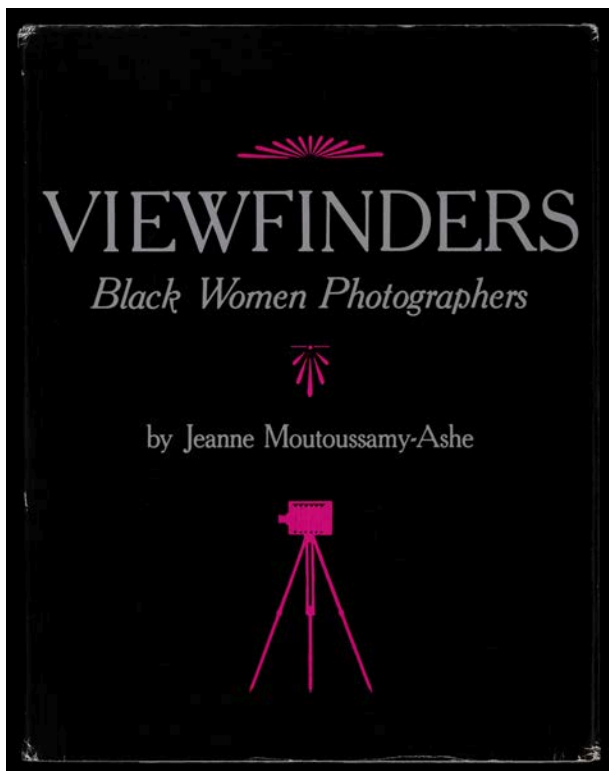


FIG. 2. — Cover of Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986). Designed by Claire B. Counihan. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B10153.

Although both are nearly identical in content, the first edition deserves close consideration. With dimensions around the size of standard printing paper, *Viewfinders* is a commercially made book. The images were photographically reproduced as offset lithograph or letterpress half-tone prints, mostly from negatives that enabled fidelity to the original photograph.⁹ Other photographs whose negatives were unavailable are not of the same reproduction quality but can be cherished for the historical value of the image. As a survey book, *Viewfinders* is slanderer than most, and the individual photographs are generously arranged on the page with space to spare (fig. 3). The credit lines repeat vertically in small print, gracing the corner of each photograph and leaving little doubt as to the name of each photograph's maker. This layout is in sharp contrast to a scrapbook or collage aesthetic, in which dense imagery creates an effect of busyness and confluence.¹⁰ Instead, each photograph in *Viewfinders* is carefully balanced on the page and distinguished from others around it. Its "bookness" is elegant yet practically didactic.

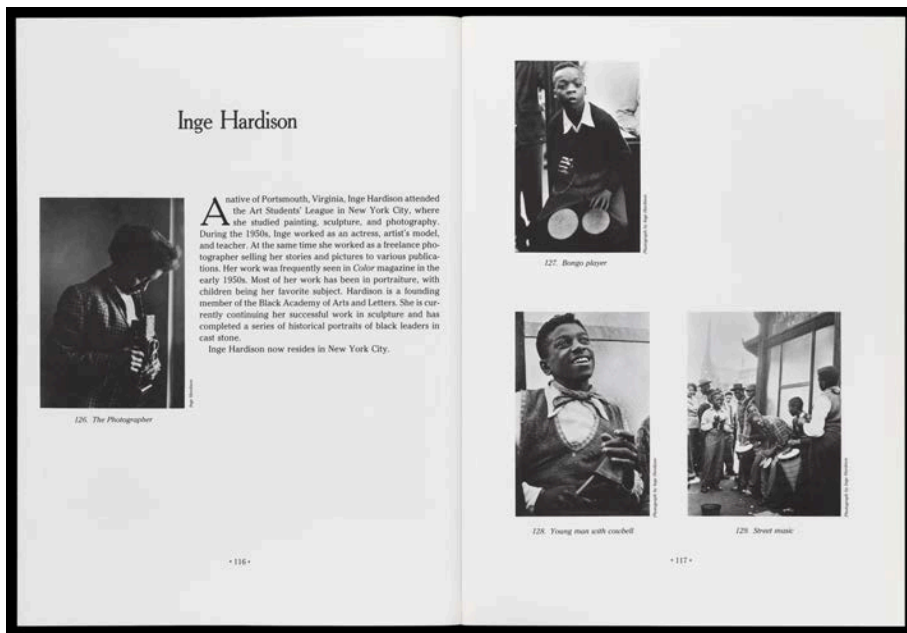


FIG. 3. — *The Photographer, Bongo Player, Young Man with Cowbell, and Street Music*, ca. 1950s, by Inge Hardison (US American, 1914–2016), spread from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), 116–117. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B10153. Art © Inge Hardison. Book © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, reproduced with permission.

Following a contextualizing introduction, *Viewfinders* is organized into five historical sections that span the nearly 150 years of photography from 1839 to the decade of the book's publication. Across the sections of the two-hundred-page book, Moutoussamy-Ashe profiles thirty-three individual photographers through short essays that offer biographical accounts of their engagement with photography. Generative to each section is the inclusion of black-and-white photographs. In some cases, a portrait photograph of the photographer is included, while in others we see an advertisement for their photography business or distinct examples from their bodies of work. The reader encounters traditional studio portraiture, abstractions of clouds and experimental work, an intimate series of a baby's delivery, photojournalistic views of political marches, a modernist depiction of the built environment, and more (fig. 4). The concluding sections feature a bibliography of the photographers featured, reminiscent of an earlier publication by Willis, along with two general listings of names grouped by the dates 1860–1960 and 1960–80, a geographical index, notes, a selected bibliography, and an index, all features that facilitate the book's presentation as a distinct contribution to photographic history.¹¹

A close look at this immensely important effort to document, collate, and narrate the *longue durée* of Black women in photography and its relationship to other projects from around the same time allows us to better understand its genesis and impact. As this essay will demonstrate, a separate research project by Moutoussamy-Ashe and published scholarly work by other writers added to an emerging critical dialogue.



FIG. 4. — Fern Logan (US American, b. 1945). *Millerton Station*, ca. 1985, from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), 167. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B10153. Art © Fern Logan. Book © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, reproduced with permission.

Elsewhere, exhibition interventions and short-lived initiatives set an important revisionist tone. Such examples are germane to the project of writing Black photographic history, a process that “rarely constitutes the object of study.”¹² This essay’s object of study is *Viewfinders*—the book itself—and the various antecedents, contemporaneous interlocutors, and modes of visibility that reposition the writing of this history of photography as pioneering. In so doing, it acknowledges Moutoussamy-Ashe’s intrepid efforts to set in motion a distinct kind of history for readers to reckon with while paying tribute to the many contributions that anticipate and add to such an expansive history of Black women photographers.

An Opened Book

The book’s influence on Black women photographers in particular is legendary.¹³ This is the book to which Black women photographers across the African diaspora turn for evidence of trailblazers who came before them. For South African photographer Zanele Muholi, the book “changed my life in so many ways.”¹⁴ This is the book that authors Laylah Amatullah Barrayn and Adama Delphine Fawundu of the independently published anthology *MFON: Women Photographers of the African Diaspora* (2017) recognize

as groundbreaking. It is one that the editors and contributing writers Joy Gregory and Taous R. Dahmani of *Shining Lights: Black Women Photographers in 1980s–90s Britain* identify as greatly influential to many—especially to the women who published *Polareyes*, a one-off journal issue of 1987 dedicated to the photographic portfolios of contemporary Black British women photographers.¹⁵ For writer and director Crystal Whaley, *Viewfinders* inspired the film of 2022 *The Sound She Saw*, on Black women photographers, one among many examples of the book's expansive reach. Yet evidence of its impact remains confined largely within Black, feminist, and specialized media outlets or through anecdotal claims. Little recognition emerges from the various overlapping academic fields that share interest in photography and the project of charting its more expansive history.

A more capacious narrative begins in the pages of *Viewfinders*, unfolding along an arc that starts with Mary E. Warren, the first Black woman photographer on record (1866), and advancing chronologically to conclude with the work of numerous Black women photojournalists of the mid-1980s.¹⁶ Since the early twentieth century, Black women could regularly engage in photography as part of their professional lives. They became studio operators, like Winifred Hall Allen, Alberta H. Brown, and Ruth Washington; journalists, like Julia Jones and Lenore Davis; or military personnel, like Elizabeth “Tex” Williams. The contents of *Viewfinders* demonstrate a vast and sweeping history of Black women in photography through text and, perhaps more subtly, through the images themselves.

Many of the photographs featured in *Viewfinders* depict Black women displaying ownership of and expertise with their photographic equipment. The first page of a six-page spread on Vera Jackson features her portrait taken by her husband, Vernon Jackson, in which she is confidently wielding a large four-by-five camera and a flashbulb contained within a halo reflector (fig. 5). The etymology of the word *photography* means to write with light; the portrait of Jackson conveys a sense of professional control over when and where that light emanates. Yet the ease with which the camera becomes a tool for entertainment and leisure can easily place the perception of Black women's serious commitment to photography in the realm of passive product consumption, seen through more mainstream images of Black women with cameras. Such a distinction is evident in a comparison between this portrait and a commercial advertisement for the Sylvania Blue Dot Flash camera, in which a smiling Black woman faces toward the viewer, holding a camera up to her face with two hands. Overpowering rays of light emanate from the camera, obscuring her eyes and the camera itself while displacing her viewpoint (fig. 6). In the advertisement, the technology of photography is employed to position and locate the Black woman within its framework. By contrast, Jackson, the steady and calm proprietor of the camera and flash-unit bulb attachment, embodies professionalism in her fitted peacoat, a classic design evoking the naval forces. Equipped to endure the potential chill of taking pictures outside, even her clothing emits a sense of readiness and command lacking in the advertisement's model.



FIG. 5. — Vernon Jackson (US American, 1907–83). *Vera Jackson Holds a Graflex Speed Graphic Camera with a King Sol Flash*, ca. 1940, 28 × 36 cm. Image courtesy of the Tom & Ethel Bradley Center at California State University, Northridge.

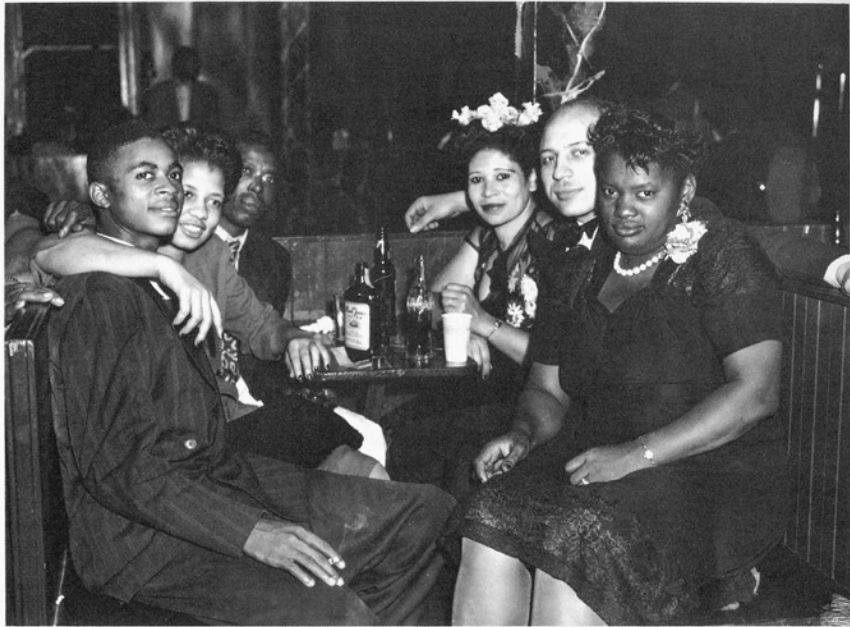
Consistently, Moutoussamy-Ashe trains her reader's eye to visually engage with images that depart from those within a more popular sphere of associations. While textual information within the book charts key aspects of photography's history, the photographs themselves are the pivotal contributions. No reproductions of works by long-acknowledged pioneers Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, William Henry Fox Talbot, or Alfred Stieglitz are found within the pages of *Viewfinder*. Yet notably, Moutoussamy-Ashe's telling of history does not exclude the canonical roster of white, male photographers, now internationally famous through the publication of Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (1964). Her introductory chapter includes the names that have come to define the medium's early history—Daguerre, Talbot, Stieglitz—because these individuals are also part of Black women's history of photography. As cultural critic Greg Tate reminds us, talking about artists of the postnationalist Black aesthetic of the mid-1980s: "They feel secure enough about black culture to claim art produced by nonblacks as part of their inheritance. No anxiety of influence here—these folks believe the cultural gene pool is for skinny-dipping."¹⁷ To walk with Tate and to proclaim that Daguerre, for example, is part of Black women photographers' inheritance reframes the terms of photography's history. While not condoning Black women's absence from the official story, Moutoussamy-Ashe's gesture



FIG. 6. — “Our Flashy Side,” advertisement for the Sylvania Blue Dot Flash camera, 1976, 20.3 × 25.4 cm. Collection of the author.

of positioning Daguerre as chosen kin to Black women photographers demonstrates the nuanced and expansive nature of artistic discourse for many Black image-makers of the mid-1980s.

Moutoussamy-Ashe was primed to recognize a range of photographers, including those who could not be identified by name. While most of *Viewfinders* is organized around identifiable photographers, a section titled “Camera Girls” brings unnamed women photographers of the 1940s into history through the recollections of Charles Williams, a Los Angeles nightclub owner. *Camera Girls* was a common term used to describe women employed to take group- and couple-clientele portraits at nightclubs during a time when the availability of camera equipment and merchandise in general was limited due to the shift in production priorities in the US following World War II.¹⁸ If people had difficulty gaining access to film, cameras, and fully equipped darkrooms, then a nightclub like Williams’s could offer this service while simultaneously reinforcing the relationship between photography and Black leisure during historical contexts when photographic material was in short supply. The women would work the crowd, cameras in hand, and produce photographs of groups posing and beaming for the camera, carefully positioned to include everyone’s faces (fig. 7). The section on the Camera Girls within the publication also stands out as the only published interview of the many that Moutoussamy-Ashe conducted. Through this interview with Williams,



89. *The Lido, during WWII*

FIG. 7. — Winifred Hall Allen (Jamaican American, 1911–). A group at the Lido nightclub in Harlem photographed in the style of Camera Girls, ca. 1940s, from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), 80 (detail). Art © Winifred Hall Allen. Book © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, reproduced with permission.

readers gain a sense of the types of questions Moutoussamy-Ashe asked to elicit the historical narrative of Black women photographers. The tone of these conversations and the nature of her interviewing process can only otherwise be experienced if one goes into the Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe Manuscript and Research Collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. A look in the archive illustrates some of the choices Moutoussamy-Ashe had to make as a writer, along with the approach she took in charting a history.

In the archive, we gain insight into the life of Jamaican-born Winifred Hall Allen, a New Negro-era photographer whose work preceded and expanded chronologically beyond the short run of the Camera Girls phenomenon. She owned a studio and worked as a portrait photographer and photojournalist in Harlem for twenty years. Allen is mentioned in the earliest known scholarly thesis on photography in Harlem as “the most successful black photographer on the block.”¹⁹ While such proclamations of success characterize her appearance in that early scholarship, the account offered through *Viewfinders* and Moutoussamy-Ashe’s research is more tempered by the challenges and precarities of life’s duration. Allen’s ambitions did not translate into the enduring pride and distinction one might expect. By the time Moutoussamy-Ashe tracked down Allen and interviewed her in the early 1980s, the once-determined Black photographer and astute businesswoman had disposed of more than half of her

photography collection.²⁰ Cockroaches had taken up residence in the closet shoeboxes in which the few photographs she had kept were stored. Moutoussamy-Ashe persuaded Allen to part with some of the negatives; the twenty-six examples in *Viewfinders* are Allen's only published photographs. As Moutoussamy-Ashe shares with the readers of *Viewfinders*, Allen did not consider her own forays into photography earlier in life as historically relevant or exceptional. One year following the publication of *Viewfinders*, Black feminist writer Jewelle Gomez laments that "(Allen's) sense of the prevailing culture's sentiments about their lack of worth was, of course, sadly accurate."²¹ The insufficient recognition of Allen's contributions to the field and the disheartening conditions of her photographs illustrate the difficulties of writing history when the sense of collective value is absent. Reflecting on her project *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940-1988* (1989), Willis writes that many of the overlooked contemporary Black photographers, "had their archives discarded because they believed no one cared."²²

Considering the archive of research materials for *Viewfinder* alongside the materials that made it into the final book, it becomes evident that Moutoussamy-Ashe had to selectively read between the lines of the narratives with her interviewees to squeeze out a history that, for some, does not register as History with a capital *H* and, more unfortunately, is seen as "unfit for history."²³ The resistance to and the erasure of this important history is unintentionally carried out by those whose names should be celebrated as much as it is actively inflicted by the larger societal systems that devalue Black women, from which, evidently, no one is spared. It is, as theorist Christina Sharpe might describe it, the weather.²⁴ Sharpe uses the weather as a metaphor for the all-consuming ubiquity of anti-Blackness through legible and illegible ways. Because, of course, the devaluation of Black women is a collective narrative, a story whose basic plotline we all know—one in which the protagonist can represent a range of subjects with varying complexities, complications, and nuances but is nonetheless resigned to being inferior or unfit for history. *Viewfinders* streamlines history to displace the depths of anti-Blackness through legibility. A collection of facts and ideas neatly chronicled and arranged on the page subdue the residuals of devaluation that are yet still present as structural norms. A range of book publications, exhibitions, and initiatives dedicated to image makers set the foundation for challenging such norms. Arguably, this concatenation of emerging efforts played a part in readying Moutoussamy Ashe and others to chart a different history.

Spanning Outward

Before *Viewfinders*, only two books had offered a surveylike, historical consideration of Black photography, serving a markedly radical departure from Newhall's canonical *History of Photography*, which, by its fifth edition in 1982, still failed to include any Black photographers. During the year 1983, curator Valencia Hollins Coar published *A Century of Black Photographers, 1840-1960*, a sweeping chronological survey that includes only

one woman photographer, to accompany an exhibition of the same title. Willis released *Black Photographers, 1840–1940: A Bio-Bibliography* in 1985, just a year before Moutoussamy-Ashe's book came out.²⁵ Significantly, in comparison, *Viewfinders* focused on Black women photographers, and was the first book to do so. As a model to build upon, Willis's and Coar's publications offered important interventions into a history of photography dominated by white, male photographers.

Moutoussamy-Ashe writes this history, when possible, by interviewing Black women photographers, privileging the voices of artists themselves. Previous recuperative books that involve this strategy include artists Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy's two-volume *Black Artists on Art* (1969–71), and *Contextures* (1978) by artists Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips; each work stakes a claim at a time when the words of Black artists were being documented and validated, sometimes for the first time.²⁶ *Viewfinders* also joined the ranks of publications that were produced by African American photographers as meaningful efforts to visually amplify aspects of Black life. Examples include Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes's *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* from 1955, a field-defining photobook surely known to Moutoussamy-Ashe.²⁷

Part of the force of Moutoussamy-Ashe's contribution is the very fact that *Viewfinders* is a book as opposed to a more ephemeral format. *Viewfinders* was originally published by New York-based Dodd, Mead & Company, a reputable and popular publisher, especially for Black literature. Aligning with the years of the civil rights movement, starting in the 1950s Dodd, Mead & Company published several anthologies of Black poetry, essays, folklore, and humor. The sale of *Viewfinders* was mobilized through the reputation preceding its publisher, the publisher's efforts to advertise it, and multiple reviews of the book's merits and weaknesses, geared directly toward the intended readership.²⁸ Through its publication, *Viewfinders* entered the capitalist sphere of the commodity world. As photography historian Anne McCauley writes: "The information included in photographic texts carries not only ideological but economic weight."²⁹ A print book released by an established publisher is produced with the intent of sale, a force less prevalent in the production of pamphlets, journals, and exhibitions. The commercial aspect becomes the engine behind the book's visibility and dissemination, which departs significantly from noncommercial efforts to share newsletters, articles, and exhibition materials. Yet, impact is not contingent upon the widespread distribution channels of book publications. Instead, as the next section will demonstrate, the grounds for renewed thinking are often located in ephemeral or archival materials of little circulation and attention.



Just one year before the publication of *Viewfinders*, Moutoussamy-Ashe completed a twenty-page research paper on the history of Black students at Cooper Union, a project that gave her experience in archival research and oral interviews.³⁰ The document, later partially published in a Black-student directory by Cooper Union, sheds light on an extensive roster of Black artists who attended Cooper Union from the nineteenth

century to 1994, when the register was published.³¹ Moutoussamy-Ashe was particularly focused on the inclusion and matriculation of Black students in the school's early history, many of whom are left out of the current roll call of significant figures. Within the document, she highlights the "firsts"—those who were the first Black students to achieve a specific milestone—a trailblazing designation that traditionally dictates the importance of Black individuals in society. Yet she does so in ways that not only reveal the accomplishments of Cooper graduates but, importantly, the circumstances through which they come into view, just as she did with Allen in *Viewfinders*. For example, Daisy Brown, possibly the first Black woman graduate of the engineering school, came to the attention of an alum through a Cooper Union bronze metal, etched with Brown's name, found at a flea market. For Moutoussamy-Ashe, bringing renewed attention to Brown would allow the school to "promote dignity by standing on the very foundation on which it was built."³² Through the Cooper Union project, history is punctuated and influenced by the very presence of individuals, not necessarily by evidence of prolific contributions. Such an outlook laid the methodological groundwork for *Viewfinders* as a survey of Black women photographers, many of whom had no extensive archive or notable accolades.

The mentorship and other impactful learning experiences that Moutoussamy-Ashe had at Cooper Union enhanced the development of *Viewfinders*. While at Cooper Union, she took classes on African art with art historian and practicing artist George Nelson Preston, which influenced her decision to pursue an independent study in West Africa in 1974 along with photographer Frank Stewart. Visiting Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, standing at the porthole looking out at the vast horizon of the sea, traversed for centuries by slave ships, informed her subsequent exploration of Daufuskie Island, off the coast of South Carolina, a place defined by the legacy of enslavement and rich Gullah culture. Such experiences fueled an acknowledgment of the inherent link between the African American and African experience. This transformative trip to Ghana and later, South Africa, where she photographed life under apartheid (1977–78), combined with her interest in capturing an underrecognized history of her alma mater, offer an understated genealogy for many of her subsequent projects.³³ More broadly, these projects fueled her curiosity and desire to visually engage with the vastness and complexity of Black life.

The accomplishment of *Viewfinders* can also be framed within the context of exhibitions, artists, and photography-centered initiatives from the 1970s and 1980s that demonstrate the contours of her dynamic engagement with a range of art and visual-cultural worlds. Just Above Midtown was an innovative, self-funded gallery space driven by an experimental ethos and dedicated to the support and exhibition of Black artists in Manhattan, including those making conceptually charged work across fields, including performance, abstraction, sculpture, and video. The exhibition roster in 1978, the year Moutoussamy-Ashe had *South Africa: Impressions*, her first solo exhibition there from 11 April to 6 May, gestures toward a relevant context for understanding the emergence of *Viewfinders* outside of a historiography of books alone.

The construction of history is not limited to scholarship. Indeed, “long before average citizens read the historians who set the standard of the day . . . they access history through celebration, site and museum visits, movies. . . . To be sure, the views they learn there are, in turn, sustained, modified, or challenged by scholars involved in primary research.”³⁴ Just Above Midtown provided this kind of sustaining force through a chain of programs that offered Moutoussamy-Ashe a context for and access to Black creativity in advance of her project to survey a longer history of Black women in photography.

In 1978, during the last year at its 57th Street location before an eviction and relocation downtown, the intimately small space of Just Above Midtown hosted an array of projects within months of each other that included artist Houston Conwill’s series of performances as part of his exhibition *Notes of a Griot*, in which evocations of ancestral chanting, whirling, and dancing were central. Moutoussamy-Ashe’s display of photographs of everyday life in apartheid Africa (*South Africa: Impressions*) followed Conwill’s show along with a string of others, including a show on origami-paper collages; an exhibition of earlier twentieth-century work by African American studio photographer James Van Der Zee, brother of Jennie L. Welcome, called *Black Has Always Been Beautiful*; and solo and group shows with eccentric titles such as *Booga Bear Paintings* and *Pocket Art*.³⁵ Just Above Midtown represents the kind of environment in which Moutoussamy-Ashe developed her identity as an artist and sharpened her awareness of the boundlessness of Black creative endeavors, past and present. The influence of the kinds of experiences afforded by Just Above Midtown may have buoyed Moutoussamy-Ashe in continuing her momentum and dedication to expanding upon the dynamism of Black creative life, this time through a focus specifically on the remarkable breadth of Black women photographers.

In a letter to the editor of the James Van Der Zee Institute’s *Photo Newsletter*, dated 21 March 1973, Moutoussamy-Ashe writes, “After studying the current issue . . . I felt encouragement. I felt a vibration and wanted to say, hey sister, I know how you feel. The important thing was that something was said, about me, for me.”³⁶ From 1972 to 1974, the institute, founded in 1969, produced the *Photo Newsletter* about six times a year. Each issue, of no more than eight to twelve pages, covered a range of materials relating to photography in service of the institute’s larger mission to promote the work of Black photographers. The newsletter evinced an emerging moment in which efforts to document and narrate histories of Black photography were taking shape. Briefly housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York before moving to the Studio Museum in 1978, the James Van Der Zee Institute operated through donations, a dedicated staff, and seed funding from the Rubenstein Foundation. The stewardship of a small collection of photographs also demonstrated the institution’s mission.

The issue that Moutoussamy-Ashe referred to in her statement of encouragement was volume two, number one (January–February 1973), the first and last issue of the Institute’s *Photo Newsletter* to focus solely on Black women photographers (fig. 8). Her comments may have also been made in response to the newsletter’s announcement of a



FIG. 8. — Cover of *Photo Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (January–February 1973), published by the James Van Der Zee Institute. Kansas City, MO, Spencer Art Reference Library at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

two-week exhibition on Black women photographers to be hosted at the newly opened Community Folk Art Gallery of Syracuse University, one of the earliest exhibitions on record of its kind.³⁷ It can be surmised that the women featured in the newsletter issue were also included in the exhibition. These photographers include Elaine Tomlin, the only Black woman staff photographer in the 1960s for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Ardina Seward, one of the first African American women photojournalists in the news broadcast industry; June Clark Greenberg, cofounder of the Women's Photography Co-op in early 1970s Toronto; Ming Smith, the first Black woman photographer to have her work enter MoMA's collection, in 1979; E'Lois Kinnon, a contributor to the *Chicago Journal: The South Side's Free Weekly Newspaper*; and Mikki Ferrill, the accomplished freelance photographer whose early assignments include covering the 1968 Olympics.³⁸

Other efforts to document and recognize the history of Black photography took form elsewhere—for example, in the pages of the first *International Black Photographer's Newsletter*, a six-page document produced in the summer of 1981.³⁹ The newsletter, regrettably, would not continue beyond its first couple of issues, despite the ambitions of a small cadre of photographers who had successfully spearheaded the *Black Photographers Annual*, whose four volumes, each a substantial endeavor—for example, the second volume featured about fifty Black photographers within more than a

hundred beautifully curated pages—ran over a seven-year period (1973, 1974, 1976, and 1980). Conceived by the visionary and influential Kamoinge Workshop, a small collective of Black photographers involved in the larger umbrella organization of the *International Black Photographers* (IBP), *The Black Photographers Annual* provided exposure to photographers frequently left out of the photography- and art-publishing arenas. The hopes of producing its drastically shorter and less designed newsletter as a more frequent quarterly publication never came to fruition. With then-executive editor of *Essence* magazine, Cheryll Y. Greene, at the helm of this later initiative, the newsletter features short blurbs describing the organization's founding and its aim to honor and celebrate the more senior members of the Black photography community, many of whom participated in the Kamoinge Workshop.⁴⁰ Of particular interest on the newsletter's final page are a few paragraphs describing what Greene and curator Gylbert Coker envision for the IBP archive. In the plan for a permanent location separate from the archive's initial location at the residence of a fellow IBP member, the authors clarify the importance of such an archive, one that would house original works, slides, portraits of photographers, oral histories, and other kinds of materials, those "relating to the history and development of Black photography."⁴¹ Building this archive would depend heavily upon the "the rich resources right at hand in our photographic history,"⁴² a large and active community portrayed in a group photograph taken by Anthony Barboza and reproduced in the issue; Moutoussamy-Ashe is identified near the right edge of the frame, one among the scattering of women pictured (fig. 9). Also reflected in the newsletter's pages, this community took shape around gatherings like the IBP dinner, at which attendees Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and Arthur Ashe appear in a photograph seated with photographers Al Fennar and John Pinderhughes.⁴³

Across the Atlantic in Britain, another short-lived publication further substantiates ongoing efforts to gather and articulate a space in which Black photographers are recognized, particularly Black women photographers. Highlighting photographic portfolios of contemporary photographers alongside short, critical essays, the British magazine *Polareyes* had a curtailed run in 1987 that lasted for only one issue. A burst of available funds from the Greater London Authority and the Arts Council facilitated its creation, while a quickly dwindling budget prevented the publication of subsequent issues. Nonetheless, an editorial board of women artists spearheaded the one-shot project to center the creative commitments and voices of contemporary Black British women photographers, which reflected an expanded understanding of Blackness with the inclusion of contributions by British artists of African descent along with artists of Southeast Asian and Indigenous backgrounds. Along with articles that center Black women photographers, the issue includes a review of *Viewfinders*, a reprinted article from volume 4 (1980) of *The Black Photographers Annual*, and a mention of Van Der Zee—all evidence of the burgeoning transatlantic momentum toward established discourse around the production of photography in Black life. Relevantly, *Viewfinders* primed the creators of *Polareyes* to see. As historian of photography Taous R. Dahmani writes, "*Viewfinders* . . . became an object of legitimization that allowed a journal like *Polareyes*



FIG. 9. — Anthony Barboza (US American, b. 1944). *3rd Annual Black Photographers Dinner Honoring Monetta Slate and Chuck Stewart #2, 1981*, from *International Black Photographer's Newsletter*, 1981. Image courtesy Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2017.40.

to fit into a historical and transatlantic tradition.”⁴⁴ Because of *Viewfinders*, the photographers of *Polareyes* could locate their efforts not only within a roster of British contemporary artists but along a longer and broader trajectory of Black women in photography. Indeed, as writer Camille Crain Drummond notes, “Using the book format to establish dominant and authoritative narratives of the historical and cultural record of entire peoples is as old as the book itself.”⁴⁵ *Viewfinders* affords different options of possibility for inclusion and redress because it charts a genealogy that had never been expressly outlined before. It offered, and still offers, an anchor for Black women photographers to locate and position themselves, sometimes most impactfully through curated modes of visual engagement.

A Model for Looking

The thoughtful inclusion of photographs within published materials can model and generate ways of looking. For example, in the fourth volume of the short-lived but influential *The Black Photographers Annual*, an untitled photograph by Moutoussamy-Ashe appears on the left-hand page of a spread opposite an untitled photograph by Harlem-based photographer Paul Phillips, their compositions visually in dialogue (fig. 10). In Moutoussamy-Ashe’s image, a woman in the middle distance sits on what



FIG. 10. — Interior spread featuring *LaGuardia Airport, New York, NY, ca. 1978*, by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, and an untitled photograph by Paul Phillips, from *The Black Photographers Annual 4* (1980): 28–29. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 94-S306. Art © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and Paul Phillips.

appears to be a climate-control ventilation bench that runs under a wall-length window with a blurred view. The expanse of space between the woman and a strolling man partially in view at the lower edge of the other side of the photograph mirrors the open area between a pair of two well-dressed men and one fashionable woman standing on a windy pier in Phillips's image. Despite different locations and contexts, the sophisticated spread's paired photographs work in tandem to advance a dynamic visual dialogue.

All too often, pairings did not work in the favor of noteworthy photographs and their subjects. In the article "Showing Our Faces: A Century of Black Women Photographed," published a year after *Viewfinders*, Gomez points to a different kind of unfortunate but persistent pairing. Describing a newspaper article, Gomez laments that "on one page we celebrated the age of America's first black vamp Dorothy Dandridge, sitting backstage about to go out and work her black magic; on another we were assaulted by the relentlessly degrading advertisements for wigs, skin bleaching creams and hair straighteners."⁴⁶ While a Black woman may be seen as exemplary, there simultaneously exists a correlation to supposed imperfections in need of correction. By contrast, in *Viewfinders*, Vera Jackson's portrait of the great Dorothy Dandridge, cocktail in hand, spotlights the star through directed lighting, evoking glamorous repose (fig. 11).

Through its intentional page layout, *Viewfinders* celebrates the cocktail portrait in connection with a second Dandridge portrait, along with smiling portraits of Black female stars Phillipa Schuyler and Hattie McDaniel and a group portrait of women celebrating the birthday of Mary McLeod Bethune. The book's arrangement of photographs constellates and centers the work of Black women image-makers—who control the viewfinder—and allows Black women to occupy the camera viewfinder's focal point. Like the various efforts that primed Moutoussamy-Ashe to recognize Robeson's significance on that day in the Beinecke, so too will *Viewfinders* continue to prime readers to disrupt marginalizing versions of photography's history, anchoring and inspiring more generative narratives.



FIG. 11. — Vera Jackson (US American, 1911–99). *Portrait of Dorothy Dandridge*, n.d., from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), 89 (detail). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B10153. Book © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, reproduced with permission.

Operating within cultural and academic institutions, historians of photography are encouraged to tell new narratives that are often anchored by a shared set of well-known texts on photography. Yet responses to the important call to develop groundbreaking research tend to overlook the methods and interventions gifted by Black women, contributions that could significantly inform and enrich the canon. What might it mean, for example, to disrupt the loop of a long-standing citational practice by exchanging the discourse around one leading text from the 1980s—say, Roland Barthes’s canonical *Camera Lucida*—for another, such as Moutoussamy-Ashe’s *Viewfinders*, taking into consideration her contemporary interlocutors and the various discursive antecedents and successors of the project? Such a relational intervention resonates with photo theorist Ariella Azoulay’s construction of history as a rewind as opposed to the creation of something new. To frame the reclaiming of history as the answer to today’s most pertinent research questions serves as a departure from writers who commonly place the ambitions of world-making within the possibilities of Black futures as opposed to Black pasts. As Azoulay writes, “To counter the imperial promise of a new beginning . . . [we must be] tuned to a different modality: that of rehearsal, reversal, rewinding, renewing, reacquiring, redistributing, readjusting, reallocating, and on and on.”⁴⁷

Indeed, being primed to discern Black photographic life and all its contours affords one the possibility of rewinding and rewriting history.

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Notes

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1. Eslanda Goode Robeson, *Self Portrait*, New York City, 1938, gelatin silver print, 20.3 × 25.4 cm, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 237.2023, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/450592>.

2. Pronounced "Jean-ee Ma-two-sah-me" according to the author in Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, "A History of Black Alumni at Cooper Union," interview by Avia Hurley and archives librarian Mary Mann, 28 September 2021, New York, Cooper Union Archives and Special Collections, MG.014, box 1. Moutoussamy-Ashe visited Yale University on the occasion of her spouse Arthur Ashe's receipt of the Yale Kipthuth Award bestowed to distinguished athletes on 10 February 1983. She found Robeson's work in the Carl Van Vechten Papers. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, "An Oral History with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe" interview by Kalia Brooks, *BOMB*, Oral History Project, 11 September 2014, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2014/09/11/jeanne-moutoussamy-ashe/>.

3. In Moutoussamy-Ashe's own words, "My interest in writing a book on black women photographers started in the spring of 1982 [*sic*] when, on a visit to Yale university's Beinecke Rare Books Library, I was looking at photographs from the Carl Van Vechten Collection. It was in this collection that I first saw photographs of well-known black Americans that were stamped with the name E. G. Robeson." Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), xvii.

4. For a compelling contribution on how the art world came to "see" photographers in Chicago's Black Arts Movement (BAM) see, Romi Crawford, "Black Arts Movement Photography in Chicago: From Impermanent Institutions to a Tentative 'Arrival,'" in *Never a Lovely So Real: Photography and Film in Chicago, 1950–1980*, ed. Michal Raz-Russo with Grace Deveney and Romi

Crawford (Art Institute of Chicago, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.53269/9780865593237/06>. In the essay, Crawford considers what she calls the "tipping point, that fulcrum-like moment when art, especially art made by minoritized persons, enters into wider circulation and more formal institutional contexts." Crawford, "Black Arts Movement Photography in Chicago," 2.

5. Moutoussamy-Ashe would later know Gordon Parks as a friend and a work connection through NBC. See Raymond Arsenault, *Arthur Ashe: A Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), 413.

6. For the most recent biography on the photographer, see Candice Jansen, "Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe," a biography produced as part of the research programme *The Origin of Others: Rewriting Art History in the Americas, 19th Century–Today* in partnership with the Clark Art Institute Archives of Women Artists, Research & Exhibitions (AWARE), 2025, <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/jeanne-moutoussamy-ashe/>.

7. Moutoussamy-Ashe, "An Oral History with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe," n.p.

8. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (repr., Writers & Readers, 1993.)

9. Many thanks to special collections conservators Lou Di Gennaro and Dawn Mankowski at New York University's Bobst Library for helping me to formulate this descriptive language upon viewing the book on 14 May 2025.

10. For example, see the collage-like layout of Toni Morrison, *The Black Book* (Random House, 1974.)

11. Deborah Willis, *Black Photographers 1840–1940: A Bio-Bibliography* (Garland, 1985).

12. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon, 1995), 22.

13. In addition, *Viewfinders* notably served as the inspiration to Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers* (Abbeville, 1994). Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, interview with the author, 22 April 2025.

14. Zanele Muholi, "Zanele Muholi: Faces & Phases," interview by Deborah Willis, *Aperture*, Spring 2015, <https://issues.aperture.org/article/2015/1/1/zanele-muholi-faces-phases>.

15. Joy Gregory and Taous R. Dahmani, *Shining Lights: Black Women Photographers in 1980s–90s Britain* (MACK & Autograph, 2024), 407. See also Taous R. Dahmani, "Polareyes: A Magazine by and for Black British Women Photographers as a Site of Resistance in London, 1987" in *Resist, Organize, Build: Feminist and Queer Activism in Britain and the United States During the Long 1980s*, ed. Sara Crook and Charles Jeffries (State University of New York Press, 2022), 244–74.

16. For more information on Mary Warren, See Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 10–11. Hereafter, short citations refer to the 1986 edition.

17. Greg Tate, "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke," in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (Simon & Schuster, 1992), 207.

18. For a journalistic account of Camera Girls in New York City, see Berton Roueché, "Hawkins Is Inside," *The New Yorker*, 30 November 1946.

19. Myrtle Evangeline Pollard, "Harlem as Is" (master's thesis, College of the City of New York, 1936).

20. Winifred Allen file, New York, The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Sc MG 343.

21. Jewelle Gomez, "Showing Our Faces: A Century of Black Women Photographed," *Ten.8*, no. 24 (1987): 17.

22. Deborah Willis, quoted in Jasmine Nichole Cobb, "Making Space: Deborah Willis and the Archive of Black Visual Culture," *Camera Obscura* 35, no. 3 (2020): 135.

23. Stephen Best, "Introduction: Unfit for History," in *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Duke University Press, 2018), 1–26. Many thanks to Emily Brady, author of the book *Let the World See What I See: Black Women Photographers from the Harlem Renaissance to Black Power* (University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming), for bringing this to my attention. Emily Brady, conversation with the author, 28 June 2023.

24. Christina Sharpe, "The Weather," chap. 4 in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 102–34.

25. Valencia Hollins Coar, *A Century of Black Photographers, 1840–1960* (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1983); and Willis, *Black Photographers 1840–1940*.

26. Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy, *Black Artists on Art*, 2 vols. (Contemporary Crafts, 1969–71); and Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures* (Just Above Midtown, 1978).

27. Taous R. Dahmani, "Missing Photobooks: A Symptomatic Reading on the Reasons for and Impact of the Lack of Publications by Black British Photographers in the 1970s and 1980s," in *The Photobook World: Artists' Books and Forgotten Social Objects* (Manchester University Press, 2023), 78.

28. These include G. Craven, review of *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*, by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Choice* 24 (1986): 110; Marilyn Richardson, "From Negative to Positive," review of *Viewfinders*, by Moutoussamy-Ashe, *The Women's Review of Books* 3, no. 12 (1986): 7–8; David M. Johnson and Yolanda Burwell, "[Review of] Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*," *Explorations in Sights and Sounds* 7, no. 1 (1987): 55–56; and John Loughery, review of *Viewfinders*, by Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Woman's Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (1989): 49.

29. Anne McCauley, "Writing Photography's History Before Newhall," *History of Photography* 21, no. 2 (1997): 87.

30. Moutoussamy-Ashe, "A History of Black Alumni at Cooper Union."

31. *The Cooper Black Book*, compiled/ designed by Dave Riggins "True," 1994, New York, Cooper Union Archives and Special Collections, Collection of Registers and Directories, RG.010, box 5.

32. Moutoussamy-Ashe, "A History of Black Alumni at Cooper Union."

33. See Candice Jansen, "Black Colored Memory," in *Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe: South Africa, 1977/1978*, ed. Michal Raz-Russo (Steidl; Gordon Parks Foundation, 2025), 200–211.

34. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 20.

35. For information on Jennie L. Welcome, see Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 28–30. Also see the MoMA exhibition history list for the Just Above Midtown Archives, <https://research.moma.org/c.php?g=1409558&p=10437693>.

36. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, letter to the editor, 21 March 1973, *Photo Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (March–April 1973): 5.

37. Despite my efforts to find additional information on this historic exhibition, I could only find a brief mention in the newsletter. Dolores Ashley, "The Black Woman Photographer," *Photo Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (January–February 1973): 7–8.

38. Other featured photographers include Deborah McCready, Carole Butler, Leigh Abernathy, and Jennifer Bryan. Ashley, "The Black Woman Photographer," 7.

39. *International Black Photographer's Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1981), Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, VAO4.01.3.234.do, https://archives.vmfamuseum.org/repositories/2/digital_objects/2105.

40. For more information on Kamoinge, see Sarah L. Eckhardt et al., *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop* (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2020.)

41. Gilbert Coker and Cheryll V. Greene, "The Archive: What We Envision," *International Black Photographer's Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1981): 4.

42. Coker and Greene, "The Archive," 4.

43. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, interview with the author, 22 April 2025. An image was reproduced in the IBP newsletter, and the identities of its subjects were confirmed by Moutoussamy-Ashe during the interview. The location of the original photograph is unknown.

44. Dahmani, "Polareyes," 247.

45. Camille Crain Drummond, "The Designer Elevating the Present and Future of Photobooks," *The PhotoBook Review*, no. 018, in *Aperture*, no. 40 (2020): 5.

46. Gomez, "Showing Our Faces," 16.

47. Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 56.

Shorter Notices

Worldwide Emotion: Interhemispheric Dialogue in David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos*

Jonah Gray

The crucified Indigenous peasant at the center of *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos* (Tropical America oppressed and destroyed by imperialism), an outdoor mural from 1932 by David Alfaro Siqueiros, has often attracted the attention of commentators (fig. 1).¹ The figure takes pride of place in the mural when it is beheld frontally, and Siqueiros apparently added it with a dramatic flourish at the last minute, the night before the mural's unveiling on the second story of what was then known as the Plaza Art Center in Los Angeles.² Reports of an audible gasp from the crowd gathered on the adjacent roof at the moment of its debut neatly seals this account of the mural's reception, suggesting that it had exactly the intended effect of shocking and titillating the assembled audience, which included Siqueiros's student collaborators, sympathetic artists, and critics.³ Also present were the project's patrons, who likely expected something quite different—the artist's official remit had been to create a pleasant, tropically themed landscape.⁴ In what follows, I make a case for understanding the mural differently, attending to influential factors in its production process, the phases of its censorship, and the pair of figures at the mural's top-right corner.⁵ Rather than examining the mural from the ideal viewpoint shared with the select group invited to the roof for its debut, I argue that the perspective of the pedestrian on Olvera Street looking up at the mural from an oblique angle deserves more attention (fig. 2). I will build on scholarship that analyzes Siqueiros's intensifying experimentation with photography and perspective in this period.⁶ If his manipulation of viewpoints in *América tropical* hailed its audience in an intentionally provocative way, I argue for a closer consideration of the interhemispheric character of the cause into which Siqueiros sought to recruit the mural's viewers. This approach continues the line of inquiry opened by art historians David Craven and Tatiana Flores in their respective scholarship on avant-gardist dialogues between Mexico and Peru.⁷ Drawing on documents from the David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers at the Getty Research Institute in which the artist critiques the ideas of his contemporary, heterodox Peruvian Marxist



FIG. 1. — David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos* (Tropical America oppressed and destroyed by imperialism), 1932, fresco applied with Arium on cement, 5.5 × 25 m. Los Angeles, Italian Hall, El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument. Art © 2026 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City. Photograph courtesy Thomas Hartman, IQ Magic; photo composite: James Jackson.



FIG. 2. — View down Olvera Street in Los Angeles showing a street-level perspective of the second-story exterior wall where Siqueiros would paint his mural, ca. 1930. Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection, Security Pacific National Bank Collection, L.A.-Plazas-The Plaza-Olvera Street, 00008434.

José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930), I interpret the two riflemen in the mural in light of what they threatened to inspire in their audience: agitation and solidarity toward a subversive, transnational revolutionary cause.

Siqueiros's commission for *América tropical* came only two years after the reinvention of Olvera Street as a landmark meant to evoke a sanitized version of the city's Spanish colonial past. Styled as a restoration by its chief proponent, socialite Christine Sterling, the establishment of El Paseo de Los Angeles involved, according to art historian S. Janelle Montgomery, an effort to transform the old central Plaza from a rough-and-tumble “free speech zone” frequented by left-wing political organizers into a quaint so-called Mexican market lined with Anglo-operated shops and populated with *puesteros* (market vendors) mandated by Sterling to wear sombreros and serapes.⁸

This proposed substitution was celebrated in *Southern California Business* magazine in August 1929 as “bringing back our yesterdays.”⁹ The whole undertaking belonged to the Mission Revival phenomenon championed by real-estate developers and the Chamber of Commerce that went back to the 1910s, which urban theorist and historian Mike Davis has termed “boosterism” in Los Angeles.¹⁰ As historian Sarah Schrank notes, the city boosters’ historical revisionism intensified during the United States federal government’s repatriation campaign of Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans, which had sparked protests in the adjacent plaza.¹¹ Sterling orchestrated the district’s redevelopment by pulling strings among the city’s business set, including the *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler. Upon the project’s completion, she reveled in her success: “Olvera Street holds for me all of the charm, and beauty which I dreamed for it, because out of the hearts of the Mexican people is spun the gold of Romance and Contentment.”¹² Constructing this imaginary, idyllic past was also a key part of the city’s public relations campaign as host for the 1932 summer Olympics. Siqueiros’s mural would contest such expressions of historical amnesia in the strongest possible terms. *América tropical* responded to the civic mythologizing—and to the parallel phenomenon of Indigenismo, which proffered competing representations of the Americas’ Indigenous past—by pushing colonial genocide to the foreground, countering the erasure of the mission revivalists’ nostalgia with an image of the violence they disavowed. Documentation of the commissioning process is scarce, so it is difficult to ascertain how much was known by the mural’s patrons about Siqueiros’s final concept before it was complete, or if there was any oversight during the painting process. However, a preliminary drawing among the David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers at the Getty Research Institute suggests that the artist may have strategically left out the controversial figurative elements in the planning stages (fig. 3). None of the figures featuring in the completed mural appear in this sketch, which seems to map out the seamless incorporation of the various doors and windows on the supporting wall into the composition.

In the wake of the Mexican Revolution, Indigenismo—the history of which extends back to the sixteenth century—became a locus of intensifying ideological contestation and cultural mediation between the emerging modern state, modernist intellectuals, and the popular demographic constituencies of campesinos and workers.¹³ The crucified peasant in *América tropical* forwent the romanticization of pre-Hispanic life that typified certain strains of Indigenismo by focusing on a moment of suffering under colonial attack. In the aftermath of *América tropical*’s debut, however, Siqueiros expressed regret about having employed the crucifix motif. “The only error,” he wrote of the mural, “stems from its use of the cross because this, even though double, lends itself to an ideological confusion.”¹⁴ This comment may refer to the fraught nature of Indigenista appropriations of Christian symbolism.¹⁵

The specific source for Siqueiros’s use of the crucifixion motif, however, is almost certainly not religious at all but rather the result of an increasingly global circulation of photographic images. Conservator Tomás Zurián and journalist Adriana Malvido

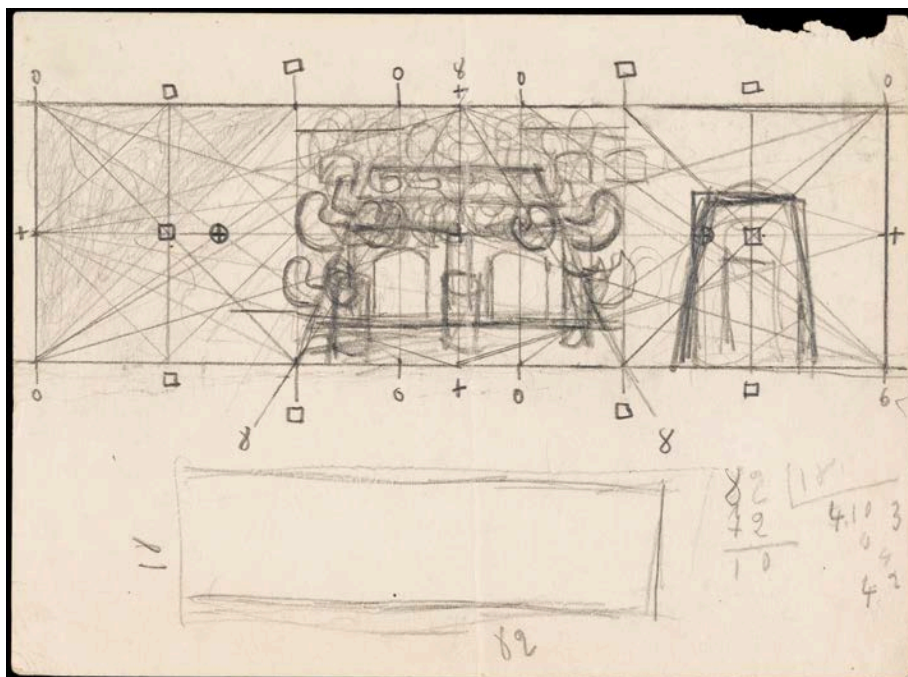


FIG. 3. — David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). Preparatory sketch for *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos*, 1932, graphite on paper, 21 × 29 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 960094. Art © Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City.

suggest that Siqueiros was quoting directly from a photograph taken in 1865 by Felice Beato, an Italian-born British photojournalist.¹⁶ The image in question, known as *Executed Sokichi*, depicts the grisly fate of a Japanese servant involved in a botched robbery. The resemblance to the figure in *América tropical* is unmistakable, including the tilted head and twisted torso and how the feet are bound to the lower cross member. Siqueiros's use of photographs as source material and for what researcher Laura González terms "preparatory sketches" goes back to his early artistic education.¹⁷ Siqueiros's exchanges with Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein—whom he had met earlier that year in Taxco, while the muralist was living under house arrest in an abandoned chapel—only intensified his thinking about the application of photography as part of the mural-making process.¹⁸ Art historian Shifra Goldman argues that their dialogue reinforced Siqueiros's notion that "the spectator, rather than passively receiving moving images, substitutes for the active role of the movie camera."¹⁹ The camera, in other words, not only aided the pictorial design of a mural but could help conceive perspectives capable of dynamically engaging viewers in motion through space.

As Siqueiros's appropriation of Beato's photograph demonstrates, the camera also enabled contemporary viewers to witness people, places and events they otherwise could not. In his speech to the John Reed Club in Los Angeles, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting: Experience of the Block Painters (Los Angeles Section)" (1932),

Siqueiros might well have been referring to the Beato image when he wrote, “Without the photographic document [the painter] shall never know, from a plastic standpoint, about the every-day bloody repression directed by the exploiting classes.”²⁰ He continues: “Without a photographic sketch, in a word, the painter shall continue to be a mystic static, i.e., a parasite of beauty.”²¹ By this reckoning, photography allowed a salutary fusion of form and content. A later example of Siqueiros’s photographic sketching technique is demonstrated in the portraits of the artist by Colombian photographer Leo Matiz (fig. 4), which provided the basis for the lithograph *Latin America* (1945). In the same shoot, photographic studies of the model Victor Arrevillaga naked, bound, and hanging from a tree became source material for the background figures in the mural *Patricios y patricidas* (Patriots and parricides; 1971). A decade after *América tropical*, Siqueiros was still integrating the camera into his artistic process even as he continued to grapple with echoing images of crucifixion.



FIG. 4. — **Leo Matiz (Colombian, 1918–98).** David Alfaro Siqueiros posing for the photographer, Mexico, ca. 1945–46. Mexico City, Archivo del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros. Photograph © Alejandra Matiz, Leo Matiz Foundation.

Siqueiros’s arrival in Los Angeles opened new technical possibilities through the proximity to Hollywood, and he eagerly availed himself of any and all photographic and cinematic equipment that his Los Angeles students could procure. The execution of his first L.A. mural at the Chouinard School of Art, *Street Meeting* (1932), incorporated acute

perspectives enabled by the camera, and its production was hastened by projecting sketches onto the wall rather than manually drawing out the whole design at scale. To realize *Street Meeting* and *América tropical*, Siqueiros assembled a crew of artists, some of whom were studying at the Chouinard School, that he designated the “Block of Mural Painters.”²² Although there is scant evidence as to whether Siqueiros and his team projected the crucified figure for *América tropical* like they did for *Street Meeting*, he did work with a photographer to explore the layout of the supporting wall for it.²³ In addition to being compositional tools, photographic and cinematic technologies served as time-saving devices. The technologies allowed the artist and his collaborators to bypass the cartoon and pouncing processes for *Street Meeting*, speeding up the mural’s creation by greatly enhancing productivity in contrast to the more time-consuming and labor-intensive buon fresco technique. As a result of these advancements, Siqueiros boldly claimed that it would take only two weeks to complete *América tropical*, which turned out to be overly ambitious. While the process ultimately continued for just over a month, considerable time was saved.

Scholars often discuss Siqueiros’s innovative use of photography and perspective and the anticipation of mobile viewership in his work.²⁴ Invigorated by his exchanges with Eisenstein, which centered on their shared ambitions for a dialectical approach to artmaking, Siqueiros began to articulate these ideas in words and in pictures.²⁵ During his short tenure in Los Angeles from April to December 1932, in political exile from Mexico, he wrote of his desire to chart a new path for muralism away from what he now deemed its failures of the 1920s: “It is not possible to produce revolutionary music, psychologically subversive, with the organ from a church.”²⁶ In other words, it was no longer enough for muralists to depict the concerns of the proletariat in the archaic medium of buon fresco. Production techniques had to be revolutionized accordingly. A comparison between *Street Meeting* with his contemporary Diego Rivera’s mural from 1931, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, exemplifies how the two painters’ approaches began to diverge. Using trompe l’oeil in the fresco, Rivera draws back the curtain on the labor involved in the painting process, showing the artist himself from behind with his legs dangling from a scaffold, surrounded by assistants laying plaster and otherwise occupied with the mural. *Street Meeting* also depicts workers perched on a scaffold illusionistically, but rather than simply representing a collaborative artistic process while employing the traditional buon fresco technique as Rivera did, Siqueiros’s incorporation of nontraditional tools such as cameras, projectors, cement guns, air brushes, and blow torches demonstrated an interest in revolutionizing the production of art itself—not only changing its content.

Rebecca Zamora highlights the allure of the Olvera Street location to Siqueiros.²⁷ Both she and Montgomery point out that aside from the adjacent rooftop, clear sightlines to the entire mural at once were only possible from the heights of the nearby civic buildings, including City Hall.²⁸ The appeal of these observations rests not only on how easy it is to picture Siqueiros thumbing his nose at such bastions of civic

authority but also on the idea that an artist would naturally focus on the vantage points from which viewers could see the entire mural. Several factors suggest that Siqueiros was more keenly attuned to how most people would actually experience this mural, which was to be partially hidden on the second story of the Plaza Art Center. Goldman mentions how Siqueiros envisioned an active, mobile spectator in contrast to the stationary, monocular perspective that emerged in the Renaissance. By definition, this concept of viewership dispenses with the notion of a single, correct vantage point from which to behold the entire mural. Indeed, the artist himself recalled how one of his collaborators on *América tropical* followed their colleagues “relentlessly with his machine [photographic camera] . . . tracing the movement of the spectator of the work, photographing [the] wall from every angle.”²⁹ In “Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting,” Siqueiros adds that preparatory sketches can be “transformed in accordance with the requirements of the visual perspective, which must be satisfied through the direct attack on the wall, *depending upon the different standpoints provided by the topography of the corresponding architecture.*”³⁰ Considerations of where and how a viewer might behold *América tropical* were top of mind for Siqueiros and his team, who were moved to incorporate a proliferation of angles and perspectives.

The importance of alternative viewpoints is also emphasized by both formal and thematic cues within the mural itself. Despite the defiant creative energy Siqueiros evinced, his social and political outlook was anything but triumphant at this juncture, as his final mural in L.A. would testify. *Portrait of Mexico Today* (1932), commissioned for a private residence in the Pacific Palisades, depicted the country’s presiding *Jefe Máximo*, Plutarco Elías Calles, as a bandit who hoarded bags of money (fig. 5). Combined with Siqueiros’s meditations on murder and destitution in both surviving L.A. murals, a profound sense of a revolution on its back foot emerges. In *América tropical* and *Portrait of Mexico Today*, only lone soldiers—not armies—remain to carry on the revolution’s liberatory promise. Scholars do not exactly agree about the identity of the rifle-toting sniper who kneels beside the campesino with the broad-brimmed hat in the upper-right corner of *América tropical*. Montgomery argues that this figure resembles depictions of the fifteenth-century Tetzcoacan ruler Nezahualcoyotl in the *Codex Ixtlilxochitl*.³¹ Zamora and art historian Raquel Tibol, however, identify the figure as Peruvian, and I am inclined to agree, given the distinctive chullo hat that he shares with the revolutionary in *Portrait of Mexico Today*, whose headgear is emblazoned with a red star.³² Art historian Laurance P. Hurlburt reproduces a preparatory drawing by Siqueiros in the book *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (1989) in which the chullo is emphasized with polka dots, its wearer cocking a rifle.³³

As Zamora points out, these figures are particularly interesting because they were the first to be whitewashed.³⁴ The censorship of *América tropical* was not immediate but took place gradually, over a period of six years. In March 1934, Arthur Millier, the art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, reported that fifteen feet of the mural’s right side—precisely the part visible to pedestrians walking down Olvera Street—had been whitewashed (fig. 6).³⁵ The rest of the mural would be obscured sometime before 1938.



FIG. 5. — David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). *Portrait of Mexico Today*, 1932, oil on plaster applied to cement, 2.5 × 9.8 m. Santa Barbara, CA, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, anonymous gift, 2001.50. Art © Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City. Image courtesy Santa Barbara Museum of Art.



FIG. 6. — View of the partly whitewashed mural *América tropical* on a second-story exterior wall from outside Casa La Golondrina Cafe on Olvera Street, Los Angeles, ca. 1933, black-and-white nitrate negative. UCLA Library Digital Collections, Los Angeles Times Photographic Collection, uclamss_1429_2667, licensed under CC BY 4.0.

This suggests that the most disturbing aspect for its eventual censors were, rather than the crucified figure, which never would have been visible to most of the mural's viewers, the revolutionary gunmen.

In 1933, after Siqueiros's deportation from the United States, his former pupils Reuben Kadish, Harold Lehman, and Philip Guston (then Goldstein) mailed him a photograph of a portable cement mural that they had painted in support of the Scottsboro Boys, nine Black teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931 and sentenced to death.³⁶ They quoted the opening lines from *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: "A specter is haunting

Europe—the specter of communism.”³⁷ I would argue that the revolutionary specter summoned by *América tropical* was not of European provenance but instead emblemized a radical pan-American political consciousness, of which Mariátegui was a key proponent.

Zamora and Goldman allude to how the military takeover of Peru in 1930 crushed the hopes for political change and economic reform that had been spurred by the anti-imperialist ideologies of Peruvian philosopher and politician Victor Raul Haya de la Torre and the writings of Mariátegui.³⁸ The latter, who died in 1930, ran the influential magazine *Amauta*, which sold around three to four thousand copies per issue and circulated widely in avant-garde circles throughout Latin America.³⁹ While Mariátegui’s relationships with Rivera and other Mexican avant-gardists have been examined separately by Craven and Flores, his connection with Siqueiros deserves closer attention. In April 1932, the month he arrived in L.A., Siqueiros made a woodcut of Mariátegui that ran alongside a memorial tribute to the Peruvian thinker in *Grito* magazine (fig. 7). *Amauta* also published the work of Uruguayan poet Blanca Luz Brum, who was married to Siqueiros at the time of his travels to L.A. The couple addressed Mariátegui as “querido camarada” (dear comrade) in their correspondence with him. On a photograph mailed to Mariátegui that shows Siqueiros and Brum embracing on a beach in Brazil, dated 16 June 1929, a cheeky caption is scrawled in Siqueiros’s distinctive hand: “Symbol of the eternal union of the north and south of Latin America!! Pact between all races of American Indians! To fight!! Against imperialism!” (figs. 8a, 8b). The reference to a union between north and south surely refers to the couple themselves, but it carries an additional significance in relation to Mariátegui’s synthesis of Marxism and Indigenismo.

In a handwritten document of fragmented text (composed sometime after Mariátegui’s death in 1930) that is among the David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers at the Getty Research Institute, the artist rehearses, in halting prose, a critique of Mariátegui’s thought. Siqueiros derides Mariátegui’s “overestimation of the ethnological factor [presumably a reference to the so-called problem of the Indian], which leads him straight to liberal and reformist conclusions.”⁴⁰ At the same time, he laments Mariátegui’s premature death. “Had he lived to this day,” Siqueiros notes, “he would have been the first to modify his entire premonition.”⁴¹ Multiple times, Siqueiros refers to Mariátegui’s “magnificent accumulation of data” within his book *7 ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928; *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, 1971), yet criticizes the book as “seriously damaged by undoubted residues of that literary sociology or rhetoric peculiar to contemporary left-liberal writers.”⁴² This sentiment resonates with the Stalinist denunciation of Mariátegui as a populist and a purveyor of “nationalist romanticism” expressed by Soviet adviser to the Latin American Bureau of the Comintern V. M. Miroshevsky in 1941.⁴³ The muralist’s reservations about the theories of his late Peruvian comrade are clear, although he is quick to extend a certain generosity to Mariátegui by indicating the promise of his social analysis. If, as Siqueiros asserts on the opening page of his text, “Mariátegui’s native

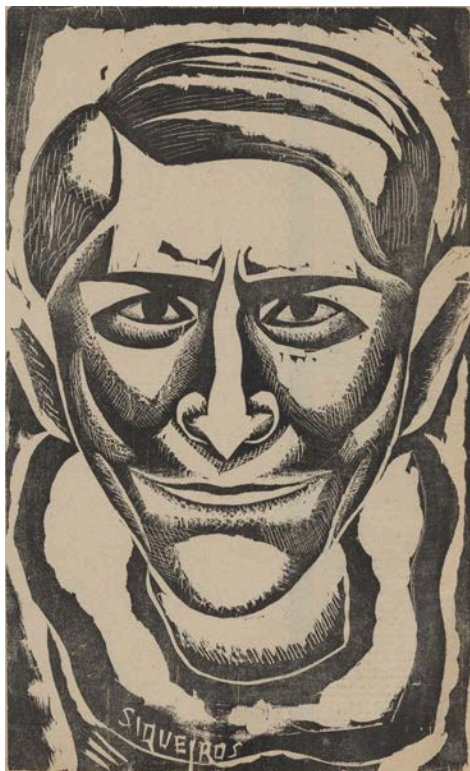
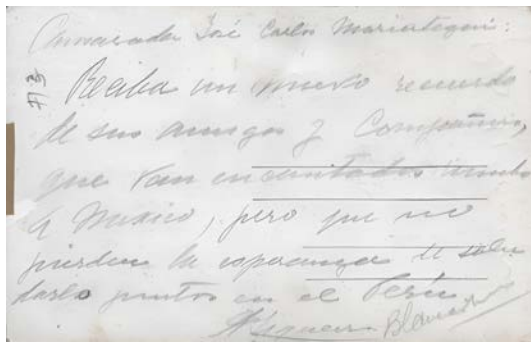


FIG. 7. — David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). José Carlos Mariátegui, woodcut, 1932. From *Grito: Órgano de la Unión de Estudiantes Pro Obrero y Campesino*, 3 April 1932. Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University, F1201 .G75 1932 NO.3. Art © Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City.



FIGS. 8A, 8B. — Postcard, front and back, from Blanca Luz Brum and David Alfaro Siqueiros to José Carlos Mariátegui, 16 June 1929. Lima, Peru, José Carlos Mariátegui Archive.

[sic] and Americanism marks the romantic, initial stage of the emergence of Marxist ideology in Latin America,” then Siqueiros regrets that the Peruvian visionary’s death permanently deferred his development of that ideology.⁴⁴

This state of deferred potential echoes through Siqueiros's work in Los Angeles. Expelled from Mexico, where he had fought during the revolution, Siqueiros's defiance was tempered in his Californian murals. Per the Plaza Art Center mural's full title, for all the shock the crucified laborer elicited, the individual's fate truly does seem to be the result of a total "oppression and destruction." He hangs from the cross almost completely alone, while the ruins all around him are overrun by the voracious roots and vines of the jungle. At this moment of defeat, with the precarious political situation in Mexico and Peru, it is significant that the figures that Siqueiros chose to bear the revolutionary flame should be a Mexican and Peruvian working together. Siqueiros looked for a way through the current political impasse by routing the Indigenista impulse in this painting through the hypermodern production techniques and formal innovations afforded by the camera. In doing so, he channeled the thinking of Mariátegui. In his 1928 essay, "El problema del indio" ("The Problem of the Indian"), Mariátegui discusses the pre-Columbian economic formation of "Incan communism," rejecting the idea that socialism is an inherently European idea somehow alien to American realities:

Faith in the renaissance of the Indian is not pinned to the material process of "Westernizing" the Quechua country. The soul of the Indian is not raised by the white man's civilization or alphabet but by the myth, the idea, of the socialist revolution. The hope of the Indian is absolutely revolutionary. . . . Why should the Inca people, who constructed the most highly developed and harmonious communistic system, be the only ones unmoved by this worldwide emotion? The consanguinity of the Indian movement with world revolutionary currents is too evident to need documentation.⁴⁵

Despite Siqueiros's disparagement of his comrade's emphasis on "the ethnological factor," *América tropical* demonstrates the artist's own drive to stoke an interhemispheric revolutionary solidarity within which the "problem of the Indian" is thoroughly enmeshed. While Mariátegui may have sought a historical precedent, however, Siqueiros is careful to distance *América tropical* from any pre-Columbian moment. Even as his mise-en-scène incorporates ancient architecture, the jungle vines threaten to engulf and drag its structures into the past. The plight of the Indigenous laborer and the insurgents sitting vigil on their perch thus exists in a suspended, anticipatory moment amid the ruins of colonial history. If he acknowledges that the problem of the Indian emerges historically, then Siqueiros is at pains to highlight the urgency of action in the present. Another typewritten document among the Siqueiros Papers, titled simply "America Tropical," ruminates on the mural's evocation of overlapping temporalities:

It is the violent symbol of the Indian peon of feudal America doubly crucified by the native exploiting classes and by imperialism, in turn, oppressing them.

It is the living symbol of the destruction of past American national cultures by the invaders of yesterday and today.

It is the preparatory action of the proletarian revolution that takes the stage and is already “cocking the trigger” to effectively launch itself into the transformative battle and the construction of a new social order.⁴⁶

The collision of past and present depicted in the mural directly contradicted the sanitized nostalgia that Olvera Street’s renovation was intended to orchestrate. For the mural’s censors, it was probably worrisome enough that the campesino and his Peruvian comrade were armed and ready to fight. Sterling’s Olvera Street project depended on scrubbing the old city center of the reputation it had gained as a gathering place and organizing site for the working class.⁴⁷ If there was one thing less acceptable to the prescribed amnesia of El Paseo de Los Angeles than a reminder of genocide, it was the prospect of downtrodden Indigenous people raising arms. While the image of defeat exemplified by the crucifixion played a role in commemorating a history that some were resolutely trying to forget, Siqueiros’s choice to situate the snipers where he did suggests a cunning propagandist’s understanding that images of terror and injustice may help to agitate, but that recruitment to a cause requires empowerment and inspiration. The decision to whitewash this section almost immediately indicates that Siqueiros’s strategic manipulation of perspectival possibilities in his first completely outdoor commission, and its urgent depiction of interhemispheric solidarity, was not welcomed by the censors, who hastened to remove it from sight.

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Notes

This research began in 2023 at the Getty Consortium Seminar with Owen Doonan at the Getty Research Institute. I am grateful for conversations with colleagues in that seminar, particularly Emma Laube and Leandro Martínez Depietri in our carpool back and forth from San Diego. Getty staff were extremely supportive during the seminar and on successive trips to special collections. Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their guidance, and to Lauren Gendler for her patience and assistance with securing images, and sharp copyediting. Thank you also to Fabiola Carranza for input on the translations of Spanish-language material from the Siqueiros Papers. Unless otherwise noted, translations are by the author with assistance by Carranza.

1. Shifra M. Goldman emphasizes the crucified figure and cites a similar reading by Jean Charlot in Goldman, “Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles,” *Art Journal* 33, no. 4 (1974): 324. S. Janelle Montgomery also discusses the figure at length in “‘Oppressed and Destroyed’: David Alfaro Siqueiros’s *América Tropical* and 1932 Los Angeles,” *Pacific Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (2020): 549. For a brief introduction to the mural’s story, see Jaime Roque, host, *Recurrent*, podcast, season 1, episode 2, “*América Tropical*: Art, Activism, and Los Angeles’s Hidden Story,”

produced by Jaime Roque, Getty, 15 May 2024, <https://www.getty.edu/podcasts/recurrent/america-tropical-art-activism-and-los-angeles-hidden-story/>.

2. *Los Angeles Times* art critic Arthur Millier is quoted in a personal letter saying, “At 1:00 A.M. that night in a dead Olvera Street I found Siqueiros sweating in an undershirt in the cold air, sitting on a scaffold, painting for dear life the peon bound to a double cross.” Millier, letter to Jack Jones, May 1970, quoted in Goldman, “Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles,” 324.

3. Arthur Millier, "Power Unadorned Marks Olvera Street Fresco," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 October 1932.

4. Arthur Millier, "Art Sheds 'White Scaffold on Collar': Huge Fresco for El Paseo," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 August 1932.

5. My argument builds on an excellent observation by Rebecca Zamora about how the mural was whitewashed in stages, starting with the area featuring these figures, in Rebecca Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 6 (2014): 120.

6. See Raquel Tibol, *Episodios fotográficos* (Libros de Proceso, 1989); Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Las masas son la matriz: Teoría y práctica de la plástica del movimiento en Siqueiros," in *Retrato de una década: 1930–1940*, exh. cat. (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1996), 68–95; Olivier Debroise, "The Vertical Screen," in *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramirez and Hector Olea (Yale University Press, 2004), 239–45; Juan Carlos Arias Herrera, "From the Screen to the Wall: Siqueiros and Eisenstein in Mexico," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 30, no. 2 (2014): 421–45; Sergio Delgado Moya, *Delirious Consumption: Aesthetics and Consumer Capitalism in Mexico and Brazil* (University of Texas Press, 2017); and Jennifer Jolly, "Aesthetics of Conflict: Perspective and Anamorphosis in Siqueiros's Art of the 1930s," *The Art Bulletin* 103, no. 1 (2021): 111–39.

7. David Craven, "Postcolonial Modernism in the Work of Diego Rivera and José Carlos Mariátegui, or New Light on a Neglected Relationship," *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (2001): 3–16; Tatiana Flores, "Dialogues Along a North-South Axis: Avant-Gardists in 1920s Mexico and Peru," *Third Text* 28, no. 3 (2014): 297–310; and Tatiana Flores, "Art, Revolution, and Indigenous Subjects," in *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, ed. Carlos Manuel Salomon (Routledge, 2018).

8. Montgomery, "'Oppressed and Destroyed,'" 542.

9. "Bringing Back Our Yesterdays," *Southern California Business*, August 1929, 16.

10. See Mike Davis, "Sunshine or Noir?," chap. one in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (Verso, 2006).

11. Sarah Schrank, "Public Art at the Global Crossroads: The Politics of Place in 1930s Los Angeles," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010): 435–57.

12. Christine Sterling, *Olvera Street: Its History and Restoration* (Adobe Studios, 1933), 20,

quoted in Montgomery, "'Oppressed and Destroyed,'" 542.

13. See Flores, "Dialogues Along a North-South Axis," on the contexts for Indigenismo in Mexico and Peru.

14. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "America Tropical," ca. 1932, typewritten manuscript in Spanish, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI), David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers, 1920–1991, 960094, box 3, folder 20.

15. On matters of religion, in particular, Indigenista imagery in the work of Mexican muralists was not always welcomed by their audiences. In 1936, an anticlerical mural by the Alianza de Trabajadores de las Artes Plásticas (Alliance of Visual Arts Workers) at a secondary school in Portales angered working-class parents, while teachers in Oaxaca complained about an Indigenista rendition of a Virgin del Perpetuo Socorro at a school in Tezoatlán. See Robin Adèle Greeley, "Muralism and the State in Post-Revolution Mexico, 1920–1970," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait (University of California Press, 2012), 26.

16. Tomás Zurián and Adriana Malvido, "Siqueiros: Hallazgo Iconográfico de América Tropical," *La Jornada*, 13 September 1997, 25–26.

17. Laura González, "Siqueiros and Photography: From the Source to the Optic Device," in *Siqueiros: Landscape Painter*, by Esther Acevedo et al. (Editorial RM, 2010), 66.

18. In addition to the artist and filmmaker's exchanges about photography and cinema, González speculates about the potential influence of Eisenstein's drawings from his time in Mexico, which include a crucifixion scene on a similar cross with upper and lower cross members. González, "Siqueiros and Photography," 69.

19. Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," 325

20. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting: Experience of the Block Painters (Los Angeles Section)," 12, Los Angeles, 1932, typewritten manuscript (in English), GRI, Siqueiros Papers, box 2, folder 32.

21. Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting," 12.

22. Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting," 1. Siqueiros's collaborators are listed as Maria Andrade, Luis Arenal, Jacob Assanger, Peter Ballbusch, Dean Cornwell, Karoly Fulop, Dorothy Groton, James Hyde, Wiard Boppo Ihnen, Harold H. Jones, John Kehoe, Richard Kollorsz, Martin Obzina, Sanford Pollock, Tony

Revels, Frederick Schwankowsky, Jean Stewart, Ivan Stoppe, Jeannette Summers, Wolo von Trutzschler, and John Weiskal in Millier, "Art Sheds 'White Scaffold on Collar,'" 15.

23. Montgomery, "Oppressed and Destroyed," 546.

24. See this essay, note 6.

25. Arias Herrera, "From the Screen to the Wall," 428.

26. Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting," 3.

27. Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 117.

28. Montgomery, "Oppressed and Destroyed," 547.

29. This quotation, which does not appear in the English version (see this essay, note 20), is from a different, Spanish-language version of Siqueiros's typescript speech for the John Reed Club, Los Angeles: David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctica-subversiva," 1932, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, folio 9.1.15.272, quoted in English translation in Anna Indych-López, "Celluloid América: Siqueiros, Hollywood, and Plástica Fílmica," in *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945*, exh. cat., ed. Barbara Haskell (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2020), 190. Indych-López notes that various versions of the speech for the John Reed Club by Siqueiros are held in the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros (SAPS) in Mexico City, many of which are analyzed in Delgado Moya, *Delirious Consumption*, 44–57. Indych-López, "Celluloid América," 195n4.

30. Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting," 11. Emphasis mine.

31. Montgomery, "Oppressed and Destroyed," 550. The portrait of Nezahualcoyotl to which Montgomery refers can be found on folio 106r in Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Codex Ixtlilxochitl*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Mexicain 65–71, n.d.

32. Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 119; and

Raquel Tibol, *Siqueiros: Introdutor de realidades* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1961).

33. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The Warriors*, study for *Tropical America*, n.d., pencil-and-ink drawing, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, from Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 210, fig. 203.

34. Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 120.

35. Arthur Millier, "Brush Strokes," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1934, A8. The UCLA Library Digital Collections erroneously date the image in this essay, figure 6, to 1930.

36. Barbara Haskell, "América: Mexican Muralism and Art in the United States, 1925–1945," in Haskell, *Vida Americana*, 25.

37. Quoted in Haskell, "América," 25.

38. Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 120

39. See Beverly Adams and Natalia Majluf, eds., *The Avant-Garde Networks of Amata: Argentina, Mexico, and Peru in the 1920s* (Asociación Museo de Arte de Lima–MALI; Blanton Museum of Art, 2019).

40. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Crítica a Mariátegui," 1, Los Angeles, n.d., GRI, Siqueiros Papers, box 5, folder 5.

41. Siqueiros, "Crítica a Mariátegui," 1.

42. Siqueiros, "Crítica a Mariátegui," 4.

43. V. M. Miroshevsky, "El 'populismo' en el Perú. Papel de Mariátegui en la historia del pensamiento social latino-americano," in *Mariátegui y los orígenes del Marxismo Latinoamericano*, ed. José Aricó (Cuadernos de Pasado y Presente, 1978), 55–70.

44. Siqueiros, "Crítica a Mariátegui," 1.

45. José Carlos Mariátegui, "The Problem of the Indian," in *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, trans. Marjory Urquidí (University of Texas Press, 1971), 66.

46. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "America Tropical."

47. Montgomery, "Oppressed and Destroyed," 538.

Becoming Simone Forti: California, 1970–72

Megan Metcalf

I am leaning over a slide at the light table. The familiar handwriting of artist and dancer Simone Forti (b. 1935) on the cardboard frame provides her name, a title—“Accompaniment to La Monte’s 2 Sounds and La Monte’s 2 Sounds”—and a date: 1968 (fig. 1). This is not the low, tight cursive of Forti’s in her twenties and thirties but the clear, spacious printing that she developed somewhat later, the same handwriting that appears in the inscriptions of her books now on my office shelf. I suspect the slide was labeled in the run-up to the acquisition of Forti’s archive in 2019 by the Getty Research Institute (GRI), or perhaps when the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York was considering Forti’s earliest works, those that Forti called “Dance Constructions” (1960–61), for its permanent collection between 2009 and 2015.¹ Now, seated in the Special Collections Reading Room at the GRI in November 2024, I’m consulting the Simone Forti papers and audiovisual materials, which have not yet been fully cataloged, in hopes of finding images of the Dance Constructions in the 1960s.² After spending years researching in the artist’s personal papers and in the collections of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, I know that extant material from Forti’s life and work in the 1960s, especially photographs, is scarce. And indeed, just a brief look at the slide at the GRI suggests it might instead depict a performance from 1971. The false lead of the mislabeled date isn’t even momentarily disappointing: I’m thrilled that what I’ve found could provide more insight into Forti’s time in Southern California between 1970 and 1972, which I’ve long hypothesized was a pivotal period for the artist.

Italian-born, Southern California-raised Forti was, until recently, primarily known in US American and European dance communities for her contributions to improvisational forms of movement. In the early 2000s, art historians and museum curators “discovered” that Forti’s artistic practice was implicated in and foundational for a number of canonical postwar movements—Happenings, Fluxus, and Minimalism, among others—and that the artist had been making drawings, videos, sculptures, music, and poetry in addition to performances for decades. As part of my scholarly inquiry into the art world’s fascination with dance, I’ve been tracking Forti’s transition from dance-world legend to visual-art star; following the artist and her works from her classroom in the dance department at the University of California, Los Angeles

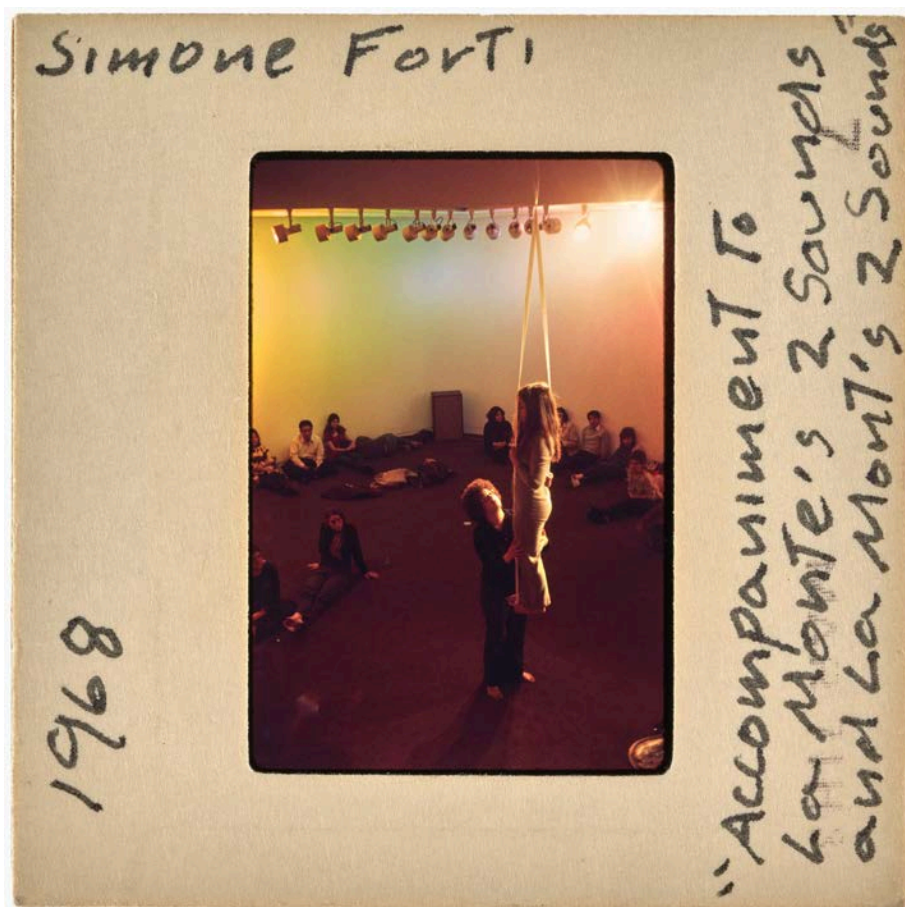


FIG. 1. — Color slide with handwritten label, “Simone Forti, ‘Accompaniment to La Monte’s 2 Sounds and La Monte’s 2 Sounds,’ possibly 1971, 5 × 5 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2019.M.23.

(UCLA), to personal and institutional archives, in international galleries and museums and through publications.

Making sense of this trajectory requires weaving together several different kinds of knowledge. I’m drawing on my bodily experience from Forti’s classes and workshops, the data provided by files and photographs in the archive, and my evolving understanding of Forti’s creative and personal relationships as well as the growing body of secondary literature about Forti.³ This scholarly labor constitutes its own dance between the methods of the art historian (which some might say overvalues the archive) and the methods of the performance theorist (which, in privileging oral history and bodily knowledge, arguably undervalues the archive). My scholarship requires both methodological approaches. As theater scholar Rebecca Schneider has aptly pointed out, archival research on any topic is an embodied endeavor: you show up, take stock of the scene, pursue leads, dive in more deeply, get lost, begin again, forge new paths.⁴ Today at the Getty, I’m letting the archive pull me along. My query is strictly present tense and

situated in the body, for the most part ignoring what others have said (and might think). If I'm paying close attention to what's in front of me, yet open to surprises, just one little clue can open up whole new webs of relations and shed light on my own processes and preconceptions—even the entire historical enterprise.

I place the loupe over the slide and draw a sharp breath: Is that a child standing in the rope? With Forti beneath her? I seem to recall a document in which Forti expressed a desire to let children play with the plywood-and-rope equipment used in her Dance Constructions. In this work, *Accompaniment for La Monte's "2 Sounds" and La Monte's "2 Sounds"* (1961; hereafter *Accompaniment*), a performer steps into a long loop of rope hanging a few feet off the ground. An assistant moves in close and winds the first performer up tightly. As the assistant steps away, the rope uncoils, and the person in it whips out in a spin, twisting one way and then the other until the momentum runs out. It's all conducted to a recording of composer La Monte Young's screeching composition *Two Sounds* (1960) at an uncomfortably loud volume, which contains the sound of metal scraped on glass—and goes on for about twelve minutes.⁵ After a dramatic start, the majority of the piece consists of the performer swaying slightly in the rope and the audience members shifting subtly in their seats as they all endure Young's music. In *Accompaniment*, Forti's use of a singular gesture and limited movement to draw attention to the presence and mechanics of the human body and the relationship between audience and artwork is characteristic of all of the Dance Constructions, which are still performed today.

In June 1968, *Accompaniment* was performed by visual artist and musician Walter De Maria in an unfinished loft studio space in New York City associated with Cornell University's College of Architecture, Art, and Planning. I had hoped to find more photographs of De Maria, who appeared in a number of dances by Forti and her Judson Dance Theater peers in the 1960s, at the GRI. Forti used a black-and-white photograph by Peter Moore of the 1968 performance to illustrate *Accompaniment* in her autobiographical book *Handbook in Motion* (1974).⁶ Written and compiled during a residency in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1972–73, *Handbook in Motion* consists of journal entries, drawings, ephemera, and photographs detailing Forti's artistic activities and influences up to that point. A nonchronological narrative juxtaposes the artist's early dance training and performances in San Francisco and New York City (1950s and '60s) with her subsequent creative experiments in Rome, upstate New York, and California (late 1960s to the early 1970s). Since its publication in 1974, Forti's account of finding herself as an artist has been enormously influential for dance practitioners.

The photograph by Moore from 1968 reproduced in *Handbook in Motion* shows a blurry De Maria elevated over checkered linoleum, but the color slide that I'm looking at now in the GRI's Reading Room is dominated by a dark carpet (see fig. 1). A row of old-school track lights dots the ceiling, while an attentive seated audience lines the edges of the space. Just off-center, the two female-presenting performers of *Accompaniment* are brightly illuminated, seemingly at the moment when the assistant winds up the person suspended in the rope. A bulky speaker—likely from which Young's recording

blasted—is in the corner where the rear walls meet. This is clearly not the same occasion as the one that appears in *Handbook in Motion*. Based on the color quality of the slide and the outfits and haircuts of the people in it, I think this is a concert of Forti's Dance Constructions (in which *Accompaniment* appeared) at the Pasadena Art Museum in February 1971, almost ten years after the works' first appearance in 1961.

Forti had returned to Southern California sometime in the late summer or fall of 1970 and stayed until the spring of 1972, a brief but productive period that is difficult to detect within the archival record. I'm especially interested in a series of informal jam sessions that Forti called "Open Gardenia," which Forti initiated at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) soon after she arrived in California. I think these sessions served as an engine for her modes of working and creative output in the decades that followed. However, not only was Forti's artistic practice newly in formation in those years but so too were the institutions with which she was associated: CalArts and the Pasadena Art Museum (today the Norton Simon Museum). Along with the usual problem of limited (or no) photographs or film/video of performances and other live events in the 1960s and 70s, the repositories where this documentation might end up were not yet securely in place. The processing and accessibility of Forti's papers and audiovisual materials at the GRI promises clues for finally constructing a coherent narrative and stable timeline for the events and artworks of 1970–72, enabling my art history to perform certain certainties.

But dance in the archive—and Forti's dance between 1970 and 1972—insists that some things will stubbornly refuse to reveal themselves fully. Forti's dances disrupt any final narrative, and my experience pursuing their remnants attests above all to the gaps, failures, fantasies, and desires that drive my project—and may drive the writing of every history. Art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty has noted how many of the performative works of the 1960s and 70s were "designed to be lost," leaving behind material testifying primarily to lack, which compels the pursuit across contexts and time.⁷ Indeed, in the archive, the absence of live movement and the performer's enlivened body generates only more longing for experiences forever out of reach or always slipping away. The slide's image of the 1971 performance illuminates so much about the performers, the museum space, and even the photographer—while provoking so many additional speculations. I'm suspended between wanting to pin everything down and wanting to let mystery remain.

Back at home, I hunt for a research photograph of a typewritten text marked with the rusty residue of an old paper clip. It's an undated, untitled proposal about a workshop that Forti wanted to teach at CalArts containing a lengthy description of the concerts she had held at the Pasadena Art Museum; I found it in Forti's papers at her home in Los Angeles around 2013, before they were acquired by the GRI.⁸ Writing at the conclusion of her museum performances, circa spring 1971, Forti described how she and her collaborators planned to install the wooden ramp with ropes required for *Slant Board* (1961; fig. 2), another Dance Construction, on the CalArts campus in Valencia, then



FIG. 2. — Rehearsal for Simone Forti's *Slant Board* (1961) in "Two Evenings at the Pasadena Art Museum," February 1971, color slide, 5 × 5 cm (detail). Photograph possibly by Serge Tcherepnin. Image courtesy of the artist and The Box LA.

still under construction, "so that anyone who is interested will be able to play on it."⁹ The proposal doesn't mention children at all.

Another false lead—and I realize I have fallen into the trap of Forti's first historians, who linked the artist and her early choreography to children's games in order to explain their radical simplicity, which had the effect of infantilizing the artist herself.¹⁰ Sitting at my desk, now a little ashamed, I wonder if I'll ever be able to find out whether the "rope board" made it to the CalArts campus, and who might have experimented with it? I also wonder whether Forti was eventually hired to teach the Gardenia Workshop that she outlined for the brand-new art school, or if she even submitted the proposal at all? A copy had remained in her files for me to discover more than four decades later, after all.

Forti's friend and colleague Allan Kaprow, who is credited with inventing the Happenings in New York City in the late 1950s and early 1960s, enlisted Forti to cover his classes at CalArts while he traveled to Cologne for an exhibition in November 1970. At the school, Forti sought collaborators for the kind of music and dance practice she had begun to develop during her time living on communes in upstate New York in 1969–1970.¹¹ She explains in her proposal for Gardenia Workshop how she had organized the Open Gardenia jam sessions: "The more I talked to people [at CalArts], the more I realized that there was a common need for an open ended yet stable situation" in which collaborations between artistic mediums and between people could take hold.¹² What resulted was "a kind of weekly festival in which everyone who showed up was a welcome performer."¹³ Forti found a regular time and place for these sessions on Friday nights from seven to nine in the multimedia trailer (a location suggested by faculty

member and composer Serge Tcherepnin) and arrived at the name Open Gardenia. She describes participants in the jam sessions “dancing and making sounds, working lights, or projecting live or recorded images” and names some members of the ad hoc group, the most famous among them Tcherepnin, Fluxus artist Shigeko Kubota, and composer Charlemagne Palestine.¹⁴ Forti’s bid was simple: She wanted to formalize the Open Gardenia activities in a class or workshop that, under her direction, “would uniquely complement the studies which are already offered at Cal Arts.”¹⁵

The overall image that Forti paints of the Open Gardenia sessions in her proposal, in *Handbook in Motion*, and in her contemporaneous notebooks is so evocative, yet certain details remain maddeningly obscure.¹⁶ I’ve never found any photographs or film documentation of the Friday night sessions at CalArts in 1970–71, and the organizer herself admitted at the time: “I have no idea of all the people who came and went.”¹⁷ Even if I had a recording, I still would never know what it was like to be there on the interim campus in that “first, famously chaotic year” of CalArts, when the previous Chouinard Art Institute and Los Angeles Conservatory of Music converged on the former Villa Cabrini Academy campus in Burbank in 1970.¹⁸ All of the documentation (and first-person recollections) in the world could never convey the full range of the movement and sounds, lights, and music in a dimly lit space filled with incense and cigarette smoke. More to the point, I’d never be able to smell the perspiration of the moving bodies in the room, feel the creative, social, and libidinal energy flowing between Open Gardenia’s participants, or join in their spontaneous side conversations.

I know this is a fantasy. But I’m nonetheless convinced that Open Gardenia’s powerful currents precipitated many of Forti’s discoveries in dance, sound, and the visual arts since 1970. With Palestine, Forti developed a collaborative, improvisational movement and music practice, later called “Illuminations,” which consisted of Forti drawing numbers and spirals on paper and then following the patterns with her entire body on a walk or run while Palestine sounded out tones and extended drones on the piano and other instruments.¹⁹ The duo eventually performed all over the world. Likewise, with CalArts printmaking professor and artist Peter Van Riper, Forti developed Big Room (sometimes also called “Home Base”), which paired her movement improvisations with Van Riper’s musical improvisations, most often on the sopranino saxophone.²⁰ They married and appeared together in major art venues nationally and internationally in the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond.²¹ Forti’s extended, iterative collaborations with Palestine and later with Van Riper combined spontaneous decision-making with the shared knowledge acquired through working together intimately over time: breathing, sounding, and moving together in the spaces of rehearsal, performance, pedagogy, and domestic life.

I can’t claim such an intimate association with the artist, but I experience something similar with the fragments in the archive, which I’ve been circling for almost fifteen years. And I’m beginning to think that there are parallels between my scholarly process and those in Illuminations and Big Room, which developed slowly out of the artists’ personal relationships, embodied knowledge, and happy accidents. The names

Illuminations and Big Room never marked an arrival or enclosure but rather the continuity in the connections between the performers and their respective mediums; each “work” folded into the next, which folded into the next, which folded into the next.²² Likewise, I’ve been constructing and reconstructing my (hi)stories with ever-expanding knowledge about the events and people with whom Forti was associated, against a backdrop of a bodily understanding of some of Forti’s work and specters of conversations and collaborations from the past that will never be recovered. I’ve pursued the material traces of the artist’s practice from her home to her gallery, The Box, in Los Angeles, and now to the GRI, generating a continually evolving picture of Forti’s body of work as well as its internal connections. But whereas the notes, letters, sketches, and other archival documentation that surround a painting or sculpture point toward a securely tangible thing, the dance configured by physical artifacts from the archive never takes a final form. This makes my pursuit seem futile while keeping me going—and keeping me humble in the knowledge that every history is an approximation.

Forti was invited to share her work at the newly opened Pasadena Art Museum in early 1971. She has written that she “naturally turned to [her] Open Gardenia family” for collaborators and performers.²³ Forti divided the material she had into two separate occasions and locations, which reflected the transition between the work she had done to date and the work she would soon pursue with Palestine and Van Riper, and others (fig. 3). On 26 February, in a downstairs gallery with a spiral staircase and dark carpet, Forti and her collaborators performed three of the five Dance Constructions that had debuted in downtown New York City in 1961 as well as a few other works Forti developed later in the 1960s (fig. 4). The evening closed with all of the performers improvising on “a folk dance,” an exercise that Forti has also called “Droning,” “Buzzing,” or “Scramble” in other contexts.²⁴ A week later, in early March, some of these performers—Forti, Palestine, Tcherepnin, and musician Lolly Bienenfeld—presented a collaboration of sound, movement, and lights in the museum’s auditorium, likely along the lines of what they had been doing together in Open Gardenia.²⁵ Forti’s separation of her past work from present at the Pasadena museum prefigured the retrospective look she would soon take while preparing *Handbook in Motion* in Nova Scotia. Made at a creative crossroads, *Handbook in Motion*, the Pasadena concerts—and almost certainly Open Gardenia—all signaled reckoning, rebirth, and re-formation.

Like Forti, the Pasadena Art Museum was also at a critical juncture: Still developing its contemporary art collection (and with limited funds), the museum featured music and other live events as well as temporary, site-specific installations to fill the galleries of a brand-new and largely reviled building, which opened to great fanfare in January 1970.²⁶ The institution itself was ultimately temporary, becoming enfolded in what is today the Norton Simon Museum around 1974.²⁷ Now fully processed and accessible to researchers, Forti’s archive at the GRI will enable scholars to reconstruct historic connections between institutions, artists, and disciplines. Museums are composed of people, after all, and performance research enables an understanding of the social dimension of institutions, correcting old narratives and long-held assumptions. Even



FIG. 5. — Rehearsal for Simone Forti's *Huddle* (1961) in "Two Evenings at the Pasadena Art Museum," February 1971, color slide, 5 × 5 cm (detail). Forti is standing at right. Image courtesy of the artist and The Box LA.

still, I suspect that Forti and her collaborators—and maybe all historical figures—will continue to resist being captured definitively. And certain episodes, like *Open Gardenia*, may in the end remain not fully knowable, which is what makes them so appealing.

As I compare the color slide at the GRI (see fig. 1) with a set of scans from Forti's gallery, it appears that the long-haired figure in the rope at the Pasadena Art Museum might not have been a child after all. Maybe it was just a person of small stature photographed from above? And the short-haired person winding her up was definitely not Forti, whose hair was longer and lighter at the time (fig. 5). I wonder if I'll ever be able to find out who these performers were, or if I'll ever get a view of the second Pasadena performance? The images I have from The Box only depict the first concert on 26 February, with its spectators and special lighting, as well as a rehearsal of the *Dance Constructions*. One of the rehearsal photographs of *Slant Board* found its way into *Handbook in Motion*, with a credit to Tcherepnin (see fig. 2).²⁸ My best guess is that if he took these photographs—there are no images of "a folk dance," in which he would have participated—then he wouldn't have been able to take photos of the multimedia performance in the auditorium on 5 March, in which he was performing. Who knows if anyone from the now-defunct museum hired a contract photographer for the evening, and if that person or their heirs would have any idea today what the negatives depicted? (Related research in other institutional archives tells me the answer is usually no, and the remaining files at the Norton Simon are slim.)

Such a window onto the second Pasadena Art Museum performance might finally provide my longed-for peek into *Open Gardenia*, which exemplifies a heady moment in art and Southern California history. But my singular focus may be clouding my ability



FIG. 6. — Setup for “Two Evenings at the Pasadena Art Museum,” February 1971, color slide, 5 × 5 cm (detail). Image courtesy of the artist and The Box LA.

to see *Open Gardenia* elsewhere. Looking at the images from *The Box*, I linger on those of the rehearsal, which had full work lights, ladders for hanging the ropes from the staircase, and a zone on the floor for cups with water or coffee (fig. 6). The dancers—like those I’ve been with in Forti’s classes, and like those I’ve seen training for her performances around the world—lounge on the floor and listen intently to the artist’s instructions. They also laugh and goof around with each other and with the artist (figs. 7, 8).

Forti, as both a collaborator and a director, not quite a student and not quite a teacher, contributed to and benefited from the energetic, interdisciplinary atmosphere that she, CalArts, and the Pasadena Art Museum fostered in that moment in the early 1970s. The chaotic, in-between, and only partly knowable are what myths are made of. And these are likely the qualities that made that period so productive for Forti and her peers—and will keep it from full legibility in the present and future. Of course I want to join them: It looks like they’re having so much fun.



FIG. 7. — Rehearsal for Simone Forti's *Slant Board* (1961) in "Two Evenings at the Pasadena Art Museum," February 1971, color slide, 5 × 5 cm (detail). Image courtesy of the artist and The Box LA.



FIG. 8. — Rehearsal for Simone Forti's *Hangers* (1961) in "Two Evenings at the Pasadena Art Museum," February 1971, color slide, 5 × 5 cm (detail). Image courtesy of the artist and The Box LA.

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Notes

Special thanks to Mara McCarthy and The Box, Los Angeles, for help with locating and reproducing the extraordinary slides that illustrate this essay. Feedback from Claudia La Rocco, three anonymous readers, and the editors of the *Getty Research Journal* made this short text achieve much more than I expected when I set out; thank you.

This essay treats the titles of works, series, and events in a manner following the artist, as much as it can be known. Italics indicate an artwork or piece of choreography formalized into a discrete entity, often through the publication of writing about that work. Titles capitalized headline style and set in roman indicate a movement practice, exercise, or ongoing series of events for which Forti arrived at an identifying name. The boundaries between a practice and a distinct work are especially unclear in improvisational movement practices, which are driven by collaborative prompts or scores rather than a desired outcome. Whether the naming conventions Forti established for her works were intentional or not, the precise handling of her titling appears not to have mattered much to the artist and her collaborators; my essay aims to honor the artist's fluidity in this regard.

1. Calling the suite of works "Dance Constructions" follows Forti's example and preserves a sense of a category of artworks; MoMA often italicizes the words, treating them like a title for the suite. See Megan Metcalf, "Making the Museum Dance: Simone Forti's *Huddle* (1961) and Its Acquisition by the Museum of Modern Art," *Dance Chronicle* 45, no. 1 (February 2022): 30–56; and Nancy Lim, "MoMA Collects: Simone Forti's *Dance Constructions*," *Inside/Out* (blog), Museum of Modern Art, 27 January 2016, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/01/27/moma-collects-simone-fortis-dance-constructions. The museum's conceptual and practical transformations of Forti's early works are the subject of Megan Metcalf, *Collecting Choreography: Simone Forti and Performance in the Contemporary Art Museum* (University of California Press, forthcoming).

2. Simone Forti papers, 1914–2019, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI), 2019.M.23, https://primo.getty.edu/permalink/f/mlc50m/GETTY_ALMA21199699560001551.

3. I began taking Forti's classes in improvisation at UCLA in 2010, continuing until she retired in 2014; from 2009 until the present, I have attended Forti's workshops, performances, and talks all over the country. In 2011, I performed in the *Dance Constructions* in Los Angeles, and, in 2014, assisted Forti as she taught them to new performers in Salzburg, Austria. Dancer Ann Cooper Albright's biographical book *Simone Forti: Improvising a Life* (Wesleyan University Press, 2024) is among the most recent accounts of Forti's practice, building on major exhibitions of Forti's work: *Simone Forti* (2023) at the Museum of

Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and *Simone Forti: Thinking with the Body, A Retrospective in Motion* (2014) at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg, Austria. See also Meredith Morse, *Soft Is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After* (MIT Press, 2016).

4. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Routledge, 2010), 104.

5. "La Monte Young-Two Sounds," YouTube video, 14:38, posted by mishima, 1 January 2012, https://youtu.be/t1ZF7jMKoow?si=Le_YVSJAfPuGRuTo. In general, only unofficial recordings of Young's work are available online. The harsh sounds—identified variously as a mallet scraped on a gong, ashtrays against a window, and tin cans on glass—were also used in Merce Cunningham's choreography *Winterbranch* (1964). An analog recording is available in the Simone Forti papers at the GRI: "La Monte Young: Two Sounds, 1960 April," audiotape reel, 13 min., Simone Forti papers, box 27, item D19, https://primo.getty.edu/permalink/f/19q6gmb/GETTY_ROSETTAIE11313741.

6. Simone Forti, *Handbook in Motion* (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974), 65.

7. Carrie Lambert, "Documentary Dialectics: Performance Lost and Found," *Visual Resources* 16, no. 3 (2000): 276.

8. Simone Forti, untitled typewritten proposal for a workshop at CalArts, circa spring 1971, with a photocopy of the first page of Robert Morris's published essay "Notes on Dance," *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (1965) embedded in it, Simone Forti papers, GRI, box 139, folder 30.

9. Forti, typewritten proposal, GRI, 3.

10. See, in particular, Don McDonagh, *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance* (Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970), 190–92; and Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 24–29.

11. Forti describes this period at length in Forti, *Handbook in Motion*, 15–27.

12. Forti, typewritten proposal, GRI, 1.

13. Forti, typewritten proposal, GRI, 1.

14. Forti, typewritten proposal, GRI, 1.

15. Forti, typewritten proposal, GRI, 5.

16. Forti describes some of the motivations behind Open Gardenia as well as its practicalities in Forti, *Handbook in Motion*, 108–13; a notebook entry that includes a drawing is reproduced on pp. 110–12. Forti's notebooks, which include additional recollections of Open Gardenia, can be found in the Forti papers, GRI, box 1, folders 2–3, 6; and box 2, folders 1–6.

17. Forti, typewritten proposal, GRI, 1.

18. "Timeline," CalArts, <https://calarts.edu/history/timeline>.

19. "Charlemagne Palestine—Piano Piece for Simone (1971)," recorded between October and December 1971, CalArts, from *Illuminations* with Simone Forti, Youtube video, 11:57, posted by fascia lata, 1 August 2021, <https://youtu.be/v3yFC-nR7qw?si=SbPMS2MPWlQeWNVQ>. Copies of this rare recording exist online, but not as official recordings. Forti and Palestine issued a vinyl record with these recordings in 2010 (Alga Marghen), and various recordings of their sessions together are now at the Getty. For example, "Illuminations, Simone Forti and Charlemagne Palestine, 1971," computer disc, Forti papers, GRI, box 26, item CM177, <https://www.getty.edu/research/collections/component/26QTQC>. Forti describes her work sessions and performances with Palestine and includes some of her preparatory drawings as well as photographs in Forti, *Handbook in Motion*, 129–39. Forti's text from *Handbook in Motion* is reproduced in Sabine Breitwieser, ed., *Simone Forti: Thinking with the*

Body (Museum der Moderne Salzburg, 2014), 199–203.

20. Forti describes Home Base in the article Simone Forti, "Home Base," *Contact Quarterly* 5, nos. 3/4 (1980): 6–10, which was included in the second edition of *Handbook in Motion* (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1980), 143–51.

21. "Seeing Hearing Peter Van Riper/Simone Forti, c. 1992," Youtube video, 28:59, posted by Peter Van Riper (username), 18 February 2013, <https://youtu.be/P3YVsYZGfkY?si=jxWrWXUOkI8-Kzs>. This would have been a very late collaboration between Forti and Van Riper that took place not long before his death.

22. Forti's *Crawling* (1972) consists of movement evolving in part out of the *Illuminations* practice. See "Simone Crawl, 1970s," YouTube video, 3:20, posted by Peter Van Riper (username), 3 June 2013, <https://youtu.be/h8oeyOeurCk?si=ZDVEDCcVPBHmgAKoY>.

23. Forti, typewritten proposal, GRI, 2.

24. "a folk dance" is how Forti listed the final event in the graphic program for the 26 February performances of "Two Evenings at the Pasadena Art Museum," 1971. "Droning" and "droneing" is how she described it in her preparatory drawings and notebooks (Los Angeles, The Box, and Forti papers, GRI, box 1, folders 2–3, 6; and box 2, folders 1–6). Forti provided a score for Buzzing in the magazine *Women's Work* edited by Alison Knowles and Annea Lockwood in 1975. The Getty has a copy of the facsimile edition of the two issues of the original magazine: Alison Knowles and Annea Lockwood, eds., *Women's Work* (Primary Information, 2019).

25. Forti, typewritten proposal, GRI, 2.

26. See Karen Jacobson, ed., *Radical Past: Contemporary Art and Music in Pasadena, 1960–1974* (Pasadena, CA: Armory Center for the Arts; Art Center College of Design, 1999).

27. See John Coplans, "Pasadena's Collapse and the Simon Takeover," *Artforum* (February 1975): 28–45.

28. Forti, *Handbook in Motion*, 57.

Conversation

“This Show Is So Metal”: The Curators of *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light* in Conversation

Kristen Collins, Glenn Phillips, and Nancy K. Turner

Although contemporary society separates science and spirituality, in the medieval world the science of light was harnessed by artists and theoreticians to better perceive and understand the sacred. Focusing on the intersection of arts and science in Western European art, this major exhibition, which took place at the Getty Museum from 10 September to 8 December 2024 as part of PST ART: Art and Science Collide, demonstrated how the study of light, vision, and the movement of heavenly bodies was explored by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars and theologians during the “Long Middle Ages” (about 800–1600 CE). With glimmering golden reliquaries, illuminated manuscripts, rock-crystal vessels, early scientific instruments, and other objects, the exhibition showcased how the ancient sciences of optics, geometry, and astronomy fed the poetry and artistry of this period (fig. 1). To convey the sense of wonder created by moving light on precious materials, and to explore ongoing fascinations with vision and perception as well as humankind’s place in the cosmos, contemporary artworks were placed in dialogue with premodern artworks. Here, the three curators of *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light* discuss their collaboration, which brought together the worlds of science and religion and bridged the fields of medieval and contemporary art.

—Kristen Collins, Nancy K. Turner, and Glenn Phillips

The conversation below took place in person in November 2024 at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. It has been condensed and edited for length, repetition, and clarity. Italics and underline have been added to capture words or phrases emphasized in the original dialogue.

Kristen Collins: Should I start? Some projects are ones that you start right out of the gate and dive right into. This one was actually a concept that Nancy Turner and I had put a pin in for quite a number of years. We had talked about doing a relatively small exhibition on light in the Manuscripts gallery accompanied by a contemporary installation in a second gallery in the North Pavilion. This was following experiences that we had many years ago in the Sinai desert, when we were planning the exhibition *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai* at the J. Paul Getty Museum in 2006–7.¹



FIG. 1. — Installation view of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 10 September–8 December 2024, with the Vatican Sakkos (left) and Munich Choros (center). Sakkos: Constantinople or Thessaloniki, Byzantium, 14th century, blue silk with silver, silver gilt, and colored silk threads, 162 × 144 cm, Vatican City, Fabbrica di San Pietro, CSPV inv. 0107; and Choros: Byzantium, 13th or 14th century, cast copper alloy, h: 576 cm, diam.: 340 cm, Munich Archäologische Staatssammlung, inv. 2003_8660. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

Over the course of researching that project, we attended Easter and many other liturgies at the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, Egypt (fig. 2). There, we witnessed the effects of moving light in a sixth-century Byzantine church. We noticed the way that it moved the visitor to states of emotion and religiosity, and we wondered if we could import some of that into the museum environment.

The germ of an idea for a Manuscripts [Department] one-gallery show was a corrective view of light in medieval spaces, and on medieval objects. Our manuscripts are inherently haptic objects. They were meant to be handled; their pages were meant to glitter in the light. And yet, when we have them on display, they're like butterflies pinned inside a collector's case. So that begged the question: How do we convey some of the activation that happens when you're carrying objects through church spaces or mosques? Or when you're opening books, or looking at light glittering on mosaic and gilded domes?

For our thought to have one contemporary art installation across the way, one artist whom I just loved so much, Ann Veronica Janssens, started the wheels turning on how a contemporary installation could channel the medieval world. She creates projections of



FIG. 2. — Easter Liturgy at the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt. Photograph by Robert S. Nelson, 2005.

light on mist. And one of the things that had so captured me at Sinai was the projection of sunlight and candlelight on clouds of incense hanging in the air.

Nancy Turner: In a parallel fashion, I got interested in the history of optics—the subject of the exhibition’s eventual second section, “Light and Vision”—because of the work I’d done on the use of metals in manuscripts, on their pages. Originally it was just to answer the basic questions: Is it gold leaf? Is it painted gold? And I had done a small



FIG. 3. — Installation view of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light* with *Tapestry of the Astrolabes*, probably Tournai, Flanders (Belgium), ca. 1400–1450, wool and silk, 415 × 800 cm. Toledo, Spain, Cabildo Catedral de Toledo, Primada de España, inv. 04/2312. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

survey of a thousand years of manuscript illumination (based on the Getty’s collection of illuminated manuscripts), looking at how methods changed over the centuries.² The way illuminations engage the eye in different ways really got me intrigued: How were people in the Middle Ages talking about the eye? How were they talking about light? And this led me to the history of medieval optics and some of that scholarship.

KC: And so this idea, which was going to come with the considerable expense of a contemporary installation, sat on the backburner for a while until the PST ART: Art and Science Collide theme was announced.³ And then it actually sat on the backburner for even a while longer. [laughter] We were late to the game—we joined the PST roster in 2021, when we were asked to pitch an exhibition for the Special Exhibitions Gallery. We jumped at the chance, because it seemed like such a great way to expand that initial idea. At that point, we had to turn a concept for a manuscripts show from our own collection into a large special exhibition. Being a part of PST ART really upped the ante as far as needing to engage with medieval science as a discipline. The rubric for that first section of the exhibition is “Astral Light,” and it is to Nancy’s credit that we jump in with the giant *Tapestry of the Astrolabes* (fig. 3), which she was convinced we could secure if only we could find the curators in charge.

NT: We have to remember, this was all conceived during the pandemic itself, in 2020–21, and we weren’t able to start traveling until ’22. But some money came up in early ’23 and we wanted to pursue the tapestry. We really didn’t know whom to contact after I spotted

it in the catalog for *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration* (1991–92), an exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, which listed Museo de Santa Cruz in Toledo, Spain, as the lender.

While some asks were made over Zoom, the request for the tapestry was made in person. We can't say enough about meeting with custodians of cultural treasures in person! And it turned out that the piece was no longer in the museum listed in the National Gallery catalog thirty years ago, as it has since moved back to Toledo Cathedral, where it had been since the early sixteenth century. My visit was this classic curatorial scenario when you have only *one* day to make the meeting happen, and you're sitting in the office of the museum director where the piece *isn't*, and having to ascertain where it is now located and how to see it! The director of the Museo de Santa Cruz, Antonio Dávila Serrano, kindly phoned the office of the Patrimonio, the body responsible for the treasures of Toledo Cathedral. Thankfully, María del Prado López from that office at the cathedral answered the phone, and she was able to meet me within the hour. She led me to a museum that the cathedral operates in another part of the city. The *Tapestry of the Astrolabes* is now housed at the cathedral's Tapestries and Textiles Museum [Museo de Tapices y Textiles de la catedral de Toledo], which had been shuttered since the Covid pandemic. She flips on the lights—and there this glorious tapestry was. It was just such a “wow!” moment, from out of the gloom and into the bright light. Ultimately, after a protracted series of e-mails, we were able to bring the tapestry here to Los Angeles. But I think that first meeting, that in-person connection with someone, was absolutely essential, no less during the context of a global pandemic.

KC: Although, one of the formative meetings that first kicked off this show for us in 2021 when we joined PST ART was an online convening, “Intersections 2021,” co-organized by the National Academy of Sciences and the Getty Foundation and held on a platform called “ePosterBoards,” that brought curators together with scientists. We were able to move through an online reception and drop into a virtual table of neuroscientists who were more than happy to talk about neuroscience and art and the intersections thereof.

NT: It was a really inspiring session for us. And likewise, they were thrilled to meet us too! It was a wonderful and formative, dare I say, *collision* of worlds. It was like speed dating in this sequence of Zoom rooms, where we gave our minute-and-a-half pitch about the *Lumen* show to all these neuroscientists, one after the next.

KC: It turned out to be a very friendly way to workshop ideas for the exhibition, which was really valuable.

NT: And as a result, we developed the third section, “Aura and Performance,” that includes the neuroscience of light, both medieval and modern. There's also the complementary convening that Kristen organized at the Getty, “Art, Science, and

Wonder in the Medieval World,” the second panel of which focused solely on the neuroscience of light.⁴

KC: It was shortly after that formative time early in the pandemic that we reached out to Glenn to partner with him, because our concept was to include a number of contemporary objects and installations, expanding on the one immersive installation that we had originally envisioned.

Glenn Phillips: So then I came in, I think, probably a year and change after you were really deeply in it.

KC: Yes, a very welcome addition.

NT: Very serendipitous, and you brought amazing things to the show.

GP: I’m going to say actually it’s for the best that you had the exhibition sketched out before we could start thinking about adding contemporary art. If we started trying to conceive it together, it maybe would have been different, and not in the best way. Because I had to start by learning the show. You had images of everything, and the catalog was somewhat drafted, and so I could start from a place of “What is the main narrative? What are the main ideas? What are the images that you see recurring?” And to then think where and how a contemporary work might fit—like, what are the moments?

KC: Hearing that fills me with such relief even now, as we’ve never talked about this! [group laughter]

KC: At the time, Nancy and I entered the big project—the PST initiative writ large—very quickly. Then we realized, you know, we need an expert. Some of my contemporary colleagues commented, “Well, you’ve constructed a show and *now* you want a contemporary curator?” But Glenn coming on board even one year in helped us to really sharpen the messaging and key points around the exhibition. And some things were surprising!

NT: Yeah. And it was an evolution, too. I mean, you didn’t have everything all sewn up right away. It took a little bit—it took some time and some conversations, right?

GP: [simultaneously with Nancy above] It took some time, yeah.

KC: And, I mean, we flipped the order of the show dramatically a few times while trying to accommodate one piece that we ultimately didn’t bring in. That exercise that the three of us went through together with the designers to map out how this piece might fit, which would have radically changed the flow of the show and the way that the story could be told—that was a big takeaway.

NT: Yes, definitely. *[laughter]*

KC: “If you want contemporary, you need to make room for it!” *[laughter]*

GP: With this show and my job in general, I work with a lot of installation artists, and I have, in part through previous PSTs, worked a lot with Light and Space art.⁵ And the exact same object succeeds or fails based on everything else around it—how the museum presents it, the amount of space they give it, how they light it, how they allow people to approach it. A lot of that work is just trying to preserve what the artist needs or what’s going to make the piece look the best. That comes out during the design phase. Because sometimes you can’t nudge the piece, or it needs to be at a specific angle, or take up a certain amount of space—that’s true of all artworks, but some works need particularly close attention.

When pieces are not fully self-contained and have an installation element, then the curator is the only person who can really look out for them. The curator has to make sure that the team understands that the space around the piece is also the piece. The artist isn’t in those meetings. And you can’t show up and change a design. Well, I mean, you could, but it’s very hard. It’s even harder in a show that’s filled with couriered objects.

KC: Absolutely. It was so helpful to have Glenn advise where we shouldn’t skimp in certain areas. Because, you know, resources are carefully budgeted, and we’re always looking for ways to optimize the funds that we have. For example, the Helen Pashgian installation wouldn’t have been so sensorily disorienting and wonderful without you advocating for the space to be painted all white.

GP: You can’t (or at least shouldn’t) just say “because I said so.” The whole team needs to learn and understand the *why* behind some of the visual and construction decisions that might be significantly more costly or labor intensive but that can also make all the difference in the success or failure of a piece. I think everyone was really supportive of this show, but we definitely had to advocate for things like that. Likewise, you were constantly advocating for some rather ambitious loans, let’s say. *[group laughter]*

KC: Definitely. Our motto was “More is more.” *[laughter]*

NT: More is better! *[laughter]* And we knew we needed big, impactful things. The Special Exhibitions Gallery is a huge space to fill. And we’ve done other medieval shows of manuscripts where it’s all very low to the ground, in object cases at eye level and lower. By contrast, contemporary artworks bring your eyes upward. The chandelier [*Munich Choros*, Byzantium, 13–14th century] of course does this (see fig. 1).⁶ The tapestry is also a big wow when you first walk in (see fig. 3).

And, you know, it’s all working within the constraints of the space. An exhibition gallery that has a corridor in it—it’s a little hard to factor in. But that was a moment of kismet,

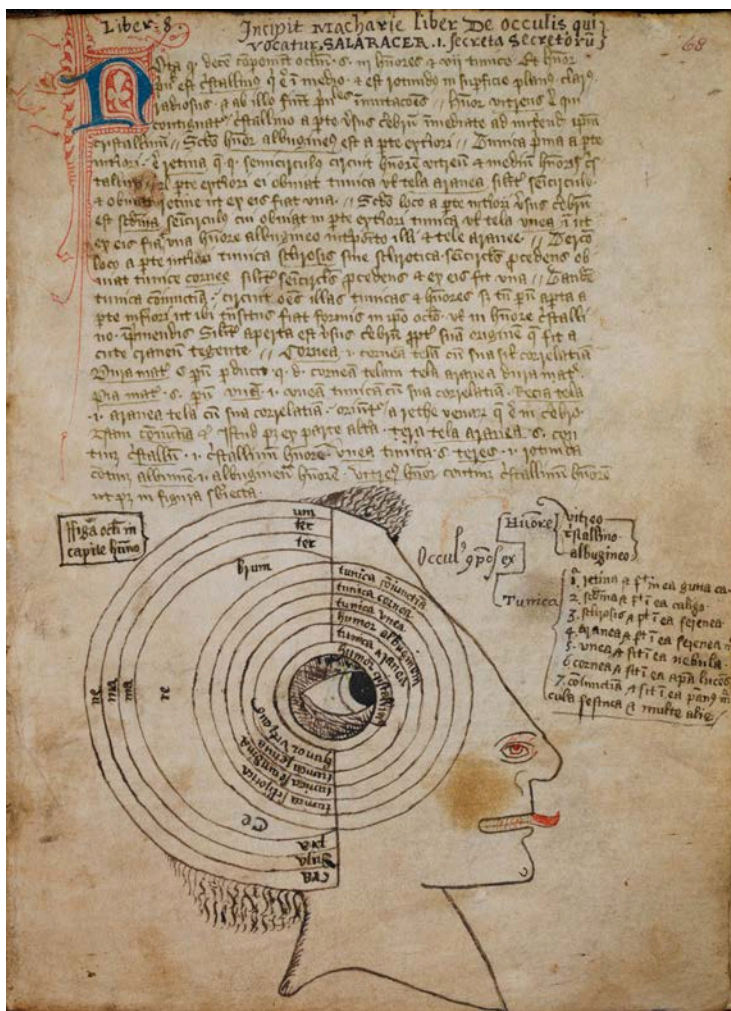


FIG. 4. — Diagram of the Seven Tunics and Three Humours of the Eye and the Skull in *Medical Miscellany*, including the *Book of Macharias on the Eye Called Salaracer, or the Secret of Secrets*, England, 1375–1425, ink on parchment, folio: 23 × 17 cm. London, British Library, MS Sloane 981, fol. 68. Photograph courtesy the British Library collection.

putting our eyeball diagrams in the space called the “oculus” (figs. 4, 5). [laughter] We get great humor out of that. [more laughter]

KC: My cousin’s six-year-old child pointed out on a tour that the oculus looks like an eye, had I noticed? It was wonderful.

One of the things worth mentioning is that Nancy and I are old school, and so when we laid the show out, we were doing so with Post-its and little pasted pictures of the cases on our gallery plan. And then we took that up to the space to try to figure out where we could fit a giant chandelier. And, you know, initially we had the show flipped—we were going to walk into the big cube first, to open the show. And we were going to close with



FIG. 5. — View of the oculus in the Special Exhibitions Gallery, Getty Center, Los Angeles.
Photograph by Kristen Collins, 2024.

the chandelier in the rectangular gallery. But standing there we realized: *It's not going to fit.*

NT: That gallery isn't high enough. [*laughter*]

KC: The rectangular gallery has a lower ceiling height. The giant chandelier [*Munich Choros*] would not fit without it trailing on the ground. So, there were some very nuts-and-bolts ways that we began laying out the show, shuffling Post-its on a plan while sitting on the gallery floor.

NT: It required a complete 180-degree flip, a wholesale rerouting of the show, which started with astronomy in the "Astral Light" section, followed by "Light and Vision," and concluding with "Aura and Performance." We were making and accommodating the show in that way. That's why one of the installations that Glenn was going to bring in

didn't fit. So he pivoted and found the perfect painting instead—Vija Celmins's *Night Sky* #4 (1992; fig. 6).



FIG. 6. — Installation view of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light* with *Night Sky* # 4, 1992, oil and canvas mounted on panel, by Vija Celmins (Latvian American, b. 1938); and geometric textile fragment, Spain or North Africa, 14th–15th century, silk lampas. Los Angeles, The Museum of Contemporary Art, 97.34, Gift of Lannan Foundation, art © Vija Celmins; and New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1946, 46.156.16. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

GP: We had gotten very far on plans for an Otto Piene Light Ballet installation (fig. 7). It was one that includes a false wall covered in little holes. The space behind the wall is illuminated, so those holes turn into tiny points of light that are in a pattern very reminiscent of the medieval nested spheres of the universe. And then a series of kinetic sculptures in the room cast changing, spinning points of light across the space, with different elements of the installation activating at different times. If you look at the whole first gallery, almost every single piece is circular. Whether circular astrolabes, depictions of the heavens, or early mapping of the sky, everything is taking the same form. And so I loved the idea, with the Piene, that you would walk into this spinning galaxy and see the repetition of these forms that you're seeing everywhere else in the gallery. But it was *not* meant to be. [*group laughter*] I think we tortured the designers in ten different ways trying to get this to fit, and they *really* tried everything—

GP: They tried things I had never seen before in that space, but it just couldn't happen.



FIG. 7. — **Otto Piene (German, 1928–2014).** *Lightroom with Mönchengladbach Wall*, 1963–2013, cardboard, wood, metal, motor, light. Art © Otto Piene Estate / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Digital image courtesy Sprüth Magers / Photograph: Timo Ohler.

KC: We even made a short-lived bid for the [museum] bookstore space that didn't pan out.

GP: In the end, though, we replaced that giant installation with the Vija Celmins painting—right before our catalog was about to be locked down. We negotiated that loan in forty-eight hours, and then I wrote the catalog text in twenty-four hours. We just told Publications, this thing has happened and, you know, in the hopes of you agreeing, we've taken the liberty of writing a new text.

So that happened within days. But I think Celmins's painting is so perfect in the space; I don't know that we would've needed a spinning galaxy, really, when what you're walking into is already so impressive. And the show has this nice crescendo now. That first little moment with the Celmins, it's like a little jewel. It's very quiet. Maybe not even everybody notices it. But it's a powerful moment in the show (see fig. 6).

I guess my revelation is that I began by looking at all this stuff as being so distant. It's so long ago; it doesn't look like art now. I don't understand what an astrolabe does, and I never will. [group laughter]

You know—the celestial maps don't match the way I think of the heavens. And then I realized that the Vija Celmins sky paintings are of star maps—actual star maps made by machines that we send into outer space so that we can see farther than we've ever seen. Because we have never stopped mapping the stars. This is one of humanity's continuous endeavors, and it's still happening very actively right now. That's a point of connection that someone might experience. Star mapping is not so distant; it's just that we do it with different machines now. And we still have people copying maps. You know, Celmins, she compares herself to a scribe.

Piene's works are based on his having to stare at the night sky for hours at a time when he was a gun operator during World War II. So there was a morphological connection there, but not as poetic in the long run. So sometimes things happen that actually benefit the show, even though it feels like something's gone wrong.

KC: Our constellations of objects took on power that we didn't expect. The painting by Celmins, who calls herself a scribe, is on view just steps away from the Hildegard of Bingen *Book of Divine Works* (*Liber divinorum operum*, Germany, ca. 1210–40). And, you know, there is a little image of Hildegard [in the lower-left corner of the manuscript page] recording her vision of the *Lux Vivens* (the living light of God).⁷ But all of her visions are cast in cosmological imagery. She sees herself or humankind as a microcosm of the larger macrocosm that is the universe.

So you have something like that just steps from the Celmins, and then steps away from there is a silk textile fragment that is very similar to the Celmins in its dimensions (see fig. 6). The textile fragment, from either North Africa or Iberia [fourteenth century], has a geometric pattern on it.⁸ We talk in the exhibition about how light traveled in lines and rays, and how geometry was used as an expression of light. This textile was embroidered with repeating star patterns, to some extent representing the infinitude of the universe. So, all of these things, you find them gelling in ways that, yes, you planned for. But then when you do two tours a day for three months, you find which stories are the most powerful. And I think that cluster is really powerful—it's a little constellation.

NT: So, we're delighted that there's poetry in a show that's rooted in math and science, right?! [laughter] Just to stand up for the astrolabes—we're manuscripts people, and we work with books that are themselves instruments with spinning discs called "volvelles." And we just got super into these astrolabes, while we freely admit that we cannot fully understand them! [laughter] We had a tutorial from Taha Yasin Arslan, an artist-scientist-maker who creates facsimiles of astrolabes; two of them are included in *Wonders of Creation Art, Science, and Innovation in the Islamic World*, another PST ART exhibition at the San Diego Museum of Art, and have since been accessioned into that collection.⁹ But we just felt so strongly that to start with actual astrolabes was a way to bring people right away into the medieval scientific world that was so cross-cultural,

interdisciplinary, trans-religious. We have astrolabes that are inscribed in Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, and Latin (fig. 8).



FIG. 8. — Installation view of the first section of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, “Astral Light,” with astronomical instruments and manuscripts. Oxford, England, Oxford History of Science Museum. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

KC: Yes, we make the point in our tours that science was the common language of the Middle Ages. We say that though people may not have been reading the same things all at the same time, they were drawing upon a common corpus of ancient Greek scholarship that was then translated, questioned, improved upon, and added to over the course of the long Middle Ages.

NT: We really did pursue the brief of PST ART to bring the art and the science together. I think the first room of the exhibition, the “Astral Light” section, does that in an impactful way.

KC: Nancy and I have always recognized our limitations as scholars of the Latin West. We do not read Arabic; we are not Islamicists. Happily, we know Islamicists, and so early on we reached out to a group of people who would form our scientific committee, and whom we could bring into the project. This has become much more common. I think that many people include a line item for scientific committees in their grant proposals. It’s not something that the Getty Museum has done before to my knowledge, and so we’re very grateful that the Exhibitions Department was able to fund this. We had at

least a dozen people on our scientific committee at various times, but it kicked off with a series of online convenings. I think we had about three or four meetings—

NT: On Zoom, in the fall of 2022.

KC: It was quite close to our deadline, I would say, *[laughter]* because then we tapped many of those people to be authors for the catalog—

NT: which was due like six months later! So this whole ambitious project has been in high gear from day one, really, because we were told by our administration to go big *[laughter]*. More typically, curatorial teams have about six years to work on these things—

KC: If not longer!

NT: And we basically had less than half that time.

KC: I'd like to go on record as a proponent for percolation time. Three years was a very tight turnaround.

NT: And to really dive into the literature—especially the scientific literature on optics and astronomy—was really a big lift.

KC: I mean, the evolution of the object list shaped our scholarship as well. The idea of being able to have the monumental *Tapestry of the Astrolabes* on view alongside some of the greatest objects from the Oxford History of Science Museum's collection of instruments—astrolabes and one quadrant [*Quadrans vetus* Horary Quadrant, possibly France, ca. 1300] (see fig. 8)—very much changed what we were reading and how we were thinking about the exhibition.

NT: The exhibition checklist was constantly iterative. We started with a very positive response from Lucy Blaxland and other colleagues at the Oxford History of Science Museum, and likewise a motivating and generous response from Poul Grinder-Hansen at the National Museum of Denmark for the Ølst Golden Altar (1200–1225). Lisa Woop and her colleagues at the Optical Museum in Jena, Germany, kindly lent us an anatomical model of an eye (fig. 9). So there were just certain things that fell into place fairly early on and then other things that took longer for us to get to.

KC: We were traveling for the show, as Nancy said, and writing long-loan request letters from a speeding train. I remember receiving our second *yes*, for the eyeball [Eye model, France, before 1700] when we were in Florence, after we'd already received a *yes* on the Golden Altar. And Nancy said, "Well, we've got a golden altar and an eyeball. We have a show" (fig. 10). *[group laughter]*



FIG. 9. — Eye model with case, France, before 1700, silver and glass (model), h: 10 cm, diam.: 4 cm; leather with gold tooling (case). Jena, Germany, Stiftung Deutsches Optisches Museum, 873610_0002726, 873610_0002621. Photograph: Luca Spano. Digital image courtesy Stiftung Deutsches Optisches Museum.



FIG. 10. — Installation view of the second section of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, “Light and Vision,” with the eye model and case, France, before 1700, in proximity to the Ølst Golden Altar, Ølst, Denmark, 1200–1225, fire-gilt copper sheet over oak, 106 × 183 cm. Jena, Germany, Stiftung Deutsches Optisches Museum, 873610_0002726, 873610_0002621; Copenhagen, National Museum of Denmark, inv. D.5144. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

GP: I mean, that’s pretty much the middle section of the show, “Light and Vision,” right?
[laughter]

NT: Exactly.

KC: Yeah, little did we know that they would ultimately be on display right next to each other, the eyeball staring at the golden altar! [group laughter]

GP: I would step back and add a word about advisory committees, because I think that this is one of the pillars of PST ART. The Getty Foundation always awards support to curators to develop an advisory or scientific committee. It’s so valuable for scholarship, but small institutions can almost never afford them, and even at larger institutions it’s one of the first thing to go when you have to cut expenses.

We’ve seen over and over again through every version of PST that being able to convene your peers and get the best specialist knowledge improves exhibitions—it brings to light potential loans; it brings catalog authors; and it benefits everybody on that committee and not just the institutional community. Anyone who has gotten one of these grants will say that having an advisory committee changed the course of their show.

NT: Oh, 100%, including this one. During the initial phase, we had a very rough object list that we shared in advance with all of our interlocutors on PowerPoint. Then we met on Zoom with groups of them, and we asked everyone to present objects that they thought would be appropriate too. So they were making suggestions. That was so helpful, to be directed to things we hadn't been aware of. And, likewise, for things that we had hoped to include but had to be dropped for various reasons, many of these works are still represented in the catalog essays because the authors saw our very early PowerPoint.

KC: So at least they're enshrined somehow. As I mentioned before, the Islamicists and the historians of science as well as the Byzantinists and Hebraists working with us have been amazing. They have been our teachers as well as our colleagues; they offered such deep field knowledge that then went into the catalog. Even beyond that, Margaret Gaida, one of our scientific committee historians of science, and Megan McNamee, another member of the committee who works on geometry and diagrams, read all of our labels and commented on them—it was difficult and, in many cases, new-to-us material. As Nancy mentioned, she's worked on optics, but the historians of science brought it to the next level. I don't think either one of us had done much with astronomy since grade school days! *[laughter]*

But as Nancy was describing before, the spatial constraints of the interior architecture of our galleries shaped the exhibition's narrative; we go from astronomy in the first section to optics in the second section, where you can use the geometry of light as well as practical geometry to think about the ways that ancient and medieval people thought about the so-called pyramid of vision and how light enabled sight, whether it was from light entering or exiting the eye. From ancient times geometry was used for land surveying or for the measurement of distances between heavenly bodies.

NT: Part of this project for us, the medievalists speaking, is that we're fundamentally responding and reacting to the Enlightenment thinking that we all have been schooled in, which says that science begins with the Enlightenment thinkers and art begins with the Renaissance in Italy. And we're saying no, science has been going on for thousands of years. Especially the astronomical observations of the movement of the stars as well as Renaissance perspective—these are coming out of a Euclidian tradition that has a nearly eight-hundred-year history by the time [Filippo] Brunelleschi comes along. We pop that bubble of "These are the Dark Ages." This is what has been in the scholarship for decades, but it just hasn't been brought to light in a public forum like an exhibition. So that was one of our major goals for the show.

KC: We still like our stories of individual genius, but, you know, [Nicolaus] Copernicus did not come to this idea of a heliocentric universe in a vacuum. He's using the math that Muslim astronomers in the Islamic sphere—the great observatories of Samarkand, Damascus, Marāḡheh, and other places—were using and developing in order to better

understand the movements of heavenly bodies. He's figuring out where the previous mathematical models were falling short and in need of refinement or rejection.

GP: Science is a way of representing and figuring the world around us, so there's a huge visual component to that. And as I've learned more about these objects, I'm seeing that on an astrolabe, you're putting a star map on top of a layer depicting where you are on the planet. And you see that repeated on the *Tapestry of the Astrolabes*. You see the bottom part with the flowers, that's the earth (see fig. 3). And then there's, a little larger, the stars above. But the constellations are on top of them, representing these higher worlds. And then where do you go from there? It eventually gets you to the heavens, or to God.

There's this kind of ladder in our show that gets you from hard science to religion. And so, for me, what's striking as we move into the second section about optics, is that artists are now using the same scientific tropes to represent ideas about God or happenings in the Bible. That ladder that gets you from science to wonder is also, I think, one of the narrative threads of the show, which pushes you into, all of a sudden, these glorious, religious, golden, amazing objects. It felt like every day during install we were opening another crate full of gold.

NT: And how did E.V. [Day]'s friend describe it?

KC: "This show is so metal." [laughter] Opening crates full of gold and, you know, a little bit of rock and roll. But then there's what Glenn was talking about, this language of diagrams. We in the Manuscripts Department at the Getty are nested in an art museum, so naturally we like the gold, glittering, scintillating objects; the diagrams were initially less exciting. And yet, the more time that we spent with art historian and historian-of-science friends and colleagues, who spend their careers on these kinds of visual constructions, we have come to look at our collection in a new way. For instance, there is this one late Ottonian manuscript that has an image of a Pentecost (fig. 11). Glenn calls it his favorite manuscript. It's of this moment when the Holy Spirit, represented by a dove, descends upon the apostles and flames appear above their heads, and they are all given the power of speech. We placed it in the exhibition's section "Light and Vision" to illustrate medieval ideas about light traveling in rays and lines. But now when I look at it, and more generally at medieval representations of the heavens, I will forever see diagrams of the nested spheres of the universe. As Glenn mentioned, the preceding section, "Astral Light," included numerous images of the spherical universe. Medieval people represented planetary motion around the earth as concentric circles, with each planet on its own track. In this case we have only the lower half of the larger heavenly sphere visible, but you could still interpret it as an echo of scientific understandings of the cosmos.



FIG. 11. — Miniature depicting Pentecost, from a benedictional (text in Latin), Regensburg, Ottonian Germany, ca. 1030–40, tempera colors, gold, and ink on parchment. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig VII 1 (83.MI.90), fols. 47v–48. Photograph: CCo 1.0.

NT: So, as Glenn mentioned, a big part of this show is the very intertwined nature of religious imagery and the diagrammatic language of science, the knowledge that science was coming up with about sight and light. And it's like Kristen said: We're seeing our own collection in a new way. One pairing that really strikes me is our English Apocalypse [*The Twenty-Four Elders Pay Homage to the Throne of God* in Getty Apocalypse, possibly London, ca. 1255–60], which we displayed right next to Roger Bacon's *Geometrical Diagrams of Rays Entering the Eye and Striking the Crystalline Humor* (1275–1300).¹⁰ Bacon was a Franciscan writing about light, and he was quoting Ibn al-Haytham, Islamic polymath and scientist who was writing in the 1030s or so. By Bacon's time, Al-Haytham's text had finally been translated into Latin, and Bacon was interpreting it in his own book on optics. He's a Franciscan, and he's a teacher at Oxford University, but at the same time he was adding to Ibn al-Haytham's text, talking about light operating as "species" and also how light gets intensified when it goes through a small aperture. And we have a picture of that in our English Apocalypse: John the Divine seeing his revelations through a little hole in the frame of the image itself. So we now read it as his visionary experience of seeing the end times as being intensified—like light—into his own eye.

KC: The final section of the exhibition is “Aura and Performance,” and it contains the germ of our initial idea to bring movement into people’s consciousness within a museum exhibition space. Here we talked about moving objects, moving light—whether the quick flicker of artificial light like lamplight, or candlelight, versus the slow sweep of sunlight over different kinds of medieval environments, including the mosque. We looked at architecture in the mosque. We became fascinated with muqarnas, which are dimensional geometric forms that are used to create the domes and squinches of mosque spaces and Iberian synagogues. The light traveling through these premodern spaces creates a lot of cast shadow, and so this is a whole other dimension of light that we are looking at. This might be a good time to mention Farmanfarmaian.

GP: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian was an Iranian artist who had an incredible history. She was living long stretches of her life in the United States and then back in Iran. She had her first exhibition in the US in the 1950s and was friends with all the abstract expressionists, and Andy Warhol, and so many other artists. She brought artists like Robert Morris and Marcia Hafif to Iran and showed them around in the late ’60s or ’70s, when she was back living there. In parts of Iran, there is an incredible architectural tradition with mosques that are encrusted in mosaic mirrored surfaces, and they sometimes even include reverse-painted glass. Monir incorporates both elements in her own work, and our exhibition features a dazzling corner-based piece [*Untitled (Muqarnas)*, 2012] that she made, I believe, when she was ninety years old, close to the end of her life (fig. 12). It’s definitely one of the great selfie opportunities in the show. It sets you in motion: the more you move around it, the more you perceive the light moving across the surfaces. As I say during tours, sometimes the motion is you. It’s your own actions that are making the light move.

NT: In that section we leaned into how surfaces and materials performed in different kinds of light. Among medievalists, there’s a phrase that has been coined that talks about the “saturated sensorium,” and this is where the neuroscience connection comes in, too.¹¹ It’s the idea that light or sight is considered primary. Sight is completely necessitated by light and contrast and darkness, but then it goes in and gets processed in the brain’s various chambers. According to how people in the Middle Ages understood the brain, there was first the common sense, the *sensus communis*, at the front of the brain, before the other chambers: the imagination and then the memory. And today neuroscientists have this phrase called “predictive processing” to describe the brain’s process of anticipating perception based on our memories of an experience. So we’re bringing all this together for this last section on the “Aura and Performance” of these objects.

KC: Yes, and Gabi [G. Gabrielle] Starr, a specialist in cognitive neuroscience, was a member of our scientific committee, and her initial discussion about the conditions under which the brain experiences surprise as something pleasurable was hugely formative. As she put it, in earlier times, a surprise would be something that wanted



FIG. 12. — *Untitled (Muqarnas)*, 2012, by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (Iranian, 1922–2019), installed in the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*. Mirrors, reverse-glass painting, and plaster on wood, each section: 149.8 × 155 × 30.5 cm. Atlanta, High Museum of Art, 2019.174, purchased with funds from the Farideh and Al Azadi Foundation. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

to kill you, or eat you, or possibly both. But the brain on light in medieval spaces could create this sense of wonder because it would have been, I don't want to say disruptive, but a marked change to come out of a personal space or home lit by a single lamp made out of tallow or oil and walk into a massive architectural space ablaze with artificial light. Even throughout the liturgical year, it's not something you could predict because

light was never stable. Some religious feasts got two candles; some had more. So the element of surprise would have added to the sense of wonderment and religiosity.

In this section we also have one of the great reunions within the exhibition, thanks to our colleagues Stefano Roffi and Davide Gasparotto: Gentile da Fabriano's *Coronation of the Virgin* (ca. 1420) and *Stigmatization of Saint Francis* (ca. 1420).¹² These two halves of Gentile's processional standard for the church of San Francesco in Fabriano, Italy, had been separated since at least the nineteenth century by the art market. The works formed a two-sided panel carried in procession. We [J. Paul Getty Museum] have the *Coronation of the Virgin*, but the other side depicting Saint Francis is in the Fondazione Magnani-Rocca, outside of Parma. We were able to organize this loan and bring the two of them temporarily back together once again, back-to-back as they originally had been. This was how they would have been experienced by viewers, when they were still functional liturgical instruments. As Nancy has pointed out, and as art historian Chris [Christopher R.] Lakey says in the catalog, the very different surface treatments on each side of this processional panel have drawn attention over the years.¹³ The *Coronation of the Virgin* is much more detailed versus the simpler and larger passages of gold on the Saint Francis side. Some try to make a chronology argument or a workshop argument to explain why this might be, but in his essay, Chris argues that it was ultimately a product of function: one side was meant to be viewed outside during daytime feast day processions, and the other was displayed on an altar by candlelight in an interior. So that's just one of the many works in the "Aura and Performance" section that needed custom lighting treatments, to evoke these different environments.

NT: You were going to talk about the Stavelot [Retable]?

KC: The show ends with the Stavelot Retable, a panel that would have sat along the back of the altar table in the royal abbey of Stavelot in Belgium (the abbey no longer exists) (fig. 13). It is a somewhat unusual Pentecost scene, in its inclusion of Christ seated on a rainbow above, and has golden rays descend to the apostles.¹⁴ It's gilded copper repoussé, with the apostles, in quite high relief. The altar is the subject of a study by Bissera Pentcheva, who is a professor at Stanford University. She has written about the optical and acoustic aura of the Stavelot Retable and the way that it would have optically shifted in different lights, with the figures' features shifting in the changing light throughout day and into the evening.¹⁵ And so we had said early on that we did not want to activate the show with artificial candles—

NT: —however tempting!

KC: And yet we decided that we would break that rule just once, and with Glenn's support, too. [laughter] Early on [in the process of curating the exhibition] he made a great statement about rules, that they could be broken just once.

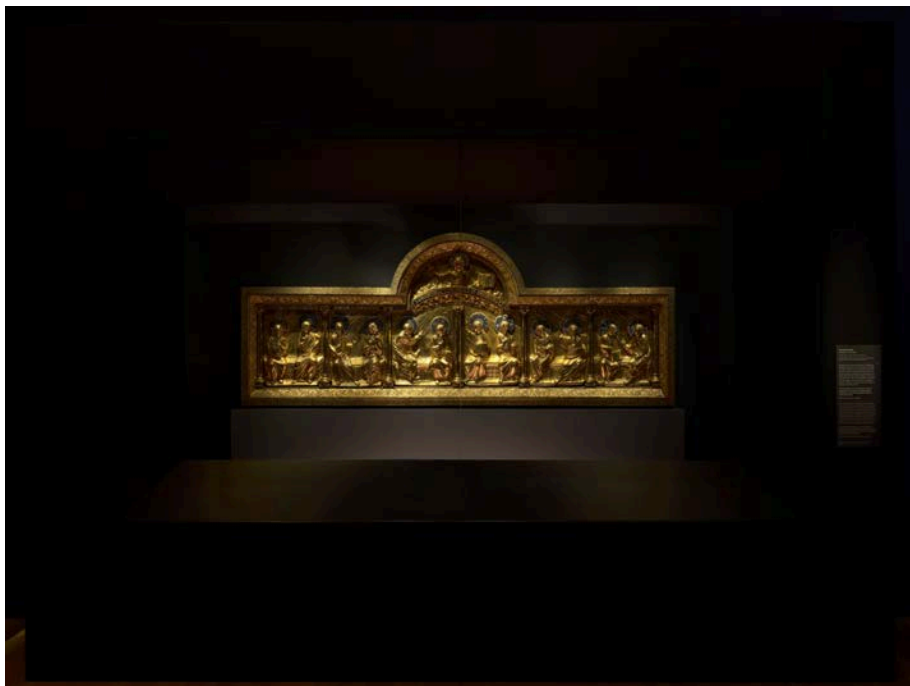


FIG. 13. — Installation view of the third section of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, “Aura and Performance,” with the Stavelot Retable, Mosan region, ca. 1160–70, embossed and engraved gilded copper, champlevé enamel, vernis brun, red jasper, rock crystal and glass replacements over wood core, 85 × 215 × 11 cm. Paris, Musée de Cluny, Cl. 13247. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

GP: You have to set rules when you’re doing a show because you have to contain it in some way, but you can always break them at least once. *[group laughter]*

KC: We worked for the first time with this amazing outside team of lighting designers, from a company called Available Light.¹⁶ They were a great team who loved the narrative behind the light. On the very last day of the installation, they programmed the moving lights that give an impression of how the Stavelot Retable would have looked over the course of the day and into the evening, in a compressed two-and-a-half minute span. And I said to one of the lighting designers, Damien Perard, “I think we have a little too much candlelight here. You know, candles were expensive. I’m not sure even a royal abbey would have had a whole row of candles all along the bottom of the altar.” He was like, “Ok, this is good. The story is really important. We’ll dial back on candles.” And I loved that. We appreciated working with people who absolutely threw themselves into the scholarship, particularly Pentcheva’s work, and came back asking for more.

The retable is on display next to the whole row of manuscripts that talk about the neuroscience of light. Our way of bringing performance and the science of light together is meant to slow the viewer down so they can observe and let the optical changes brought about by light seep into their mood and experience of the exhibition.

NT: We should add how essential the design team (both our in-house designers headed by Alan Konishi and the consulting lighting team that Alan brought in) was, and the fact that the museum was so committed to the show to bring in lighting specialists for the first time. They realized, of course, if there was ever a show to have it, it would be one about light—

KC: Light, right?

NT: Right. And these were professional lighting designers who come from a theater background, and they know how to create drama with lighting. Not to mention the lighting is hidden in the incredible display case that our own Preparations team built (with the lighting built internally in the case). The case lighting is achieved by little, computer-controlled LED lights—incredibly sophisticated, the likes of which we've never done before.

But this [the Stavelot Retable] is an object that was completely worth going to these extra lengths for, activating what Bissera [Pentcheva] had written about and illustrated in a journal essay and in the *Lumen* catalog.¹⁷ So the fact that we could bring this to our audience—an object with light raking across its surface, changing over time—we want them to sit down and slow down long enough to watch it.

KC: We were so lucky to have a designer who has a background in architecture as well, because Alan Konishi, in doing the design for that amazing case, was a huge part of it. He, along with his colleague Chaya Arabia, worked on two large and really ambitious contemporary installations as well as all of the historical medieval art. It was like conducting an orchestra—there were so many moving parts involved. And speaking of orchestra conductors, Amber Keller [Head of Exhibitions at the Getty Museum] was a major factor in the success of this exhibition. When doing a show on this scale you need, not just technical and logistical support, but someone who believes wholeheartedly in the project and knows what the team can accomplish.

GP: Maybe this is a good moment to address the seven contemporary works in the show, plus an eighth piece that we say is “emotionally included.” There are two that are separate from the main part of the exhibition—in the ideal situation, one will be the first piece you see, and the other will be the last. We do see the rotunda commission as the first piece in the show, because you can't go into the show without walking through it; it's a piece by Charles Ross called *Spectrum 14*, and there are fourteen of what may be the largest solid material prisms ever fabricated mounted into our ceiling at very precise angles (fig. 14). So any time during daylight hours that you walk into that rotunda, you will see at least one or usually quite a few spectral bands of light hitting the floor, or the wall, or you, or other spaces in there. It's different every day because the sun moves differently every day. And there are what Charles refers to as summer prisms and winter prisms, because they will only be hit at certain times of year.



FIG. 14. — A visitor to the Getty Center in Los Angeles looks at *Spectrum 14* (2024) by Charles Ross (US American, b. 1937), fourteen acrylic prisms tuned to the sun and suspended in skylights, part of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, 2024. Art © 2025 Charles R. Ross / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph © 2024 J. Paul Getty Trust.

GP: I had a feeling about how this piece was going to work, and it's turned out to be so different, because the spectra moved way faster than we ever would've thought. In the summer, they're moving about six inches a minute. Spectral light, because it is dispersed and covers more ground, moves at twice the rate of a normal sunbeam. So if you really slow yourself down and look at it, you can actually see the movement. And that is the rotation of the earth that you're seeing. And when you come back the next day at the exact same time, they are going to be in a different place than they were the day before. When Charles told me that, I was like, *Sure, by maybe millimeters or centimeters*, but in the summer—which, again, the summer is the most active, most chaotic time—sometimes it was a difference of a couple feet. They really, *really* change a lot, and that change is the orbit of the earth around the sun. So, the piece is measuring two types of planetary movement. One is something that we can, if we slow down, perceive the first time we visit it. The other you have to visit the piece over and over again, over the course of a year, to really understand.

And there are multiple connections to the show. One: we needed rainbows, basically. If you pay attention in the show, in so many of the depictions of God, he's either sitting on a rainbow or surrounded by rainbows, or both. The rainbows aren't always in color; sometimes it's just the shape. Now that I know that, I see it everywhere. This notion that a rainbow might be surrounding the divine and pointing to it is so perfect because you can never get to the rainbow, right?

Two, you walk into the show, the first things you see are the devices that people used to help them know the date or when sunrise or sunset is going to be, or to help them navigate. Our predecessors, by necessity, had to be more connected to the cycle of a day or the cycle of a season. We don't have to do any of that; we have phones in our pockets that tell us. For someone who really wants to slow down and give their attention, the piece will let you feel a little bit more connected to what we now know as planetary motion (back then it would have been considered the movement of the sun). You then go in to the exhibition to see all the centuries of achievements that led to that. [Pause] So that's the first one [contemporary work in the show.] [laughter]

NT: Yes, just to say about rainbows, besides God being surrounded by them, there's also an active scientific inquiry into their nature at this time. By 1300, you already have diagrams of how light reflects and refracts through and off the backside of a raindrop, as given in a treatise on the rainbow by Theodoric of Freiburg.¹⁸

KC: And Theodoric was hugely important for us because he's how many hundred years—?

NT: Nearly three hundred and fifty.

KC: *Centuries* before Sir Isaac Newton's experiment with the prism.

KC: We have good old Theodoric doing his experiment by filling glass globes with water and looking at how light reflects through them, as if they were a single droplet of water hanging in mist, forming the rainbow.

KC: Nancy always says, "He didn't get it quite right, but. . . ."

NT: He thought colors mixed in the eye, which was very intriguing.

KC: Yeah. But these Enlightenment stories that we're told, they really obscure all of the ways that medieval people, for centuries, were working on these problems.

NT: Right. Like we have Witelo's synthesis on optics, the *Opticae thesaurus*, from circa 1270. Witelo is also a Franciscan, and he's working at the papal court in Viterbo. He's gotten his hands on a copy of Roger Bacon's *Perspectiva* (dated 1267), and he's synthesizing Bacon along with much of the ancient corpus on optics and geometry, along with a commentary on Ibn al-Haytham's treatise on optics. Witelo's compendium was such a great synthesis that it continued to be copied and printed well into the sixteenth century, and we know that Johannes Kepler studied it, and so did many of these much later, early modern scientists and theoreticians.

GP: Well, the final piece in the show is an installation by Helen Pashgian. Kristen was talking about the surprise of this transition of walking from your everyday life into some enormous cathedral. We can bring a lot of amazing things into the galleries, but

a medieval cathedral isn't one of them. And so this final piece, it accomplishes a lot of the same things (fig. 15). A transporting environment, but carried out through opposite means. So instead of creating that wonder through an accumulation of ornament and figuration, it's done by removing information. It's incredibly minimal.

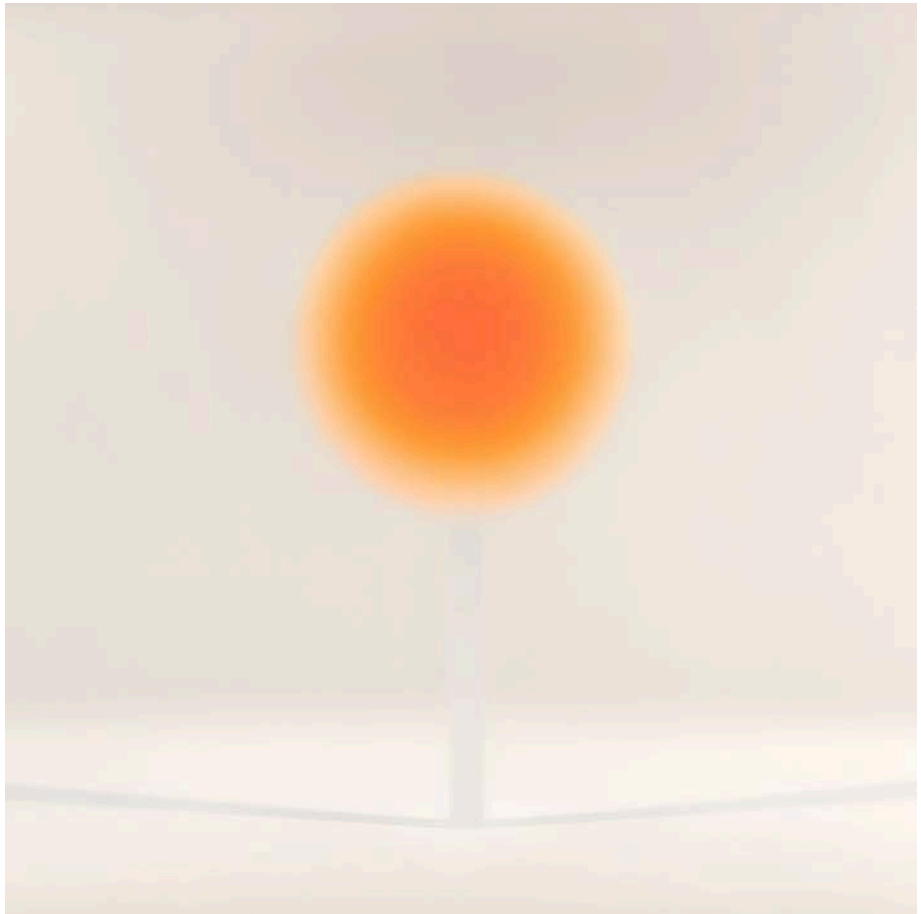


FIG. 15. — *Untitled (Lens)*, 2023, by Helen Pashgian (US American, b. 1934), an installation for the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, 2024. Cast urethane, diam: 127 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist. © Helen Pashgian.

In the middle of the space, it's a disc-shaped sculpture whose edges are so thin that you can't quite tell where the sculpture ends and where the room begins. And then we've removed the corners from the room, and we've removed the join between the floor and the wall, so everything's curved. You lose your sense of depth because you can no longer tell where the walls and floor actually connect. Pashgian says that the eye is always searching for an edge, and when we don't find it, I guess there's a bit of unease as we try to locate ourselves. I think that's the beginning of this transporting experience. The lights in the room change. In about a five-minute cycle, they get brighter and darker, and they ultimately go almost totally dark. And as you're looking at this disc, you suddenly

begin to see that it has a halo, this sort of aqua-colored halo, that seems to be moving. Every time you move your eye, it moves: that's your eye producing afterimages.

And so the piece is a communion. Part of what we see is what is actually there. And part of what we see is our bodies' own reaction to what we're seeing. It was common with Light and Space artists, pushing things to such a minimal extreme that our own processes of perception become part of the experience. That's certainly the case here.

And then my big realization this week. In the middle of the show, in the section about vision where there's the incredible Danish altar and then, on top of it, a monstrance, Kristen and Nancy always talk in their tours about the physicality of vision and how you could do ocular communion. Helen's piece is kind of that: it is an ocular communion, and it is emphasizing this physicality of vision. In the catalog I wrote that it's pieces like Helen's that could help you realize why earlier scientists thought that vision may be something coming out of the eye, that afterimages could lead to ideas like that.

KC: Yeah, for us that piece so beautifully captures some of that early experience that Nancy and I had at Saint Catherine's, where you had changing light moving pretty quickly throughout the morning and shining through an aperture onto an altar. It was obscuring or confusing your vision as much as it was illuminating, because the dazzling light was blurring edges of objects on the altar. And the feelings provoked by watching light perform in that way were quite powerful and, in many ways, akin to Light and Space installations. When you are immersed in these environments you get a little bit of that sensory confusion that the medieval liturgy provided. So I think we knew that we had to have at least one in the show that would provide the full surround.

NT: Working with Helen was so great because she is just across town in Pasadena and has a space built out, just as Glenn described. We could go to see a whole variety of discs in her studio of different hues, different intensities. And we all discussed which one would be best for our audience, people who would be popping in maybe even before they see the exhibition. Of course, we wanted this to be seen at the very end, so we went for the one with maximum impact on the eye: a beautiful, big, bright-orange disc.

GP: This piece was a difficult build-out. It's hard to make a room with no corners, and our building makes it even harder. There are structural aspects of our building and the way our air-return system works that make building inside of the gallery difficult. It's partly that it's difficult anyway, and then it's even more difficult here. Ultimately, she said that it was the best build-out that she's been given. The only thing we did was listen to her and do what she asked. That's all we did. We listened to the artist.

NT: It's also worth saying here, both Helen and E.V. [Day] were super excited about being included in a show with historic works, because they're usually in shows with other contemporary artists. And so that was really gratifying, to see how much they saw the resonance of their works with historical pieces.



FIG. 16. — Master of the Retable of the Reyes Católicos (Spanish, active ca. 1485–1500). *The Annunciation* (detail), late 15th century, oil on wood panel, 153.7 × 94.3 cm. San Francisco, California, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 61.44.21.

KC: A conversation with E.V. on opening night had me thinking more clearly than previously about how the language of diagrams infiltrates religious imagery. Pointing to that Annunciation [*The Annunciation*, late fifteenth century, Master of the Retable of the Reyes Católicos, fig. 16],¹⁹ she was like, “It’s so naturalistic. It’s the highest degree of naturalism for its time and yet you have these stylized extraterrestrial laser beam rays. Why, why?” We were then planning a program about medieval science with our colleague Megan McNamee, who works on geometry in medieval manuscripts and on diagrams. It created a nice prompt for further messaging on the tours about this point that E. V. found so fascinating—this supernatural radiance looks like medieval diagrams of light, which was thought to travel in lines and rays. And it has been really nice to point out to people that we didn’t just leave geometry in the first section; it’s here in these various religious artworks in “Aura and Performance,” which many might see as the most overtly “religious” section of the show.

GP: The piece by E.V. Day, it's the largest in the show (fig. 17). It recreates what the golden rays of an Annunciation might have looked like if they were real. So, in this case, aircraft cable has been gilded and connected to fiber optic monofilament that from a distance becomes invisible. It's certainly our most dramatic sightline in the show, when you have these golden rays descending over the section of the show with all these incredible religious items.



FIG. 17. — Installation view of the second section of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, “Light and Vision,” with *Golden Rays / In Vitro*, 2024, by E.V. Day (US American, b. 1967). Aircraft cable, gold leaf, monofilament, and hardware. On the wall behind is *The Annunciation* by the Master of the Retable of the Reyes Católicos, late 15th century, San Francisco, San Francisco Fine Arts Museums, 61.44.21. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

KC: Well, that was a very fun one to install, putting it into dialogue with the painting [*The Annunciation*]. We installed the painting the second day, and so E.V. was gone by then. It was opening night when she finally saw it.

GP: I was texting her pictures.

NT: That piece [*Golden Rays / In Vitro*] was also brought to life with the lighting-design team from Available Light. They cast a really beautiful amber light on the gilded wires that make them even more scintillating and shimmering and visible from a distance.

KC: Nancy and I had looked at a variety of Annunciation paintings, but this was a late loan decision that came together. And so we secured the loan of this painting after we’d been working with E.V. for a while, and then E.V. found out which one it was, and it turns out this painting was in her archive—her photo archive—as an image that she had

been interested in. Bringing those two together, they had this zap of connection. They function together as an installation.

GP: Her piece was first made in Rome when she was artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome, and she installed it in her studio, which is a very grand space. The gold cables started inside and extended out her window about another forty feet. So there were a lot of steps involved in bringing it here.

I would credit E.V. for the extent of our lighting design, since the work was really an outdoor nighttime piece illuminated by flood lights below. Talking to her about the piece, she said, “The context of *Lumen* is so perfect for my Golden Rays installation. The cables are like the body of God’s voice pulled out of the medieval Annunciation painting in the show! It plugs right into that whole shimmering machinery of devotion.” She said, “I would love to do this—this is a dream, absolutely—but I need a lighting designer. I think that’s the only way. The only way I know how to do this piece is for it to be dark, and then I just blast it with light from underneath.” And, I was like, “Well, I don’t think you can blast anything in a gallery full of medieval manuscripts!” And she said, “I also don’t know where the shadows would land when contained by walls. I would love to make this work, but I need professional assistance to really get it to work in your gallery space” (fig. 18).

GP: We were probably already talking about a lighting designer at that point, but I’m sure that was when I started thinking, *Oh god, actually everything in the show needs a lighting designer*. But that’s another case where we simply listened to the artist. Unfortunately, that can be very rare, and it’s even more rare with women artists. Often, they say exactly what they want, and the institution starts trying to talk them out of it, because it’s going to be more expensive, you know. But that piece is so dependent on every little thing being done perfectly—which of course the artist knows better than anyone. You can’t bargain your way—well you’ll bargain your way into a failure if you don’t give it what it needs.

KC: Yeah, we were lucky that the museum went all in on this show and recognized that a show on light needed the Available Light team! *[laughter]*

GP: Maybe this is a good opportunity to circle back to the eighth contemporary work in the show, the one I described as emotionally included. In the rotunda, Charles Ross’s work is measuring two types of planetary movement, right? The daily rotation and the yearly orbit. But there’s a third type of planetary movement that he has spent the last fifty years of his life trying to visualize. If you’ve ever spun a top and then the top starts to wobble—our planet does the same thing, and one wobble takes twenty-six thousand years to happen. Charles has made this incredible work of land art that helps to visualize this phenomenon, which our medieval predecessors called the precession of



FIG. 18. — Preliminary planning exercise for the installation of E.V. Day's *Golden Rays / In Vitro*, 2024, in the Special Exhibitions Gallery at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, with E.V. Day and lighting designer Kate Furst, February 2024. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

the equinoxes. I said it's emotionally included in the show because it's sitting on a mesa in New Mexico (fig. 19). [laughter] We can't bring it here.

But it's a moment in the show that I love because, at the very center of the *Tapestry of the Astrolabes*, there is the North Star, Polaris represented with a little circle around it (see fig. 3). Right next to that, there's a manuscript depicting a monk using a device called a *horologium nocturnum* to tell time at night.²⁰ You point it at Polaris and then, based on where the stars are around it, you can tell the time at night. And so *Star Axis* by Ross is also a sighting tube that is aimed at Polaris. It's an eleven-story pyramid, and at the top is an oculus that is framing Polaris directly. Each step going up has two sets of dates engraved: a date in the future and a date in the past, and so as you walk up, as you approach the oculus, it's getting larger in your field of view. The perimeter of the oculus is framing how far Polaris will move over the course of a night on the date that is engraved on the steps. When you are at the bottom of the steps, which is close to the

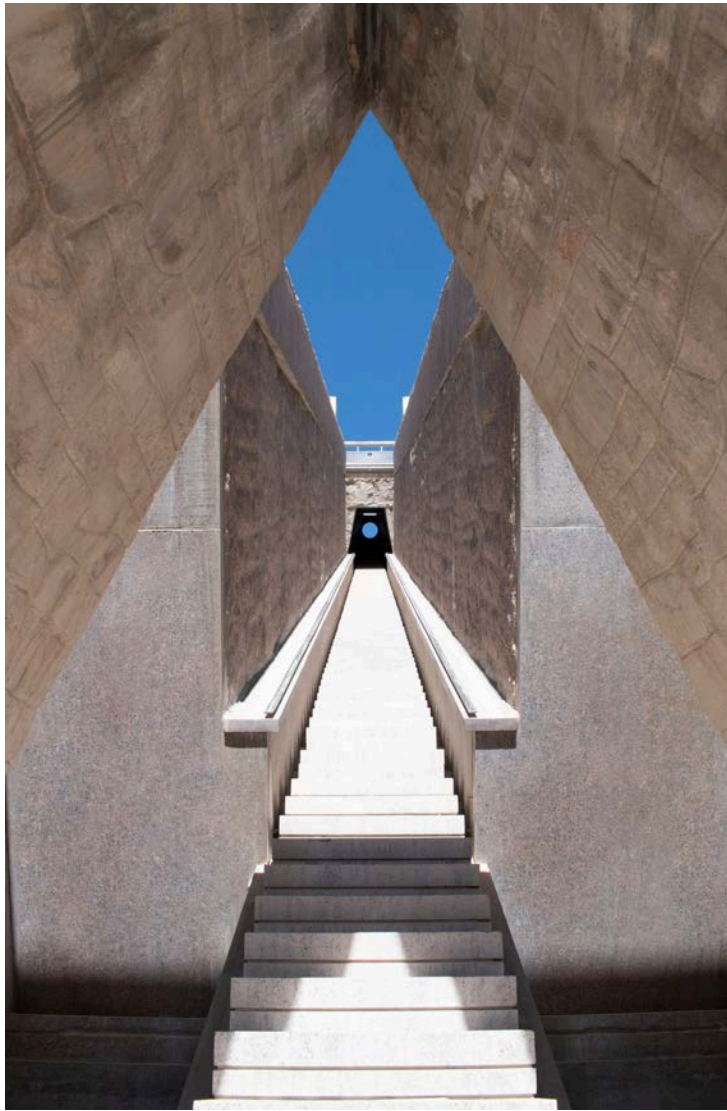


FIG. 19. — Charles Ross (US American, b. 1937). *Star Axis*, 1971–ongoing, granite, sandstone, bronze, stainless steel, earth. View looking up the Star Tunnel. Art © 2026 Charles Ross / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

present, the oculus is very small, and indeed Polaris moves very little over the course of a night right now, which is why it is our North Star. But because of this twenty-six-thousand-year wobble, the North Star changes over time. In a couple thousand years we'll have a different one, and then another one a thousand years after that, and so on. As you walk the stairs and get closer to the oculus, it gets larger in your field of vision, showing you just how much our planet wobbles over time. So you're tracing geometry in time, and when you get to the top, you witness the farthest that the wobble ever is.

When you're at the very top, which is depicting the orbit of Polaris thirteen thousand years in the future and thirteen thousand years in the past over the course of one night, it actually falls and goes below the horizon line at a certain point, and comes back up. Just the process of climbing this set of stairs allows you to visualize that twenty-six-thousand-year cycle. The extent of that cycle began to be discovered in the Middle Ages as astronomers compared their measurements with Greek astronomy and realized that the numbers were different. Enough time had passed between ancient Greece and the Middle Ages that the difference was now measurable. And they had so much respect for their predecessors that instead of saying "their measurements were wrong and ours are right," they said, "The entire planet must be moving"—and that was the right answer! I remember vividly when I first brought Ross to Kristen and Nancy's attention, and they read about his work, Kristen's first reaction was, "He knows about the precession of the equinoxes!"

KC: That was my fangirl moment! [*group laughter*] I had a houseguest recently who picked up my copy of Seb Falk's *The Light Ages: The Surprising Science of Medieval Science* (2020) and noticed my Post-its flagging the section on the precession of the equinoxes. I remember absorbing all of this astronomy for the first time. Then to be able to go to a site where an artist had decided that this was the thing that he would show generations of people to come is pretty amazing: How this polestar that we call our true north, the star by which we navigate, is *not that*. And then to put you in this stairway and have you climb up through time—one hand on a rail marking the past and one hand on one inscribed with a year in the future—was a mind-bending experience.

NT: Which had to be done in the pitch black of night, right, so there's no ambient light. This was even before the moon came up, when we were there.

GP: And one at a time, because if anyone's ahead of you, they're going to block the oculus.

NT: Charles [Ross] and his partner, Jill [O'Bryan], said, "Let the polestar pull you up." We could hear our footfalls. We could hear each other's breathing because it was dead silent.

NT: But you don't want to take your eyes away from Polaris, because it's above you and then it's not. You're in this dark tunnel, and it's a little freaky. And it was just so moving emotionally. I mean, the artist spent fifty years, his adult lifetime, building a pyramid to make this point and physicalize it. And you feel this in your body. I mean, he's making this knowledge tactile.

GP: I think the whole perspective of the show is really how much effort it took over generations for humankind to figure this stuff out. That has always struck me: the enormity of some of these achievements that we take for granted, which now you can just tell somebody. Right?

All to each other: Right? *[laughter]*

KC: But what a once-in-a-lifetime experience that was! It took us from immersive environments filled with light to extreme darkness with one little pinpoint of light.

KC: It's funny because, you know, so much of the work that Nancy and I did on the last part of the show on medieval sensoria involved being bombarded with scent and sound and light. It was somewhat overkill, a smorgasbord of sensory experience. And then to go into this space that was like a sensory deprivation tank—that moment when you're in the viewing tube with only the pinpoint of Polaris was, I found, a little scary in a delightful way; it was a little overwhelming.

NT: Well, it was awesome! It really was about the awe.

GP: Yeah.

KC: As we rode down the mountain, we all ruminated on these moments in the careers of art historians where we think of just how lucky we are that we work on this stuff.

NT: Because the show has taken us in these directions we could never have anticipated in the beginning.

KC: And I mean, every great project does that, right? It surprises you somehow. I definitely feel like this stretched us to take on science—so thank you, Getty Foundation! *[laughter]* I still don't know my constellations, but I can recognize them in a medieval manuscript. Out in the field, I'm a little more limited. *[chuckles]* I feel like the catalog just scratched the surface in so many ways. There was this whole field of study that, because I was not good at math or science in high school and earlier, I peeled out of it as soon as possible in college. And there's this whole area of our collection that could use some amplification and study. It's fair to say, I'm not going to become a historian of science, but there's definitely cataloging work and further shows to be done with this kind of material in the Getty's collection. So I'm looking forward to that, which is a hard left from where I was before, the land of devotional touching and kissing of medieval books.

GP: My feelings about incorporating contemporary art into historical shows have changed a lot. I'm always happy to see it, but if you think back to moments when you've encountered it in shows, it's not always as successful as one maybe would hope. You can end up leaving a project worried, *Oh, God, am I going to get clobbered?* Because when we see it not working as well as it could've. . . . Those curators probably thought it was going to work, right? But this project brought me to a place where I now feel that there can be a kind of methodology to it, that there's a reason for it, and that there's a way that it could be done—

KC: Done sensitively, right?—



FIG. 20. — Installation view of the exhibition *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light*, with *Untitled (Parabolic Lens)*, 1971, by Fred Eversley (US American, 1941–2024). Three-color, three-layer cast polyester, diam: 92.7 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art, acquired through the generosity of Michael S. Ovitiz and Gary and Karen Winnick, and Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, 782.2017. Art © Frederick Eversley. Photograph © J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024.

GP: Done sensitively. I think if it's a historical show with contemporary art added, then the primary needs to be the narrative of the main show, and the contemporary pieces should not try to compete with it. And I think sometimes that's what happens—the newer work tries to take over. We're using the contemporary works in some cases to bring a little bit of scale and wonder. But you should want the things to play well together, and you should want them to enhance the narrative. You want the pieces to make a light bulb go off in somebody's head, not a question mark. Shows like this are not the moment for thwarting or twisting or complicating the narrative. So I think finding the right people who can help show that historical ideas are relevant today, or that artists can use some of the same ideas is, in my opinion, how it can work. I think here of Fred Eversley's glorious lens sculpture in the show (fig. 20). It's such a knockout object, but we placed it so that it was reflecting, encompassing, and showcasing all of the other amazing crystal objects in the show, and by the time people reached this object they would (we hope) associate the colors and form of the work with the nested spheres of the universe that they had already encountered several times. It felt harmonious, while also allowing for a great moment of interactivity and wonder.

KC: I think having a full consideration for ways that all of these works acted as lenses—lenses through which you could better understand the larger narrative that we're trying

to tell—was really important. They weren't just representational; they were didactic, helping us to tell a story and prompt consideration of our themes.

GP: Most of the contemporary pieces are completely abstract, except for one painting of stars. The imperative was to use an object to create a perceptual experience that is going to relate to what else is happening in the room. Maybe the strongest example of that was Anish Kapoor's *Non-Object Black* (2018) being placed in the "Divine Darkness" section of the show.²¹ This was probably the most abstract and "difficult" section of the show, asking visitors to think about the impossibility of ever being able to comprehend the divine. It's something we can only glimpse in fragments at most. And then we have this Kapoor sculpture coated in Vantablack, the darkest substance on earth. It looks like a flat, two-dimensional diamond shape, until you move around the box and realize it actually protrudes into space. The sculpture is so black that it has suppressed our ability to perceive depth. So we have to undergo that same process of apprehending something in bits to begin to understand its true form. And then I only understood on our final tour of the exhibition that the Kapoor work is also a reliquary, just like the reliquaries that were near it. Once those sculptures are coated in Vantablack, they get vacuum sealed into that vitrine, and the vitrine can never be opened again.

NT: As for *Lumen's* afterlives, I've gotten really interested in ocular communion and how sight becomes tactile in the high and late medieval Latin West. I've started looking at how pigments are also medicinal and whether healing could be done through the perception of colorants on the page. That's what I'm exploring right now, visual ingestion, visual healing through these medicinals on the page. It's bringing me back to what I know best and the stuff that manuscripts are made of.

GP: I feel like that's a book that could be really successful now, like if you tell people that using inks made from these colorants could heal them.

NT: I gave two talks last year on this, so, yeah, I hope that's my next project to publish.²² [chuckles] Thanks, everyone, for this shared conversation! This was a snapshot, right? We've learned so much since putting this exhibition together.

KC: That's an important thing to be said, particularly at a moment when symposium volumes are becoming more infrequent. So often the really interesting stuff that bubbles up through an exhibition you only come to after the book is out. After you've been living with the show in the galleries, and you've had these really rich conversations. After you've had a study day and sensory activity led by Barry Smith [professor at University of London and founding director of the Centre for the Study of the Senses] while smelling incense and hearing Hildegard Bingen in the galleries! I think there are all kinds of exhibition afterlives that continue to ripple, and it remains to be seen how we capture them.

Kristen Collins is curator of manuscripts in the Getty Museum.

Glenn Phillips is chief curator at the Getty Research Institute.

Nancy K. Turner is conservator of manuscripts at the Getty Museum.

Notes

1. *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, curated by Robert S. Nelson and Kristen Collins, Getty Center, Los Angeles, 14 November 2006–4 March 2007. See Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins, eds., *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, exh. cat. (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006).
2. Nancy K. Turner, "Surface Effect and Substance: Precious Metals in Illuminated Manuscripts," in *Illuminating Metalwork: Metal, Object, and Image in Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. Joseph Salvatore Ackley and Shannon L. Wearing (De Gruyter, 2022), 51–110.
3. "PST ART: Art & Science Collide," Getty, <https://www.getty.edu/projects/pacific-standard-time-2024/>.
4. Nancy Thompson, G. Gabrielle Starr, and Abbey Stockstill, moderated by Barry C. Smith, "Art, Science, and Wonder in the Medieval World (Panel 2: The Neuroscience of Light)," Getty Center, Los Angeles, 10 November 2024, https://youtu.be/vfl_6cNVuZ4?si=V72pZ6c-dodYbyPe.
5. Rebecca McGrew et al., *It Happened at Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles 1969–1973*, exh. cat. (Pomona College Museum of Art, 2011).
6. Kristen Collins and Nancy K. Turner, eds., with contemporary contributions by Glenn Phillips, *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light, 800–1600* (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2024), 224, pl. 114.
7. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 53, pl. 27.
8. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 218, pl. 107.
9. *Wonders of Creation: Art, Science, and Innovation in the Islamic World*, curated by Ladan Akbarnia, 7 September 2024–5 January 2025, San Diego Museum of Art, <https://www.sdmart.org/exhibition/wonders-of-creation-art-science-and-innovation-in-the-islamic-world/>.
10. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 118–19, pl. 49; 112, pl. 41.
11. See, for instance, Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen et al., *The Saturated Sensorium, Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages* (Aarhus University Press, 2015).
12. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 232–33, pls. 123, 124.
13. Christopher R. Lakey elaborates in "Dazzling Splendor in a Processional Standard by Gentile da Fabriano," in Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 195–96.
14. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 202–3, pl. 90.
15. Bissera V. Pentcheva, "Optical and Acoustic Aura in the Medieval Image: The Golden Retable of the Pentecost at Stavelot," *Material Religion* 16, no. 1 (2020): 9–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1696558>.
16. Available Light, <https://www.availablelight.com/>.
17. Pentcheva, "Optical and Acoustic Aura in the Medieval Image"; and Bissera V. Pentcheva, "Radiant Light and Sound in the Medieval Church," in Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 187–93.
18. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 142, pl. 75.
19. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 151, pl. 87.
20. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 45, pl. 18.
21. Collins and Turner, *Lumen*, 128, pl. 61.
22. Nancy K. Turner, "Pigments and Dyes, Medicine and Healing: Finding *materia medica* in Manuscript Illumination," in *Visualizing Drugs & Dyes: Art and Pharmacology in (Early) Medieval Worlds (600–1400)*, ed. Theresa Hollar, Matthew Griebeler, and Hannah Baader (Brill, forthcoming); and Nancy K. Turner, "Sight and the Healing Efficacies of Painting Materials as Affective *Pharmaka* in Medieval Devotional Manuscripts," in *The Senses, Cognition, and the Body in Medieval Devotional Practices*, ed. Pieter Boonstra et al. (Brepols, forthcoming).