Cosmic oven or Athanor from Annibal Berlet,
*Le Vray Cours de Physique*,
Paris, 1653

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Out of Nowhere:
Emptiness and Aesthetic Feeling in the Works of Collective Actions

Nadezhda Gribkova

In a joke from the late Soviet period, a man throws pamphlets on the Red Square, right outside Lenin’s Mausoleum. A KGB officer arrests him on the spot only to find both sides of the leaflet blank. “Comrade, what are you doing?” the officer asks, “The leaflets are empty!” “What’s the point,” the arrested replies, “everything is clear as is.” The anecdote plays with the absurdity of the action—if everything is “clear as is” what is the purpose of the flyers?—highlighting a seemingly pointless gesture that nonetheless arouses tense suspicion of the authorities also rendered absurd in its turn.  

While the blankness of the leaflet does not contain a meaningful statement, critique, or call to action, the scene that ensues around the unmarked page illustrates the interrelational (i.e. social and formal) dynamics that characterize much of the late Soviet political climate.

It might be more conventional to read the emptiness of the flyer as symbolic of the hollow ideological core of the Socialist project, along with the impending collapse of the Soviet state. In such a light, the pamphlet can be seen as an allusion to the crisis of representation, communication, and self-expression, not exclusively characteristic of the late-Soviet context. Like much of post-war art, conceptualism turned to notions of emptiness and dematerialization to articulate a position defiantly alternative to the tried and by then suspect notions of institution and aesthetic form. In 1970s Moscow, a community of unofficial artists—most commonly referred to as Moscow Conceptualists—similarly explored the qualities of their cultural climate, diagnosing its eerie ideological and institutional insubstantiality with a tone of both chagrin and lyricism. These explorations found various forms. In Moscow, among the unofficial poets, sculptors, and painters, the most notable collective working in performance art was the Collective Actions group (hereafter also referred to as CA) founded in 1976.

The subject of this study, Collective Actions offers a decisively unique approach to both conceptual and formal considerations of emptiness as a compositional element. What is curious in the opening joke is the communicative and formal function of the empty leaflet that brings both the gravity and the absurdity of surrounding circumstances into a sharper focus, accentuating the actions of the parties involved. This function of emptiness lies at the core of my understanding of how the art practices of CA depart from the common evocations of emptiness in Western and Soviet conceptualism. I propose that Collective Actions provides an alternative approach to the dominant theme of emptiness by engaging its aesthetic quality and attempts to articulate the possibility of human practice within an empty space.

The stakes of approaching Collective Actions through the theme of emptiness are best understood when one considers the historical moment of Collective Actions’ work: the contemporaneous artistic tendencies within the unofficial art circle in the Soviet Union and the ambition of Western conceptual art. The emergence of conceptual art in the post-war West was, to an extent, an expression of growing anxiety about the political complacency of institutionalized art. Following art historian Blake Stimson, one may understand this dynamic as a “shift from object-based aestheticism to a language- and theory-based anti-aestheticism.” This shift from object to theory allowed the artists to explore metaphorical dematerialization of a work of art as an emancipatory rejection of art’s institutionalization as well as categories of composition and artistic form. Renunciation of aesthetic, formal, and compositional structures is conceived as liberatory purging, as evident in John Baldessari’s work from 1967 (Figure 1). In Everything Is Purged, by the means of a few lines of text painted on a clean canvas, Baldessari irreverently declares to have wiped his artwork clean of all ideas, leaving it in the

1 While not entirely a laughing matter at the time of the joke’s circulation, this form of protest became even less so in recent years. Starting in 2014, journalists, political activists, and civilians turn to the format of a one-man picket (“ОДИНОЧНЫЙ ПИКЕТ”) holding up empty banners, as gestures in protest of official policies. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the number of blank-poster protests has increased. The consequences for such actions grew graver—escalating from fines to administrative arrests.

2 A notable anthropological and culturological study of this period can be found in Alexei Yurchak’s Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation. Princeton University Press, 2013.

3 Among others, art historian Rosalind Krauss addresses the precarious status of material support in works of late modernism. Specifically, Krauss considers the role photography, above all other media, plays in the demise of media-specificity and the notion of medium as such. See Rosalind Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” Critical Inquiry 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 289–305.


5 In her work, Rosalind Krauss proposes conceptualism’s rejection of medium-specificity, as an attempt to escape “the effects of the market.” See Rosalind Krauss, A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 11.


realm of pure art that is expressed by a blank page with a few lines of text on it. Of course, a comedic paradox arises, as the viewer may very well recognize the contradiction between the work's form and its message. *Everything Is Purged* seems to have lost all aesthetic quality and remains in the realm of ideas expressed through a written statement.8

In her account of the phenomenon of dematerialization, critic and theoretician Lucy Lippard establishes an art-historical trajectory that outlines the gradual transformation of artistic practices that, in the American post-war moment, moved beyond the material. In her 1968 essay “The Dematerialization of Art,” Lippard positions this tendency in line with the project of historical avant-garde. Lippard writes:

> the artist has achieved more with less, has continued to make something of “naught” fifty years after Malevich’s *White on White* seemed to have defined naught for once and for all. We still do not know how much less “nothing” can be, has an ultimate zero point been arrived at with black paintings, white paintings, light beams, transparent film, silent concerts, invisible sculpture, or any of the other projects mentioned above? It hardly seems likely.9

For Lippard, art’s dematerialization and de-aestheticization continues the project of the historical avant-garde that, heralded by the originator of Suprematism Kazimir Malevich, demands a radical termination of the aesthetic evolution of form.10 Works by artists such as Yves Klein and Joseph Kosuth further demonstrate the tendency toward dematerialization. The emptying of the artistic form was seen as a means for, to use Klein’s language, “overcoming the problematics of art.”11 Keeping this lineage in mind, one may see the movement into the beyond alluding to the avant-garde marriage of scientific ambition and utopian transcendentalism. Nevertheless, the beyond here hardly constitutes a destination but rather connotes an eagerness to take a broadly defined trajectory.

Similar aesthetic tendencies can be traced in late-Soviet art. While it was the complacency with the market that haunted artmaking in the West, the unofficial Soviet artists approached conceptual art practices as attempts to circumvent banal complacency with the state. Khrušchev’s Thaw—a period of relative cultural and state liberalization following the death of Stalin in 1953—allowed the Soviet citizens to get a glimpse of the world on the other side of the Iron Curtain.12 In the late 1970s Soviet Union, following this short period of de-Stalinization, the state returned to its hallmark, Stalin-era restrictions and oppressive practices.13 This return to already re-examined and condemned policies of the past led to the hollowing out of socialism’s ideological corpus that eventually led to the system’s entropic disintegration.14 Many Moscow Conceptualists harvested this new quality of “emptiness” felt where socialism had once been as both a medium for an imaginative escape from the disappointments and restrictions of the everyday and an opportunity to raise questions about their place in the newly emergent ideological void. Ilya Kabakov, perhaps the most well-known Moscow Conceptualist in the West, once described this predicament as “the state of emptiness in that place in which we regularly live.”15

For Kabakov, living in “the state of emptiness,” is to be painfully aware of one’s own increasing incongruity with one’s surroundings. His installation *Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* from 1985 (Figure 2) holds, at its center, an absence. The work demonstrates the ways in which the space of one’s room can be both a sanctuary one curates according to his lived experiences and a prison cell that encloses its inhabitant, pushing him toward an abrupt and violent breakaway. The two qualities here do not contradict each other but enhance one another’s potency. Kabakov creates an interior of a room in a communal apartment that contains a foldout metal cot and an improvised bench built out of two chairs, and a wooden panel. The room’s walls are erratically covered with Soviet propaganda posters and information brochures. From the ceiling, Kabakov suspends a catapult-like device that, we are invited to read, has recently been used to transport the inhabitant of the room (his shoes left on the floor by the bench) out of his cell into the stratosphere. The ceiling of the room is ripped open, marking the dramatic exit point. In his analysis of the work, art historian Adrian Barr points out that the status of a communal apartment as “a microcosm of the socialist project” especially fascinated Kabakov, who “probes the relationship between this degraded (yet still potent) ideological space and the lived experience of those

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8 In conversation with Sidra Stich, who points out the irony in *Everything Is Purged*, Baldessari does not speak about the gesture as ironic nor humorous, but rather as a play with notions of belief and ontological nature of artwork as such. See full interview in “Conceptual Alchemy: A Conversation with John Baldessari.” *American Art* 19, no. 1 (2005): 60–81. https://doi.org/10.1086/429975.


12 First-person recollections of the cultural and political climate of the late-Soviet period can be found in an edited volume of interviews *Soviet Dissident Artists: interviews after Perestroika*, eds. Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).


14 Here one can consider Nikita Khrušchev’s “Secret Speech” of 1956 as the most notable example of a denunciation of Stalin’s regime.

who inhabit it.”

Writing about this installation, art historian Matthew Jesse Jackson shares an insight into Kabakov’s position vis-à-vis the notion of an “organized” space. For Kabakov, Jackson explains, the drive to curate, as seen in the installation, suggests an uncomfortable kinship between the practices of spatial organization that were characteristic of both the historical avant-garde and the Soviet state’s “exhortative management.”

Assuming a position that rings similar to that of philosopher Boris Groys, who suggests a continuation between the project of the historical avant-garde and Soviet totalitarianism, Kabakov rejects both iterations of structural organization with a single eruptive blow. A result of such projects, Kabakov seems to suggest, is an empty, uninhabitable space.

Unlike Kabakov, who turned to the Soviet communal, private experiences, pioneers of Sots Art Komar and Melamid made use of the state’s artistic language that addressed the public. Sots Art worked with the visual language of Socialist Realism and ideological paraphernalia, satirizing their pathos and laying bare the absurdity underpinning the grandeur of their claims. In their work *Ideal Slogan* from 1972 (Figure 3), Komar and Melamid take the familiar form of a red socialist banner and replace what would have been an exclamatory statement with a row of white rectangles that culminates with an exclamation mark. Anything or nothing, the artists seem to suggest, can be contained in such a banner—its ideologically-charged form has shed the capacity to retain meaning and is presented here as an empty formulaic vessel.

Kabakov’s installation offers a sense of an absent subject, while Komar and Melamid illustrate an endless fungibility and meaninglessness of the authoritative discourse. The physical space allotted to the Soviet citizen seems violently uninhabitable and crippling, while the sphere of ideology is rid of any reliable core and is hostile to any meaning. Such allusions to an emptied or absent subjectivity—an interiority weakened, peripheral (in contrast to the Russian avant-garde artists) positionality vis-à-vis the political.

Organizing their performances within the Moscow Conceptualist circle, Collective Actions exercised an approach to the dominant themes that nonetheless differed from that of Western and fellow unofficial artists. It rendered emptiness not a consequence of a disenchanted negation of undesirable, repressive circumstances but as a condition of possibility.


19 This distinction has been elaborated by Victor Tupitsyn in his chapter “Moscow Communal Conceptualism” in *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post) Modernism in Russia*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 101–122.

20 In her account of political implications of text-based works of Komar and Melamid, art historian Mary Nicholas points to the way in which the public grew “adept at not seeing” the posters, as they became just another mundane part of public spaces. The artists signed the parodied slogans, drawing attention to the meaning of the texts and making them available for audience’s re-evaluation. See Mary A. Nicholas, “We Were Born to Make Fairytales Come True,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, (June-Sept.-Dec. 2011), 343.


for an aesthetic experience. Diverging from Western notion of material’s emancipatory dissolution, Sots Art’s sardonic emptying of ideological discourse, and Kabakovian suspicion of organization and construction as artistic method, Collective Actions implemented emptiness as a compositional, spatial, and site-defining element in their works.

Collective Actions group was founded in Moscow in 1976. Among its founding members are poet Andrei Monastyrski, artist Nikita Alekseev, photographer Georgy Kiesewalter, and artist and trained librarian Nikolai Paikov.\(^1\) CA is primarily known for its ongoing series of “Trips out of town” consisting of minimal outdoor participatory performances. These actions involve a group of audience-participants (friends and acquaintances of the unofficial art circle) and take place in the open suburban fields, usually on the weekends.\(^2\) Some gatherings involve props and costumes and frequently rely on a series of instructions that the audience members are asked to follow. Upon the completion of these actions, participants are invited to write reflections and recollections of their experiences. In addressing the nature of these works, Monastyrski often uses the term “empty,” referring, among other things, to the absence of a clear purpose for each action.\(^3\) In CA’s work, the notion of “emptiness” (pustotá) appears in more than one way. For instance, among its other iterations, emptiness is theorized by Monastyrski as an important demonstrational quality of photographs that depict uninhabited fields at different points during the actions. A close reading of early works organized by the group, with a particular focus on their structural and aesthetic qualities, demonstrates “emptiness” playing a compositional role in these performances.

Scholarship dedicated to the works of Collective Actions pays due attention to the notion of emptiness and proposes varying approaches to its theorizing. Art historian Yelena Kalinsky, in her study of CA’s documentary practices, considers how documentation and photography specifically work to circumvent the issue of representation of “empty action” given its inherent un-representability.\(^4\) Kalinsky’s close examination of the notion “empty photograph,” a term coined by Andrei Monastyrski, demonstrates the metaphorical nature of much of the photographic evidence of CA’s works.\(^5\) The photograph at times “relinquishes its claim to indexicality and ... becomes an event in itself.”\(^6\) This emptiness is not fully available to the audience during the action’s unraveling, as the event unfolds unbeknownst to the participant. Nor is it accessible for the beholder of documentation, because the document becomes another work altogether, related but separate.\(^7\) Art critic and theorist Victor Tupitsyn approaches CA’s practice through the prism of language, accounting for the overwhelmingly logocentric nature of Soviet culture. Tupitsyn reads the actions as curated instances of diffusing the participants’ will to speak, perpetually postponing the “verbal time” by filling it with action, and only allowing the participants to verbalize their subjective experiences upon completion of the in-the-filed action. The emptiness for Tupitsyn resides in the realm of the word, manifest in the “verbal vacuum” that is compensated for post factum through recollections, discussions, and commentaries.\(^8\) Unlike Kalinsky and Tupitsyn, art historian Marina Gerber does not focus on notions of lack or absence of representation or speech, but rather understands this “emptiness” as a “lack or absence as such.”\(^9\) The experience of the empty action, Gerber proposes, “relieves tension and gives the viewers a sense of comfortable emptiness.”\(^10\) Gerber’s work on CA is organized around the notion of the artists’ and audience’s free time, dedicated to the organization of and participation in the actions, differing drastically from their life in the Soviet every day. Highlighting that contrast in the context of CA’s practices, Gerber’s is a psychologically pleasant, “comfortable emptiness.”\(^11\)

The aforementioned theorizations of Collective Actions’ emptiness—factographic, verbal, and psychological—are both diverging in understandings of the concept and intimately

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\(^{23}\) Membership changed over time, for an account of the group’s early years see George Kiesewalter (pen name Givi Kordashvili), “Istoritsa ‘Kollektivnykh deistvii’: Povest’ v dvukh chastiakh s epilogom,” in Kollektivnye Deistviya, Poezdki za Gorod, vols. 2–3 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2011), 125–43.

\(^{24}\) Not all actions took place in rural settings. Some works were organized in the city (The Group 3 and The Exit from 1983) as well as private apartments of the CA members (Playback from 1981 and Voices from 1985). Works that were situated in rural settings were conducted in large rural spaces unmonitored by the state. The natural setting was attractive as an “anti-museum,” a space that allowed for experimentation and expansion. The first large event organized by the unofficial artist in the bucolic setting is the infamous Bulldozer Exhibition of September 15, 1974. The exhibition took place at the Belyaevo urban forest and presented paintings of underground artists. The exhibition was demonstratively dismantled by the authorities, who turned to water cannons and bulldozers to break up the gathering. For detailed discussion of the organization of the Bulldozer Exhibition, see Matthew Jesse Jackson, The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 136–39.

linked, complicating and enriching one-another's claim.\textsuperscript{34} For the present study, I propose the generative implications of emptiness as formal and compositional element that emerge out of CA’s members’ thinking in aesthetic, and almost painterly, compositional terms. This approach may reveal the extent to which these works belong to the lineage of dematerialization in contemporary art.

In his texts from late 1970’s, Monastyrski works to articulate, formally and conceptually, a utilization of emptiness as a compositionally constitutive element of an aesthetic formal experience orchestrated within the bounds of a given action. This artistic trajectory is evident in the gradual development of the actions from smaller happening-like events (\textit{Appearance} and \textit{Liebl ich} from 1976) to time-sensitive, conceptual participatory works (\textit{Third Variant} and \textit{Time of Action} from 1978).\textsuperscript{35} In one of the first actions organized by Andrei Monastyrski, \textit{Slogan} from 1977 (Figure 4), a group of artists gathered in a Moscow suburban region of Firsanovka for the installation of a red banner. The banner read, “I do not complain about anything, and I almost like it here, although I have never been here before and know nothing about this place.”\textsuperscript{36} The text quotes Monastyrski’s poem titled “Nothing happens.”\textsuperscript{37}

The familiar form of bright-red cloth inspires an expectation of jubilant party rhetoric. Monastyrski, however, subverts this expectation by inscribing onto the banner a statement of an almost fearful and apologetic complacency. Unlike the traditional propaganda object, this one has its fists unclenched, voice lowered, gaze softened. The banner presents a tension between a triumphalist form and a defiantly anti-triumphalist statement. It parodies the form of the party’s official trappings and infuses it with a rhetoric of unofficial, poetic, anti-agitational register.\textsuperscript{38} This tension between discursive tonalities is brought to the fore as the oxymoronic banner is placed into a rural, nondescript space of a public park on the outskirts of Moscow, unattended by the state propaganda.\textsuperscript{39} The “empty action” of installing the banner in Firsanovka, establishing a distance from the centers of power and the participants’ everyday urban spaces, provides literal and conceptual space for squaring the tonal and formal tensions of the work.

Implementation of the familiar state-associated forms and their parodic estrangement within the bucolic, unadulterated spaciousness of the chosen site is characteristic of the early participatory performances organized by Collective Actions. The “empty action,” an installation of the banner to no particular end, proscribes no fixed reading of the tension contained in the banner.\textsuperscript{40} Rather, it poses a question available to the viewer’s deliberation, interpretation, or dismissal. In other words, the location of the work, the formal emptiness of the snow-covered Firsanovka region, allows the action to relocate the banner from an ideologically charged political context into an ideologically un-marked space.\textsuperscript{41}

In his 1985 essay titled “With a Wheel in The Head,” Monastyrski describes \textit{Slogan} as an aesthetic inversion of his participation in a 1967 student protest at Pushkin Square.\textsuperscript{42} In his recollections, Monastyrski recounts the event as underwhelming and “unserious,” as he briefly holds up a banner

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\textsuperscript{34} I see these approaches to the notions of “emptiness” in opposition to the postwar anti-enlightenment tradition, which began already in 1943 with Jean-Paul Sartre’s \textit{Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology}. In his work, Sartre posits that “nothingness” defines much of one’s lived experience. In her consideration of Sartre’s writing, literary scholar Meghan Vicks contrasts Sartre’s conception that “nothingness only comes into the world through the being of man” with Martin Heidegger’s notion that “human existence (Dasein) only occurs by being held out in the nothing” (Vicks, 38). Sartre and Heidegger differ in the trajectory they outline vis-à-vis “nothingness” but hold it as central to understanding the human condition. While the period-specific phenomenological discourse proposes theorizing “nothingness” in the realm of literature and metaphysics, the notion of spatial emptiness as an aesthetic, workable quality of a given artwork presents an alternative to such phenomenological considerations. See Meghan Vicks, \textit{Narratives of Nothing in 20th-century Literature} (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

\textsuperscript{35} For the descriptions of the actions mentioned here and the participant’s commentaries, see \textit{Kollektivnye Deistviia, Poezdkii za Gorod}, vol. 1 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 1980). \url{https://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS.htm}.

\textsuperscript{36} English translation of the banner may be found here \url{https://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS-4.htm}.

\textsuperscript{37} Andrei Monastyrski, “Nichego ne Proiskhodit” [1976], \textit{Poeticheskii Mir} (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2007), 67–118.

\textsuperscript{38} For more on use of text in the works of Moscow Conceptualism, see Mary Nichols, “Reading Moscow Conceptualism,” \textit{Slavic Review} 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 22–51.

\textsuperscript{39} Following Monastyrski’s writing, scholars have also understood the outdoor practices as critiquing the tradition of Socialist Realist landscape. See Marina Gerber, “Collective Actions’ Conception of Art” in \textit{Empty Action: Labour and Free Time in the Art of Collective Actions} (Verlag, Bielefeld: Transcript, 1018), 71–107.

\textsuperscript{40} In the preface to the first volume of \textit{Trips Out of Town}, Monastyrski stresses the open-endedness of the actions, the importance of the audience’s active interpretation of the witnessed work. No specific reading is prescribed, Monastyrski writes: “the viewer begins to wonder about the meaning of this or that activity and finally “discovers” its mythological or some other content.” See Andrei Monastyrski, Preface to Volume One in \textit{Trips out of Town}. 1980. Trans. Yelena Kalinsky, accessed September 8, 2022, \url{http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MONASTYRSKI-PREFACE-TO-1-VOLUME.htm}.

\textsuperscript{41} I refer to these spaces as empty, not as a way to refuse them a history or meaning existing outside Collective Actions’ works, but to honor their formal role in the actions discussed here and to stay in line with the artists’ focus on rural settings as residing on the outside of the political, ideological, state functioning. The formal qualities of these spaces, present in much of the Collective Actions’ photo documentation, are ones of vastness, organicity, and de-population. While these works welcome myriad contemporary readings through eco-critical, Anthropocene, and new materialist lenses, my primary aim here is to consider them in their sociohistorical context and analyze their structure using categories available to the artists at the time.

\textsuperscript{42} Historical note on the protest can be found here \url{http://old.memo.ru/history/diss/links/dempushk.htm}. 
the text of which he does not deem important enough to share with his readers. The 1967 protest against the repression of Soviet poets resulted in arrests and further persecution of the activists. In thinking about the viability and risks of such a political gesture, Monastyrski raises the question of form and content within an artistic framework emerging in the first years of the group’s work. In Slogan, Monastyrski writes, “the social, demarcated as form by the red color of the Collective Actions’ banner, was used as a filler, as a plastic element […] in order to build an artistic and existential space, a new framework of aesthetic conventions, inside of which, the social could exist, and not the other way around.” In other words, Monastyrski is interested in the practice of re-framing and re-, or rather de-contextualization, for the purposes of aesthetic constructions. The plasticity of the social (“социум”) is activated within the compositional tension among the open, de-contextualized rural space, as opposed to being deterministic and constitutive of the artistic and existential framework. The category of the social (both alluded to by the banner and present as viewers-participants) here becomes a plastic form that exists within a specific set of aesthetic coordinates.

To think about this claim art historically, I focus not on what Monastyrski calls a “filler” (“наполнитель”), but rather the aesthetic framework, a conceptual form put forth in the early outdoor works that are characterized by the open empty spaces Collective Actions used to conduct their works. The emptiness of the fields, strikingly evident in the photographic documentation of the actions, also echoes the nature of the in-the-field activity, purposefully purposeless or, to use Monastyrski’s language, “empty,” as the participants are invited to a suburban open field and asked to perform or witness tasks the goal of which is seldom articulated for them. It is precisely the quality of spaciousness, emptiness, and vastness that is constitutive of aesthetic conventions Collective Actions explored during the first decades of the group’s existence.

The manner of engaging with the aesthetics of emptiness is varied throughout the diverse body of works documented and catalogued by CA. The group’s consideration of its compositional potential comes through particularly poignantly in an action from 1981, titled “Gazing at the Waterfall,” organized by Nikolai Panitkov. For the action, the viewers were invited to an open field to witness Panitkov, located at a considerable distance from the audience, run through the field in different directions and at different speeds falling from time to time, for the duration of seven minutes (Figure 5–6). Panikov then stopped in the middle of the field and stood still, with his hat in his hand, for another three minutes. The witnesses were then handed a printed reproduction of 15th century Chinese artist Fen Xi’s “Looking at a Waterfall,” pointing to the fact that the trajectory of Panitkov’s footsteps against the field were meant to mimic the artwork’s outline (Figure 7). Xi’s depiction of the waterfall consists of dramatic concentrations of ink that signify deep shadows and light traces of pigment that suggest the landscape’s disappearing into the distance. Hence, the white areas of the paper are not understood as voids of nothingness in the natural landscape but are read in concord with the marks that contour them. Panitkov pushed the fifteenth century composition through the lens of conceptual understanding of form and parodies it to probe its aesthetic quality in a new context.

This formal thinking is by no means limited to the group’s engagement with visual arts. The practical accentuation of empty spaces is recognizable in contemporaneous experimental music, both in the Soviet Union and the United States, and conceptual poetry that proliferated the unofficial Moscow circle. Thinking about the aesthetic and artistic quality of CA’s works during the first decade of group’s practice, Monastyrski contemplates the aesthetic structure of the actions and the function allotted to the manifestations of emptiness seen in other aesthetic constructions. In an unpublished essay titled “Искусство фонов” (“The Art of Backgrounds”) Monastyrski highlights precisely the organizing quality of emptiness, seeing it not as a stand-alone, conceptually self-sufficient notion, but one with a “positive charge,” that functions as a connecting membrane among the elements of a work. “In reality,” Monastyrski writes, there is no such thing as real or mental emptiness. There is a chaos of the mind, chaos of the feeling—these things are completely different. Emptiness—is a pure notion [понятые] with a positive charge [с ознаком плос]—like a pause between two sounds. Because a pause is more active on the level of the work’s organization [организации вещи]—more so than a word or a sound.59

To approach CA’s engagement with emptiness as predominately metaphorical, non-material concept is to risk favoring the notion’s eerie allusion to lack or absence and foregrounding it to a fault. To think of it in organizational terms, however, may lead one to understand it as a formal condition

44 The rally Monastyrski is referring to was one among several political demonstrations, often referred to as “glastnost’ rally” beginning in 1965. For the description of the action, see Kollektivnye Deistviia, Poezdki za Gors, vols. 2–3 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2011), 22.
46 Andrei Monastyrski, “S Kolesom v Golove.”
47 Andrei Monastyrski, “S Kolesom v Golove.”
48 For the description of the action, see Kollektivnye Deistviia, Poezdki za Gors, vols. 2–3 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2011), 22.
49 Typescript of essay “Искусство фонов” by Andrei Monastyrski, box 1, folder 1, Collective Actions archive, Zimmerli Museum, Soviet Nonconformist Art Archive, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Translation mine.
for aesthetic and critical engagements, both individual and collective, with artistic propositions put forth by the actions’ organizers. Aesthetic conventions that contour the social, to re-phrase Monastyrski, result in a conceptual work that, much like a painterly or musical composition, relies on interrelations of its parts. This compositional aspect allows for interrelational play that feels like a dynamic social form, the parts of which relate to one another through a set of agreed upon conditions.

One action that illustrates the role of emptiness in the aesthetic orchestration of social form is Place of Action from 1979.50 Here, emptiness is implemented as the quality of the action’s setting as well as an aesthetic conduit for both self-reflexive and collective experiences of its participants.51 During the action, the participants are gathered on the edge of a field and are asked to cross it, following the path of small wooden stakes. The journey across the field each participant must take alone. One by one, they begin to move deeper into the open space. As instructed, upon reaching each stake, the participant stops and turns back, toward a photographer who remains at the starting point, to have her picture taken (Figure 8). More than halfway through the journey, she arrives at a curtain installed in the middle of the field. Here, she finds instructions to pull back the curtain and lie down in a ditch dug up on the other side of it, closing the curtain behind her (Figures 9–10). Now horizontal, she waits for the next person to arrive. After a short while, the curtain is pulled back by the participants that followed and, as per instructions, they take each other’s photos in their respective positions. The newly arrived participant then occupies the ditch, and she, who has just risen, continues crossing the field until she reaches the other side, reuniting with those who went before her. She notices that some are looking at a wooden panel hammered to the tree. What is revealed as a signboard presents meticulously regimented movements of every participant written into a grid (Figure 11).

The photographic documentation of the action and the participants’ recollections illustrate how an experience of spatial emptiness provides a fertile ground for imaginative leaps, reflections, and meditations on one’s own positioning within the field. One way such an interaction with the empty space is achieved is through highlighting the inability of the material props and interventions—the takes, the curtain, the ditch—to intervene, circumvent, or fracture the spatial vastness successfully.52 While directing the participant’s trajectory, the participant stops and turns back, toward a photographer who pretends to read it. The photograph of Mironenko lying down, however, does not depict a man in a state of serene awe of his circumstance (Figure 12). When photographed, the artist opens up a copy of H.G. Wells’s Russia in the Shadows and pretends to read it.54 Mironenko’s humorous self-fashioning, a playfully posing for the camera (Figure 13), established a momentous artistic collaboration between the photographer and the photographed.55

Structural and conceptual complexities characteristic of these works allow for a peculiar kind of humor and play that informs the artistic encounters of the participants. The parodic objects ignite such experiences. For instance, participants’ encounter with the signboard, the main parodic element in the action, is recounted in Ilya Kabakov’s recollection. Kabakov writes: “I must say that I felt a pang at such profanation of the ‘other world.’ I am here practically post-mortem, I am practically flying, while here we are again accounting, re-accounting, the strict regimentation of everything that was taking place. Although, who knows, it must mean that such things exist here too.”56 Kabakov’s quote is instrumental to this reading as it underscores a peculiar quality of humor that permeates the complex structure of the action. The notion of an

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50 For the description of the action and recollections of the participants, see https://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS-12.htm.


52 Indeed, the material props are repeatedly described as having an ambiguous relationship with the setting. Ilya Kabakov, for example, describes his encountering the curtain as dream-like experience, natural and yet strange. Ilya Kabakov, “Kabakov's Story: Place of Action,” in Collective Actions: Audience Recollections from the First Five Years, 1976–1982, trans. and ed. Yelena Kalinsky (Chicago: Soberscove Press: 2012), 42.


54 Russia in the Shadows is a volume originally published in 1921, compiling essays by H.G. that narrate author’s trips to Russia in the early 1920s.


announcement board in Heaven is humorous and weary. The laughter at play within the aesthetic framework of the action realigns the critical positionality of the viewer-participant along the formal, compositional, and interrelational axis, as opposed to the social and symbolic axis. In other words, the humor at work is not one that targets, overidentifies with, or mocks the parodied practice, but one that asks to look beyond the apparent readings: connotations of state-control, reincarnation, rites of passage, and a return to the soil. The decidedly playful and unofficial experiential mode at work in Place of Action does not allow for a definitively resolved reading of such allusions, or at least makes them secondary to the overall makeup of the work. For one cannot lay in “sacred Russian black earth” and giggle. Placed in the seemingly de-contextualized formal qualities of the site, namely its emptiness as described above, conceptual components of the work become available to and even require novel, at times humorous, modes of reading that assert the individual and collective contextualities of the participants. This largely untheorized aspect of the action, then, brings to the fore a series of tensions between one’s collective and individual experience, the vastness of the field and the confines of the ditch, and the abstract exploration of the empty space versus overly familiar regimentation of a lived experience. These encounters with and within the empty space allow for imaginative leaps, humor, and defamiliarizing of the state’s official rhetoric, constructing conditions for alternative experiences of the spatial, social, and temporal dimensions.

In 2011, the New Museum in New York reinstalled Monastyrski’s 1970s banner at the Governor’s Island in, as part of the exhibition “Ostalgia” (a play on the words nostalgia and ost, or est, meaning east in German) (Figure 14). The exhibition was dedicated to the romantic longing for the time before the collapse of the Communist Bloc.57 Here, placed within a historical, contextually charged site, the banner indeed becomes a statement rather than an artwork subject to aesthetic contemplation. The official account by the New Museum of the installations says as much, namely that the work is a “commentary on the history of displacement and relocation that characterizes New York’s harbor.”58 But what is lost in this transplantation is the aesthetic convention Monastyrski initially establishes in the rural setting. Installation of the banner in 2011, in other words, is more akin to Ideal Slogan of Komar and Melamid, than to the 1977 installation in Firsanovka. The “social,” contextual, ideologically charged work dictates the “framework of aesthetic conventions”59 of the work, as opposed to residing within the aesthetic structures organized through the artistic choice of the action’s organizer.

Articulating emptiness within the compositional structure of the actions allows Collective Actions to move beyond statement-based artwork and language-based conceptual anti-aestheticism. Instead, CA turns toward an aesthetic, conceptual form containing empty spaces, and asks the participants and us, as secondary readers, to consider formal, compositional relations among the elements of each work. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Monastyrski seems to have made works that engaged with the notions of emptied forms not as means of ironic critique or formulations of an escape, theorizing an endless, boundless space forever distant from the Soviet every day. Rather, his work seeks to formulate a way to imagine how one could inhabit and establish a human practice in an empty space. Monastyrski’s approach differs from that of Western and fellow Moscow Conceptualists in that it renders emptiness not a byproduct of the disenchanted negation of the old but as a special quality of the newly articulated space, available for artistic practice and aesthetic exploration.

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57 For a survey of museum exhibitions exploring the of Eastern Europe, see Curating “Eastern Europe” and Beyond: Art Histories through the Exhibition, ed. Mária Orišková (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014).
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EVERYTHING IS PURGED FROM THIS PAINTING
BUT ART, NO IDEAS HAVE ENTERED THIS WORK.


Figure 7. Collective Actions, *Gazing at the Waterfall*, February 12, 1981. A reproduction of Fen Xi’s *Looking at a Waterfall* handed out to the viewer-participants during the action. © Andrei Monastyrski and Collective Actions.


Figure 11. Collective Actions, *Place of Action*, 1979. Participants before the signboard with action documentation at the conclusion of the action. © Andrei Monastyrski and Collective Actions.
OUT OF NOWHERE: EMPTINESS AND AESTHETIC FEELING IN THE WORKS OF COLLECTIVE ACTIONS


One well-known type of bronze ritual vessel from ancient China is jue. In many museums, art history publications, and public monuments, jue has been identified as a bronze cup, with three legs and a mouth stretching out like two spoons. However, this popular form of jue was rediscovered and reintroduced in the eleventh century by antiquarians of the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Before this antique form of jue was rediscovered, jue cups were designed and crafted differently. For instance, in an illustrated ritual manual from the beginning of the Song Dynasty — Illustrations of the Three Classics of Rites (henceforth the Illustrations) — the jue was described and illustrated as a goblet with a bird-shaped stem (Figure 1). For the justification of the design numerous ritual manuals were cited, seemingly indicating that this design was the standard norm before the Song. Thus, even though the three-legged jue gained tremendous popularity after the eleventh century, the jue with a bird-shaped stem was representative of the earlier designs and their strategic synergy of the mid-tenth century.

In recent years, discoveries of the non-three-legged jue and growing interest in the Illustrations have raised scholarly attention to the jue with bird décor. Pre-imperial-era cups with inscriptions stating their identity as “jue” have been unearthed. Art historians, historians, and museum curators, like Li Ling, Yan Buke, and Wu Hsiao-yun, are advocates for the jue changing designs in the pre-imperial era, and the three-legged jue being one of them. Yan Buke, a historian, published two articles illuminating how the jue had undergone a dramatic change in appearance from the pre-imperial era to the Illustrations. He suspected that ritualists from the late pre-imperial era had reused five different designs of cups, including the “jue,” for a new set of ritual cups referred to as the “Five jue.” The capacities and implementations of these cups were crucial for the invention of the “Five jue,” but the appearances of the “Five jue” were neglected until ritualists around the beginning of the Common Era developed cups with corn-shaped bodies and ring feet for all the “Five jue,” making this basic design the most prominent and dominant since then. As such, Yan seems to label the Illustrations, or rather its compiler Nie Chongyi (fl. 948–964), as a sincere follower of a long tradition rather than a practical reformer who revised and adjusted traditions tactfully. Meanwhile, Yan’s focus is the pre-imperial era and early imperial era, glancing over many later developments of the design of the jue.

Art historians Jeffrey Moser and François Louis have examined the Illustrations in their studies, mentioning the design of the jue. Moser takes note of the jue when arguing that Nie was inconsistent in interpreting and evaluating ancient ritual manuals and previous designs. Moser’s primary focus is on the inscriptions that explain the design in the Illustrations. Louis compares the illustration with archaeological discoveries in Design by the Book, an object-oriented study that serves as a catalogue of an exhibition. With the application of a different methodology, Louis sees the jue as one of many examples of Nie adjusting, instead of abandoning, earlier designs from the Tang Dynasty (618–907), the principal dynasty in China before the establishment of the Song Dynasty. Moser and Louis associate the design of the jue in the Illustrations with different origins: the former as the hermeneutic practice of ancient ritual texts, and the latter as the up-to-date design developed from the recent past. The illustrations of the ritual objects in the Illustrations might have been done by illustrators other than Nie himself, displaying some intriguing contradictions with Nie’s description. However, these differences were most likely accepted by Nie and other ritualists, or they would not have survived in printed copies circulated across the Song Dynasty. The design of the “Five jue” cups in the Illustrations should be looked at as a product of negotiation between different sources of designs and various intentions. To fully understand the design of the cups, I decide to scrutinise both the illustration and the accompanying text.

Developing from these recent studies, I investigate the numerous earlier designs of the “jue” cups reused in the Illustrations, together with the implications and reasons used to justify the adaptation of these earlier designs in the
mid-tenth century. In the article’s first section, I focus on the text that explains the creation of the jue and then proceed to analyse the illustrations. After that, I connect the design with related objects and examine the historical background of the compilation project, which encouraged Nie to criticise the dominating ritual manuals and design of the jue of his time and to investigate ancient ritual manuals for his design.

In the second section, I focus on the other four cups in the “Five jue” category. As Yan Burke’s research demonstrates, the “Five jue” refers to a group of five ritual cups used for diverse rituals. The Illustrations provides us with a sequential introduction of the five cups. In some writings, these cups were generalised as the “jue” cups. Nevertheless, while the jue is designed as a goblet with a bird-shaped stem in the Illustrations, the other four cups of the category appear as corn-shaped mugs with a handle and a ring foot (Figure 2). Confusingly, Nie abandons his criticism of the latest design, which is obvious in the jue entry, abruptly modelling his creation of the four cups on these sources. After closely examining the four cup’s design in the Illustrations, I connect Nie’s design to some surviving objects, ritual practices, and particular concerns Nie faced in the mid-tenth century to contextualise Nie’s different approaches in designing the “Five jue.”

By comparing the designs, my aim is to construct a more holistic understanding of the design of the “jue” cups in the Illustrations and connect these cups with the discourse on state rituals around the mid-tenth century. By examining the design of the “Five jue” cups in the Illustrations and preceding examples of the cups, I argue that the design of ritual cups in the Illustrations not only came from the ancient and orthodox models responding to the court’s pursuit of a new design of ritual objects, but also served as a compromise to the practical need to sustain the up-to-date and widely approved design of imperial utensils.

Before unfolding my study on the jue and the remaining ritual cups, I shall clarify two issues regarding the dating of the Illustrations. Firstly, the book’s origin should be traced back to the period before the foundation of the Song Dynasty. It was indeed completed at the beginning of the Song dynasty and practised as one central ritual manual. Nevertheless, the Illustrations was essentially a response to the chaotic interregnum between the collapse of the once mighty Tang Dynasty and the prosperous Song Dynasty. The Tang ended after a long period of decline at the beginning of the tenth century, and many regional powers waxed and waned. In 951, the Later Zhou emerged around the former political centre of the Tang. However, this state turned out to be equally as short-lived as its numerous predecessors. In 960, a coup ended the Later Zhou and established the Song Dynasty. The end of the Tang created a vacuum of political superiority and an absence of authority over state rituals. Many regional powers chose to adopt Tang ritual manuals, but the Later Zhou decided to revise them by appointing officials to revisit ritual regulations and re-examine the Tang design of ritual objects. Nie Chongyi, a scholar and a court ritualist, began to participate in the revision project in 956, from which he gained himself the assignment to compile the Illustrations. Thus, Nie’s work was closely associated with the Later Zhou’s ambitious revision project of Tang rituals.

Secondly, the oldest surviving printed edition of the Illustrations came from 1175, yet it remains possible to grasp some Later Zhou designs from the prints. This is partly because the official recognition and support in the early Song had paved the way for the wide circulation of the Illustrations. Its texts were quoted throughout various other publications, and the illustrations were either reprinted in other books or copied in paintings. For example, at the beginning of the twelfth century, a jue in the shape of a goblet with a bird stem was depicted in paintings conducted by a court artist. In the mid-twelfth century, a scholar named Yang Jia (ca. 1110–1184) had written a book to facilitate the study of ancient classics and texts. Yang has quoted texts from the Illustrations to help visualise the ritual vessels, and local officials made sure to add illustrations before publishing the book. The illustrations of the zhi cup, one of the “Five jue” cups, are almost identical to that in the Illustrations, loyally replicating the three cloud patterns on the body and the seemingly malfunctioning handle (Figure 3). These sources aid in the identification of the unchanged features and reconstructing the mid-tenth century design. A contemporary photocopied reprint of the 1175 edition is an essential source for my research. While I chose to rely on information from this copy, I am aware that it could be dangerous to assume that the present document remains the same as the original manuscript. However, the Illustrations still provide us with a rare chance to peek into the design of the jue and some other ritual vessels before the revolutionary reintroduction of antiquarian designs.


11 There are many examples of Tang influences on tenth-century rituals and I will discuss one later in this article.


ANCIENT OR UP-TO-DATE? NIE CHONGYI’S DESIGN OF FIVE DRINKING CUPS FOR THE COURT IN THE 950’S

1: The Design of the jue

The entry of the jue in the Illustrations stands out from the other entries of the four cups in the “Five jue” category. First, the elaborated explanation of the jue has been singled out from the section introducing most ritual cups. This section is on ritual vessels for sacrifices to nature spirits. While the jue has been included in this section, its entry is so short that it requires readers to look for the entry of “yu (jade) jue” for further details. “Yu jue” is almost identical to the jue but made of jade. Moreover, its entry appears much later when Nie introduces vessels used to worship imperial ancestors.14

Second, Nie redesigned the jue and the jade jue together with the other forty-one ritual vessels used at court sacrifices between 956 and 957, a stand-alone project took place before the official start of the compilation project of the Illustrations.15

At this preliminary stage, Nie was most likely still trying to convince other court ritualists about his fundamental design principle regarding the revival of ancient traditional designs. Hence, the text that explains his design of the jue and the jade jue is carefully articulated yet assertive.

Nie’s design of the jue and the jade jue synthesises multiple layers of design from the past—especially the remote past. Nie begins the entry on the jade jue with quotes from the Classics of Rites, an orthodox text meant for rituals that could be dated back at least to the early imperial era. Nie then cites Zheng Xuan (ca. 127–220), an authoritative ritualist from that time, for his description of the function and size of the jade jue.16 Thereafter, two illustrated ritual manuals from later periods, roughly between the second and fifth century, are cited, indicating that the jue should have a tail, two wings, a square foot, red lacquer on the interior surface, and red cloud patterns on the exterior.17 After that, these fragmented instructions are bundled up by a description of an example: “Now I can see a bird carved out of wood among the sacrificial vessels. Under [the bird’s] belly, iron is used to make the attached claws. It stands on a square board.”18 The jue cups observed by Nie were likely to be those used at court. After introducing the examples in use, Nie comments on how they “have also missed it [the correct form of jue],” considering the piece’s imperfect manifestations of the orthodox ritual manuals from the remote past and revealing his disapproval of the contemporary design and the latest ritual manuals. To correct mistakes from the medieval era, Nie quotes another early-imperial source, arguing that the jue should have a rounded mouth and a rounded foot. Additionally, Nie returns to the sources he first quoted in the entry to justify his decision to add surface patterns to the body of the jue.19 Unfortunately, the sources Nie relied on are too laconic and fragmented to generate a revolutionary change to the design of the jue.

The illustrations attached to the jue entries suggest Nie’s change, which was based on the ancient references, are moderate (Figure 1). The illustrations display cups with bird-shaped décor and clear traces of claws, like the examples Nie supposedly condemned. Cloud patterns on the exterior create no direct conflict with the early ritual manuals and they remain clear in the illustrations. The most significant and apparent change Nie applied is replacing a square board at the bottom with a rounded ring foot. However minor Nie’s changes are, Nie used these changes to advocate a return to the ancient form of the jue described in ritual manuals from the remote past.

Aside for the illustrations, a ceramic vessel excavated from the tomb of Empress Ai (d. 675) of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) also confirms the inheritance of some features of Tang jue cups, though Nie neglects the Tang sources in his writing. Hsieh Ming-liang, an art historian, was the first to notice that this excavated vessel has striking similarities with Nie’s design in the Illustrations, including red pigment on the interior wall of the cup and a bird-shaped stand with its beak and eyes vividly incised (Figure 4).20 Nevertheless, the foot of the vessel, as an unclear image from the brief archaeological report displays, looks nothing like a ring, but more-so two independent poles.21 Hence, Tang design of the jue could be similar to the one used in the 950s.

Nie’s criticism toward the extant design of ritual vessels, which may follow the Tang design, matched with a court project to rebuild court ritual sites and reproduce ritual paraphernalia in the 950s. Prior to the 950s, imperial ritual sites in Luoyang, whose last recorded large-scale maintenance was conducted by the court of the Tang Dynasty in 846, were reused by the rulers of the post-Tang era.22 The reuse of Tang ritual sites might have generated a sense of lineal succession from the once powerful Tang Dynasty to the following states.

14 Nie, Illustrations, Vol. 2, 12.1a, 4b–5b, and 14.5b.
16 For the dates of Zheng Xuan, see Qiao Hui, Lidai sanli tu wenxian kaosuo [Literature survey on illustrations to the three rites classics from different dynasties] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020), 23–25.
18 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
19 Nie, Illustrations, Vol. 2, 14.5b.
and supported the rulers’ claim for legitimate dominance over the territory which once belonged to Tang. However, rulers of Later Zhou (951–960) decided to vacate these sites and built new ritual sites in the new capital, Kaifeng.  

In 958, Nie argued against some ritualists’ concern that the new imperial ancestral temple was too small for a grand sacrifice. This debate regarding the scale of the ancestral temple seems to suggest new ritual sites were not satisfactory enough for certain ritualists, while Nie was ready to compromise and cooperate with his colleagues and rulers who initiated the construction project.

Furthermore, Nie opposed his senior colleague’s plan to follow the Tang design of sacrificial jades. In 953, court ritualists had to downsize the Tang design because of a shortage of jade at court. In 956, a new set of jades was about to be produced, with supposedly enough raw material available. Hence, Yin Zhuo (891–971), who happened to be Nie’s director, proposed the return to Tang guidelines, while Nie was busy coming up with a new design by citing the Classics of Rites and other ritual texts from the early imperial era, leaving a good impression on many other senior ritualists. Nie’s proposal was approved by the ruler.

Nie’s role in the reconstruction of ritual sites and reproduction of ritual implements of the 950s was crucial to his design of the jue, as well as other items in the Illustrations. Jeffrey Moser argues in his dissertation that Nie intentionally emphasized his agency by interpreting previous ritual texts and designs to make room for conclusive opinions from the imperial authority.

However, Nie’s design of ritual paraphernalia was an outcome of imperial intervention since the early 950s, rather than a cause or a proposal for it. As discussed above, the court had started moving away from Tang ritual legacies by building new rituals sites. In 956, Nie’s proposal to abandon Tang design of sacrificial jades was acknowledged by Later Zhou ritualists as well as the ruler. Thereafter, Nie gained the appointment for himself to examine the other forty-three ritual vessels, including the jue.

Thus, it was probably a Later Zhou court’s expectation, if not a requirement, for Nie to produce a convincing design of ritual vessels which was different from those prominent in the recent past. Nie’s knowledge in early ritual manuals and his capability to utilize his knowledge to build and design Later Zhou ritual implements gave Nie the opportunity to redesign the jue, the jade jue, and the other forty-one ritual vessels between 956 and 957. In Nie’s writing about his design of the jue, there is an explicit emphasis on early sources and pronounced disagreement about the designs produced after the early imperial era. This should be considered an attempt to match his design of the jue with Later Zhou’s ongoing project to distinguish their rituals from their contemporary counterparts. Nevertheless, the actual design of the jue revealed by the illustrations suggest the change is modest. This could be the result of a laconic description of the jue from early texts. However, such change could also be related to the strong legacy of the Tang design in the tenth century, which is clear in Nie’s design of the other four cups of the “Five jue” category.

2: The Shape of the Other Four Cups of the “Five jue” Category—Gu, Zhi, Jue², and San

Unlike the design of the jue, Nie’s design of the other four cups from the “Five jue” category—gu, zhi, jue² (a homophone written differently in Chinese from jue), and san—is heavily influenced by the Tang design. In the entries dedicated to these four cups, which follow the short entry of the jue, Nie quotes some Tang ritual texts as a justification for his designs of these cups and models his design after some cups used at the Tang court.

In this section, I focus on the shape of these four cups, because the shape has been elaborately discussed in ritual texts, including the Illustrations and the ones quoted in the Illustrations. By focusing on the shape of these four cups and analysing the origins of the shape, I want to demonstrate the contradictions coming up between Tang shapes and ancient ritual guidelines Nie advocated in the design of the jue. Furthermore, I suggest the application of the “Five jue” cups at court feasts required some incorporation of Tang features into Nie’s design.

The entry text of these four cups groups them together by citing the same sources, making numerous cross-references, providing measurements of the cups in a unanimous order, and explicitly classifying these four cups in the “shang (drinking cups)” category rather than the “jue” category. First, three sources are cited throughout these four entries. The text by the early-imperial ritualist Zheng Xuan cited in the entry of the jade jue has been mentioned to provide information on the capacity of cups. Nevertheless, Nie abandons his critical attitude to the previous designs in the jue entry and cites “old illustrations” instead, which refers to six sets of illustrated ritual manuals produced between the early imperial times and the Tang Dynasty, to provide references on the outlook regarding these four cups. Meanwhile, Nie quotes a Tang source, which is absent from the entry of the jade jue. Secondly, cross-referencing can be found. In the jue² entry, Nie says “its design follows [that of] san cup.” In the san entry, Nie says the san cup “is similar to gu cup.” But these cross-references make

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24 Wang, Wudai huiyao, 3.44–45.

25 Wang, Wudai huiyao, 3.51–52. See also Louis, Design by the Book, 42–44.


27 Homophones and polyphonic characters are common in Chinese language. “jue” is a polyphonic character usually pronounced as “jiào”, but it is pronounced as “jue” when referring to a cup. There is another pair of homophones in this article, which pronounces as “zhī”. To differentiate the homophones, I add a superscript “2” after the word that appears later. Hence, “jue” refers to the first cup in the “Five jue” category and the main focus of this article, while “jue²” is the forth one in the “Five jue” category. “Zhi” refers to the third cup in the category, and “zhi” is the other type of cup.

28 Dou Yan, preface of Nie, Illustrations, Vol. 1, 1a–1b.
no mention to the jue or the jade jue. Thirdly, Nie measures the cups and provides measurements in the following order: diameter of the mouth, depth, and diameter of the bottom of the four cups. This unanimous order seems to indicate that the shape of the four cups is identical. As such, in the san entry, Nie paraphrases the Tang source, stating that these four non-
jue cups (gu, zhi, jue, and san) should have been categorised as “shang”. This proposal is repeated in the entry of gong—another ritual cup—later in the text.29 Nie’s pronounced recategorization has reinforced a quote in the zhi entry, which states that “all shang cups shape the same” (Figure 2).30 The sources cited by Nie in these four entries seem to indicate that these cups have always been identified alongside each other in early texts like Zheng Xuan’s work and Tang ritual texts. Furthermore, the measurements and discussion about the appearance of the “shang” cups consolidate Nie’s proposed categorisation. These efforts in re-categorisation had probably convinced Song illustrators to picture the four cups in similar shapes.

Nevertheless, the measurements provided by Nie, the capacity quoted from Zheng Xuan’s work, and the illustrations of these four entries create two contradictions, which suggest Nie had modeled his cups not only on a design from ritual manuals as he insisted in the entries of jue cups but also the actual ones used at the Later Zhou court. On the one hand, the existing capacities of these cups estimated based on the measurements provided by Nie do not match the totals mentioned by Zheng Xian or Nie’s quotations. For instance, san is about one-half larger than jue based on Nie’s measurements, but Zheng Xuan suggests a much more moderate increase in size.11 The measurements provided by Nie seem to be empirical data since Nie states in the entry of gu that the measurements of the four cups are “all counted based on a millet ruler [Nie’s special ruler].”12 Besides this statement, there are no other references to the source of Nie’s measurements. Thus, Nie might have prioritised the cups in use over the design proposed by previous ritual texts.

On the other hand, the width-depth ratio of these four cups based on the measurements provided by Nie does not balance with the cups in the illustrations. Both zhi and san should look squat with their mouth slightly wider than their height, like in Figure 5. The slimmest cup among the four happens to be the first cup among the four—gu. According to Nie’s text, its width-depth ratio is around 1:1.125, while its illustration shows a ratio of around 1:1.25.33 In other words, the illustration of gu is not entirely wrong. Thus, this contradiction may have two causes. One is that the illustrators wanted to follow Nie’s statement that the four “shang” cups have the same shape, and the other one is that the illustrators did not read Nie’s text carefully but reproduced the established illustrations.

The slim shape of gu and the cups in the illustrations could be traced back to, according to Yan Buke, the pre-imperial era. Yan has noticed that many of the drinking cups incised on some pre-imperial objects look like horns or tall cylindrical cups.34 While the design of the “Five jue” might have changed slightly, the Tang cup from the tomb of Empress Ai still has a slim body.35 Although none of the “old illustrations” Nie referred to have survived, archaeological discoveries suggest that slim ritual cups did exist before Nie. These “old illustrations” and some existing slim cups might be the source of the design of gu and the representations of the slim cups in Nie’s Illustrations.

In contrast to the slim shapes, the design of squat cups is not rooted in ritual manuals and the early design of the ritual cups. The squat zhi and san cups designed by Nie are like some drinking cups used at the Tang and, later, Song courts. Four gilt-silver cups unearthed from a Tang hoard at present-day Hejia, part of the ancient Tang capital Chang’an, have a ring foot, handle, and wide rim. One of these cups depicts eight foreign musicians surrounded by garden scenes common in China (Figure 6). Its ring handle is topped with a triangular plaquette known as thumb rest, which was common among Sogdian cups.36 The diameter of the mouth of this cup surpasses its depth, like zhi and san in the Illustrations. The other three cups from the same hoard have different surface décors and body shapes, but they all appear squat. According to Qi Dongfang, a contemporary scholar of material culture along the Silk Road, these cups were buried in 783, and many scholars have agreed that these objects were typical of the eighth-century Tang court.37 However, these cups display originality and creativity by combining different cultural motifs and patterns with little intention to generate replicable standards that allow ritual paraphernalia to be produced in multiplicity. The court fashion resembled by these cups might have little to do with Tang’s official design of the “Five jue.”

By the twelfth century, the Sogdian thumb rest and squat body shape did not disappear. Instead, these two features formed a cup that survived to the present in great quantity. This type of cup was referred to as “zhi” (a homophone written

29 Nie, Illustrations, Vol. 2, 12.4b-5b.
30 Nie, Illustrations, Vol. 2, 12.5a.
31 Nie, Illustrations, Vol. 2, 12.5a.
32 Nie, Illustrations, Vol. 2, 12.4b.
33 Nie, Illustrations, Vol. 2, 12.4b.
differently in Chinese from *zhī* or "Qu (bent) *zhī*." It usually has a very shallow body, a big flat bottom, no ring foot, limited surface decorations, and, more importantly, a handle with a flat plaquette like the Sogdian thumb rest (Figure 7). Ts’ai Mei-ên, a researcher at the National Palace Museum, points out that this type of cup was one of the vessels manufactured under official monitor with standardized models at different kilns. In 1187, Song officials proposed to replace "jue" with *zhī* at the court feasts that celebrated the winter solstice and the new year. The surviving examples of shallow cups with Sogdian thumb rest suggest some elements popular among luxurious cups used in court life in Tang times had survived in the post-Tang era and, eventually, developed into a new form of ritualised objects used at the Song court.

Incorporating fashionable design into the design of ritual cups sounds implausible, yet Nie had adapted the squat shapes without criticism. In the *gu* entry, Nie states that he uses a ruler made especially for the Illustrations to measure the cups, which indicates Nie was aware of the exact appearance and the popularity of the cups he modelled on. In the *jue* entry and many other entries of the Illustrations, Nie stresses the importance of returning to early ritual manuals and criticising the design of ritual vessels, like *jue*, in the tenth century. However, the four non-*jue* cups of the "Five *jue*" category adapt the shape popularised since Tang.

Nie attempts to differentiate these four cups from the *jue* and other ritual vessels, which seems to be his justification for his problematic design of the four cups. In the entries of these four cups, Nie uses a Tang source to decipher the meaning of the names of the four cups, highlighting the moral problem of intoxication and its connection to the four cups. According to this Tang source, "gu" (the name of the smallest cup among the four) means drinking "little" with etiquette, while "san" (the name of the largest one) means "mockery" of over-drinking. This way of explanation should have been humiliating to some officials, who were required to use *san* cups at certain court sacrifices. However, these explanations serve as moral judgments to drinking behaviours when one has the freedom to choose his drinking cup. Hence, an implicit assumption behind Nie’s interpretation of the Tang source and his re-categorisation of the cups could be that the four non-*jue* cups could be used on occasions where rigid ritual guidelines were absent.

These occasions could be court feasts, whose ritual guidelines were lifted in Tang. Initially, court feasts were considered part of court rituals, and the "Five *jue*" cups were implemented. Ritual Code of the Kaiyuan reign of the Great Tang, a critical Tang official ritual manual since 732, has only a few court feasts listed and regulated. For example, this ritual manual instructs an official to request a *jue* cup or a *zhī* cup of liquid from the Tang emperor to make a toast at court feasts that celebrate the winter solstice and the new year. This manual also indicates that these feasts are important diplomatic occasions when representatives from different regions of the empire and foreign envoys attended. As mentioned earlier, Song officials changed this practice in 1187, replacing the "*jue*" cups with *zhī* cups. In the meantime, other court feasts, like feasts to celebrate the ruler’s birthday, have been neglected by the Tang ritual manual. However, the "Five *jue*" cups might have been still used at these feasts. Yue Ke (1183–1243), a low-ranking court official, describes a *jue* cup, with which he drank at a feast that celebrated the Song emperor’s birthday in 1207, in his private memoir: "The *jue* is [made of] silver and [gets] thick at its rim. [But] because it only has one ear, [it is] pretty difficult to drink [from]." Yue’s description mentions neither bird décor nor the antiquarian three-legged shape. Instead, the cup with a single handle is likely to be a *zhī* cup. But Yue Ke had miscategorised the cups as "*jue*", believing the birthday party was one of the occasions where ritual cups like the "Five *jue*" and ritual guidelines should be implemented.

By using some popular shapes that originated from the Tang court, Nie sustained a visual connection between his design and the prominent Tang design. This connection was crucial in materialising imperial authority in a time of turbulence. While the Tang Empire had collapsed for more than fifty years when Nie worked on the design of these four cups, Tang ritual standards and the design of ritual objects still facilitated the numerous regional powers to regulate and perform their court rituals, as well as communicate efficiently via gifted ritual objects. For example:


42 Zheng Xuan, and Jia Gongyan (fl. 650s), ed., Zhou li zhuzhu [Annotated Rite of Zhou], ed. by Li Xueqin (Beijing: Beijing Daxue chubanshe, 1999), 464–70.

43 Xiao Song, ed., *Da Tang Kaiyuan li [Ritual Code of the Kaiyuan Reign of the Great Tang]* (732; Gong shan tang, 1886), 95.1a–98.6b. Citation refers to the Zhonghua shuju edition.

In the sixth month of the third year (of the Tongguang reign, 925), the Ritual Academy of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices reports: “It is about to perform the ceremony that confers Qian Liu as king of the Wuyue Kingdom. According to ritual manuals, we should use bamboo slips [to deliver the appointment].” The emperor orders, “It’s better to ask the bureaus to make jade slips to match with [Qian’s] great merit.”

This is a Later Tang (923–936), Later Zhou’s predecessor, record of a discussion on designing and making ritual slips to confer the king of the Wuyue Kingdom (907–978)—an independent state to the southeast of Later Tang. In both the Tang and Song, jade or marble slips were reserved for emperors and empresses, while bamboo was a more common material for ritual. The Qian family had received one or two sets of bamboo slips from Central Plains states for the conferment ceremony, though it is unclear when and who had used them. By 925, Qian Liu had been ruling Wuyue de facto for almost two decades. The jade slips could be a sign of respect and help to consolidate Qian’s political dominance in Wuyue. He Jianming, a contemporary historian, spots that Wuyue’s close relation with Later Tang was a geopolitical strategy to contain its enemy—the Wu state (907–937). For Later Tang, an ally was probably valuable in 925 as it was preparing for a big war against another state. Hence, the jade slips could be Later Tang’s bribery of Wuyue, an effort to sustain a strategic peace. Without the spread of Tang regulations and symbolisms of the different materials of ritual slips, the recorded discussion on materials of the conferment slips would be meaningless.

Meanwhile, this event also indicates that minor changes to ritual objects were politically significant to the tenth-century officials and rulers. Since Nie’s designs were meant to be implemented, Nie needed to consider which occasions his vessels would be used and who would use his ships. Had the “Five jue” cups been used at court feasts, Nie should have been cautious about changing the design too dramatically to deteriorate the court’s hospitality and authority to guests invited to a feast.

Although I have suggested that the Tang cups with Sogdian handles impacted the four drinking cups measured by Nie, it is hard to prove that these surviving samples were the prototypes of the four drinking cups. Instead, the popularity of these cups in Tang court and their similarities with some Song cups are signs that Nie might have incorporated the design of some common types of cups that have been widely accepted and used at court feasts in the tenth century. This decision to reuse some up-to-date designs from the Tang creates apparent conflicts with the ritual manuals Nie appreciated in the entry of jue. Nevertheless, Nie neglects the problem raised by modelling his design on different sources in these entries by shifting the focus of his description of the cups from his design to over-drinking and the usage of these cups at feasts unregulated by ritual manuals since the Tang. The unsolved contradictions could be careless mistakes made by Nie, illustrators, or other officials involved in the compilation and printing project of the Illustrations. However, the decision to measure some squat cups at the Later Zhou court for the design of the four non-jue cups was a meaningful decision, which has been explained implicitly by Nie’s suggestion to separate the four cups from the “Five jue” category. Thus, the shape of these four non-jue cups reveals a calculated and practical design to make the objects suitable for an imperial commission in a time when numerous states competed under the waning Tang legacy for a new dominating authority.

3: Conclusion

Catherine Bell, a scholar of rituals, has argued that ritualisation is a process of strategically separating certain activities from daily routines. Similarly, Nie’s designs of the jue and other drinking cups could be, according to the demonstrations above, a process for the ritualisation of the drinking cups. In Nie’s process of ritualising the ritual implements, he had carefully selected ritual manuals and previous models for different ritual vessels.

Nie expressed his appreciation and heavy dependence on early ritual manuals in his design of the jue. However, his design displayed no significant difference from the previous models, namely the Tang model and the one in use. The Later Zhou rulers went in pursuit of a departure from ritual practices

49 Catherine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, 2nd ed., foreword by Diane Jonte-Pace (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7–8, 67, and 74.
of their recent past, especially Tang. As mentioned in the first section, Later Zhou rulers had moved their ritual centre from the Tang capital to their new capital. Meanwhile, although Nie’s writing on ritual paraphernalia indicated a set of it was available at Kaifeng, the court still undertook a systematic redesign and reproduction of ritual paraphernalia, which led to the production of the *Illustrations*. Hence, Nie utilised early ritual texts to justify his changes in the design of the *jue*, distancing his design from the routine of tenth-century rituals practised in the post-Tang world. In the entries of *jue* and jade *jue*, Nie’s criticism of the design of *jue* in his recent past, including Tang, was an excuse for him and the Later Zhou court to return to the ancient standard.

While the Later Zhou court and Nie attempted to advocate a new design of ritual objects like the *jue*, the Tang legacy was still prominent throughout the tenth century. The need to use the “Five *jue*” cups at court feasts, at which guests outside the court attended, might be a reason for urging Nie to incorporate the shapes of cups familiar to tenth-century “daily routines” into his design of the four non-*jue* cups. Though the shapes Nie adopted have shown some inconsistencies with the ritual manuals cited in the *Illustrations*, Nie neglects the contradictions by re-categorising the four cups into a new group and justifies the big difference between his design of *jue* and the four cups by distancing the cups into two types.

The different sources Nie used to justify his design of the “Five *jue*” cups suggest that it is essential to place the *Illustrations* in the mid-tenth century, or rather its historical background, to comprehend some contradictions or inconsistencies in Nie’s design. The historical background includes the Later Zhou court’s ambition to establish a new and authoritative paradigm of design to replace the Tang and contemporary design, as well as Nie’s career and the practical need to apply these drinking cups at court feasts. Though this article only focuses on the “*jue*” cups, I hope my strong emphasis on the historical background of the *Illustrations* could help future studies on the work, as well as highlight the value of this text to reflections on the medieval design of ritual cups.

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Figure 1. Illustrations of jue in the Illustrations. Adapted from Nie, Illustrations, Vol.2, 12.4b.
Figure 2. Illustrations of gu, zhi, jue2, and san in the Illustrations. Adapted from Nie, Illustrations, Vol.2, 12.4b-5a.
Figure 3. Illustration of zhi in Investigation of the Six Classics. Adapted from Yang, Liu jing tu kao, Zhouli.21b. Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University (990079180350203941).
Figure 4. *Bird-shaped Pottery Jue*, ca. 687, Tang. Painted pottery; height: 7.5 cm; diameter of mouth: 4.5. From the tomb of Empress Ai of Tang in Gongling, Yanshi, Henan Province. Adapted from Guo, “Tang Gongling Ai Huanghou mu buiten chutu wenwu,” 14.

Figure 5. Illustrations of *gu* and *zhi* in the *Illustrations*. Edited by the author. Adapted from Nie, *Illustrations*, Vol.2, j. 12, pp. 4b–5a.
Figure 6. *Gilt Silver Cup with Handle and Musician Patterns*, 8th century, Tang. Gilt Silver; height: 6.7 cm; diameter of the mouth: 6.9–7.4 cm; diameter of foot: 4.4 cm; weight: 285 g. From the hoard at Hejiacun, Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. The Shaanxi history Museum, Xi’an, No. 71:99. Adapted from Qi, *Hua wu Datang chun*, p. 184.

Figure 7. *Single Handled Cup*, 12th–13th century, Song or Jin. Ceramic; height: 4.2 cm; diameter of the mouth: 16.9 cm; diameter of foot: 10.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Gu-ci-01662B-N000000000.
Sino-Filipino Artistic Collaboration: Agency Via Ivory Sculpture Production in Seventeenth-Century Colonial Manila

Dani Putney

Introduction

The Hispano-Philippine style of ivory sculpture production in colonial Manila is almost synonymous with the growth of Spain's global empire from the sixteenth century onward. Crucified Christ (Figure 1) epitomizes this distinct, then-popular sculptural style: a porcelain-like face with a long nose, almond eyes, arched eyebrows, distinguished eyelids, and flowing hair along the side of the figure's face. These sculptures, which exist today with “very few archival references to the[ir] manufacture . . . [and] no surviving contracts or artist names and no signed works from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries,” have been studied by historians and art critics alike in terms of Latin American consumer demand, marketability, Catholic devotion and conversion, and “Chineseness,” among other veins of inquiry. Common across these investigations is discussion of the significance of Chinese immigrants—called Sangleys (or “those who come to trade”) within the Spanish colony—who have been consistently identified as the creators of these sculptures. Up to this point, art-historical scholarship has not meaningfully interrogated this designation.

While crediting the Sangleys with the production of Hispano-Philippine sculptures is understandable considering art historians’ definition of the style and the few surviving archival documents that specifically mention Chinese immigrants, there exists a complex interplay of sociocultural forces that undergird the creation of these art objects. Intercultural interactions are not a new concept in relation to forces that undergird the creation of these art objects. The growth of Spain’s global empire from the sixteenth century onward.

Of the term “intersubjective” comes from Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” Cultural Studies 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 173, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353. In his article, Quijano describes knowledge as “an intersubjective relation for the purpose of something.” I engage the notion of intersubjectivity throughout this paper to frame the Sangleys and native Filipinos’ collaboration in Manila, as well as argue for a broader, networked view of colonial art history in general.

To “unsilence” the native Filipino artisans of colonial Manila, I first turn to Homi K. Bhabha’s conception of cultural hybridity, including phenomena such as mimicry, 5 Reyes, “Flaunting It,” 692.

5 Reyes, “Flaunting It,” 692.


At least one distinct description of early Chinese sculptors’ style is noted in art-historical scholarship. The following book provides a detailed foray into, and application of, historical silencing as a critical framework: Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Also, my use of the term “intersubjective” comes from Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” Cultural Studies 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 173, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353. In his article, Quijano describes knowledge as “an intersubjective relation for the purpose of something.” I engage the notion of intersubjectivity throughout this paper to frame the Sangleys and native Filipinos’ collaboration in Manila, as well as argue for a broader, networked view of colonial art history in general.

5 Reyes, “Flaunting It,” 692.
ambivalence, and slippage, to frame my artwork analysis. After introducing Bhabha, I provide a brief historical overview of colonial Manila to better situate my argument within the specific sociocultural moment that existed in the city between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. I then analyze several pairs of sculptures depicting Catholic icons such as the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus. These analyses solidify the desirability of the hybrid Hispano-Philippine style. Finally, I complicate the historical understanding of these sculptures’ manufacture by constructing a narrative of native Filipino collaboration, one that acknowledges these individuals’ artistic prowess, interactions with the Sangleys, and role in producing high-quality, internationally recognized art objects.

Hybridity of Colonial Artwork

Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* offers a theory of hybridity to account for the “borderline work of culture” present in colonial art history. He asserts, “Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.” The scholar’s move beyond binary conceptions of cultural difference, instead dwelling within the interstitial spaces where minority perspectives are articulated and negotiated, provides an apt framework for the reconsideration of sculpture production in colonial Manila. Instead of reinscribing unquestioned (or minimally questioned) knowledge regarding the development of the Hispano-Philippine style, I locate a commonality between the Chinese immigrants and native Filipinos in their collaborative creation of ivory statuary.

A few key terms related to cultural hybridity are significant to the construction of an in-between space of artistic agency for the Sangleys and native Filipinos. The first is mimicry, a word Bhabha uses to describe representation within a colonial state. At its most basic, mimicry reflects that which is “almost the same, but not quite” (emphasis original). If, for example, the colonized group were to re-create a colonizer’s sign, whatever that might be, it would be an imperfect imitation, only partial. Mimicry, then, exists as a tool of subversion for colonized subjects in their artistic creation, what Bhabha calls a “menace” (emphasis original) that discloses “the ambivalence of colonial discourse” and “disrupts its authority.” Ambivalence also emerges as an important consideration here, as colonial discourse itself lies within a state of in-betweenness. The conflictual, tense, and unstable axis colonialism exists upon enables the development of fluid colonized identities that simultaneously work inside colonial authority and against it. This ambivalent position is productive because it encourages the transformation of colonial discourse from that of unidirectional power (colonizer unto colonized) to that of colonized “recalcitrance which... poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.” The final term, slippage, operates alongside mimicry and ambivalence to help buttress Bhabha’s theoretical framework of cultural hybridity. Slippage is, most simply, the excess or difference that appears in an act of mimicry within an ambivalent colonial state. The inappropriate, inconsistent elements of a colonized subject’s imitation of the colonizer’s culture, whether these aspects reflect native symbols and icons or something else entirely, constitute what Bhabha deems slippage. A clear example of mimicry, ambivalence, and slippage working in tandem to promote the subversive potential of colonized subjects appears in Bhabha’s “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817,” in which he considers the English Bible and the accompanying imperialist missions conducted using the language, endeavors that were co-opted by natives to create forms of “hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialismand authority.”

Considering mimicry and slippage as tools of the colonized and ambivalence as the larger state colonized subjects inhabit, I trace the agency of sculptors within colonial Manila by analyzing Hispano-Philippine statuary’s hybridized features and by comparing sculptures of the Hispano-Philippine style with contemporaneous art objects produced in China. My initial analysis of these sculptures does not interrogate the credit traditionally given to the Sangleys for their production. However, establishing a sense of agency via hybridity regardless of creator is necessary to position native Filipinos as one part of an intersubjective relationship of artistic innovation, as mimicry and slippage were tools available to both groups in their representations of Catholic iconography. The development of an inimitable style, both aligned with and resistant to imperial authority, is key to the agentic positions of colonized subjects such as the Sangleys and native Filipinos. In the following section, I historicize colonial Manila and provide a sociocultural lens through which to view the artisans’ roles as artistic innovators.

Colonial Manila: A Brief History

Due to Spanish colonization in the early 1570s, Manila was transformed into the colony’s preeminent political, religious, multiracial trading hub, and one of the wealthiest

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11 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 10.

12 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 3.


14 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122.

15 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 126.

16 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122–23.

17 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 123.

18 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122.

19 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122–23.

20 Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” 154.
and greatest entrepôts in Asia.” Key to this development were the Manila galleons, Spanish trading ships that “brought the commodities of Asia, the Americas, and Europe into global circulation.” Spanish-sponsored trade not only enabled Manila-made goods to be distributed worldwide; it also connected various communities that lived within and traveled to the colonial city. Considered “a contact point for the meeting of peoples, ideas, and goods,” Manila, and the larger island of Luzon, featured an influx of Muslim missionaries and Chinese traders well before Spain colonized the region. Various chiefdoms across the Philippines throughout the second millennium CE were enmeshed in trade networks in East and Southeast Asia—societies that exchanged their raw materials, such as beeswax and cotton, for finished Chinese products, most notably porcelain. This interregional trade network across Asia pre-Spanish colonization set a historical precedent for Sino-Filipino collaboration to occur during and after the development of Luzon’s colonial city. Although Manila’s newfound trading culture largely benefited the Spaniards who wielded imperial power over the territory, the native Filipino and Sangley populations played a fundamental role in the development of this milieu. Chinese immigrants lived in the Parián outside the Intramuros (the walled portion of Manila) and operated shops, markets, and taverns, in addition to offering a litany of services such as baking, tailoring, carpentry, and printing. Manileños of different backgrounds, whether Spanish or native Filipino, would frequent the Parián, relying on the Chinese immigrant community for essential services. In contrast to the Sangleys, native Filipinos generally lived along the Pasig River, which bisects Manila, and worked as market gardeners, domestic servants, and skilled craftsmen, among other roles. Both the Sangleys and native Filipinos immersed themselves in Manila’s culture, proving instrumental to the city’s growth as well as the development of the Spanish empire. A large part of the Sangley and native Filipinos’ niche in this cosmopolitan metropolis was undoubtedly artistic production, as evidenced by the surviving ivory statuary of Catholic icons found in shipwrecks and archaeological excavations both in the Philippines and around the world. In the next section, I turn to analyses of this Hispano-Philippine statuary in light of cultural hybridity and the social context of colonial Manila.

The Hybridized Hispano-Philippine Style: Marketable and Subversive

Meticulously carved Hispano-Philippine sculptures of Catholic icons such as Jesus Christ (Figure 1), the archangel Michael, and John the Baptist were produced in colonial Manila for more than 250 years and ranged in size from a few inches to more than three feet tall. The artisans who crafted these sculptures—whether Sangleys, native Filipinos, or both—incorporated a blend of European styles, Chinese motifs, and other imagery to depict Catholic figures in a distinct, irreparable manner. Considering the flurry of trading, craftsmanship, and bold fashion statements throughout cosmopolitan Manila, coupled with increased immigration to the colonial city, artisans likely felt the pressure to create marketable sculptures. These sculptures’ hybridity and subsequent appeal to different Spanish territories around the world was the linchpin to their commercial success. A pair of sculptures, one produced in China of the bodhisattva Guanyin, a (partially) enlightened Buddhist figure associated with mercy and kindness, and the other of the Virgin Mary (created in Manila), illustrates colonial artisans’ innovation in developing the hybridized Hispano-Philippine style. Guanyin Holding a Child (Figure 2) was sculpted sometime between 1580–1644, contemporaneous with the Virgin and Child statue (Figure 3), estimated to have been created within the first half of the seventeenth century. Viewed together, these sculptures depict similar curved stances, facial features (especially the arched eyebrows, rounded faces, and slight smiles), drapery along each figure’s torso, and positioning of hands underneath the children’s bodies. Notably different is the placement of the child—to the right of Guanyin’s chest, to the left of Mary’s—but both sculptures include a small toy for the infant to interact with. The Virgin and Child is also about half the size of Guanyin Holding a Child, while the former’s ivory material appears more lustrous than the latter’s.

Though the stylistic differences between the sculptures are understandable given the separate locations of manufacture, the many similarities demonstrate an intercultural linkage. Specifically, the curved stance, countenance, drapery, and hand placement represent an intentional act of mimicry and slippage à la Bhabha. The Chinese immigrants who participated in the production of Virgin Mary sculptures in Manila would have seen depictions of Guanyin similar to Guanyin Holding a Child, especially if these individuals immigrated to the city recently. Within the colonial context of Manila, the artisans, comprised in part by Sangleys, paid homage to the bodhisattva Guanyin by carving Mary with features suggestive of the Buddhist figure. The artisans menaced Mary’s representation by carving Mary with features suggestive of the Buddhist figure. The artisans menaced Mary’s representation...
by incorporating, or “slipping in,” visual elements of a different religion’s iconography. While some art historians have sought to demonstrate a shared “Chineseness” between the Hispano-Philippine Mary and figures like Guanyin, what links the depictions of these two figures is the stylistic choices informing their representation, not the ethnicity (or ethnicities) of the artisans.31

Scholars of Chinese religion have often referred to Guanyin as “the Buddhist Madonna.”32 While this designation reflects a colonial response to Chinese religious practices, it more importantly points to a connection between the two icons much earlier than Guanyin’s slippage into the Hispano-Philippine style in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.33 Christianity was first introduced to China in the seventh century, and representations of icons such as the Virgin Mary evolved within the country as centuries passed.34 By the fourteenth century, for example, Franciscan visitors to China often confused images of Mary and Guanyin (with or without children), as the two physically resembled each other and possessed “a shared register of protecting power and exemplary virtues.”35 A 1342 Yangzhou tombstone depicting Christian icons also features a hybridized Mary “dressed in Chinese clothes” and sitting in an “unmistakably” Chinese chair.36 The Franciscan visitors’ confusion and the Yangzhou tombstone reflect a religious syncretism, with depictions of Mary and Guanyin at the center.

When sculpting the Virgin and Child, Manileño artisans could choose to slip in Guanyin-like features, taking advantage of the ambivalent, destabilized colonial culture to offer a “similar, but not quite” representation of the popular Marian image that would satisfy the Spaniards’ religious goals but maintain a sense of agency in terms of portraying aspects of more familiar cultures.37 As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes about success in the art market, “To sell oneself and one’s products as art in the marketplace, one must, above all, clear a space in which one is distinguished from other producers and products.”38 Though the context is different, the notion of difference being desirable rings particularly true for colonial Manila and its glut of commercial activity. Ultimately, the city’s artisans were successful in distinguishing their sculptures from other depictions of Catholic icons: “[T]hey effectively outcompeted images from Europe that had previously functioned as instruments of conversion and devotion and as artistic models. . . . Southeast Asian ivories, for a variety of reasons, were preferred over European ones in the Spanish colonies on both sides of the Pacific.”39

The slippage of Guanyin-like elements into the Virgin and Child sculpture, while significant, only offers one side of the artisans’ mimicry of Catholic icons. Another important consideration is the artisans’ copying of European representations of Christian figures, as well as how these stylistic elements interact with what Bhabha calls the “excess” components of Hispano-Philippine sculptures. While there exists uncertainty regarding which European models the Manila artisans used for their statuary, several art historians agree that Flemish sculptures bear the most resemblance to those produced in the Philippines.40 The Christ Child (Figure 4) exemplifies the Flemish style: wavy hair neatly positioned along the figure’s head, arched eyebrows, almond-shaped eyes, and a contrapposto-like stance. While this sculpture is made of walnut, not ivory, the similarities among the Christ Child, Crucified Jesus (Figure 1), and the Virgin and Child (Figure 3), in particular their hair, facial features, and stances, indicate a shared cultural origin.

By pairing a Hispano-Philippine sculpture of Baby Jesus with a reclining Buddha created in China, the interplay of copying and slippage becomes more apparent. The Infant Jesus Asleep (Figure 5) was sculpted in Manila in the second half of the seventeenth century, while Qiao Bin’s Par nirvāṇa (death and transcendence of the Buddha) and attendant arhats (Figure 6), created in China, precedes it by about a century and a half. Though the two figures exist in different religious systems, their similar depictions point to a syncretism like that of the Virgin and Child and Guanyin Holding a Child, especially considering the history of Christianity and its development throughout China. Immediately noticeable when viewing the two figures together is their shared pose: Each figure’s right hand relaxedly sits against the cheek. Upon closer inspection, however, another similarity becomes apparent. If the Baby Jesus figure were rotated ninety degrees to the left, it would match the position of the reclining Buddha, with the left leg atop the right. Each figure’s left arm would also rest upon the raised left leg in the same manner: curved and relaxed like the right hand on the cheek. To complete the comparison, both Baby Jesus and the reclining Buddha display a calm countenance, with eyes and mouth similarly set.

The shared pose between The Infant Jesus Asleep and Par nirvāṇa (death and transcendence of the Buddha) and attendant arhats represents the artisans’ slippage, who paid homage to Buddha by incorporating visual elements of the

31 See Porras, “Locating Hispano-Philippine Ivories,” 267–72, for an overview of the debate surrounding Hispano-Philippine statuary’s supposedly ethnically Chinese features.


37 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 122.


Buddhist figure into their sculpture of Baby Jesus. The artisans intentionally alluded to the likeness of the reclining Buddha, a figure on his deathbed, in their (partial) representation of Baby Jesus, a child beginning his life. This reversal, from death to life, further reflects the menacing—or the “mockery,” as Bhabha has also described it—of the sculptors’ choice to slip in certain details. This preservation of visual culture within the Spaniards’ religious iconography in colonial Manila exemplifies the artisans’ resistance, however subtle, to total imperial domination. The decision to depict Baby Jesus in the manner of a reclining Buddha, a figure Chinese immigrants would have seen before, establishes a sense of agency among the sculptors.

The artisans’ agency emerges more clearly upon considering the Flemish motifs they incorporated into The Infant Jesus Asleep. Comparing this Baby Jesus to the Flemish model represented in the Christ Child, the resemblance is striking. Both figures feature a wavy hairstyle, flowing almost flush against the head and curling outward around the ears; arched eyebrows and similar mouth and nose shapes; and a noticeable sheen, despite the Christ Child being made of walnut. The hybridized Baby Jesus figure, reflecting both a Flemish style in his hair, countenance, and luster and a Chinese style in the positioning of his hands and legs, as well as in the calmness across his face, arises as a sum greater than its constituent parts. The ambivalence of the colonial site of Manila enabled the artisans to mock the hegemonic religious culture by creating an inimitable style ironically desired by the colonizers themselves. The Infant Jesus Asleep’s marks of slippage are effective precisely because they interact with the expected Flemish features included on the sculpture. The excess of Chinese visual motifs transforms the statue into a marketable piece of Manila for Spaniards to distribute around the world.

But what about the native Filipinos? Up to this point, I have discussed the artisans’ agency in their mimicry and slippage, at times implicating the Sangleyes in the creation of the Hispano-Philippine style. Though Chinese immigrants played an important role in the style’s success, I now turn to the native Filipino population and consider the sculptures’ cultural hybridity alongside this group’s artistic history and development.

Native Filipino and Sangley Intersubjectivity

Before Manila was established as a colonial city, native Filipinos engaged in various forms of artistic practice. Seated bulul figure holding a vessel (Figure 7) depicts an anito, or a graven image of a deity, carved in the fifteenth-century Philippines. The materiality of an anito provides a method of worshipping divata (or nature spirits); in other words, the anito acts as a bridge to the spirit world. Anitos “reside in the house . . . [to] serve as divine guardians who protect the members of the family and oversee their general welfare.”

The name bulul given to Figure 7 also indicates that the carver (or group of carvers) resided in northern Luzon, as this idol is associated with the Ifugao people and province, located about a few hundred kilometers north of Manila. To create a bulul figure such as Figure 7, the Ifugao use “sharp tools to carve, mold, contour, and etch forms and patterns.”

The style of Seated bulul figure holding a vessel departs from the Hispano-Philippine sculptures of Catholic icons discussed above, but the early creation of anito carvings, especially near the eventual site of colonial Manila, serves as a precedent for native Filipino sculpture-making in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Native Filipinos turned to carving to produce humanlike forms, as represented by the bulul and other anitos, within the framework of a spiritual tradition. It would be reasonable to suggest that the native Filipinos’ sculptural practices primed them for participation within Manila’s art workshops, spaces that also created human figures meaningful within a religious system (Catholicism). The creation of bulul figures in the fifteenth century in Luzon highlights a perennial artistic intent on the part of the native Filipinos, one that has been previously disregarded, whether intentionally or inadvertently, in art-historical scholarship regarding Manila’s sculpture production.

The work of an early native Filipino sculptor, Juan de los Santos from San Pablo City of Luzon, further complicates the historical narrative of Philippine artistry. Active in the first half of the seventeenth century, Santos produced a variety of religious sculptures, many of which are housed today at the San Agustin Museum, Church, and Convent in Manila. One of his most famous works of art is Retablo (Figure 9)—previously used as the central altarpiece of the San Agustin Church—which features a broken-arch pediment, uniform niches, and various intricately carved saints. The complexity and symmetry of this altarpiece, reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance, reflects an attention to detail similar to that represented in Hispano-Philippine statuary. While the

48 Anitos, Highlands of Luzon. Anito of the Igorrotes. Igorrote Drums (Figure 8) displays an anito produced at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Igorrotes (the parent ethnic group of the Ifugao people) in a style similar to Seated bulul figure holding a vessel. The continuation of this style into modernity argues against a teleological approach to native Filipino sculptural practices, as the Igorrotes were still choosing to represent their anitos more abstractly hundreds of years into the future.
49 Hernandez, “The Spanish Colonial Tradition.”
50 San Agustin Museum, Church, and Convent, “RETABLO OF JUAN DE LOS SANTOS,” Facebook, November 27, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/sanagustinmuseum/posts/retablo-of-juan-de-los-santospoly-chromed-wood-17th-centuryhis-retablo-altarpiece/1580918375298871/. This Facebook post from 2017 is one of the only available and accessible sources that discusses the work of Juan de los Santos.
individual sculptures themselves differ in form, their shared precision in polychroming, drapery, and rendering of facial features places Santos and the Manila artisans within the same constellation of sculptural innovation and achievement. Indeed, Santos was only one of many carvers who served the Catholic Church: Native Filipino artisans, almost always anonymous, would carve and gild church doors, pulpits, facades, reliefs, and, of course, altarpieces for the Spaniards.  

The sculptural traditions of native Filipinos, both before Spanish colonization (as with anitos) and after (as with retablos), call into question the designation of Hispano-Philippine statuary as solely Chinese-made. Native Filipinos have always produced intricate carvings within a spiritual or religious context—a skill set that would lend itself well to the production of sculptures depicting Catholic icons. Additionally, native Filipinos were quick to learn European artistic practices post-colonization. Geoffrey C. Gunn notes, “Indios or Tagalog [other names for Indigenous Filipinos] artists proved good students of the Spanish friars in taking up two-dimensional art, especially in the reproduction of religious icons. . . . Nevertheless, it was sculpture in which the Tagalog artists excelled.” With knowledge of native Filipino artistry during the Spanish colonial period, it seems suspect that this group of artisans would be excluded from the development of the Hispanic-Philippine style of ivory sculpture-making. This exclusion becomes more dubious when paired with the large population size of native Filipinos in Manila by 1620 (20,000), as well as with the amount of mixed-race individuals with native Filipino heritage at this time (more than 1,000).  

As agentive artisans creating anitos, altarpieces, and other types of statuary, native Filipino artisans would have had the same access to mimicry and slippage as tools to subtly subvert Spanish imperialism within the ambivalent state of Manila. I contend that the native Filipinos collaborated with their Sangley counterparts to produce Hispano-Philippine sculptures, whether in the Parián or another area of Manila, as part of an intersubjective artistic relationship.  

Returning to Crucified Christ (Figure 1), this statue offers a glimpse of the native Filipino and Sangley artisans’ intersubjectivity. This sculpture, much like the Virgin and Child (Figure 3) and The Infant Jesus Asleep (Figure 5), is a partial representation of Spanish Catholicism, depicting Christ with traces of Flemish and Chinese influence. These elements work together to constitute a mimicry, a menacing, of Spanish signification. However, there exists a third component of the sculpture that specifies a native Filipino influence. Christ’s loincloth bears resemblance to the striped cloths Filipino men would wear during the first half of the seventeenth century. As seventeenth-century Spanish rector Francisco Colín describes these breech-like garments, “[N]ative Filipinos in Manila] wore a richly colored cloth, which was generally edged with gold, about the waist and brought up between the legs, so that the legs were decently covered to the middle of the thigh.” The stripes on Christ’s loincloth, which is tucked between the figure’s legs and extends mid-thigh, coupled with the garment’s gilded edges match both Colín’s description of the item of clothing and historiographical accounts of it.  

Part of the artisans’ act of slippage, then, was including this homage to native Filipino men’s breech-like garments. The inclusion of this detail would be more reasonable coming from a native Filipino hand, as it would not benefit a Sangley artisan in terms of cultural subversion or the reclamation of one’s culture to depict Indigenous men’s fashion sensibilities on a sculpture largely intended for export to other Spanish colonies. Native Filipinos must have collaborated with Chinese immigrants to produce this sculpture and others, ultimately shepherding in a Flemish-Chinese-Philippine hybrid style of statuary. The contact zone of Manila and its intersubjectively connected artisans made it possible for such a complex hybridized style to flourish and be distributed throughout Philippine churches and Spanish territories worldwide.  

To further construct an intersubjective relationship between the native Filipino and Sangley artisans, I revisit certain documentation and narratives to interrogate commonly held historical beliefs, as well as to illuminate already-existing connections between the two groups. One of the most cited primary sources concerning Sangley artistry comes from Dominican bishop Domingo de Salazar of the sixteenth century:

Now I shall speak of the Sangleys, of whom there would be much to say. . . . What arouses my wonder most is, that when I arrived [they did not know] how to paint anything; but now they have so perfected themselves in this art that they have produced marvelous work with both the brush and the chisel, and I think that nothing more perfect could be produced than some of their [ivory] statues of the Child Jesus which I have seen. . . . The churches are being supplied with the images that these [people] make, which were greatly lacking before. And considering the ability they show in making likenesses of the sculptures that come from Spain, I think that before long we will not need the sculptures made in Flanders.  

56 Though the complexities of native Filipino religious practices are beyond the scope of this article, the Christ statue has the potential to also be read or coded as a figure represented in northern Filipino spiritual traditions. The allusions to Guanyin and Buddha in Manila sculptural practices, for example, beg the question: Which specific religious figures did native Filipino artisans consider when producing ivory statuary with the Sangleyes?
57 See Park, “Made by Migrants”; Reyes, “Flaunting It”; and Porras, “Locating Hispano-Philippine Ivories,” for three contemporary examples that use the same letter from Salazar. Also, this translated version of the quote appears in Park, 71.
Salazar’s sentiments may appear innocuous to some, but further historicizing brings attention to a few possible misconceptions. During the same period across the Pacific Ocean, Spaniards collectively referred to Asian immigrants to the New Spanish territories as chinos regardless of specific ethnicity: Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, and Indian migrants, among other groups, were part of the same demographic under Spanish imperial rule.58 However, the Spaniards were inconsistent with their designation. In one example, Asian immigrants in the Acapulco militia were referred to as “Luzon Indians of the Philippines whom [the Spaniards] vulgarly call[ed] chinos”; in this case, chino functioned pejoratively to identify native Filipino groups (such as the Tagalogs and Pampangos) and Sino-Filipino mestizos apart from other militiamen of color, such as Africans, individuals of mixed African and European descent, and those with Indian ancestry.59

In another example, the Catholic Church would vacillate between defining chinos as either indios (Indigenous peoples) and gente vil (base folk) in tribunal cases, despite their status as “heathens” under ecclesiastical rule and their theoretical immunity from faith-based proceedings.60 Spaniards’ ethnic groupings were as reliable as the men who codified and acted upon them, with no recourse to the immigrants of color who existed under such categories.

Although the Philippines and other territories of New Spain were distinct geographically and, to some extent, culturally, all areas were controlled by the same government, and ethnic terms would have likely carried over in the galleon trade and during travel throughout the New Spanish empire. However, even if Spaniards in the Philippines disregarded terms used elsewhere in New Spain, or if they created their own set of descriptors (Sangleys was specific to Manila), the inconsistent application of such language destabilizes the assumed truth of Salazar’s quote above. When he penned his letter to King Philip II in 1590, was Salazar acknowledging the Sangleys individually, or was he grouping them with the native Filipinos and Sino-Filipino mestizos who lived in Manila and frequently interacted with the Parián?61 Further, considering New Spain’s history of pseudoscientific ethnic classification, was there a political motive behind Salazar’s specification of Sangleys in his letter? Or was Salazar simply unable to differentiate among the various Asian communities that lived in Manila, particularly with the rise in mixed-race unions? Unfortunately, these questions cannot be answered with the scant documentation that exists in the historical archive of colonial Manila, with Salazar’s letter itself one of the only sources art historians can look to for “evidence” of statutory artisanship.

With this reality in mind, I propose a native Filipino and Sangleys intersubjectivity as the origin of the Hispano-Philippine style. These two groups collaborating in Manila, each with histories of artistic practice and the tools of mimicry and slippage at their disposal, could unite artistically under Spanish imperial rule to develop a style that would secure their position in an unstable, ambivalent colonial society while also enabling them to exert a sense of agency in subtly mocking Catholic religious signification in their statuary. Such collaboration, too, was not unheard of, whether on a macro scale, the pre-colonial trade network the Philippines and China participated in, or at the micro level, the Chinese copying of native Filipino and Sino-Filipino mestizo prints post-colonization.62 The issue of artistic credit lies in the complex interplay of sociocultural forces that brought native Filipino and Sangleys artisans together.

Conclusion: Chinese-Philippine Statuary and Future Inquiry

In applying Bhabha’s framework of cultural hybridity and considering the sociohistorical realities of Manila, I have demonstrated the intercultural ties between native Filipino and Sangleys artisans in the colonial city. When informed by the ambivalent state of Manila, the cosmopolitanism and trading fervor of the city, and the pressure to develop an artistic niche, the artisans’ ivory sculptures of Catholic icons, including works such as Crucified Christ (Figure 1), the Virgin and Child (Figure 3), and The Infant Jesus Asleep (Figure 5), represent a set of agentive choices in the statuary’s mimicry of Spanish signification and slippage of cultural difference. Upon initial inspection, when paired with contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous statuary such as Guanyin Holding a Child (Figure 2), Qiao Bin’s Par nirvana (death and transcendence of the Buddha) and attendant arhats (Figure 6), and the Christ Child (Figure 4), Hispano-Philippine sculptures reflect a mix of Flemish and Chinese styles. However, with knowledge of native Filipino artistic practices pre- and post-colonization, such as the creation of spiritual anitos (Figures 7 and 8) and Catholic retablos (Figure 9), as well as the depiction of Indigenous men’s breech-like garments on Crucified Christ, it becomes apparent that this style features a Flemish-Chinese-Philippine blend of visual elements. The act of mimicry extends to both Sangleys and native Filipinos as a tool of subtly subverting Spanish imperialism and establishing artistic agency within a colonial state.


63 Florina H. Capistrano-Baker, “Trophies of Trade: Collecting Nineteenth-Century Sino-Filipino Export Paintings,” Archives of Asian Art 67, no. 2 (October 2017): 237–56, https://doi.org/10.1215/00666637-4229719. This article by Capistrano-Baker points to an intersubjective painting relationship that existed between the Chinese immigrants and Filipino (both Indigenous and mixed) artisans of colonial Manila. Various prints thought to have been Philippine originals are, rather, Chinese copies of Filipino painters’ work. This dynamic, while of a different medium and within a different century (Capistrano-Baker considers nineteenth-century export paintings specifically), further solidifies a history of collaboration between the two communities, one that, if it existed to the extent it did through these prints, could reasonably exist through ivory sculpture production two centuries prior.
This intersubjective relationship between the two groups of artisans becomes clearer when interrogating commonly cited primary sources, such as Domingo de Salazar’s 1590 letter to King Philip II, and the narratives that have emerged from such documentation. The complexities of categorizing immigrants of color throughout New Spain and the inconsistencies in ethnic groupings, especially in light of the various territories’ sizable mixed-race populations, call into question the notion that the Sangleys were the sole producers of ivory statuary in Manila. With all these considerations in mind, I argue for a Sino-Filipino intersubjective relationship regarding these sculptures’ manufacture, partly to unsilence the native Filipinos who played an important role in the Hispano-Philippine style’s development but also to provide a colonially informed, intercultural lens through which to view the creation of these art objects in their historical moment.

I propose that art historians redesignate the Hispano-Philippine style as “Chinese-Philippine” due to the collaboration between the Sangleys and native Filipinos. This new description simultaneously credits both the Sangleys and native Filipinos in the sculptures’ creation and decenters the Spaniards’ role in the development of this subversive, yet marketable and desirable, style. Further, the placement of “Chinese” first pays homage to art-historical scholarship’s longstanding identification of the Sangleys as the creators of this sculptural style—only now the hyphenated term captures the broader intersubjective, intercultural reality of the sculptures’ manufacture. Along with the term “Chinese-Philippine,” I proffer the descriptor “Sino-Filipino,” which I have used throughout this paper, to characterize the intersubjective relationship between the two groups of artisans.64

In endeavoring to construct an art-historical narrative that considers the intersubjectivity between the Sangleys and native Filipinos, as well as the sociohistorical moment of the sculptures’ production, I recognize that the intercultural forces of colonial Manila extend beyond these two groups and the trade networks surrounding them.65 Due to the dearth of archival records, especially outside the colonial Spanish archive, that specify who created these sculptures, the task for art historians instead becomes one of reconsidering the sculptures’ production, I recognize that the intercultural contact responsible for enabling the manufacture of this hybridized group of art objects. Part of this larger reconsideration, too, might include investigating the Sino-Filipino mestizo population apart from native Filipinos. In this paper, I have identified Sino-Filipino mestizos in relation to the Indigenous population of Manila to complicate the history of artisanship and assert a specifically native Filipino artistic agency in the colonial city. However, future inquiry should trouble this differentiation, perhaps individually locating Sino-Filipino mestizos as distinct agents in Manila’s culture of artistic production.

Nevertheless, the native Filipino role in ivory sculpture-making has been understudied up to this point and warrants critical discussion. I have aligned a group of agential artisans with their Sangley counterparts to reframe the historical narrative of colonial Manila’s artistic practices. What emerges from the silences of this history is a set of productive mistranslations that helps construct a clearer, although imperfect, portrait of art history’s colonialist past.66

As one scholar cautions, “It is also possible that some ‘Chinese-style’ Christian ivories shipped through Manila were actually made elsewhere in Asia.”65 While Onn similarly questions solely crediting the Sangleys for the creation of ivory sculptures in Manila, the scholar also suggests that Japanese, Thai, Indian, and other groups of Asian artisans could have participated in the development of this style of statuary.

I have adapted this idea of “productive mistranslation” from Aruna D’Souza, “Sea of Poppies and the Possibilities of Mistranslation,” in Traduttore, Traditore, ed. Karen Greenwalt and Katja Rivera (Chicago: Gallery 400, 2017), 46–58. In her article, D’Souza presents the novel Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh as an example of the inherent unknowability of a colonial event. Instead, what exists is a catalog of incomplete understandings. It is these misunderstandings (or mistranslations) that make new creative forms, especially through language, possible.
Bibliography


Figure 1. *Crucified Christ*, ca. 1600–1650, polychromed ivory, 24.6 x 26.8 x 5.1 in. (62.5 x 68 x 13 cm.). Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum, Cambridge. Public domain; photograph provided by Harvard Art Museums.
Figure 2. Guanyin Holding a Child, ca. 1580–1644, ivory, height 11.4 in. (28.9 cm.). The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Public domain; photograph provided by The Walters Art Museum.
Figure 3. *Virgin and Child*, ca. 1600–1650, gilded ivory with traces of paint, height 5.5 in. (14 cm.). The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Public domain; photograph provided by The Walters Art Museum.

Figure 4. *Christ Child*, ca. 1510, polychromed walnut, 20.1 x 8.1 x 4.9 in. (51 x 20.5 x 12.5 cm.). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Public domain; photograph provided by the Rijksmuseum.
Figure 5. *The Infant Jesus Asleep*, ca. 1650–1700, gilded ivory with traces of paint, height 8.6 in. (21.7 cm.). The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Public domain; photograph provided by The Walters Art Museum.
Figure 6. Qiao Bin, *Par nirvana (death and transcendence of the Buddha) and attendant arhats*, 1503, polychromed earthenware, 14 x 17.1 x 9 in. (35.6 x 43.5 x 22.9 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public domain; photograph provided by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 7. Seated bulul figure holding a vessel, 15th century, wood, height 18.9 in. (48 cm.). Quai Branly Museum, Paris. Public domain; photograph provided by Art Resource.
Figure 8. Anitos, Highlands of Luzon. Anito of the Igorrotes. Igorrote Drums, ca. 1900–1909, photographs. Cornell University Library / Southeast Asia Visions: John M. Echols Collection, Ithaca. Public domain; photographs provided by Cornell University Library.
Figure 9. Juan de los Santos, *Retablo*, 17th century, polychromed wood. San Agustin Museum, Church, and Convent, Manila. Public domain; photograph provided by Marc Lino J. Abila.
Mary Cassatt’s portraits of her sister, Lydia: Tracing signifiers of disease and impending death

Lini Radhakrishnan

In 2020, Stephen Russell, an associate Professor of internal medicine and pediatrics, developed a course for medical students at the University of Alabama. Titled “Prescribing Art: How Observation Enhances Medicine,” the course was a collaboration between the School of Medicine and the Abroms-Engel Institute of Fine Arts. Russell employed Mary Cassatt’s Girl in the Garden (1880–82, Musée d’Orsay) (Figure 1) to explain the practical application of artistic analysis in teaching strategies for clinical observation. He asserted that Cassatt had painted a woman suffering from rheumatoid arthritis.1 The painting depicts the foregrounded figure of a young woman seated in a garden with her torso facing the viewer and her head bent intently over a piece of lace held in her hands. The muted pastel-toned gown and pale skin highlight her slightly flushed cheeks. More importantly, the pale hues frame the redness and swelling around the knuckles of her right hand. The subject’s left hand is clutched awkwardly into a fist, while the digits on the right hand are wound tightly around the needle. The traces of rheumatoid arthritis visible in the redness on the knotted, slightly misshapen knuckles and the strained digits were the primary focal points for Russell’s intended audience. However, Russell presumed that Cassatt had no medical knowledge about the condition itself and he attributed the presence of the symptoms to the artist’s heightened sense of observation.

In contrast, a letter from Cassatt’s mother written in 1885 suggests that the artist most likely had the opportunity to observe the debilitating disease at close quarters. Writing to her granddaughter, Mrs. Katherine Cassatt noted the ameliorating effect of a change in location on her rheumatism—the layman’s term for rheumatoid arthritis. She reported relief in the stiffness of her joints and a blissful absence of pain.2 When Cassatt painted her sensitive illustration of rheumatoid arthritis, she was probably caring for her mother, who was struck with the very same affliction. Given this, Cassatt’s awareness of arthritic symptoms is quite plausible. The fact that Cassatt chose to show the subject sewing implies that not only was she mindful of the symptoms, but, in all likelihood, the condition inspired the pose and the depicted activity. She picked a pursuit that showcased the effort required to perform a repetitive action with afflicted joints.

Best known for her intimate depictions of women and children in domestic spaces, Cassatt is typically relegated to the role of female observer. In this paper, I challenge this conventional reading of her work as essentializing interpretations of domesticity. In recent years, feminist scholarship has reevaluated Cassatt’s work to great effect although these studies still largely overlook the inspiration behind her mother-child subject.3 Cassatt painted the young girl somewhere between 1880 and 1882, a period that featured a recurring subject in her work—her ailing sister, Lydia. I examine the artist’s portraits of her sister, painted in the final years of Lydia’s life, and identify potent, but overlooked signifiers of disease and impending death on her face and body. Analyzing her portraits of her sister reveal deliberate interventions by the artist. Cassatt bore witness to the bodily decline and ultimate demise of her sister and parents. Taking on the care of her invalid family enabled Cassatt to develop a deeper intimacy with the vulnerable body and honed her eye to recognize corporeal traces of disease. I argue that the portraits were visualized through the educated gaze of a caregiver. I trace the manifestation of signifiers that I term the “symptomatic index” and define as symptoms of disease expressed subtly on the subject’s form. The term symptomatic index was coined to trace the distinct signifiers of disease in Cassatt’s rendering of the figure and is inspired by Charles Pierce’s semiotic theory.4 These markers on the subject’s form


2 “Since I came to town my rheumatism has improved very much, or rather my stiffness for I had no pain except when I moved – I can now get in & out of the carriage without much trouble”. See letter from Mrs. Robert S. Cassatt to Katharine, November 12, 1885, Microfilm, Roll No. C1, Frame 189, Mary Cassatt collection, 1871–1955. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, New York office.

3 Critics have consistently characterized Cassatt’s work as a mundane recording of her bourgeoise life.

An instance of this essentializing characterization is visible in American Art Historian Edgar Richardson’s description of Cassatt’s work as unimaginative and frivolous, “She offers us a circumscribed Jamesian world of well-bred ladies living lives of leisure, delighting in their dresses, their company and their well-behaved children. There is an odd contrast between the boldness of her style and the world of perpetual afternoon tea it serves to record. Did she exhaust her sense of discovery in becoming an artist at all?... For all its distinction, her art is that of a very conventional person living in the very conventional world of the nineties. As a recorder of the female side of that little circle of wealth and privilege, she will always have a place. But tea, clothes, and nursery; nursery, clothes and tea.”, “Sophisticates and Innocents Abroad,” Art News, (April 1954): 21–23.

Another instance is evident in Alfred de Lostalot’s review of the 1879 Impressionist exhibition that credited the originality in Cassatt’s work to independent teaching style although her style is completely different. Her male colleague, Edgar Degas, deeming it a success of her “master’s” independent teaching style although her style is completely different. Shackelford’s 1998 subscription to Lostalot’s biased review reveals that more than a hundred years later the prejudice against women artists persists. (Mary Cassatt: Modern Women, ed. Judith A. Barter (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with Henry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998), 116).

Griselda Pollock’s 1998 analysis offered a refreshing interpretation of Cassatt’s work as unimagination and frivolous, “She offers us a circumscribed Jamesian world of well-bred ladies living lives of leisure, delighting in their dresses, their company and their well-behaved children. There is an odd contrast between the boldness of her style and the world of perpetual afternoon tea it serves to record. Did she exhaust her sense of discovery in becoming an artist at all?... For all its distinction, her art is that of a very conventional person living in the very conventional world of the nineties. As a recorder of the female side of that little circle of wealth and privilege, she will always have a place. But tea, clothes, and nursery; nursery, clothes and tea.”, “Sophisticates and Innocents Abroad,” Art News, (April 1954): 21–23.

4 For more information on semiotic theory, see discussion on Pierce’s semiotics in Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klondk’s Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods, (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 208–212.
are perceived as an indexical sign not just of the medical condition that consumed the subject, but also of the artist’s lived experience as a caregiver that in turn influenced her visual vocabulary. In other words, the symptomatic index is evidence of the invasive presence of disease in the subject’s body as well as an indexical sign of the caregiver’s gaze. Cassatt rendered her sister’s skin to appear almost translucent, as if to reveal symptoms that have become fully visible on the surface.

Emergent signifiers of disease—the symptomatic index

In 1913 Cassatt wrote to her dear friend, Louise Havemeyer, “How lonely one can be in this world!!”, an economy of words that expressed the depth of pain accrued over the years and the immense sense of isolation that pervaded her existence after she had lost all her immediate family. A particularly devastating loss was that of her older sister, Lydia, someone Cassatt had expected to be her lifelong companion. When Cassatt took on a studio in Paris in 1875, Lydia joined her sister as a companion and a chaperone, lending respectability to the otherwise unacceptable arrangement of a single woman living alone in the city. Lydia endured excruciating physical pain and weakness for several years. By 1879, doctors diagnosed the possibility of Bright’s disease, a debilitating and deadly affliction of the kidneys that in modern medicine is termed acute or chronic nephritis. The pair developed an intimacy and a growing fondness that seems to materialize through the paint Cassatt used to delicately capture Lydia who became a frequent subject of the artist’s work.

In an 1878 painting of her sister, Lydia reading the morning paper (No. 1) (Figure 2), Cassatt portrays Lydia enveloped in a delicate flurry of pale fabric engaged in the act of reading. She places the figure diagonally across the canvas, a placement she particularly favored when rendering Lydia and herself. The ample bosom suggests a fairly healthy disposition whilst not revealing any curves and the warm blush tones on the relaxed face sculpts the delicate profile against the pale backdrop. The portrait captures a seemingly tranquil morning relatively free of the frequent pain that plagued Lydia. Her face is sheltered in the warm morning shadow while the sunlight catches parts of her neck, ear and graceful fingers that hold up the newspaper. The rosy tones reflected throughout the picture allow the image to bask in the morning glow of wellness. The delicate brushstrokes on the gown renders an appearance of sheerness as the fabric transitions smoothly into the skin around the neck and into the backdrop. Lydia’s form appears to be fading away into the warm morning rays. The armchair fashioned with a mass of curved soft brushstrokes expresses a plushness whilst emphasizing the gradual dissolution of form. Louiseine Havemeyer referenced the portraits while describing Lydia as “beautifully dressed, elegant, indolent” and endorsed Cassatt’s vision of her sister.8

On a Balcony (Figure 3) is another full-bodied representation of Lydia seated in the morning sun reading a paper. There is a comparable absence of curves on the figure suggesting a layering of fabric, as if Cassatt’s sister was bundled up for warmth. The allusion aligns with recommendations made by contemporary doctors suggesting the patient wear something warm and absorbent to prevent the skin from becoming excessively cold or moist that could lead to chills and prove fatal. Her auburn hair pulled back in a bun is rendered unusually thickly, but also with an exaggerated softness. Flesh tones are visible throughout the translucent fabric of the gown and the figure is framed by the backdrop of colorful blossoms. There is a redness on her facial skin—especially around the t-zone—that is quite noticeably enacted through Cassatt’s symptomatic index. Here, the index that expresses the symptoms and attests to the existence of disease in Lydia’s body appears as a blush-green discoloration around her eyes, at the corner of her lips, near her hairline, her sideburn area and on her elegantly rendered hands. The blue tones around her eyes lend an air of fatigue suggesting a sleepless night. Her head is nestled in the shroud-like white fabric swathed around her neck. Cassatt used the same kind of dry white brushstrokes on the fabric curving over that single blossom at the neckline and in the backdrop to create a trail of transparent leaves that emanates from the back of Lydia’s neck. These delicate strokes lend an air of fragility to the representation. All these elements—just like the main subject—appear to be fading away, while paradoxically being immortalized in her sister’s brushstrokes.

Their father, Robert Cassatt, chronicled Lydia’s suffering in the family records as “many years of ill-health and eighty-four days of deathbed agony.” In the final lines of this entry, he noted her courageous forbearance writing, “Lydia had been an invalid for years—suffering greatly at times. She bore all with the greatest fortitude and patience, scarce ever an impatient word escaping her lips.”10 In addition to the subtle signifiers of the affliction, Cassatt’s portrayal of her sister includes a stillness, a calm that conveys the qualities of resilience and patience tenderly noted down by their father three years later in Lydia’s death record.

A picture of Lydia, Lydia crocheting in the Garden at Marly (Figure 4), painted around a year later reveals an alarming loss of weight. In a letter to her son Alexander in the same year, Mrs. Cassatt described symptoms tormenting Lydia that could explain the weight loss, namely neuralgia of the stomach and

5 See letter from Mary Cassatt to Louise Havemeyer, March, [1913?], Box 1, Folder 11, Item 06, Digital Collection – Havemeyer Family Papers relating to Art Collecting, 1901–1922, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives.
7 Barter, Modern Women, 56.

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an uneasy appetite. These unrelenting symptoms persisted over the years right up until the final months of Lydia's life. Mr. Cassatt's letter two months prior to her death presented nausea as the enduring cause that prevented Lydia from retaining any nourishment. He cautioned Alexander that neither Lydia nor her mother were aware of her critical state, which implied that Cassatt and her father were burdened with that painful knowledge while having to maintain a brave face to preserve the duo's perceived ignorance. Mr. Cassatt ended an 1882 letter with the words—"be the order of nature I ought to go first and I hope I may be so..."—reflecting his heartrending hope that Lydia cheats the doctor’s prognosis, and he doesn't have to bury his child. Another letter from Mr. Cassatt just two weeks later reiterated Lydia's continued distress caused by the unyielding nausea, insomnia, and acute pain. Also chronicled is Lydia's glowing endorsement of Cassatt's excellent nursing skills, her heartbreaking acceptance of her fate as she conveyed her final wishes to her sister, and the artist's dedication to her sibling as she prioritized Lydia's care over her work.13

In *Lydia crocheting in the Garden at Marly* (Figure 4), Cassatt chose to pose Lydia in a garden engrossed in the more mechanical act of crocheting. The activity complied with contemporary medical advice that recommended adequate mental stimulation to generate an interest in life without causing mental anxiety or exhaustion in the patient.14 Though the subject is foregrounded as in the earlier images, the inclusion of the receding path and foliage evoke a sense of distance. One could perhaps visualize Lydia vanishing down this path. The symptomatic index makes a striking appearance in the sunken eye sockets and the lips that are noticeably thinner in comparison to the earlier portraits. The mouth is drawn down at the corners adding a visible lack of vitality. The boniness of her hands is evident even through the tan gloves. The way Lydia holds the material and the crochet needle implies slow and labored progress. Her hair is obscured by a transparent lace trim over her forehead emphasizing her delicate gauntness. Tracing Lydia's suffering over this extended period provides an inkling of the length of her agony and the feeling of helplessness her family must have felt in failing to ease her pain. While tending to her sister, Cassatt must have been anxiously observing the growing physical traces of decline.

The hint of distance between the subject and the viewer implied in the earlier work, *lydia crocheting in the Garden at Marly* (Figure 4) is amplified dramatically in two other representations, where Cassatt captures Lydia from behind, engrossed in her crocheting. In both paintings, Lydia is no longer foregrounded and is depicted facing away from the viewer. That physical distance between the sisters embodies Cassatt’s looming fear of losing Lydia. In *Lydia Seated in the Garden with a Dog in Her Lap* (Figure 5), a trailer figure is framed by blossoms much like *On a Balcony* (Figure 3) from the year 1878–1879. Author and curator of American Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago, Judith Barter assigned a gloomier significance to the later portrait suggesting the backdrop served as a commemorative tribute to the dying sibling.15 A similar memorializing note is perceivable in the other painting, *Lydia Seated on a Terrace Crocheting* (Figure 6), where the subject's identity is buried in wispy white fabric almost from head to toe imparting a spirit like presence. The lone figure is seated on a dark green bench which is placed at an angle that further restricts the viewer's access to the subject. Lydia appears to be moving away from the earthly realm and being recast as a memory right there on her sister's canvas.

Corelating art and medicine in Cassatt's images

Cassatt's close encounters with disease in her personal life and her frequently articulated distrust of physicians spurred her interest in medicine. A 1903 letter addressed to her friend Theodate Pope, provides an insight on Cassatt's view of the medical profession and her dissatisfaction with medical practices. She wrote, “We don't seem to progress in medical science as much as we think; how is it there are so many mistakes made? The faculty of diagnosis is after all much more exact in medical science as much as we think; how is it there are so many mistakes made? The faculty of diagnosis is after all much more exact; how is it there are so many mistakes made? The faculty of diagnosis is after all much more exact; how is it there are so many mistakes made? The faculty of diagnosis is after all much more exact...”16 Cassatt believed that diagnostic skills were an innate psychic quality scarce amongst medical professionals. Her frustration over inaccurate diagnosis was not limited to Pissarro's fate. She often spoke about the doctors being wrong about her mother's condition. One such instance recorded in her letter to Louiseine Havemeyer states that her “mother outlived all of her doctors' prognostics.”17 This deep-seated skepticism cultivated a need for agency, a need to avoid uninformed dependency on a physician's recommendations. Her consequent close


13 See Letter from Robert Cassatt to Alexander Cassatt, dated 18 September 1882, “Some new and alarming symptoms have developed in Lydia's case and she herself begins to realize her danger and has lately spoken to Mary of her probable death, and made her promise to have her buried in the country and directed her to give keepsakes to you and Gard. Poor dear! This is the first time she has spoken plainly and directly of her death... she bears her affliction with wonderful patience and resignation. She suffers fearfully not only from pain but from nausea and greatly also from want of sleep. She has intervals of comparative ease, but they grow shorter and shorter. Last night was a distressing one to her. Mame keeps up very well and Lydia says she has developed into a most excellent nurse. As far as her art is concerned her fate as she conveyed her final wishes to her sister, and the artist’s dedication to her sibling as she prioritized Lydia’s care over her work.13


17 See letter from Mary Cassatt to Louiseine Havemeyer, November 29, [1907?], Box 1, Folder 05, Item 04, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives.
reading of medical texts could also explain her inclination to recognize and render physical manifestation of symptoms. Her letters often included advice on treatment options and her suggestions were based on her study of publications on domestic medicine including that of French chemist, naturalist, and physiologist François-Vincent Raspail.

Cassatt further demonstrated her faith in Raspail’s cures when she sent a copy of his book, most likely *Annuaire de la santé* to her brother in 1885. Her accompanying letter included remedies she endorsed for treating sprains.18 Raspail’s reputation as a skilled practitioner who scorned royal diplomas, but cared about curing ailments must have appealed to Cassatt. The artist shared a comparable disdain for academic authority in her field.19 The positive sales figures of Raspail’s books suggest that Cassatt was in good company, with educated, affluent individuals as well as aristocrats placing their trust in the “physician’s” medical abilities.20 Raspail’s book *Annuaire de la santé* also makes an appearance in Vincent van Gogh’s *Still Life with a plate of onions* exhibiting the widespread popularity of Raspail’s domestic remedies.21

Louise Havemeyer recalled a period in 1883 when the artist was laid up in bed with a broken leg and self-treating with Raspail’s camphor remedy. Cassatt considered Raspail the “Father of Modern Surgery.”22 She extolled the virtues of camphor, a compound covered extensively by Raspail for treatment of various ailments and advocated the use of camphor to her family and friends to treat various medical conditions.23 Cassatt’s study of medical texts undoubtedly supplemented her knowledge of treatment options and cognizance of physical traces of ailments—knowledge that she channeled into her caregiving and artistic practice.

Around the same period as the portraits examined in this paper, a seemingly different albeit comparable subject is seen in Cassatt’s 1878 *Children in a garden (The Nurse)*, which depicts a nurse with her charges in a verdant plot reminiscent of the spaces occupied by her sister, Lydia. There are other parallels as the nurse is also caught in profile, seated and shown knitting. The younger child is sleeping blissfully in the pram, while the other is at the woman’s feet bent over playing in the dirt. Each subject is depicted occupied in their own space. The painting indicates that as far back as 1878 when Lydia was her prime subject, Cassatt’s visual register began associating her own caregiving experience to representations of women and children. Her thoughtful employment of a nurse as one of her figures presents her subjects as caregiver and cared-for.

**Artistic and physical signs of deterioration**

Returning to the images of Lydia, the gradual detrimental effects of the degenerative disease on her body are traceable in the series of portraits painted by her sister. A notable observation is that the signifiers in the work are not limited to the manifestation of symptoms. Also discernable are distinct artistic choices that suggest a philosophical leaning. In *Autumn* (Figure 7, 1880), the colors echoing the title are concentrated on Lydia’s attire, as she is shown seated on the familiar green park bench against an autumnal backdrop as the green foliage changes color and the ground is carpeted with golden reddish-brown flecks of fallen leaves. The rust color on the bonnet rim is echoed on the rest of the ensemble along with other autumn colors of orange and yellow. Lydia’s uncharacteristically idle hands covered in tan colored gloves are placed on her lap. The right hand clutches a closed fan, while the left hand grasps the right, betraying a tension mirrored in her expression. Unlike the earlier portrayals that show Lydia immersed in some activity, here she appears self-absorbed. Her strong profile is clearly defined and her eyes gaze sightlessly into the distance, suggesting a degree of emotional turmoil. The symptomatic index of her agony is orchestrated in the blue discoloration around her eyes. The autumnal colors express a melancholic vision of a fading life reflected in the changing season visualized around the figure.

In *Cup of Tea* (Figure 8), Lydia is once again shown self-absorbed holding up the teacup in a vacant gesture. Incidentally, doctors advised a cup of strong tea to treat

20 Dora B. Weiner, “Francois-Vincent Raspail: Doctor and Champion of the Poor,” French Historical Studies 1, No. 2, (1959), 159–160. The positive sales figures of Raspail’s books suggest that Cassatt was in good company, with educated, affluent individuals as well as aristocrats placing their trust in the “physician’s” medical abilities.20 Raspail’s book *Annuaire de la santé* also makes an appearance in Vincent van Gogh’s *Still Life with a plate of onions* exhibiting the widespread popularity of Raspail’s domestic remedies.21


22 See letter from Mary Cassatt to Havemeyer, “You must get this book, my dear, Camphor! Nothing but camphor! Compresses of camphor, spirits of camphor, and pomade of camphor! It is wonderful! You know, it kept my mother alive for years. I am rubbed with it and done up to in it every day. When they carried me up here, Mathilde put a compress on my leg and the doctor said we could not have done better. Raspail is, as you know, the ‘Father of Modern Surgery.’ I know I will be well soon.”, Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty*, 280.

Raspail was a French chemist, ‘physician’, naturalist and physiologist who was one of the founders of the cell theory, advocated the use of antiseptics, better sanitation, diet and was convinced of the health benefits of camphor.

23 Cassatt recommended the use of camphor to her sister-in-law Lois to alleviate her child’s cough also indicating that her mother was being treated with the compound as well. “We are sorry to hear of Eddie’s cough, I hope you tried the camphor, Mother still goes on, or rather has begun again her treatment. Eddie’s cough though is probably from the stomach if he is growing fast.”, Mathews, *Selected Letter*, 193.
headaches, a condition that frequently bothered Lydia and is listed as a persistent, violent natured symptom caused by high blood pressure and retention of toxins that the kidney is unable to purge out of the system. In the painting, she is covered in the now familiar layers of fabric and only her facial skin is exposed. The wispiness of the fabric, the contrast of the dark armchair against the light colors on the figure, the discoloration marking the tired eyes are comparable to similar passages in earlier representations. There is a remarkable fluidity to the brushstrokes forming the figure that make it appear as though Lydia is dissolving into the paint—in fact, her features appear to be a step away from liquefying into her ensemble. Particularly striking is the planter containing upright, mostly purple and white blossoms with the exception of the singular flower on the far right. The viewer's eye is literally directed by Lydia’s gaze through the line of the basin to the only drooping flower that is almost falling out of the container. She chose to paint this sole bloom in the same tints that make up Lydia’s attire, thereby establishing a striking connection between the listless figure and the wilting carnation in her line of vision—both are definitively envisioned headed towards the inevitable end designated by nature.

Lydia at a Tapestry Frame (Figure 9) was likely the last portrait that Cassatt painted of her sister. As the title indicates Lydia is depicted at a tapestry frame, but this time the hands at work are neither gloved nor elegant. The left hand seen under the frame has become misshapen and the bluish gray tinge seen on the contorted digits denote poor oxygenation, a distinct sign of diminishing kidney function. There is a similar discoloration on her facial skin and signs of edema or swelling around the eyes and under the chin. Edema was a condition linked to Bright’s disease and referred to the puffiness caused by excess fluid trapped in the body’s tissues. The symptomatic index especially the clearly pictured edema and crudely rendered distorted hand implies the progression of the disease and the advanced physical deterioration that ensued. Cassatt’s observational prowess and medical knowledge led her to project these powerful reminders of imminent loss on her subject.

Conclusion

Lydia died in November of 1882 after being bedridden for months. The mounting trauma of witnessing the decline of a loved one came to a head with Lydia’s demise. Cassatt was so devastated by her sister’s passing that she could not pick up a paintbrush for six months. I propose that her subsequent work should be read as a response to the death of her favorite subject, who was also in her care. The evident signs of malady or the symptomatic index and the philosophical artistic signifiers in Lydia’s portraits are a reflection of the artist’s traumatic lived experience as a caregiver. By establishing the presence of the symptomatic index and linking these signifiers to Cassatt’s personal history, these images become foundational to the next chapter of her work and serve as a precursor to a remarkable shift in her subjects. They signpost a critical juncture in her oeuvre when she began to construct representations of women and children that disrupt traditional maternity tropes and reimagine the visual culture of caregiving.

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“This Alabama Medical School is Training Students to Diagnose Figures in Famous Paintings. Why? It’s a Surefire Way of Exposing their Biases and Assumptions”, Artnet News, (June 29, 2020).
MARY CASSATT’S PORTRAITS OF HER SISTER, LYDIA: TRACING SIGNIFIERS OF DISEASE AND IMPENDING DEATH

Figure 1. Mary Cassatt, *Girl in the Garden*, between 1880–1882, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 65 cm, © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d’Orsay). Photo credit: Wikimedia.
Figure 2. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia reading the morning paper (No. 1)* / *Woman Reading*, 1878–1879, oil on canvas, 98.42 x 78.74 cm, Joslyn Art Museum purchase, Joslyn Endowment Fund, 1943.38. Photo credit: Wikimedia.

Figure 3. Mary Cassatt, *On a Balcony*, c. 1878–79, oil on canvas, 89.9 x 65.2 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Albert J. Beveridge in memory of her aunt, Delia Spencer Field. Photo credit: Wikimedia.

Figure 4. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia crocheting in the Garden at Marly*, 1880, oil on canvas, 65.6 x 92.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Gardner Cassatt, 1965. Photo credit: Wikimedia.
MARY CASSATT’S PORTRAITS OF HER SISTER, LYDIA: TRACING SIGNIFIERS OF DISEASE AND IMPENDING DEATH

Figure 5. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Seated in the Garden with a Dog in Her Lap*, c. 1880, oil on canvas, 27.3 x 40.6 cm, private collection. Photo credit: Wikiart.

Figure 6. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Seated on a Terrace Crocheting*, oil and tempera on canvas, 38.1 x 61.5 cm, Collection of Mr., and Mrs. Charles Hermanowski. Photo credit: WikiGallery.
Figure 7. Mary Cassatt, *Autumn, Portrait of Lydia Cassatt*, 1880, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 63.5 cm, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris. Photo credit: Wikimedia.
MARY CASSATT’S PORTRAITS OF HER SISTER, LYDIA: TRACING SIGNIFIERS OF DISEASE AND IMPENDING DEATH

Figure 8. Mary Cassatt, The Cup of Tea, ca. 1880–81, oil on canvas, 92.4 x 65.4 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, From the Collection of James Stillman, Gift of Dr. Ernest G. Stillman, 1922. Photo credit: Wikimedia.
Figure 9. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*, ca. 1881, oil on canvas, 65.1 x 92.4 cm, Flint Institute of Arts, Gift of the Whiting Foundation. Photo credit: Wikimedia.
“Framing” Kandinsky’s Painting with Red Spot (1914): An Intervention of Abstraction and Meaning Making in The Museum Space

Mia Reich

In contemporary museum studies discourse, scholars have begun to reexamine both the role of the curator and the exhibition space in their joint effect on visitor experience. One element that underpins the relationship of these combined parties is language, or more commonly known within this discipline, the wall label. This label intrinsically “frames” its adjacent artwork as it proposes a certain narrative, one that is crafted by curators and communicates ideas and themes deemed important by its writers. However, what about art that eludes one singular interpretation, such as abstraction? Could proposing an exclusive narrative be detrimental to the multiplicity of meaning that abstract art promotes?

Considering these issues, this paper examines Bild mit Rotten Fleck (Painting with Red Spot; 1914; Figure 1) by Wassily Kandinsky and its current “framing” at the Centre Pompidou in Paris to analyze both the relationship between language, abstraction and meaning making, and the complicated role of artist intent that accompanies exhibiting Kandinsky. This paper argues that “framing” Kandinsky’s Painting with Red Spot (P.W.R.S) in relation to the artist’s embrace of kitsch in 1914 will provide a framework for his stylistic experiments at this time in his career, one that offers the proper steppingstones to encourage visitor engagement while still leaving room for a multiplicity of meaning. Additionally, I will provide an in-depth examination of Kandinsky’s goals and expectations of the viewer leading up to and during 1914. This will be done to establish how the artist may have potentially wanted the viewer to engage with P.W.R.S., partly in contrast to the Centre Pompidou but also my own perspective of visitor engagement. In light of the issues raised here, I will then discuss whether Kandinsky’s aims are suitable for the modern-day museum space and how his desires of immediacy may challenge the mission of most artistic institutions.

Though P.W.R.S. is housed in the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou, curiously enough, the work itself has not been exhibited on its walls in quite some time, having been loaned worldwide to various institutions to serve in multiple exhibitions. Despite this physical absence, the Centre Pompidou’s website provides a brief formal analysis of the painting accompanied by a contextualization, the latter written by a member of their curatorial team, Christian Derouet. In some ways, this information is almost more accessible than observing it in the gallery, as it can be viewed quickly and easily by audiences worldwide. In addition to this formal analysis that maps the relationships between some compositional elements using relatively charged verbiage such as “vibration,” “trembling,” and “shimmering,” Derouet contextualizes P.W.R.S. into two major events in Kandinsky’s personal life and artistic career. First discussed is the painting’s adjacency to his first major commission from the United States within the same year (1914) and the breakout of WWI. Secondly, Derouet details Kandinsky’s hasty exodus from Munich to Moscow as a result of the war and thus the marking the “end of his first career.” However, before these two historical elements are discussed, Derouet adds an additional layer of analysis that specifically addresses the red spot in the corner of the painting. Here, he labels it as an explicit reference to the red corner of the izbas (wooden log houses) that Kandinsky visited in Moscow, implying that the spot's location in the corner of the composition is an allusion to its role as a “protective icon.” This is a typical spiritual adornment that can be seen in the folkloric interiors of the izbas, its name krasnyi ugol translating to “red or beautiful corner” and often seen housing imagery of saints and other religious icons.

This is where my intervention originates. The anecdote to which Derouet is alluding to pre-dates P.W.R.S. by roughly a year, this being Kandinsky’s own publication, Reminiscences, in 1913. Here, the artist recalls the red corner as “thickly covered with painted and printed pictures of saints… burning in front of it the red flame of a small pendant lamp.” Now while it is certainly not implausible to make the association between the izba’s red corner and that of P.W.R.S., the issue comes from the semi-finite narrative that this establishes. If we follow the logic of Derouet, would the viewer not be inclined to assume that the entire composition is latent with symbolism of Kandinsky’s experience in Moscow? Ultimately, in some way, it is as if identifying the red spot as symbolic of the Russian izbas is the “solution” to P.W.R.S., an objective “truth” that mediates the uncertainty that typically accompanies non-objective art. It is here that I align myself with Rhonda Lane Howard’s critique of this practice, seen in her dissertation, “Avoiding Abstraction: An Investigation of The Average Museum Visitor’s Difficulty with Abstract Painting.” Here she asserts that evaluating art—and primarily abstract art—is a personal investigation, with no definitive right or wrong answer.

This begs the question: how can we maintain this multiplicity of meaning while still providing sufficient context that helps engage the viewer critically with the artwork? In lieu of answers, I believe one should present the viewers with relevant history that will both supplement and enhance their own visual understanding of the work. Howard also discusses the institutional aversion to wall text, seen by consulting

the opinions of John Walsh—director of the J. Paul Getty Museum—who confesses that many museum professionals believe that an “unmediated encounter is the most meaningful approach to a work of art.”5 As Dutch artist Mieke Bal suggests in her book Double Exposure, this lack of language would thereby place a confidence in “the primary and sole power of visual images” as it keeps “verbal ‘noise’ to a minimum.”6

Like Howard, I disagree with this belief. To the majority of museum visitors, despite competency level, language is often the primary way they have to make sense out of challenging artwork. If written properly, these labels will be supplemental and not commandeering to the work itself, “providing factual information or posing questions to both the uneducated and educated viewer.”7

Also aligning with this perspective is Michael Baxandall, who, in his essay, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” examines the interwoven relationship between the three primary agents in the museum exhibition: the artist, the curator, and the viewer. With these three agents behaving in differently directed ways, Baxandall conceives of their convergence in the “space between object and label.”8 He acknowledges the label as a means in which the curator presents their own thinking about the object, one that they feel critical to communicate to the viewer. However, he argues that they must be aware that they are only one of three agents in the equation and should acknowledge that within the space between label and object, the viewer may act in their own right. Ultimately, he suggests that the curator should be less focused on directing the viewer’s mind in a particular way and instead focus on “enlarging the space,” something done by offering a relevant cultural fact that demands the viewer to make a connection.

In the case of P.W.R.S, I internalize the shared positions of myself, Howard, and Baxandall and turn to Bibiana Obler and her examination of Kandinsky’s ambivalent relationship with kitsch art. By utilizing these perspectives in tandem, I argue that the “cultural fact” within this context is Kandinsky’s contradictory embrace of kitsch in 1914, despite his earlier rejection of it, and that supplying the painting with this context will provide a framework for the artist’s stylistic experiments and visual language at this time in his career. While Obler’s dating of the artist’s relationship with kitsch is extensive, for the sake of relevancy I will be utilizing the following elements of Obler’s argument: the origins of Kandinsky’s aversion to kitsch and his often-failed attempts to avoid this “decorative” label, the introduction of reverse-glass painting into his artistic repertoire, and how kitsch became a purposeful tactic later in 1914 when the artist had completely abandoned representation in his abstraction.

Originating in Munich between 1860 and 1870, “kitsch” was a label that belittled the cheap, mass-produced art demanded by English tourists who were attracted to the quaintness of Bavaria.9 With this in mind, it was common for twentieth-century experimentations with folk art imagery to be conflated with kitsch; in some ways, this issue can be distilled to authenticity (folk art) versus commercialism (kitsch) and the supposed blurred line between them. This association began to trouble Kandinsky in his more formative years of representational painting where folk art dominated his earlier subject matter. The artist’s efforts to escape the relegation of his work to kitsch and his fascination with folk art go hand-in-hand, both fueled by the same desire to combat his current world that was plagued of materialism. While Kandinsky openly disapproved of artists desperate “scramble” for material rewards through their work—a goal often propelled by greed and littered with overproduction—his main issue stemmed from its theosophical implications. To Kandinsky, art was approaching the threshold of a spiritual awakening. This is discussed extensively in his treatise publication Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912), where he urged artists to strive toward transcending the brute imitation of nature—the material world—and instead express their own “inner world,” one of unique desires and insights that could help capture the “inner value” of life around them.10 There is language used here that is rather esoteric in Kandinsky’s writings, such as “inner value” or “inner sound,” and these will be further expanded on in the discussion of the artist’s goals in the following section. For now, this brief digression is to contextualize Kandinsky’s ideologies as they pertained to combatting the external world of materialism and advocating for spiritual revolution of the artist—the dominance of “inner necessity.”

With Kandinsky’s fervent hopes for art to surpass its current materialist grasp, it is clear that his artwork being discredited as kitsch would be unfavorable. However, the folk-art imagery that the artist clung to at the early beginnings of the twentieth century only perpetuated this derogatory categorization, being seen as primarily “decorative” and for commercial appeal. In addition to plein air landscapes, Kandinsky would produce sketches of fantastical narratives or subjects of bourgeois leisure, some almost fairy-tale in nature, seen in his gouache painting, Once Upon a Time (Figure 2; 1904). Folk art itself occupied a somewhat ambivalent space during German industrialization, sliding between either a preservation of national folk traditions or an art that purposefully exploited this growing materialist society and capitalized off mass production.11 Avoiding this polarization, Kandinsky’s folk art, at least as it was intended, had a unique point of entry.

5 Howard, “Avoiding Abstraction,” 33.
7 Howard, “Avoiding Abstraction,” 33.
11 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 30–32.
As Obler argues, Kandinsky’s relationship with folk art and kitsch, even this early on in his career, was a “self-conscious strategy” that aimed to expose the impossibility of ever recovering an innocent “primitivism” in the wake of industrialization and the tension between the two. However, the way in which this intention was translated into Kandinsky’s paintings—and eventually into the public eye—was not only counterproductive to the artist’s aims, but ultimately proved his point. In addition to being chastised by critics for producing paintings more akin to the applied arts, Kandinsky’s folk art was actually the source of his first public success. This brush with commercial profit only furthered the artist’s association with kitsch, and not in the ways he had hoped; to avoid further confusion between his art and materialist interests, Kandinsky decided to abandon the production of these drawings in 1907. The artist’s interest in folkloric themes and ways of living did not disappear however, and in 1909 he and his partner Gabriele Münter briefly settled in the town of Murnau, Germany. Here, their shared interests in “primitive” folk art and fantasies of purity flourished.

This experience, while the catalyst for many other artistic and ideological revelations, is appositely important for foregrounding Kandinsky’s interest in reverse-glass painting. The process of painting on glass encouraged—a simplification of forms, seen in its use of bold black outlining and swaths of vibrant color pieced together behind it. While this style indeed embodied the illusion of “primitivism” and sincerity Kandinsky was looking to achieve, more importantly it acted as a critical steppingstone in the artist’s evolving visual language toward abstraction. Often times these glass paintings would act as early studies to larger oil paintings, allowing for a strong visual comparison of how the techniques of the former transferred into the latter. An example of this can be seen in Kandinsky’s Glass Painting with Sun (1910; Figure 3) and Small Pleasures (1913; Figure 4). A pronounced visual element that is consistent between the two is the dissolution of color and Quetschtechnik (meaning the “squashing” or scumbling of paint); often, these two go hand in hand. While the production of these glass paintings tapered off in 1913, the profound impact their visual language had on Kandinsky’s relationship with dissolving the object in his abstract is undeniable. This can be seen primarily in the use of Quetschtechnik to not only disrupt the smooth pigments around it—a technique that Lisa Florman claims results in spatial ambiguity—but also to blur traces of recognizable imagery.

This evolving relationship between Kandinsky and kitsch would come to a head in June of 1913, when he wrote to his artistic peer, Franz Marc, and voiced a decision that would ultimately dictate his visual language for the following years of 1914–1915. Here, Kandinsky expresses his intentions to “go to the border of kitsch (or as many will think, across the border),” and as Obler suggests, “give his critics exactly what they already thought he was giving them.” It is here that P.W.R.S. becomes of primary interest, seeing that it was created just about a year after this decision by Kandinsky. Though Obler does not speak explicitly nor too in-depth about P.W.R.S., her discussion of the contemporaneous commission by Edwin R. Campbell helps distinguish Kandinsky’s explicit acceptance of commercialist circumstances, but also how he managed to still set himself apart from traditional “ornamental” pictures. Campbell’s commission requested that four panels were to be created for the interior of his home, “strong, brilliant pictures” all of the “same mood... so that they will harmonize and make four beautiful walls.” While Kandinsky was granted artistic freedom, he was implored to produce a “pleasing set of pictures [landscapes],” ones that would satisfy even the most skeptical of customers and hopefully encourage subsequent commissions. It should be clear now that the circumstances of Campbells’ request practically frame Kandinsky’s work—and its best suited function—as ornamental, eye-pleasing wallpaper. This is only enhanced by the artist’s complete abandonment of any traceable figuration in 1914, allowing the extreme abstraction of these paintings to be versatile and appropriate for any potential home decoration.

However, to avoid falling too far into this trap, Kandinsky subverts any reference to a pleasing landscape and even abandons traditional representations of spatial configuration altogether. Works like Campbell’s panels (1914; Figures 5–8) and particularly P.W.R.S. are turbulent, undulating, and overall chaotic; there are no horizon lines or true ground to situate these forms into a real and cohesive space. In P.W.R.S., jagged zigzags and clouds of pigment enter the composition from each corner, alluding to their potential existence outside of the frame and densely converging in the center. Located in the bottom left quadrant are small, tightly bound clusters of color, bursting out from the confines of the upward reaching white form that encloses them. These clusters are mimicked in the upper right quadrant, this time given the extreme abstraction of these paintings to be versatile and vivid black enclosure. The upper left houses a vibrant red spot, an element so dominant that it dictates the painting’s title; its flat opacity stands out—or rather, sinks backward—when juxtaposed to the thicker Quetschtechnik surrounding it, disrupting the visual field by creating combatting spatial effects. Oddly enough, this red spot is somewhat echoed in the bottom right quadrant, where its shadowy, unrealized counterpart gently emerges from out of frame. These chaotic compositions, according to Obler, were Kandinsky’s attempt of approaching the ornamental—kitsch—

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12 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 27.
13 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 35.
15 Lisa Florman, Concerning the Spiritual--And the Concrete--in Kandinsky’s Art (California: Stanford University Press), 103.
16 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 57.
17 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 61.
while forcefully setting himself apart from it, embodying more of the “sublime” than the “beautiful.”

Surely, as demonstrated here, Kandinsky’s complicated relationship with kitsch was strained, ambivalent, and eventually receptive. His own interventions were made, and as Obler states, he embraced material “in order to transcend it.” This context surrounding P.W.R.S., one that places within a timeline of Kandinsky’s evolving relationship with abstraction, is absent from the Centre Pompidou’s description. Instead, the only major element being referenced is what the red spot symbolizes within the composition. Undoubtedly the chaotic configuration of P.W.R.S. could be intimidating to a modern-day museum goer, not just because of the intensity of its forms, but because they may not know where to start. The Centre Pompidou attempts to ease this, facilitating a point of entry: the red spot as symbolic of the red izbas that Kandinsky encountered in Moscow.

While I find this choice understandable, I also find it reductive. As shown in this paper, there is a rich history of the artist’s relationship with the concept of kitsch that directly involves P.W.R.S. and its unique visual language. I contest that by framing P.W.R.S with the historical context provided here, the viewer is ultimately urged to make their own informed analyses—both conceptual and visual. Kandinsky’s version of kitsch in 1914 will function as the same sort of steppingstone of that at the Centre Pompidou. However, instead of telling the viewer what to look at, this will aid them in how to look.

A separate but equally important issue that complicates my own proposed framing of Kandinsky’s P.W.R.S. (and potentially his abstraction as a whole) is the artist’s own desires for viewer contemplation. How exactly did Kandinsky wish for his spectators to engage with his abstraction? Could these expectations extend to the modern-day museum visitor? Kandinsky has notably published extensive writings on his artistic process and philosophies behind the contemplation of art. Latent within these writings, often evolving with his own journey with abstraction, are the ways in which he feels his paintings—and ultimately abstraction—should be critically engaged with. I stress here the word “critically,” because the type of engagement Kandinsky voices is not passive in nature, and imbue them with life. The effects of color are extensively discussed in Lipps’s *Asthetik: Psychologie des Schonen und der Kunst* (Aesthetics: Psychology of Beauty and Art; 1903), and the influences that these ideas had on Kandinsky are quite clear when examining the language used by the philosopher. For instance, Lipps claims that colors are “lively of themselves” and “dipped in mood... giving them an inner life or power.” This power, while attributed to the viewer, does not originate within them, but the color itself. However, while each color possesses its own character, Lipps insists that each is ultimately completely hidden, would “only in the course of time reveal themselves to the engrossed, attentive viewer.”

Kandinsky also voices the ways in which form and especially color affect the viewers. Not only does the artist critique how these formal elements have traditionally impacted viewers in the past, but he also details how they should do so in the new wake of spiritualist art. To this extent, he often speaks of colors by addressing their inner sound, the strong characteristics that these colors emulate in solitude and away from associations of external sources. Black embodies a certain pause, an eternal silence in which motion is absent, while red is lively and turbulent, full of action and burning intensity. Kandinsky criticizes the viewer’s desire to seek associative explanations for color, claiming that this “conjuring up the memory of another physical agent” only dilutes the true effect of color on the psyche. This insinuates that association is tied to a more superficial engagement with color, while recognizing its “inner sound” will ensure a direct impact on the soul. Kandinsky uses a metaphor of the piano to demonstrate this type of immediacy, claiming that “color is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano, with its many strings.” To him, viewers are often too preoccupied with trying to find a meaning, or an external connection between parts of a picture; this desire, like many others, arises from the materialist society that Kandinsky condemns. Ultimately, the viewers of his time do not try and experience the “inner life of the picture,” or “to let the picture affect him directly.”

It is important to note that the positions that Kandinsky takes on the issues of experiencing painting are not unique. In fact, a majority of the artist’s thoughts on color derive from the theory of Einfühlung, or empathy theory. In the late nineteenth century, empathy theory was introduced first by Friedrich Theodor Vischer and later expanded on by Theodor Lipps. This aesthetic theory ultimately aimed to provide some sort of psychological understanding on how we interact with forms and colors, particularly the way we “feel into” them and imbue them with life. The effects of color are extensively discussed in Lipps’s *Asthetik: Psychologie des Schonen und der Kunst* (Aesthetics: Psychology of Beauty and Art; 1903), and the influences that these ideas had on Kandinsky are quite clear when examining the language used by the philosopher. For instance, Lipps claims that colors are “lively of themselves” and “dipped in mood... giving them an inner life or power.” This power, while attributed to the viewer, does not originate within them, but the color itself. However, while each color possesses its own character, Lipps insists that such is ultimately


20 The type of paintings that Kandinsky critiques with this sentiment are the ones praised most highly by Clement Greenberg—one of the artist’s biggest critics as seen in his publications of the mid-twentieth century. In his essay *Modernist Painting* (1961), Greenberg gives accolades to works of art that adhere to “medium specificity.” In terms of painting, this means that the techniques employed do not try and employ false realism other dimensions, like that of the Renaissance masters, but instead references and embraces the two-dimensional limitations of the paint itself. As Kenneth Berry states in “A Personal View on Greenberg and Kandinsky” (1995), Greenberg described Kandinsky’s work as a “failure to acquire a modern sense of style,” and that the artist’s allusion to “illusionistic depth” and spatial ambiguity (expressive of a more cosmological perspective) was antithetical to the type of self-referential modernist painting that Greenberg highly regarded.


22 Kandinsky, “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,” *Complete Writings on Art*, 185–186.


24 Kandinsky, “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,” 160.


26 David Morgan, “The Idea of Abstraction in German Theories of the Ornament from Kant to Kandinsky,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, no. 3 (Summer, 1992), 235.
determined by the viewer— each person “feels” this mood into the color.27

Similarities can be seen between Lipps’s words and those of Kandinsky, recalling the artist’s discussion of the “inner sound” of colors and the role of the viewer in identifying it. Even Kandinsky’s desires of an “engrossed, attentive viewer” can be traced back to the ideologies of Robert Vischer, son of Friedrich Theodor Vischer, in his own publications on empathy theory. Vischer expresses the differences between ways of looking: seeing versus scanning. The former is a passive, almost unconscious process and only provides a broad understanding of a visual phenomenon as a whole—an act that is the opposite of Kandinsky’s wishes. Scanning, however, is more active and conscious than its counterpart; it involves contacting the intricacies of a visual object—examining left, right, up and down—and ultimately denotes the reflexes of Kandinsky’s “engrossed viewer.” This type of relationship, according to Vischer, animates and revitalizes a “dead phenomenon,” or in the case of this paper, a painting.28

In 1914, the year that P.W.R.S. was created, Kandinsky would address the current state of his abstraction in a prepared lecture for an opening exhibition in Cologne. It is here that he reflects on the role that “dissolution” (an effect potentially achieved in part by Quetschtechnik) has played thus far in bringing him to the point of “absolute painting,” where he claimed to currently be. At the time of Composition VI and Painting with White Border in 1913, Kandinsky claims that he “…dissolved objects to a greater or lesser extent within the same picture, so that they might not be recognized at all once and so that these emotional overtones might thus be experienced gradually by the spectator, one after another.”29

He notes, however, that this was only done because he had not yet reached the level of maturity to which he could experience purely abstract forms without bridging the gap through objects. In 1914, Kandinsky claims that the pictures painted since then have “neither a theme or point of departure,” and that slowly but surely, pure abstract elements have “crowded out” forms of representational origin.30

We can assume, then, that Kandinsky anticipates his viewers to experience his abstraction from 1914 onward—including P.W.R.S.—through the means of empathy theory. If there are, as he insists, no relation to objects or any narratives whatsoever, the viewer is forced to directly engage with the abstract elements in solitude—experience the painting as a painting. However, is this way of engagement accessible to most viewers of Kandinsky’s abstraction? I argue that the answer is ultimately no, and that the average spectator would not instinctually resort to this kind of contemplation. Perhaps this is why Kandinsky chose to write extensively about it in the first place, resorting to literature as a means of communicating his lofty expectations. The artist even acknowledges the possibility of failure at the end of his 1914 lecture, where he states his desire to paint “good, necessary, living pictures, which are experienced properly by at least a few viewers.”31

I believe that “properly” in this context refers to the tenants of empathy theory outlined above and not through external, material associations.

Now that we understand Kandinsky’s intentions in regard to his abstraction, the question arises: Is it necessary for us to take this into consideration when exhibiting his work? I find this question both interesting and relevant considering the rise in debate of “artist intent” in contemporary museum studies, particularly regarding when it does and does not matter. For example, in Glenn Wharton’s “Artist Intention and The Conservation of Contemporary Art,” he examines the complicated role that artist intent plays in acts of conservation and restoration. In some cases, consultation with artists is critical when conceptual themes become outdated and their display needs to be reconceived to stay up to date with technological advances.32 There are also some instances in which artist intention is critical to ensure proper representation of a minority group and to clarify a message; this is seen in Elizabeth Sweeney’s discussion of contemporary disability art, where disabled artists actively provide public statements of intention to assert the meaning of their work. Sweeney explains that in certain contexts, the curator may position artist intent as “the most discerning factor when considering if exploitation should be a concern.”33 Conversely, as also illustrated by Wharton, artists have claimed that their ideas evolve from materials and processes, and that they “rarely have preconceived images of the final product.”34 This would, in some way, make the artist intent nearly untraceable and potentially difficult to consider when exhibiting their work.

While the issues outlined above are relevant in understanding the role that artist intent plays in the curatorial process, they are by nature contemporary examples. This means that, in most cases, the artist is present and able to be consulted with in some way. What about cases such as Kandinsky, where discussions of his intentions are all post-mortem? Though he cannot be contacted physically, it has been established that Kandinsky has published extensively on his own evolving views on abstraction, the viewer, and society overall. While this is only a tailored and restricted view of his outlook, this has not stopped both scholars and curators from referring to the artist’s writings in their publications and exhibitions alike. Exactly how, and what, should we consider

30 Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture (1914),” 399.
31 Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture (1914),” 400.
of Kandinsky’s intentions when discussing and displaying *P.W.R.S.?*

As presented thus far, there are two primary intentions of Kandinsky that are addressed in the context of this paper: his purposeful decision to “go to the border of kitsch,” a move that dictated his visual language in works like *P.W.R.S.*, and how he subsequently intended the viewers to engage with his abstraction at this time. The former takes place during the stage of production, or the moment between Kandinsky’s ideas and the painting’s creation. The latter, however, encompasses issues that post-date the work’s contemporary context, or the moment between the painting’s display and viewer reception. It is here that Kandinsky advocates for a purely visual and formal contemplation from the spectator. Though I argue that Kandinsky’s embrace of kitsch should be considered in the framing of *P.W.R.S.*, I subsequently argue that his intentions of display and viewer engagement should not. These two issues, embodying two different modes of intention, will be addressed via the perspectives of Michael Baxandall and David Summers.

The issues that accompany this retrospective method are detailed by Baxandall in *Patterns of Intention*, where he illustrates the nuanced relationship between the two main agents in art historical analysis: the participant (the artist), and the observer (the inferential critic). The term inferential, in this context, refers to the form of art criticism that “reconstructs purposiveness and intention,” positing the maker of a picture as someone “addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution.”

A main problem that Baxandall addresses between the participant and the observer is the spectrum of advantages and disadvantages that either party has regarding knowledge of the artist’s cultural climate. Chiefly, this pertains to the different modes that each agent is engaging with said climate: the artist operates within his milieu with flexibility, internalizing the stimuli that in turn affects their actions and ultimately behaving without rational self-consciousness. The observer, however, has perspective. This allows them to reflect, work from comparisons and generalizations that—as a result—give special prominence to certain elements of the artist’s culture over others.

In the case of *P.W.R.S.*, I believe that this relates to the Centre Pompidou’s association of the red spot with the red corner of the izbas. While yes, Kandinsky had—on record—encountered the izbas a year prior to this painting, by using Baxandall’s logic, how can one be certain that Kandinsky intended for this explicit association between the two? Although this proposed narrative has its own scholarly voice, that of the curator at the Pompidou and not Kandinsky himself, the language of this writing appears matter of fact: “the red color refers to the ‘red corner’ of the izbas where the protective icon sits.”

No allusions to inferences or theorizations, but that this is indeed the answer to the red spot’s existence. It is here that I find the Centre Pompidou falling into the trap that Baxandall discusses between participant and observer. Perhaps their retrospective analysis posits too much of a presumptuous relationship between Kandinsky, the izbas, and the creation of *P.W.R.S*. In opposition of this, I argue that framing the painting with Kandinsky’s embrace of kitsch in 1914 adheres to Baxandall’s proposal of the artist as “problem-solver” as a way of understanding intent. Kandinsky, having voiced his problem of properly achieving his own mediation of kitsch into his abstraction, attempts to solve this by actively embracing kitsch in its near entirety, providing a unique intervention on commercialism with truly sublime and fervently abstract compositions.

The issue arises when we consider Kandinsky’s intentions that take place after creation, ones that closely involve the way the viewer engages with his abstraction and specifically works like *P.W.R.S*. As discussed previously, I argue that this is intention relates to that of empathy theory and experiencing the painting as a painting, “feeling into” its forms and colors to cultivate an unmediated interaction. While I believe that Kandinsky’s intentions—as ambitious as they are—could be suitable for an informative wall text, I do not think that they should permeate into certain curatorial decisions, such as labels—or lack thereof. This is where I turn to David Summers and his discussion of the “symmetry of intention,” a phenomenon that can only occur if an intention is adequately expressed through the artwork and whose success is contingent on if the intention and result are indeed symmetrical. In the case of *P.W.R.S.*, Kandinsky had made it clear—particularly around this time in 1914—that he aspired for an “attentive and engrossed viewer,” one that would recognize the inner sound of form and color through a pure, direct experience. I believe that Kandinsky’s attempt to realize this intent was his gradual but determined process in “dissolving” the object and painting truly abstract compositions, something that he claims he had achieved by the time that *P.W.R.S.* was created. By using the logic proposed by Summers, I argue that Kandinsky’s aspirations for his viewers align with this symmetry of intent; to the artist, *P.W.R.S.* materialized at a time where his abstraction relied on no “points of origin,” no external content, and whose subsequent composition embodied that of “pure abstract form.” This, in Summers’s analogy, is the result. In the same breath Kandinsky also acknowledges his intent, this being the desire to paint “living pictures” that are “experienced properly by at least a few viewers” (my italics). When consulting the artist’s words, though he acknowledges its potential of failure, we can presume that Kandinsky is purposefully trying to realize his intentions of viewer engagement through his choices in abstraction.

40 Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture (1914),” 399.
41 Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture (1914),” 399.
However, as Summers continues, this symmetry of intention assumes an innate fallacy: “through the work, we should all ‘see’ the intention.”**42 The issue is one of perception: we all see art differently, and *P.W.R.S.* is surely not exempt from this. In addition to the Centre Pompidou’s discussion of the red spot as an explicit allusion to an external experience, scholars like Rose-Carol Washton Long insist that even Kandinsky’s paintings of 1914 whose titles “only relate to color and form,” like *P.W.R.S.*, “can be shown to have themes consistent with Kandinsky’s messianic world view.”**43 Though she does not examine *P.W.R.S.* specifically— perhaps because it does not support her own investigation— she examines one of the panels for Edwin R. Campbell that was created contemporaneously, one colloquially referred to as *Summer* (Figure 5). Here, within the extremely turbulent merging of colors, Washton Long identifies an angel in the upper-left corner. Though emphatic in her claims, this angel is indicated only by four parallel black lines and whose red “trumpet,” stretching diagonally across the canvas in the center of the painting, is designated simply by a sweeping red stroke.**44 I find that the main detriment to Washton Long’s argument comes from her heavy reliance on water-color studies that predate the final painting, such is the case with Campbell’s panel. Ultimately, this implies that these parallels can only be drawn when the two are juxtaposed. What about very abstract works like this panel that are not exhibited with its accompanying study? What kind of conclusions is the viewer inclined to draw when relationships to external content are absent? Though Kandinsky believes that the answer to the latter question should be an unmediated, pure meditation on color and form, it seems that both scholars like Washton Long and museums alike find this to be an unsatisfactory and potentially impossible solution. While scholarly approaches may seek external contextualization for more thesis-oriented research, museum institutions likely make these decisions based on elements of visitor engagement and accessibility.

Considering Kandinsky’s attitudes toward color and his expectations of the viewer, it is clear that the choices of the Centre Pompidou— in respect to framing *P.W.R.S.*— disregard this element of the artist’s intentions entirely. The museum’s dictation of the red spot as symbolic of the Russian izbas that Kandinsky encountered is a true embodiment of the “associations” he warned against. That being said, my proposition of contextualizing *P.W.R.S.* with Kandinsky’s relationship with kitsch ignores this type of intent just the same, instead favoring Baxandall’s notion of the artist as “problemsolver.” My intervention of the choices made by the Centre Pompidou constitute a reframing, not an absence of a label entirely, even though I stand to believe that the latter would be most in-line with Kandinsky’s desires. Theoretically, if we adhere to Kandinsky’s symmetry of intent, this is true; if *P.W.R.S.* were to simply have a tombstone label— artist, title, date— then surely the viewer would be encouraged to experience the painting as a *painting*. In this case, there are no references to external sources— like the red corner of the izbas— and no historical contextualization that could influence the way the forms and colors are understood. However, when revisiting Gail Gregg, we can see exactly why an absent label would be unsuccessful. Gregg addresses some of the following issues whose results were gathered by institutional focus groups: visitors spend roughly ten seconds in front of an object— seven to read the label and three to look at the work— and often visitors think to themselves “I don’t know what to look at first.”**45 Considering this, it is possible that if *P.W.R.S.* were to not have a label, it would only exacerbate this issue. It appears that the Centre Pompidou attempts to explicitly counteract this problem, utilizing the “red spot” and its reference to an external source as an accessible point of entry. By instead framing *P.W.R.S.* with the historical contextualization of Kandinsky’s relationship with kitsch, visitors will be provided the proper steppingstones to encourage engagement with the artist’s abstraction while allowing for a multiplicity of meaning within the painting.

Ultimately, I argue that Kandinsky’s desire for immediacy— as in colors “exerting a direct influence onto the soul” and without association— challenges the missions of most museums. Accessibility is typically a paramount concern for institutions, and despite the somewhat “universal” potential of Kandinsky’s wishes, I contest that the average museum visitor may not be inclined to experience abstraction in this way. As E. H. Gombrich states, “it is instinctual for human beings to want to find the familiar.”**46 Even when a narrative might not be immediately present, it may be our instinct to search for one. As Cristina Silaghi suggested in her analysis of *P.W.R.S.*, the painting’s visual language, while almost completely non-objective, possesses the qualities that one may be exposed to in representational paintings, such as animation, gesture, and inflection.**47 Therefore, despite Kandinsky’s intentions of appreciating the painting as “living on its own,” the viewer may frequently be inclined to search for a narrative within its composition.

While I have discussed here the issues with Kandinsky’s intentions and expectations, there is one theme that is heralded throughout his writings that I believe can be maintained within the museum space: the critical role of the spectator in the “making” of the work. By consulting Kandinsky’s desires, what he deems the *engrossed* viewer, it is evident that spectator engagement was a primary concern, and while it may not be in the manner in which museum studies addresses it today, I find the overlap to be substantial. Though the issue of immediacy may not translate successfully into the modern museum, it is

47 Silaghi, “Plenitudes of Painting,” 349.
undeniable that the viewer is often the catalyst of meaning within the painting. If we revisit the pillars of empathy theory, while the colors themselves are predisposed with their own “moods” and “inner lives,” it is the individual viewers who feel these moods into the colors themselves. It is with this positing of the viewer as “maker” that I argue for a recontextualization of _P.W.R.S._, one that provides a historical framework to understand its visual language while still allowing visitors to maintain their agency in the creative process. This is addressed in Beverly Serrell’s _Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach_, where in her chapter “The Label’s Voice: Who is Talking to Me?” she emphasizes the importance of letting the viewer “do some of the talking.” According to Serrell, labels should aim to encourage participation and avoid too much “you” voice; arguably, the text by the Centre Pompidou eliminates any potential participation by providing a near-definitive solution to the viewer: the red spot is ultimately symbolic of the red corner of the Russian izbas. Is this perhaps too much “you” voice on the part of the institution? I believe that by framing Kandinsky’s _P.W.R.S._ through the historical context of the artist’s relationship with kitsch, the subjectivity of the curator’s “you” voice is subsided while the agency of the viewer is prioritized.

As Baxandall proposes in the content of wall labels, the viewer looks for causes. Though Baxandall speaks explicitly here about exhibiting non-Western culture, I believe that this can be applicable to abstraction. Typically, as seen in the Centre Pompidou’s prioritized information, the work’s accompanying information describes the curator’s perception of the object and puts forth what they feel necessary to communicate to the viewer. Though Baxandall proposes that viewers may be more interested in causes rather than effects, I argue that in the case of _P.W.R.S._, understanding the cause can inform the effect. I argue that the historical context of Kandinsky’s relationship with kitsch supplies the cause for the visual language of _P.W.R.S._, and the effect is, as a result, an individualized analysis on the part of the viewer. Baxandall claims that the “space” between object and label is where the visitor exists, making intellectual connections between the artist and the curator. The role that the viewer plays in this scenario is critical and should be (and is being) taken into consideration in contemporary museums studies scholarship. Baxandall suggests that, to ensure the importance of the viewer’s disposition in the space, that curators should focus on “enlarging the space” rather than directing the viewer’s mind in a particular way. An example that he offers is to provide a cultural fact that demands the viewer to work and make a connection, an idea that is more “tactful and stimulating than explicit interpretation.” In regard to _P.W.R.S._, Kandinsky’s relationship with kitsch serves as the cultural fact to enlarge the space, ideally encouraging viewers to make the connection between kitsch, Kandinsky’s glass paintings, and the visual language of the painting overall.

The multiplicity of meaning that I acknowledge here does not only apply to viewers but to curators also; _P.W.R.S._ is bound to see different interpretations by scholars and curatorial teams, each time being re-framed slightly differently. However, by providing the viewer with tools on how to look at abstraction as opposed to some concrete “solution,” the role of the curator becomes transformed into that of a facilitator, one that utilizes this subjectivity as the crux of critical visitor engagement. Instead of seeing this as a detriment to establishing a “true” meaning of _P.W.R.S._, I believe this embodies an element of Kandinsky’s aspirations all along: a painting continuously subject to re-interpretation, heightened levels of engagement, and whose ubiquity has permeated into prominent discourse today.

Through a combined and complimentary art historical examination of Kandinsky’s abstraction and the role of the wall label, this paper proposes a different kind of solution to the difficulty of facilitating abstract art to its audiences in contrast to the approach of the Centre Pompidou. By providing more historically based context to the viewer as opposed to curatorial interpretations of certain formal elements, the viewer is given a kind of creative agency that potentially mimics that of the curator. With the historical steppingstones present to ease audiences into looking closer, Kandinsky’s _P.W.R.S._ now becomes an incredibly vibrant and turbulent exploration of the artist’s critical yet playful experimentation with kitsch. However, the intense interactions between the formal elements, fraught with endless interpretations, are now placed in the hands of the viewers to discover.

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51 Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention,” 40

52 Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention,” 40.
**Bibliography**


Figure 2. Kandinsky, *Once Upon a Time*, gouache on colored card, 1904, Städtische Galerie im Lebachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich, Germany. In *Intimate Collaborations: Kandinsky & Münter, Arp & Taeuber*, by Bibiana K. Obler, plate 13.
Figure 3. Kandinsky, *Glass Painting with Sun*, tempera and oil with silver and gold bronze on glass, 1910, Städtische Galerie im Lebachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich, Germany. In *Intimate Collaborations: Kandinsky & Münter, Arp & Taeuber*, by Bibiana K. Obler, plate 29.


How to make site-specific art when sites themselves have histories: Whittier Boulevard as Asco’s “camino surreal”

Brandon Sward

“The land, so heavily charged with traces and with past readings, seems very similar to a palimpsest.”

— André Corboz

The term “site-specific” is generally used to describe art self-consciously made to exist in a certain place, which effectively makes the site a static background for the dynamism of art. Some of the most canonical artworks of the 20th century fall under this rubric, such as Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc (1981) in front of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in Manhattan’s Foley Federal Plaza or Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty (1970) constructed out of mud, salt, and basalt on the northeastern shore of Utah’s Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point. Why is it that art suddenly became aware of its site? In her monograph on site-specific art entitled One Place after Another, Miwon Kwon suggests, “The mobilization of site-specific art from decades ago, and the nomadism of artists in recent site-oriented practices, can be viewed alike as symptomatic of the dynamics of deterritorialization as theorized in urban spatial discourse.” The term “deterritorialization” is not Kwon’s, but borrowed from the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In A Thousand Plateaus, they describe deterritorialization as “the movement by which one leaves a territory.” In other words, the term signifies a loosening of the ties that connect cultural practices to geographic places. To translate into the language of another European philosopher, the forces of neoliberal capitalism have produced a loss of what Martin Heidegger calls “dwelling” in favor of “building,” resulting in an inability to “live poetically.”

Although it will not be productive to relitigate Heidegger’s relationship with National Socialism, it is also difficult to overlook the implied conservatism of such a position. Insofar as dwelling assumes a deep rootedness with a place, it implies a sense of traditional belonging in contradistinction to the destabilizing nomadism that Kwon attributes to “deterritorialization.” But even as art ventures outside of the four white walls of gallery and museum, many canonical site-specific artworks did not fully exploit the possibilities that Kwon’s nomadism makes possible. Indeed, there is a certain nostalgia in works like Tilted Arc and Spiral Jetty, through which an artist seeks to refasten meaning to space as a critique of a world that seems to be moving ever faster, or even spinning out of control. But of course, the artist is required to select which meanings of the site she wants to highlight, arguably leaving other possible meanings to atrophy. This paper argues there is a way to make site-specific art that better attends to the multivocality of site in a series of performances in East Los Angeles by the Chicano art collective Asco (Spanish for “disgust” or “nausea”; me da asco, “it disgusts/nauseates me” or literally “it gives me nausea/disgust”), active from 1972 to 1987.

The members of Asco (Harry Gamboa, Jr., Glugio “Gronk” Nicandro, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez) grew up during the Vietnam War spanning from 1955 to 1975, which many Chicanos in the Los Angeles area believed was killing them at a disproportionate rate. Indeed, Gronk cites the Vietnam War as inspiring Asco’s name. In his words, “a lot of our friends were coming back in body bags and were dying, and we were seeing a whole generation come back that weren’t alive anymore. And in a sense that gave us nausea—or ‘nauseous.’ And that is Asco, in a way.” In order to protest Vietnam, Chicano activists banded together to form the Chicano Moratorium, which existed from 1969 to 1971. This group organized the National Chicano Moratorium March along Whittier Boulevard in 1970 to voice their disapproval of the Vietnam War and its effects on their community.

A major commercial corridor in East Los Angeles, Whittier Boulevard runs about twenty miles from the Los Angeles River at its eastern end to Brea at its western end. Not only was Whittier Boulevard the location of much community activity, it also connected East Los Angeles to the heart of the Los Angeles metropolitan area (after the Los Angeles River, Whittier Boulevard becomes Sixth Avenue and continues on towards downtown). Several of Asco’s performances over the years would occur on Whittier Boulevard. Regarding the importance of the street to Asco, Herrón reminisces,

5 Indeed, we might extend this analysis to the muralism Asco critiqued, through which the city of Los Angeles similarly sought to fix a people (i.e., Chicanos) to a place (i.e., the Eastside).

6 Multivocality is a crucial way anthropologists, at least, have reconceptualized place as “a politicized social and cultural construct.” Margaret C. Rodman, “Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality,” American Anthropologist 94, no. 3 (Sep. 1992): 640.

At the time of the Moratorium, I was in high school. I remember the procession originating at Belvedere Park, protesting the Vietnam War and all the Chicanos that [sic] lost their lives. The police brutality was incredible. It affected me quite a bit and I think it affected all of us. So that’s why Whittier Boulevard became such an important street, and a place for us to conduct our performances and connect them to our community and the way society viewed us at the time.8

We can see in this quote the double role Whittier Boulevard plays as simultaneously symbolizing the reality and reputation of East Los Angeles, as well as bridging the barrio and the art world, between which Asco would continually navigate. This feeling of being caught between two worlds is expressed at multiple points in the journalistic accounts of and interview with members of Asco. Los Angeles art critic Linda Frye Burnham explains that Asco’s name “was chosen because, as artists, the group got no respect, either in the conservative Latino environment of their home turf or in the Anglo art world.”9 In an interview with Burnham, Patsi Valdez laments, “We weren’t Chicano enough for someone, too Mexican for others.”10 This sense of betweenness and indeterminacy also resonates with the idiosyncrasies of the urban topography of Los Angeles. In his attempt to articulate an LA-based alternative to the dominant “Chicago school” of urbanism, geographer Michael Dear asserts that “it is no longer the center that organizes the urban hinterlands, but the hinterlands that determine what remains of the center.”11

However, if we take a longer view of the history of this area of what is now the Southwestern United States, we can see yet another dual role for Whittier Boulevard. The thoroughfare also carries a portion of El Camino Real (Spanish for “Royal Road” or “King’s Highway”), which once connected twenty-one religious outposts in what was then Alta California, a province of New Spain. We know Asco was aware of this fact because Gamboa once “used the phrase ‘el camino surreal’ (the surreal road/path), a play on El Camino Real, the historic highway of colonial California, to describe Whittier Boulevard as the setting where everyday reality could quickly devolve into absurdist, excessive action.”12 Hence, “el camino surreal” is both a pun on “El Camino Real” and a gesture towards the surreality of Asco’s performances. Although scholars of Asco like art historian C. Ondine Chavoya are aware Asco knew portions of Whittier Boulevard were constructed over what was once El Camino Real, it doesn’t play a significant interpretive role for these scholars. To be sure, Chavoya and his ilk have brought valuable attention to groups like Asco who have been systematically neglected, but their analytic orientation has been what I describe as “presentist,” or more likely to rely upon temporally proximate referents than temporally distant ones. To their credit, a bias such as this is both natural and understandable, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that we ought to limit ourselves to only that which is close in time. By exploring how Asco self-consciously referenced different historical layers of Whittier Boulevard in their performances along it, I argue they allow some of the multiple voices of a site to speak simultaneously.

By foregrounding Whittier Boulevard as the site for several Asco performances, we can see that rather than making simple “protest art” like some uncritical observers might assume, Asco’s performance demonstrates a profound awareness of the historical forces excluding them from both the Chicano communities of East LA and the Anglo art world downtown and on the Westside. In two performances, Stations of the Cross (1971) and First Supper (After a Major Riot) (1974), Asco used mimicry of Roman Catholic liturgical rites to compare their experiences as racial minorities with the colonization of Latin America, thus politicizing a religion that has, justifiably or unjustifiably, been blamed for the supposed traditionalism of Mexican Americans. Two other performances, Walking Mural (1972) and Instant Mural (1974), poked fun at muralism, the stereotypical brand of Mexican art as represented by painters like José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, thus calling attention to the cultural expectations ghettoizing Chicano art as “folk art.” In Asco’s first piece, Spray Paint LACMA/Project Pie in De/Face (1972), members tagged the outside entrance of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in protest of a curator who in a meeting with Gamboa to discuss the possibility of including Chicanos in future exhibitions explained that Chicanos were only capable of making folk art or graffiti.

Accordingly, we may read Asco’s Whittier Boulevard performances as examples of what the Internationale Situationniste, the primary journal of the Situationist International, calls détournement, defined as follows:

The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense, détournement within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres.13

10 Burnham, “Asco.”
By resignifying culturally loaded religious and muralist imagery through performance, Asco loosens up the meanings associated with such imagery so these meanings can be redeployed in more politically progressive ways. Although all art is strictly speaking unable to produce new meanings ex nihilo, by presenting the history of a people in a novel way Asco makes room for the potentially discordant multivocality of site.

The French scholar Michel de Certeau offers some theoretical traction for how we might think the multivocality of site. In The Practice of Everyday Life, de Certeau differentiates between place and space such that the former is “is the order (of whatever kind) in accordance with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence” and the latter “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables.”14 If space is so joined with the idea of flow, then a place only becomes a space if and when people use it. Therefore, “space is a practiced place.”15 To translate into the terms our present case, Whittier Boulevard could be used as a commercial corridor, a way of getting from A to B, or the setting of site-specific performances, to say nothing of the types of passage this route supported back when it was El Camino Real. Like all places, there is a historical residue here available for reactivation. Through their performances that brought the past into the present, Asco provides a way of thinking about how to make site-specific art when sites themselves have histories.

More directly, it may be that performance as an artistic medium is uniquely equipped to support the play of multiple meanings of a site in a way that the largely sculptural practices of Serra or Smithson cannot.16 Perhaps there’s something about performance that allows it to preserve the multivocality of site. This would accord well with previous studies of performance, such as the late José Esteban Muñoz’s Disidentifications. In one of his definitions of its eponymous term, Muñoz explains, “Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”17 To transpose Muñoz into our present terms, both identification and counteridentification, the two poles disidentification falls between, are univocal positions—the subject either simply assimilates to or simply rejects hegemonic ideology. Due to its intermediary position, to disidentify is to speak with at least two voices. Since “to disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject,” the disidentificatory subject speaks with both her own voice and that of another.18 It is unsurprising that artists from historically disenfranchised groups would opt for such a strategy.

Although one may not see oneself reflected in hegemonic culture, it would be too psychically painful to conclude that one simply has no place within one’s society. Disidentification is a survival strategy in which dominant culture is repurposed for other ends:

The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.19

Although disidentification is essentially the failure of the subject to fully inhabit hegemonic culture, within this failure lies a radical possibility. To disidentify is essentially no refuse to accept the world as it is and to imagine other possible worlds we might collectively bring into existence.20 Failure, then, only becomes failure within the context of a world that cannot at the moment supply the conditions under which this failure wouldn’t count as failure. In her reading of Asco in Abject Performances, Leticia Alvarado concludes, “we are invited, by dwelling on loss, absence, and failure, to imagine a form of collectivity that does not require consensus or singularity, which was often achieved at the exclusion of some of its members.”21 In this way, we might connect Asco’s performances to a politically progressive agenda. Perhaps by drawing out the multivocality of site through their performances, Asco allows us to map possible paths forward from our pasts to our potential futures that might result in a more egalitarian world than the one we have today.

Asco Contra Catholicism

Let us begin with a description of Asco’s Stations of the Cross (Figure 1) by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez, co-curators of Asco’s retrospective entitled Asco: Elite of the Obscure at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2011.

15 de Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, 117.
16 It may be that Rosalind Krauss’s “expanded field” of sculpture can now accommodate performance as well (e.g., a performance is a sculpture made with the body), but for present purposes I will use “performance” and “sculpture” with their conventional meanings (i.e., performances use the body, sculpture materials). Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” October 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44.
17 José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.
18 Muñoz, Disidentifications, 12.
19 Muñoz, Disidentifications, 31.
20 In this we can make sense of Muñoz’s ostensibly puzzling turn to futurity in his next major work: Cruising Utopia; our queer dissatisfaction with this world necessarily implies the possibility of a better future. José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
Asco's first public performance, *Stations of the Cross* was a morbid one-mile procession along Whittier Boulevard, the main thoroughfare through East Los Angeles, during the holiday season in 1971. Iconoclastically transforming the Mexican Catholic tradition of Las Posadas into a ritual of remembrance and resistance against the deaths in Vietnam, the procession consisted of Gamboa, Gronk, and Herrón, who carried a fifteen-foot cross that had been constructed out of cardboard and layered with paint. The final rite was held in front of the Marine Corps recruiting center where the costumed trio observed a ceremonial five minutes of silence before placing the cross at the door of the station and fleeing the scene.22

The Stations of the Cross is a Roman Catholic ritual that traces the *Via Dolorosa*, the path Christ is believed to have walked to Mount Calvary, where He was crucified. Consisting of fourteen scenes, the Stations begin with Pontius Pilate condemning Christ to death (Station One), climaxing with Christ dying on the cross (Station Eleven) and ends with Christ's entombment (Station Fourteen). The Stations of the Cross are effectively a reenactment of Christ's death, and hence of Christianity as a whole, which is based upon God sacrificing Himself in the form of Christ in order to redeem humanity. Understood in this way, the use of Catholic imagery in a protest against the Vietnam War becomes quite potent. Rather than Christ sacrificing Himself for the human race, *Stations of the Cross* references the Chicanos who sacrificed themselves for the US during their service in its military, a reading which strongly resonates with that of Leticia Alvarado, who suggests, "While we can read Pilate's actions as illustrating how government decisions about minority experience can be determined by a hostile majority, Gronk transforms Pilate's refusal to accept guilt into an act of insistent spectatorship."23

Although the Stations of the Cross are most commonly performed during the solemn liturgical season of Lent, the culmination of Lent on Good Friday is quickly followed by the joyfulness of Easter, the resurrection of Christ and hence the theological foundation of Christianity *tout court*. One of the most obvious differences between the death of Christ and the deaths of Chicano soldiers in Vietnam is that the latter will not come back to life. This fact is underscored by the *calaveras* makeup worn by the processers in *Stations of the Cross*, associated with neither Lent nor Easter but rather with the Mexican holiday *Día de Muertos*.24

Although the Stations of the Cross originated historically in religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem, *Día de Muertos* is an ideal example of the religious syncretism common during the colonization of the Americas. Originally *Día de Muertos* was a summer festival dedicated to Mictéacihuatl, the Aztec “Lady of the Dead.” Over time, however, *Día de Muertos* became associated with Allhallowtide (i.e., All Saints’ Eve, All Saints’ Day, and All Souls’ Day), a Roman Catholic triduum honoring the dead.25 Accordingly, we might understand the Chicano causalities during the Vietnam War as sacrifices without resurrections. By referencing the Stations of the Cross, Asco likens Chicano soldiers to Christ, but by adding the *calaveras* makeup, Asco also reminds us that these soldiers will not return from the dead. This interpretation is supported by the fact that *The Stations of the Cross* does not perform all 14 stations—we do not get to the crucifixion itself (Station 1), let alone the entombment (Station 14). The interruption of the cycle emphasizes that Chicano death has not been able to redeem the United States the way Christ’s death redeemed humanity; Chicano suffering remains merely Chicano suffering, without larger purpose in the world. Harry Gamboa, Jr. once “noted that ‘every day was Day of the Dead’ in East Los Angeles,” a proclamation combining extremity and ordinariness in a way we have come to associate with the work of theorist Lauren Berlant.26 But while Berlant refers to the condition of “slow death,” the deaths we witness here are not only slow—they are endless.27

But what is the added significance of *The Stations of the Cross* occurring on Whittier Boulevard? We might draw a parallel between the layering of Whittier Boulevard over sections of El Camino Real and the prior layering of El Camino Real over Indigenous lands. Perhaps Asco saw an analog between Spanish efforts to convert the Indigenous peoples of the Americas to Christianity and the United States’ efforts to garner support for the Vietnam War. In both cases a hegemonic group utilized their position of power in an attempt to replace the values of a weaker group with their own. This reading is supported by Asco’s decision to specifically target a Marine Corps recruiting center. The smallest branch of the United States Armed Forces, the Marines receive diverse training on land, at sea, and in the air. As the most elite military organization, the Marines arguably best represents the hope for upward mobility the military represents for many disadvantaged people of color, Chicanos among them.

By deploying both Catholic and Mexican imagery in *Stations of the Cross*, Asco critiques the Vietnam War through cultures predating the United States in this particular area, thus reminding the viewer this region was once Mexico and only became incorporated into the United States through complex socio-political processes.28 While there is some arbitrariness

24 *Día de Muertos* is the name of this holiday in Spanish and not *Día de los Muertos*, which is a translation of *Día de Muertos* into English and then back into Spanish.
25 Ironically, the more famous Roman Catholic triduum is the Paschal Triduum, consisting of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday.
28 The fact that *Stations of the Cross* occurred on Christmas Eve emphasizes this sense of temporal priority. If we understand Christianity as beginning on Christmas with Christ’s birth, then Christmas Eve is in a sense before Christianity, just as the *calaveras* makeup likewise references pre-Christian traditions, even if these traditions came to be thereafter incorporated into Christianity.
in the boundaries of most countries, the United States–Mexico border perhaps seems especially arbitrary due to both how quickly and decisively it changed with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn has cited as the beginning of Mexican-American dispossession in the Southwestern US.29

With Stations of the Cross, Asco asks how much sense it makes for Chicanos to support a country that arguably hasn’t had the best interests of Mexicans at heart since at least 1848, and probably earlier. By turning Whittier Boulevard into a modern-day Via Dolorosa, Stations of the Cross seems to warn Chicanos going to the Marine recruiting center of the fate awaiting those who too easily forget how the United States has historically treated them. Although Asco scholar C. Ondine Chavoya correctly states, “Stations of the Cross conceptually, if not efficaciously, staged an urban disturbance to symbolically block any further Chicanos from enlisting at the center that day,” it is also important to bear in mind how Asco got to that center.30

By mimicking the actual Via Dolorosa, Asco does not merely symbolically prevent Chicanos from enlisting in the military. Much like the ritual after which it is named, the strange procession of Stations of the Cross invites onlookers to engage in the sort of reflection characterizing the Stations in their original Roman Catholic iteration. Many onlookers in predominantly Chicano East Los Angeles would have been familiar with Catholic rituals like the Stations of the Cross and probably wouldn’t have mistaken it for an actual religious procession due to the time of year it occurred. Onlookers would merely need to follow Asco to understand the gesture, as the five minutes of silence at the Marine Corps recruiting center would surely have been understood as an act of protest at such a politically charged historical moment.

Exactly three years after Stations of the Cross, on 24 December 1974, Asco performed First Supper (After a Major Riot) (Figure 2) on a traffic island at the intersection of Whittier Boulevard and Arizona Street during rush hour. This particular intersection was significant because it “had been built over a particularly bloody site of the East Los Angeles riots as part of an urban ‘redvelopment’ project in 1973.”31 Of the piece, Chavoya writes, “Beyond identifying the site as a spatial symbol of subordination, First Supper (After a Major Riot) enacts a counterspectacle to mitigate its transformation into a non-place and spectacle of historical amnesia.”32

The terms “spectacle” and “non-place” reference an epigraph from French anthropologist Marc Augé with which Chavoya begins the section of “Internal Exiles,” one of Chavoya’s early essays on Asco, which discusses First Supper (After a Major Riot). It runs: “The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude. There is no room for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle.”33 Yet if the goal of First Supper (After a Major Riot) were to counteract historical amnesia, then why would Asco not try to leave a more permanent mark, as in their graffiti work Spray Paint LACMA/Project Pie in De/Face (1972)? And why is there no imagery that recalls the previous riot of 1973?

Rather than narrowly interpreting First Supper (After a Major Riot) as an anti-gentrification protest, I would like to propose that First Supper (After a Major Riot) situates the aforementioned riot of 1973 as but one example in a broader history of oppression throughout what is sometimes called “greater Latin America.” In addition to occurring in a “non-place,” we could also describe First Supper (After a Major Riot) as presenting Chicanos as a “non-people.” If Augé’s “non-place” is characterized by its inability to sustain “singular identity” or “relations,” a “non-people” might be described as a people perceived as not capable of sustaining such identities and relations, a depersonalized people. In other words, a non-people is a people denied the right of being fully human.34 In this sense First Supper (After a Major Riot) is a first supper rather than a last supper because it represent the first time this particular (non-)space has become a place; that is, this is the first time this space has been memorialized, thus separating it from all other places, which possess different meanings, and from all other spaces, which do not possess meanings at all.

If we accordingly view First Supper (After a Major Riot) as representing a non-people, much of the rest of the work begins to make more sense, such as the puzzling presence of Gronk’s 1973 painting The Truth About the Terror in Chile in the performance. In their essay for the Elite of the Obscure exhibition catalogue, Chavoya and Gonzalez argue the painting connects “the repressive regime to Augusto Pinochet to the political injustices that the Chicano population experienced in the barrio and the various means through which Chicano activism was suppressed by police, infiltration, and defensive urban planning.”35 Looking more closely at The Truth About the Terror in Chile, we see a humanoid form without head, hands, feet, or even clear genitalia. The most likely referents for this painting are the Chileans “disappeared” after the 1973 Chilean coup d’état that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power.

While we ought not to downplay the suppression of Chicano activism by the “police, infiltration, and defensive urban planning” faced by Chicanos in East Los Angeles, this reading of First Supper (After a Major Riot) suggests that perhaps the deeper problem is that Chicanos are seen as less than fully human, thus justifying such treatment. By connecting

31 Chavoya, “Internal Exiles,” 196.
32 Chavoya, “Internal Exiles,” 196.
34 This idea is similar to philosopher Judith Butler’s concept of “ungrievable life.” Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (New York: Verso, 2004).
moments of forgetting in Los Angeles and Chile, Asco reveals dehumanization as a broader problem affecting multiple contingents of greater Latin America, thus necessitating a response that takes a larger historical view rather than one myopically focusing on the present. This results in a less naïve political theory than what more presentist interpretations of Asco’s performances would produce.

In this light, the Catholic imagery of First Supper (After a Major Riot) and Stations of the Cross takes on a new significance. If Asco’s art indeed critiques the status of Chicanos as a non-people, then invocation of Catholicism isn’t merely Asco’s parroting their cultural surroundings, but rather an attempt to remind viewers that Mexican Americans in current day California did not always have a hyphenated identity, since all that is now California was once Mexico. Like any city, Los Angeles consists of layer upon sedimented layer, with the upper layers more readily accessible rather than lower layers. At the intersection of Whittier Boulevard and Arizona Street where First Supper (After a Major Riot) was performed, one of these metaphorical upper layers is the aforementioned anti-gentrification riot of 1973, while one of these metaphorical lower layers could be El Camino Real.

Considering how First Supper (After a Major Riot) compares 1970s Los Angeles to 1970s Chile, it seems one can move not only “vertically” through these layers (i.e., across time), but also “horizontally” through them (i.e., across distance). Although the “disappearances” the Chilean government committed were directed against their ideological opponents rather than undifferentiated masses of people, as was more the case in Los Angeles, both the United States and Chile used forgetting as a political tool. Through its site-specificity and formal characteristics, First Supper (After a Major Riot) references three moments of forgetting: the erasure of the anti-gentrification protest of 1973, the erasure of a California in which people of Mexican descent were not a minority, and the erasure of individuals more generally throughout greater Latin America, such as in Pinochet’s Chile.

Asco Contra Muralism

On a Christmas Eve between Stations of the Cross and First Supper (After a Major Riot), Asco performed Walking Mural (Figure 3). As their continued preference for 24 December evidences, this work is very much a continued grappling with the legacies of Catholicism by Chicano communities. Indeed, this “mural,” as others, is chock full of religious imagery, from the beams and halos associated with hagiography to the embodiment of walker Patssi Valdez as Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. The first Marian apparition in the Americas, as well as the first morena Virgin, Our Lady of Guadalupe became an important religious and political symbol for Mexico, a seeming act of divine approval of the state. Devotion to Guadalupe is so fervent that some Mexican Catholics refer to themselves as Guadalupanos (“followers of Guadalupe”) rather than Catholics, despite the fact that it was the Catholic Church which canonized her.

But Valdez did not embody Guadalupe in any conventional sense. First, the Virgin has been transformed from a static object of adoration into a mobile corporeal body (or perhaps Valdez has merely returned to the original Mary, as human as any other). In effect, “Valdez freed the Virgen—physically and artistically—from her frozen prose, and, in effect, consciously enacted a ‘re-gendered’ contemporary apparition of her in East L.A.” With her classically bowed head and praying hands, the traditional presentation of the Virgen de Guadalupe presents us with an idealized submissive femininity. In contrast, Valdez is defiant, striding along Whittier Boulevard whereas the Virgin hovers on a moon held by an angel. For Valdez this détournement is purposeful. She admits, “at the time, it may have been seen as blasphemy, but I was reinterpreting the Virgen and I was not doing anything degrading to her. She is us and we are her. I was making her beautiful, glittery, and festive.” Valdez effectively carries the identification of Guadalupe with Mexico one step further, saying that if “she is us and we are her” then Mexicans should be able to refashion her.

And refashion she did. Glittery, goth, and glam, Valdez brought the Virgin into not only flesh and blood, but also into sexuality. A long slit would have revealed flashes of the artist’s legs as she walked. This style of dress was a recurrent one in Asco’s performances and had its roots in trends within Chicano fashion: “Barrio fashion, which is thrift shop fashion out of necessity as well as chic, is more theater than fashion.” While murals often dealt with “serious” themes of religion and politics, Walking Mural has a playfulness arguably in tension with the art form. In short, Walking Mural treats grave subjects with levity, a mismatch we may describe as lying at the heart of what Susan Sontag describes as “camp.” In her seminal “Notes on Camp,” Sontag writes, “Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not.” Through this disconnect, Asco imagines a future that doesn’t necessarily break with the past, but which reimagines this past with an eye toward bringing new futures into existence.

36 Working as they were during the era of liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Teología de la liberación was published in 1971 and translated into English in 1973), Asco could well have seen Catholicism as a potential political tool. Although they aren’t theologians, the members of Asco possessed deep knowledge of the histories and cultures of the Latin American diaspora. Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation, trans., Caridad Ina and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973).


41 Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Picador, 1966), 279.
This orientation to the past is evidenced by Gronk’s critique that “a lot of Latino artists went back in history for imagery. We wanted to stay in the present and find our imagery as urban artists and produce a body of work out of our sense of displacement.”42 Of course, Asco did go back in history for imagery, for what are Catholicism or muralism if not the history of Mexico and its diaspora? But there is also a sense in which Gronk’s statement is true; Asco’s art does not have the nostalgic feel of much of Chicano art movement, it is rooted in both the past and the present. At one moment, muralism did have a similar temporal orientation. Consider América Tropical: Oprimida y Destrozada por los Imperialismos (“Tropical America: Oppressed and Destroyed by Imperialism”) by David Alfaro Siqueiros. Painted in 1932 at Olvera Street, a Mexican themed attraction in downtown LA, the mural depicted a Mesoamerican pyramid in front of which an Indigenous person is crucified amid ruins. At the top of the cross is the American eagle we associate with the US and on one side are two Mexican revolutionary snipers.

As is probably unsurprising, the mural scandalized the officials who commissioned it and it was promptly whitewashed, though it has since been restored. At the time Siqueiros was working, muralism still had a political edge, not having yet congealed into the hard stereotypes that felt stifling to Asco. By walking the mural, Asco “advanced the convention of street murals from a static media to a moving performance medium,” thus calling attention to the expectations imprisoning them.43 It is quite fitting that the first of Asco’s artworks was Spray Paint LACMA/Project Pie in De/ Face. At the other end of the spectrum from folk art was the rigor of conceptualism and through Spray Paint LACMA Asco effectively makes the museum their art, a reversal that arguably has more in common with an artist like Marcel Broodthaers than it does with an artist like Siqueiros. With delicious irony, Spray Paint LACMA both confirms and disproves the curator who provoked the response by telling Asco members that Chicanos only made folk art and graffiti, since the piece is at once graffiti and (conceptual, rather than folk) art.44

Through Walking Mural, Asco breathes new life into a political aesthetic that had become stagnant. Although the omnipresence of Chicano murals on the walls of Los Angeles is ostensible evidence of the empowerment of Chicanos, their presence may have served more to provide the illusion the city was helping as the material conditions of Chicanos changed little if at all. For Leticia Alvarado, “the piece serves as a critique of the inactivity and resulting political ineffectuality of the mural form despite the permanent presence of murals on urban walls.”45 Chon Noriega offers a slightly different perspective: “Part of what [Asco] were saying was that the Mural Movement and the Chicano Art Movement had become as frozen as the ‘frozen revolution’ of Mexico that it was referencing, and that its icons had ceased to function in a flexible enough manner for either aesthetic or political ends.”46 Détournement allowed Asco to rechannel the symbolic capital invested in muralism toward more progressive ends. By bringing Chicano identity into conceptualism and vice versa, Asco built the very bridge they sought between East LA and the Anglo art world. Through their bodies, Asco became a metaphorical Whittier Boulevard, connecting their disadvantaged upbringings and communities to the fame and fortune that awaited them a few miles but also a world away.

Asco’s members were certainly not the only ones in search of this route, nor even the first. In the midst of their performances, the Chicano art collective Los Four produced the first exhibition of Chicano art at a major US museum. Originally composed of Frank Romero, Carlos Almaraz, Robert de la Rocha, and Gilbert Luján, Los Four’s art could have been seen at LACMA from 26 February to 24 March 1974. It is perhaps an even more exquisite irony that the same museum whose racist curator provided the impetus for Asco was responsible for this historic show. Although an extended analysis of Los Four will not be possible within the confines of this paper, some comparisons will be instructive. At first blush, Los Four appears to have a much less conflicted relationship with muralism than Asco. Certainly, Los Four is not simply reproducing muralism, but they are perhaps better characterized as updaters rather than true critics. Their paintings evoke the size of murals and contain a blend of the Mesoamerican imagery associated with the “big three” (Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros) and graffiti. We might describe Los Four as having a very triumphalist view of Chicano identity, as opposed to the more deconstructive stance of Asco. Indeed, it is arguably the fact that Los Four largely confirmed the expectations of the Anglo art world vis-à-vis Chicano art which accounts for their being the first Chicano artists to achieve mainstream art world acceptance.

In 1974, the same year Los Four breached LACMA, Asco conducted another performance critiquing muralism: Instant Mural (Figure 4). Also occurring along Whittier Boulevard, the work consisted of two members of Asco taped to a wall, thus producing an “instant mural.” The two remained affixed to the wall for about an hour as passersby asked them if they needed help. Like many of their performances, Instant Mural was very ephemeral, a tactic that Chavoya and Gonzalez describe as “one means for Asco to bypass the rigidity of muralism’s status as the proscribed and generative vehicle for artistic training, expression, and experience within the Chicano movement.”47 If Los Four utilized the expectations of the Anglo art world to catapult themselves to recognition, Asco felt these expectations to be stifling (Asco’s survey Elite of the Obscure didn’t occur until 2011—perhaps a consequence of their insistence on not conforming to the preconceptions of

42 quoted in Burnham “Asco,” 408.
44 See previous discussion of Spray Paint LACMA, above.
45 Alvarado, Abject Performances, 83.
47 Chavoya and Gonzalez, “Asco and the Politics of Revulsion,” 52.
institutional gatekeepers). By literally affixing their bodies to a wall, they corporeally express their enchantment by Chicano stereotypes, thus drawing out of muralism a stagnancy that was there all along.

We are now in a position to discuss the medium character of performance and why Asco might have felt drawn to it rather than the paintings associated with Mexican muralism and Los Four. Although it is certainly possible to make paintings or sculptures capable of movement or change, these are not the most intuitive characteristics of these mediums. Indeed, we would usually consider changes in these mediums degradation and by extension a deficiency of the work. In contrast, performance is almost synonymous with motion; the human body was made to move and it is both difficult and uncomfortable to stay still for too long. Performance, then, seems to be an ideal medium for those seeking to challenge the expectations and stereotypes that “hold” them in place. Performance also was an ideal way of expressing the interests Asco had in fashion, which was also related to the distance between the Anglo and Chicano worlds of Los Angeles. Although Asco sought the recognition of the art world, they rejected the terms on which this recognition was most readily available (i.e., bowing to Chicano stereotypes in a way we might describe Los Four as doing). Similarly, Asco was also attracted to the glam rock aesthetic without possessing the resources needed to fully embody this ideal. Asco’s barrio glam and performances demonstrate their desire to do it their own way, even when they shared the goals of Anglo society.

Despite their critical approach, Asco does not reject Chicano identity. When asked about her relationship with Chicano art, Valdez responds, “It is Chicano art because Chicanos did it. What else can it be since they’ve always lived in the area. It’s just in them. Anything you draw just comes out Chicano.” We witness here a return to the body. Rather than aligning Chicano art with some sort of content or approach as in the cases of Los Four and muralism, this quote returns to the question of community. If culture has no existence outside of a community, then those within a community should be able to change it, just as Valdez understood it as within her purview to resignify Our Lady of Guadalupe in Walking Mural. It is, however, clear how this would interrupt of mindset of those outside of the community. As non-Chicanos, Anglos/as only see this world from the outside and hence as belonging to a sort of timeless traditionalism. The oldest essentialist trick is the belief the Other never changes.

The Site Speaks

Where does all of this leave us? Theoretically, Asco provides a model for how site-specific art might be made in a way that allows the multiple voices of a site to speak. To return now to the idea of the multiplicity of meaning, de Certeau writes that “to plan a city is both to think the very plurality of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural effective; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it.” The linkage of space and practice means it is only at the moment of initial imagination that there is anything like univocity. It is conceivable there was once someone who designed a place and who thus anticipated its users behaving a certain way. This designer may install features within the place to encourage some uses and discourage others. Nevertheless, to create a place is not to control it and everyone is free to use places either as intended or find new ways of being within the place, thus transforming it into a space.

While de Certeau allows us to understand how a place might support multiple practices at the same time, the concept of practice also opens us up to think about change over time. Perhaps usage of a place hewed closer to the intentions of its creator near its creation, only to drift thereafter. Or perhaps unorthodox practices started to grow from the outset, due to unanticipated persons coming to the place or an incomplete knowledge of the expected audience. In either case, the combination of the passage of time with the variety of humanity produces a situation wherein different groups pursue different practices in the same place for different lengths of time, some holding onto practices long after others have abandoned them and others initiating new practices that will seem strange to those around them.

In this way, practice is also indissociable from narrative. If practice is the perspective of the third-person outsider, then narrative is the perspective of the first-person insider. While it is commonplace to think of narratives linguistically, narratives are also spatial; they unfold in space. By extension, a space not only supports spatial practices, but also narrative practices. De Certeau’s words, “Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.” This interpretation is paralleled by the French langue/parole distinction de Certeau draws upon earlier in the book: “Gilbert Ryle, borrowing Saussure’s distinction between ‘langue’ (a system) and ‘parole’ an act, compared the former to a fund of capital and the latter to the operations it makes possible: on the one hand, a stock of materials, on the other, transactions and uses.”

In this case, langue is the clear analog of space. Although languages are admittedly unlike places in that they are always collective products, a langue is similar to a place in that it provides certain rules of the game that players may choose to obey or break. As an organizing principle, it is not possible to see the whole of a langue at once. We do not witness “language,” but individual speech-acts, or parole. Parole is langue in action. Like space, parole is language as flow, not structure. As such, we might imagine places as making possible not only different types of motion, but also different narratives. Just as langue encompasses all possible paroles (even violations of norms derive their significance from the norms so violated), so too does a place hold within it the potential for the entire range of narratives within which it


49 de Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, 94.

50 de Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, 115.

51 de Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, 32–3.
might be implicated.

Like a trail in the woods, certain spatial narratives may come to feel quite “natural” through frequency of use, though it is of course nigh impossible to say which of these will come to be so privileged (thus justifying the use of scare quotes). Other spatial narratives may fall by the wayside, atrophying through lack of use; a process that could be exacerbated when new places come to supersede older ones. Nevertheless, even without an anchoring place, spatial practices may be bodily or imaginatively remembered by those who once engaged with the space.

By bringing Asco into conversation with the New York school artists classically associated with site-specificity and discussed by Miwon Kwon in One Place after Another, we can begin to sketch a critique of site-specificity via Asco. Although motivated by an ostensibly democratic impulse (i.e., allowing the site to enter into the meaning of art rather than serving as a mere stage for it), the New York breed of site-specificity could be interpreted as having swerved into a control complex, in which the artist decides how she wishes to invite the site into her work. We might describe Asco as working alongside site rather than atop it, insofar as they refuse to prioritize one and only one meaning of a site, but allow its multiple voices to speak, admittedly producing an effect at times cacophonous. The question we are left with is whether cacophony is the risk of democracy, and whether this risk is one we are nevertheless willing to take.

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Bibliography


Figure 1. Asco, Stations of the Cross, 1971, performance, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Seymour Rosen.
Figure 2 Asco, *First Supper* (After a Major Riot), 1974, performance, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Seymour Rosen.
Figure 3. Asco, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, 1972, performance, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Harry Gamboa, Jr.

Export Paintings or trade paintings commonly refer to pictorial works that depict indigenous images across a variety of subject matters including people, landscapes, and objects with the purpose of being sold to foreign customers and overseas markets. Export paintings were typically made between the eighteenth century and the early twentieth century in so-called “non-western” nations such as China, Korea, India, and the Philippines.1 Such products emerged with the expansion of international trade between those nations and the Euro-American countries. Such products were purchased by foreign travelers and circulated in their home countries, introducing the “unknown” world to Euro-Americans.

Export paintings are often understood to reveal exoticized views of so-called “western” visitors toward “non-western” countries by unveiling the modernistic practices that emphasized racial, cultural, and national differences. Local painters are known to have incorporated requests of Euro-American customers and reflected their taste when creating such imageries. Because of this, export paintings are often attested as instillations of Orientalist ideologies with the claim of self-objectification of one’s culture. However, it can be simplistic to generalize export paintings of multiple nations through one framework without considering different social, historical, and artistic journeys that the countries took. To explore various ways to view the genre of export paintings, this paper discusses Chinese and Korean export paintings and compares their trajectories in scholarship, commercial history, and subject matters. In doing so, this paper aims to highlight the roles of export painters who responded to the fluctuating periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in China and Korea.

Chinese export paintings, or “wai xiao hua” in Chinese, are discussed and displayed more than export paintings of other countries, mainly due to their extensive production and wide circulation. Scholars first studied export paintings as part of the overarching history of Chinese export art that included porcelain and furniture which had been popularly sold to foreign countries since the sixteenth century. For the past few decades, scholars have researched Chinese export paintings as an independent topic and have interpreted them either as depictions of what foreigners wanted to see or “documents that provided an insight into the local traditions, customs and daily life.”2 However, the recent scholarship strives to challenge the prevailing notions and to implement different methodologies in studying the genre. For instance, Guangdong Museum’s publication discusses Chinese export paintings within the commercial and manufacturing history of other export commodities.3 Highlighting the intricate qualities of Chinese export paintings, contemporary scholars also urge to shift the understanding of the objects from mere historical records to creative artworks as Hongsheng Cai states such works were not “vulgar” but “elegance.”4

Compared to Chinese export paintings, Korean export paintings, “su-chul-hwa” in Korean, have been studied considerably less as a comprehensive research topic, leaving a large gap in the scholarship on the genre. The research on Korean export paintings is heavily focused on one export painter, Kim Jun-geun (active late nineteenth century), whose works illustrate the daily lives of Korean people (Figure 1). Scholars have surveyed a wide range of Kim’s paintings and stressed their popularity amongst Euro-American consumers. More recently, scholars began to pay considerable attention to colonialist and Orientalist narratives that were projected by Euro-American imperialists and embedded in Kim’s images.5 According to Shin Sunyoung, Kim’s paintings were used by “westerners” to assert their racial superiority and pursue a mission to “civilize” the people of the “non-west.”6 As such, it is widely construed that Korean export paintings are consequences of the imperialist initiatives of “the west” that purposefully accentuated vulgar imageries of working-class commoners in a “non-western” country. Although this remains a viable interpretation, it should not be the sole approach to studying the complex layers intertwined in export paintings produced by Kim Jun-geun and other Korean painters from the late nineteenth century. Rather, the commercial history of Korean export paintings needs to be discussed whilst paying attention to the artistic quality of each artwork.

The comparison of the commercial history of Chinese and Korean export paintings allows evaluating the extent to

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1 Although I try to best avoid using the terms “western” and “non-western,” I intentionally use the terms in quotation marks when discussing and/or questioning the epistemology.


3 Victoria and Albert Museum et al., 18-19 shi ji Yangcheng feng wu: Yingguo Weidao liya Abote bo wu yuan cang Guangzhou wai xiao hua [Souvenir from Canton: Chinese export paintings from the Victoria and Albert Museum] (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu han she, 2003); and Guangdong Sheng bo wu guan, Yi qu tong hui : Guangdong Sheng bo wu guan cang qing dai wai xiao yi shu jing pin ji [Chinese export fine art in the Qing Dynasty from Guangdong Museum] (Guangzhou: Ling nan nan mei shu chu ban she, 2010), 13–17.


which foreigners influenced the export painting industry in each country. The production of Chinese export paintings started in port cities in China, such as Guangzhou, Macao, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, when the country’s commercial trade with Europe and America was flourishing in the mid-eighteenth century. Due to this historical background, Euro-Americans who visited and lived in China have been typically regarded as the major players in the development of export paintings, especially with the projection of their taste and the selection of subject matters. Marcia Reed notes that export paintings “depicted Chinese subjects in a manner adapted to Western taste and expectations.” Craig Clunas also states that export paintings “do not reflect Chinese artists’ own aesthetic norms” and “were produced solely for foreign customers.” However, although these assertions underline the customer-object relationship, it is important to think about the position of foreigners in eighteenth-century Guangzhou where the export painting market first emerged in China.

The distinctive setting of eighteenth-century Chinese trade and commerce indicates that foreigners may have had less impact on the production of Chinese export paintings than what is generally construed. In the mid-eighteenth century, Guangzhou became the central place for production and sales of export commodities because the Chinese government designated it as the sole port city that allowed foreign countries to operate trade in accordance with the single-port policy of 1757. Since then, other sets of restrictions were put forth, controlling the commercial activities of foreigners in the land of China. For instance, foreign officers had to stay in a small district to the north of Guangzhou by a factory area called Thirteen Hong Street, where cargoes of foreign companies, mostly European, were collected and distributed (Figure 2). Chinese merchants, also known as Hong merchants, owned the factory buildings and the land in the area and oversaw both commercial and daily activities of foreign traders to maintain their good behaviors in the country. Paul Van Dyke even asserts that Europeans had no control over what was to be purchased or sold in Guangzhou, which was far different from how foreigners typically maintained dominant roles in most of the port cities in other Asian countries.11

Contrary to the Qing court’s proactive, authoritative role in the eighteenth-century trade scene, the court of Joseon Korea (1392–1910) could not exert such power when parleying with foreign nations in the nineteenth century. Abandoning its long-standing so-called isolationist position, groups of Joseon officials urged to expand its diplomatic and commercial relationships with foreign countries. While Korea held a lukewarm attitude towards the interchange of goods, services, and technologies with foreign countries, such as Japan and France, frequently appeared on the coasts of Korea. They plundered and initiated gunfire to the territory of Korea at times. Under such military pressure, Joseon finally conferred and agreed to sign the Treaty of Ganghwa, also known as the Japan–Korea Treaty in 1876. In accordance with the fifth article in the treaty, Joseon opened the ports of Wonsan and Incheon in addition to that of Busan to Japan. Euro-American countries, including France, Britain, Germany, and the United States, also established treaties with Joseon, resulting in the opening of the ports to those countries as well. These historical events are often discussed as the main impetus for the beginning of export paintings in Korea, as suggested that Korean export painting is commonly described as the art of the port-opening era.

The series of treaties between Korea and foreign nations embraced less restrictive regulations on foreigners’ activities in Korea compared to the rules applied to foreigners in China in the eighteenth century. For instance, according to the second clause of the fourth article in the United Kingdom–Korean Treaty of 1883, “British subjects shall have the right to rent or to purchase land or houses, and to erect dwelling, warehouses, and factories.” The sixth clause of the same article also states that “British subjects shall be allowed to go where they please without passports within a distance of 100 Corean li [approximately twenty-six miles] from any of the ports and places open to trade.” With the relative freedom to live, travel, and operate businesses in the Korean peninsula, foreigners might have been able to intimately engage with residents and artists and make close observations of their domestic lives. Possibly due to this reason, large volumes of Korean export paintings consist of detailed depictions of daily scenes of Korean people. In all likelihood, foreigners would have been able to exert impact on the selection of subject matters in Korean export paintings, although such interpretation needs further examination.

Comparing the history of early trading with foreigners in China and Korea, it is analyzed that export paintings of the two nations developed in varying conditions. In eighteenth-century China, foreign individuals were not likely able to actively negotiate their power to reflect their tastes and demands in

7 Marcia Reed, “A Perfume is Best from Afar: Publishing China for Europe” in China on Paper: European and Chinese Works from the Late Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century, ed. Marcia Reed and Paola Dematte (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute), 22
10 Paul A. Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok, Images of Canton Factories 1760–1822: Reading History in Art (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), xv–xvi.
11 Paul A. Van Dyke, Merchants of Canton and Macao: Success and Failure in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 1.
the making of export paintings given the restrictions they faced. They could not freely leave the restricted area that was assigned to them and were not able to control what was to be sold for the export market in Guangzhou. On the other hand, the treaty documents between Korea and other countries from the late nineteenth century indicate that foreigners were able to travel around the country and live with the Korean population.\(^\text{15}\) Within the circumstance, they could enjoy more freedom to interact with local people, possibly including export painters who would be able to produce images that foreign customers wanted. Whether this can be seen as an adaptation of “western tastes and ideologies” remains a question to be answered.

In addition to investigating the status of foreigners during the time of the production of export paintings, it is instrumental to look at the commercializing methods of export paintings in China and Korea. The export painting market in China cannot be discussed without mentioning New China Street in Guangzhou. Under the government order, a marketplace for foreigners was newly formed near the factory area in 1760. The street was called “New Street” or “New China Street.”\(^\text{16}\) It became the central place where export painting studios were populated and where foreign customers visited to purchase export paintings. The street scenes were popular subject matters depicted by both Chinese and European artists, as found in the rendering of the studio of the renowned export painter Tingqua (active 1840–1870), located on New China Street (Figure 3). In the image, multiple artists are working in the painting studio, showing the workshop-style production system of export paintings. It is recorded that export artists collaboratively produced images as one artist focused on each element in the paintings, such as trees, figures, and houses.\(^\text{17}\) Considering the highly centralized marketplace and production system for export paintings, it is worth presuming the role of the Chinese government in producing and disseminating export paintings by providing a platform where Chinese artists could engage with Euro-American buyers. Later, export painting markets began to spread to other cities, such as Macao, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, with the expansion of new trade routes throughout the country and the revision of trade regulations. Therefore, a wider variety of export paintings from the regions became available for purchase.

Unlike the Chinese export painting market, which left a wealth of visual and textual resources, there is little information known about where exactly export paintings were made and sold in Korea. Nonetheless, it can be assumed by looking at the popular marketplaces of the time and the cities where export painters lived and worked. Marketplaces for foreigners were formed in port cities such as Incheon, Wonsan, and Busan, that were newly opened in Korea in the late nineteenth century. Kim Jun-geun is known to have been active in Wonsan as many of his paintings bear the inscription, “Kim Jun-geun of Wonsan.”\(^\text{18}\) In addition, American ethnographer Stewart Culin (1858–1929) wrote that Kim was an artist in the village of Choryang near Busan in his book that included Kim’s illustrations.\(^\text{19}\) In Choryang, there was a settlement for Chinese nationals with the Qing consulate established in 1884. Therefore, it is presumable that Kim Jun-geun may have learned about Chinese export paintings, which had been already produced for about a century, through Chinese immigrants living in the neighborhood. Culin also recorded that Kim’s illustrations included in his book were “executed in 1886 upon the order of Miss Shufeldt, daughter of Rear Admiral R. W. Shufeldt, U. S. N.”\(^\text{20}\) This implies that Kim possibly moved between the port cities where he could meet new clients and gain resources for his export painting business.

It seems that export paintings were made and sold not only in the port cities but also in the capital of Korea, Hanyang (present-day Seoul). It is recorded in the Report of the National Museum that twenty-eight drawings by Han Jinwoo (dates unknown) were collected in Seoul, Korea, in 1885.\(^\text{21}\) The object provenance indicates that the twenty-eight works by Han Jinwoo cost 200 ryang (currency of Joseon), which was not cheap at the time.\(^\text{22}\) Although the original works are missing, the copies show that Han replicated the popular genre paintings by the celebrated eighteenth-century painter Kim Hongdo (1745–after 1806) (Figure 4).\(^\text{23}\) Many Korean export paintings were purchased and collected individually rather than being exported in large quantities. Because of this, scholars often argue that Korean examples should not

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16 Paul A. Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok, Images of Canton Factories, xviii.
18 Wonsan is a port city on the eastern side of the Korean peninsula.
20 Culin, Korean Games, v.
21 The drawings were collected by J. B. Bernadou (1858–1894) who was sent to Korea as a US naval officer and collected ethnographic and visual materials at the request of the Smithsonian Institute in the United States. For more information about J. B. Bernadou’s activities and the anthropological collecting scenes in nineteenth-century Korea, see Robert Oppenheim, “Anthropological Collecting Networks in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea,” in An Asian Frontier: American Anthropology and Korea, 1882–1945, ed. Robert Oppenheim (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 46–72.
be called “export paintings.”

There may be another term to better describe the object type, but the categorization of “export art,” such as export porcelain and export furniture, has been widely used regardless of the modes of commerce and production. In addition, Chinese export paintings were also often sold individually and made-to-orders. Therefore, the term “Korean export paintings” continues to be used in this paper despite the existing debate.

In the initial phases when export paintings first developed in China and Korea, the formation of new marketplaces for export commodities allowed painters to meet foreign clients and artists and exchange information. The Chinese export painting market was operated with a more centralized system led by the Qing government. The government also attracted many export painters to New China Street with the establishment of artists’ studios, which enabled the mass-production of Chinese export paintings. Compared to this, the Korean export painting market was loosely organized in multiple locations of marketplaces where export painters moved around to find more opportunities to sell artworks. Both modes of production and business operation suggest that local artists actively participated in the art-making business, seeking to maximize the profits under different circumstances. This also implies that local artists played an agentive role in the markets of export paintings in China and Korea.

In Korea, genre paintings by eighteenth-century masters such as Kim Hongdo and Shin Yunbok (1758–1814?), were copied by nineteenth-century artists and often sold overseas. In addition to the example by Han Jinyou mentioned above, the British Museum houses a genre painting album completed by a monk painter Mun Hyesan (active 1875–1930) (Figure 4). This work is a copy of Kim Hongdo’s celebrated genre painting album. Mun put his own seal, manifesting his claim as the artist of the album. Such an action suggests that these kinds of images were not considered copies but works of art made with the learning of old imageries at the time.

The late-nineteenth-century painting series created by a Korean artist in the collection of the GRASSI Museum of Ethnography in Leipzig is another example that combined the styles of eighteenth-century masters, such as Kim Hongdo and Kim Deukshin (1754–1822), with contemporaneous painting techniques (Figure 6). One painting in the series that portrays a scholar on horseback being accompanied by a servant displays an analogy to Kim Hongdo’s tranquil depiction of a similar scene (Figure 7). One can find repetitive components such as the composition of descending figures and the inclusion of the nightingales on the trees, albeit with differences in specific details and stylistic approaches. At the end of the inscription in the nineteenth-century painting, the artist added a descriptive phrase in classical Chinese, writing "gimaja," meaning a horseman. The seal of hwasu may refer to the artist’s pen name, but it is unknown who the artist was. This painting insinuates a stylistic feature of nineteenth-century Korean paintings that combined a contemporaneous technique that colored certain elements vividly with a well-known subject matter from the eighteenth century.

Such an attempt to reference old imageries can be found in Chinese export paintings as well. One of the examples is a painting album depicting labor scenes such as weaving and tilling, in rural areas of China. Copying the styles of Song-dynasty (960–1279) paintings of weaving and tilling, labor genre paintings were actively commissioned by Qing emperors “as a means to substantiate in permanence the dynasty’s dedication to a classically informed, prosperous, and benevolent reign” in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as stated by Roslyn Lee Hammers. Eighteenth-century export paintings similarly illustrated such scenes, alluding to the possibility that the images may have been encouraged by the Qing government to promote its stability and diligence to viewers in other countries. There are similarities in the composition and the layout when comparing the nineteenth-century export painting by Wu Jun (dates unknown) (Figure 8) with one of the woodblock prints from Imperially Composed Pictures of Tilling and Weaving made by court painter Jiao Bingzhen (1689–1726) under the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722; reigned 1662–1722) (Figure 9). The painting by Wu Jun replicates the use of architectural elements for the image composition as shown in the eighteenth-century woodblock print by Jiao Bingzhen. Moreover, Wu Jun’s version embodies an even more idealized depiction of the weaving scene with the rendering of a more refined and decorative building compared to the humble setting illustrated in the work by Jiao Bingzhen. Chinese export artists modified certain elements possibly to make the images more appealing to foreign customers who wanted to see an idealized image of China. Although such a copying method can be seen as diminishing the originality of an artwork, export paintings that replicate or make references to earlier artworks reveal local artists’ in-depth understanding of traditional paintings and painting techniques. If one evaluates export paintings based on the originality and the rarity of artwork, they may fail to properly measure the artistic value and the rich history embedded with Chinese and Korean export paintings.

This comparative study of Korean and Chinese export paintings expands the scholarly discussion on Korean export paintings that have been limitedly interpreted within a theoretical lens. In the period of such uncertainty, artists of both Chinese and Korean export paintings did not simply embrace foreign customers’ interests and requests but rather employed a variety of methods to create and sell their artworks more effectively and efficiently. They integrated stylistic approaches, techniques, and subject matters rooted


in the long-lasting visual traditions of China and Korea with the combination of multiple sources that were available at the time. Therefore, export paintings should not be separated as “low” or “commercial” art distinguished or separated from “high” or “elite” art and need to be discerned in the broader context of East Asian art history. Back to my original question—whether export paintings are images of self-objectification with the instillation of Orientalist ideologies—I assert that export paintings were not consequences of such theoretical dialogues but timely responses to the period with the influxes of various people, objects, and ideologies, which coexisted with what had been already there. I further argue that such excessive focus on the theoretical interpretation of export paintings often undermines the artistic value of the objects and the agency of the makers.

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Bibliography


Figure 1: Kim Jun-geun (Korean, Dates unknown), Seesaw, late nineteenth century, ink and color on silk, 28.2 x 46 cm (11 x 18 in). National Folk Museum of Korea. Image: National Museum of Korea/E-Museum.
Figure 2: Attributed to Guan Zuolin (Spoilum; Chinese, active 1765–1805), *A Close View of the Foreign Factories* (Detailed), about 1807, oil on canvas. Hong Kong Museum of Art. Image: Wikipedia Creative Common.
Figure 3: The studio of Tingqua (Guan Lianchang; Chinese, active 1840–1870), *Shop of Tingqua*, about 1830, gouache on paper, 18 x 26 cm (7 x 10.2 in). Peabody Essex Museum. Image: Wikipedia Creative Common.
Figure 4: W. H. Chandlee (American, 1865–1955), *Copies of Han Jinwoo’s Genre Drawings*, about 1886 (original drawings were made before or in 1885). Image: Otis T. Mason, “Corea by Native Artists,” *Science* vol. 8, no. 183 (August 1886), 116.

Figure 5: Mun Hyesan (Korean, active 1895–1910), *Genre painting album* (detail), late nineteenth or early twentieth century, ink and color on paper, album: 36.1 x 32.2 cm (14.2 x 12.6 in); leaf: 32.2 x 24.5 cm (12.6 x 9.6 in). The British Museum.
Figure 6: Korean artist (unknown), *Genre Painting*, nineteenth century, ink and color on paper, 64.4 x 42.1 cm (25.4 x 16.5 in). GRASSI Museum of Ethnography in Leipzig.
Figure 7: Kim Hongdo (Korean, 1745–after 1806), *Listening on Horseback to a Nightingale Singing*, late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century, ink and color on paper, 117 x 52.2 cm (46 x 20.5 in). Kansong Art Museum. Image: Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea.
Figure 8: Wu Jun (Chinese, dates unknown), Preparing Warp Yarns, 1870–1890, watercolor and ink on paper, 41 cm x 30.3 cm (16.1 x 11.9 in). Victoria and Albert Museum.
The Reader in the Cosmos: Maps and Mnemonics in a Manuscript of Goussoin de Metz’s L’image du monde [BnF.ms.fr.574]

Sam Truman

In a pair of small diagrams, two men set out on an imagined journey around the world (Figure 1). They venture in opposite directions—one goes left, while the other goes right—until finally they meet, upside down, at the lower edge of the earth. These diagrams are some of many that populate a fourteenth-century manuscript of Goussoin de Metz’s L’image du monde, currently held in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF.fr.574). The Image, an encyclopedia originally composed in the mid-thirteenth century, was intended by its author to be used as a tool through which one might come to know God by knowing his creations. The manuscript, likely painted in Paris around 1320 for Guillaume Flote (1280–1366), advisor to Philip IV and chancellor of France, is a luxurious copy containing a prose redaction of Goussoin’s original poetic text accompanied by a number of detailed miniatures. Twenty-eight of these are diagrams that play an integral role in the didactic function of the Image; Goussoin himself states that the book could not be easily understood without them. Throughout the text, he frequently pauses his narrative to direct the reader to a particular figure, where complicated ideas are carefully detailed and visualized.

Although maps and diagrams have constituted a large part of the study of medieval memory, the figures in the Image have not yet been considered within this context. I argue that these images should be understood primarily as mnemonic devices that work to construct and reinforce the reader’s place within the broad system of creation. I begin by briefly discussing the place of the Image within the broader context of the medieval encyclopedic tradition. I then consider how diagrams work to create, store, and convey information. With this contextual information established, I turn to the manuscript itself, proposing three possible ways of reading or engaging with the diagrams of BnF 574. Finally, I conclude by considering how previous owners’ interactions with the book may have worked to incorporate them into the complicated world of Goussoin’s cosmography.

1 Special thanks to Professor Elina Gertsman for her guidance and support over the course of this project. I would also like to thank Alex, Reed, Mia, and Elliot for their invaluable insight and encouragement. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the Florida State University department of Art History for giving me the opportunity to publish my research on this topic.

2 Henceforth: BnF 574.

3 By the work one might know the worker. “Car par les œuvres connoist on l’ouvrer et comment il peut ester.” Oliver H. Prior, L’image du Monde, Translatio studii, and Vernacular Narrative,” Viator, no. 2 (2013), 142.

4 “Ce livre de clergie, que l’en apelle l’ymage dou monde, qui est translatez de latin en rommanz, contient LV chapistres et XXVIII figures, sanz quoi li livres ne porroiet estre lievement entenduz.” Prior, L’image, 57.

1. The Manuscript in Context

The Image du Monde, the earliest known vernacular encyclopedia produced in western Europe, holds an important place in the medieval encyclopedic tradition. The work was written around 1245 in the Lorraine dialect and spans 6,586 lines of rhymed octosyllabic verse. Likely because of its accessible language and format, the Image quickly became popular, and a prose redaction soon followed. In addition to multiple French editions, the text was also translated into English in the 1480s by William Caxton and continued to circulate into the sixteenth century. Today more than two hundred manuscript copies of the Image are known to exist.

The “encyclopédisme” of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, marked by a rapidly growing interest in the collection and cultivation of knowledge, sets the stage for the Image’s composition. The Fourth Lateran Council, held in 1215, which considered the education of both clerics and the laity to be a crucial part of the curam animarum, the care of the soul, exemplifies education’s importance during this period. Throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries, scholarly centers began coalescing in cities like Bologna, Oxford, and Paris, where learning flourished in newly founded universities. The twelfth century also saw a significant shift in the information available to western European scholars, as works in both Greek and Arabic


7 The first prose redaction is attributed to Goussoin himself. Other redactions, including a second verse edition that greatly expands on the original, are less securely attributed. Prior details the debates surrounding these many redactions in his edition, Prior, L’image, 18–25.


10 Concilium Lateranense IV, can. xi, in Concilio rum Oecumenicoorum Decreta (Basel, et al., 162), 216.

were translated into Latin for the first time. Along with this expansion of resources came a growing desire to understand the world as part of a grand system. Goussoin based the text of the Image on a variety of authoritative sources ranging from Latin antiquity to contemporaneous vernacular narratives. The most significant of these is Honorius Augustodunensis’s Image Mundi, a popular twelfth-century encyclopedia that combines geography, cosmology, and world history. Other sources include Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Augustine. However, unlike works such as Isidore of Seville’s famous Etymologiae, the Image does not purport to be a totalizing repository of knowledge but instead a specialized collection focused on geography and astronomy.

The Image maintains the traditional hierarchical organization that marks most medieval encyclopedias while mimicking the order of creation—both beginning and ending with God. In the preface, Goussoin insists that his audience read the work straight through, claiming that “whoever wants to listen to this command [to read in order] will be able to learn in this book a great part of the making of the world and how it was made and accomplished by the nature of God.”

To follow Goussoin’s concepts, therefore, is to construct knowledge; each subsequent idea elaborates on the last until the reader reaches the ultimate culmination of information at the text’s end. Ordered reading plays an important role in how the text’s many diagrams facilitate the viewer’s experience of the text. For now, however, it will guide our examination of the manuscript’s structure.

BnF 574 is divided into three basic sections covering the liberal arts, the divisions of the earth, and the organization of the cosmos. The preface, which outlines the book’s contents, opens with an image of an astronomer and a scribe seated in separate frames beneath golden, Gothic arches (Figure 2). In one hand, the astronomer holds an armillary sphere, a model of the cosmos in miniature. With his other hand, he gestures to a table that displays other tools of his trade. Across from the astronomer, a tonsured scribe—knife in one hand, quill in the other—bends over his work. In the historiated initial below, a teacher, whose appearance closely echoes the astronomer’s, addresses a group of attentive pupils. He points to the pages of his book while the students follow along in their own copies. Together, the arrangement of these images shows how information is transmitted from first-hand observation of the heavens, through the pen of the scribe, to the eyes of the readers. Collectively, they emphasize the exchange of knowledge from one authority to the next, which is a hallmark of medieval encyclopédisme.

Following the preface, readers encounter a historiated initial where God sits with the world cradled in the crook of his arm (Figure 3). This miniature, which introduces the main body of the Image, is positioned at the head of Goussoin’s injunction to the beholder to read the text straight through, emphasizing that there is a set order to both creation and to its comprehension. The first section of the work deals with the seven liberal arts, culminating with astronomy, through which—Goussoin claims—humanity can learn “the things of the heavens and the earth.” These disciplines form the initial basis of Goussoin’s system since, as he states, “[it is] by the seven arts one knows the facts of the world and how it is.”

The second part covers the divisions and inhabitants of the earth, while the third examines the structures and functions of the cosmos. The maps and diagrams that constitute the visual program of the second sections will be the focus of the bulk of this paper. I consider them first in terms of world building; as manifestations of the known universe and one’s place within it. I then examine how the diagrams function as mnemonic devices that offer an externalization of the knowledge of divine creation.

II. Diagrams and Mnemonics: Making a World

Maps and diagrams are both signs and signifiers of a constructed world. At their most basic level, these images visually delineate the relationships between things in spatial

14 For a detailed discussion of the role of vernacular narrative texts, particularly the work of Chrétien de Troyes, in Goussoin’s Image see Brown, generally.
15 For a complete list of primary and secondary sources referenced by Goussoin see Prior, L’image du monde, 30–31.
16 Brown, “The Vernacular Universe,” 142.
17 “Ci tenis l’image du monde qui commenc a Dieu, et a Dieu prent fin, qui en la fin nous doint ses biens et sa grace. Amen.” Prior, L’image, 203.
20 “Qui bien veult savoir et entendre cest livre pour savoir et pour apprander il doit vivre et soi contenir en cest sicle, dont il vaudra mieulz touz les jours de sa vie, si lise tout premiernement et tout ordenément, si qu’il ne lise riens avant, devant ce qu’il entendra bien ce qui est devant. Et ainsi porra il savoir et entendre cest livre.” Prior, L’image, 59.
21 “Car Nostre Sires fist toutes riens par raison, et donna son non a chascune riens.” Prior, L’image, 83.
terms. Yet, they also represent the knowledge of the society that produced them. As Nelson Goodman shows, diagrams do not reflect reality so much as they create it. In the context of BnF 547, a small historiated initial at the opening of the first chapter of the text, which shows God in the act of creation, is the first signal of our entry into a constructed world (Figure 4). With a formless void in one hand and a compass in another, he is the architect who circumscribes order from chaos. However, the aspect of world-definition that characterizes the Image is most evident in the second part of the text, where Goussoin defines the realms of the inhabited earth. These divisions are visually defined in a series of three diagrams on folios 49 v–r (Figures 5–6). The first of these, in the left-hand column of 49v, shows the cardinal directions, orient (east), mide (south), and occident (west). The apparent absence of septentrion (north), along with the other empty labels in the manuscript, will be discussed in further detail below. The two other diagrams in this group follow the so-called T-O format, which splits the world into three parts. Goussoin uses these maps to stress that Asia covers everything in the east from north to south, Europe occupies the north and west, while Africa is located to the south and west. Such maps, also called Noachid maps, are oriented to the east with the largest landmass, Asia, at the top. The vertical line of the T depicts the Mediterranean, while the crossbar shows the river Tanais to the left and the Nile to the right. In addition to their geographic arguments, these maps also depict and reinforce what was already an established feature of medieval cartography and travel literature: the distinctions between the familiar self and the monstrous Other.

Like Goussoin’s Image the famous Psalter Map, created in England around 1265 (Figure 7), exemplifies world-building through images. The map follows the T-O format, with important locations carefully noted. Jerusalem, circled in the middle, stands as the figurative navel of the world and the center of creation. Rome, marked by a small crown-shaped symbol, is visible just below it. Further from the sacred center of Jerusalem, the world grows wilder and more dangerous. The legendary Gates of Alexander, visible in the upper left, close off the fearsome realm of Gog and Magog, where the monstrous inhabitants eat human flesh. Along the lower right edge, other monsters including blemmyae, cynocephali, and sciopepods are contained in alternating red and blue boxes. The world of the Image is similarly populated with strange and marvelous things that lurk just beyond the boundaries of the civilized world. In the text, he recounts tales of far-off places like India, where the trees are so tall that they touch the sky and the people are very small and sprout horns. Goussoin claims that even in Europe oddities lurk in the form of strange Englishmen with tails—a detail notably absent from William Caxton’s 1480 English translation of the text. To a reader in medieval France, where Goussoin lived and wrote, this section of the Image confirms their self-identity within the order of creation. By bringing the earth’s peripheries into greater focus, the T-O diagrams of BnF 574 and their accompanying text direct the viewer to contemplate their own existential place, first on the earth and then within the greater cosmological structure.

The multitude of carefully labeled, ordered, and organized diagrams make BnF 574 an excellent case study in mnemonics: the schemas by which readers internalize, compartmentalize, and access information. Indeed, in his 1913 study of the prose Image, Oliver H. Prior comments in passing that the great advantage of the work is its ability to act as an aid to memory. The manuscript’s images, however, have not yet been considered in this context. A reading of the book as a memory device is directly suggested in the 1527 edition printed in England by Laurence Andree. His printing, which derives from Goussoin’s prose redaction, expands on the main body of the work, including a short treatise on the ars
memoria, the art of memory. The text reads in part:

And so of every corporal thing, thou must imagine that thou seest the same corporal thing in the place....but if thou canst not have a corporal image of the same thing as if thou wouldest remember a thing which is of itself no bodily nor corporal thing but incorporeal, that thou must yet take an image thereof that is a corporal thing as thou wouldest remember this word “to read”, then thou mayest imagine one looking at a book...so that every image must be a bodily and a corporal thing.34

This passage speaks primarily to the central role that images and image making hold in the development of memory. Medieval theories of the mind outline a basic structure for this image-based mode of knowledge acquisition. First, sense perception delivers information to the brain. Then, the faculty of imaginatio, or imagination, creates a likeness (phantasm) of that information in the mind. This process of mental image-making allows for thinking which, in turn, allows for information to be stored in the mind in the same way that a seal is pressed into wax.35 All knowledge, therefore, is dependent on memory, which is itself dependent on pictures—either real or imagined—where information can be visualized, kept, and accessed for later recall. However, as Mary Carruthers demonstrates, true memory does not stop at recall.36 It is not enough to simply parrot information that has been ingrained into the mind through habit. Rather, memory is a creative faculty of composition that depends on the ability to not only access this information, but to move freely from one locus, or place of knowledge, to the next. These empty and endlessly flexible loci enable large amounts of information to be stored in the mind, which, in turn, enables the composition of new ideas. The maps and diagrams of BnF 574 work in the service of memory because they offer physical, external loci— mnemonic hooks that anchor the viewer to the book’s page and, subsequently, to the knowledge stored within.

Having established how the diagrams of BnF 574 can function as places of creation, collection, and recollection of information, we can now explore three potential modes of reading the work: in order, in iteration, and in motion. In the next section, I follow Alexa Sand’s concept of “difficult reading,” which she describes as a process that continually engages the reader’s mind in the activity of non-linear comprehension.37 This difficulty comprises an ongoing struggle of coordinating information presented on the page with information that is already known and remembered. Through this lens, the book is not simply a repository of knowledge, but a conduit for it. With difficulty as the “guiding principle,” the reader is led through a journey of rigorous intellectual engagement, marked by the mind’s struggle to move between what is explicitly present on the page and what is known or imagined.38 Ultimately, difficult reading is about assimilating information; it is a means of continually constructing new knowledge.

III. Difficult Reading in the Image

The first method of reading the text and images of the Image—in order—is the most straightforward and follows Goussoin’s prescription. In the initial lines following the preface, he emphasizes the importance of approaching his encyclopedia in an ordered manner:

whoever wants to know and understand this book... then let him read everything first and in order, and not read ahead at all, before he really understands what comes before. In this way he will be able to know and understand this book.39

At the end of this ordered reading, on folio 136 verso, the viewer is brought face to face for the first time with an image of the cosmos in its entirety (Figure 8). The full-page miniature depicts Christ enthroned above a diagrammatic representation of the heavenly spheres that radiate outwards in concentric rings from the dark center of the Inferno.40 A short synopsis follows the image, in which Goussoin recounts everything he has told the reader in the course of the text.41 This summary is itself a memory device that requires readers to mentally recall

36 See for example Carruther’s discussion of the pseudo-Ciceronian Rhetorica ad Herennium, a handbook on trained memory that was widely popular in the later Middle Ages. Carruthers, Book, 90.
39 “Qui bien veult savoir et entendre cest livre pour savoir et pour aprandre comment il doit vivre et soi contenir en cest sicle, dont il vaudra mieulz tout les jours de sa vie, si lise tout premiery et tout ordeneement, si qu’il ne lise rien avant, devant ce qu’il entendra bien ce qui est devant. Et ainsi porra il savoir et entendre cest livre.” Prior, L’image, 67, translation in Brown, 145.
40 Goussoin explains that hell must be at the center of the cosmos because it is the heaviest place and must, therefore, be below the earth. For Goussoin’s chapter on the location and denizens of hell see Prior, L’image, 139-142. For a discussion of images that depict the Inferno at the center of the cosmos see Barbara Obrist, “The Physical and Spiritual Universe: Infernos and Paradise in Medieval Cosmography,” Studies in Iconography 36 (2015): 41–78, esp. 63–67.
41 Prior, L’image, 202–204.
the contents of the work, suggesting that re-reading the text is not only possible, but also instructive.

The second mode of reading that I suggest, therefore, is iterative, a process that involves repeated viewing and reviewing of the manuscript's contents. Iteration has often been associated with the kind of thoughtless repetition that led Francis Yates to contend that medieval memory was essentially rote, rather than the creative process that Carruthers professes.42 I propose, therefore, that an iterative reading of the Image should not be seen as a process of repetition, but rather as one of elaboration in which each successive return helps develop a composite, synthetic view of the text. It is an act of “cerebral juggling” in which the mind moves “between underlying self-assembled scaffolding and transparently overlaid ethereal structures.”43 This mode of iterative viewing is suggested by the meta-images that appear throughout the manuscript. These pictures echo across the pages, creating a web of mnemonic association that entangles the viewer in Gousson’s cosmology. The viewer might see these echoes, for example, in the two images of God holding the world that begin and end the main body of the text (Figures 3 and 8). Additionally, the orb itself resonates with the T-O maps that populate the beginning of the second section, lending the work an overall sense of interconnectedness (Figures 5–6).

The most striking example of these mnemonic echoes, however, appears on the well-known Arma Christi page on folio 140v where the disembodied wound of Christ gapes bright red against a deep blue diapered background (Figure 9).44 As David Areford notes, the wound bears a striking visual similarity to one of the diagrams found within the main body of the work, suggesting that a link can be made between the two.45 That image, on folio 47v, is part of a two-level diagram depicting the quadripartite divisions of the earth (Figure 10). The upper register shows the full orb of the world filled with a green, scalloped pattern. Below, a single slice of the same world is labeled “an apple in four parts.”46 The slice, white-ringed and almond shaped, clearly echoes the disembodied wound of Christ and creates an immediate visual association between the two. At the same time, the green color that fills the two shapes appears consistently throughout the manuscript to denote the earth, as seen for example in the pair of diagrams that began this paper (Figure 1). Such connections are integral to medieval culture which, to paraphrase Jean-Claude Schmitt, is one of association, analogy, and similitude—eager to couple material data with spiritual values.47 Following these observations, I would suggest that these associated images in Bnf 574 carry a distinctly mnemonic function centered around visual recall—the viewer sees the wound and remembers the world.

The prominence of the association between wound and world is furthered when the image is considered alongside other examples of mappa mundi that show the inhabited earth circumscribed within a mandorla. The maps of Benedictine chronicler Ranulf Higden (1280–1363), make for a particularly evocative analogue.48 They appear in manuscripts of Higden’s Polychronicon, a compendium of history from Creation to the late-fourteenth century that enjoyed immense popularity in England.49 In one mid-fourteenth century example, now held in the British Library, both Jerusalem and Rome are prominently depicted and highlighted in boxes (Royal MS. 14.C.xii, Figure 11). Although it has been argued that the format of these maps was simply an adaptation to the shape of the codex leaf itself, the mandorla nevertheless grants them an undeniable sacred significance.50 In the context of Bnf 574, this comparison speaks to the subjectivity of mnemonic devices. As tools of the mind, they are necessarily unstable, accruing significations that are specific to both the individual and to their lived context.

The final layer of difficult reading that I present sets the diagrams of the manuscript into motion in the mind of the viewer. Such motion is the crucial element that gives meaning to the iterative reading, allowing it to become a truly generative process capable of composing new ideas. The format of the book itself inspires movement—the act of turning the pages guides the reader through the work while the individual diagrams lead the eye across the page from image to image. Likewise, the work is permeated by circles which make up at least part of every diagram in the book. In addition to recalling mobile devices like rotae and volvelles, these


46 The labels, written in red in each corner of the image read “La poume fendue en quatre quarties.” Prior, L’image, 104.


circles evoke the endless turning of the heavenly spheres.\(^{51}\) Goussoin himself directly addresses the inherent mobility of circles in chapter thirteen, which is dedicated to the question of “why God made the world round.” He answers it, in part, by claiming that the world is round because roundness is the shape most favorable to movement.\(^{52}\) In addition to recalling the movement of circles, many of the diagrams of BnF 574 depict their subjects in motion. This temporal mode of visual narrative appears most prominently in the image of the pair of men circumnavigating the globe (Figure 1).

The mental manipulation required on the part of the reader to activate the diagrams in the manuscript also involves filling in blanks and combining images within the mind’s eye. Two conspicuously empty labels appear on the aforementioned world maps on folio 49r (Figure 5). Recall that the first of these, in the left-hand column, is missing a label for septentrion (north). The second, one of Goussoin’s T-O maps, appears to be missing the label for occident (west), directly across from oriens (east).\(^{53}\) Two other instances of blank spaces occur in BnF 574: the final cosmological map lacks infernus and terra, and both tituli on the Arma Christi page are vacant (Figure 9). These empty labels are not a feature of the Image itself, and Goussoin does not acknowledge them in the text. Nevertheless, as Elina Gertsman argues, blank spaces are generative: they encourage the mind to fill in the gaps. Such images, she writes, are vulnerable to the production of meaning, able to mutually activate and receive the viewer’s agency.\(^{54}\) In the context of the Image, supplying names to the empty labels would require the viewer to alternate between the images and the text, thus hooking the reader to the work and increasing the diagrams’ mnemonic utility.

Mental manipulation of diagrams also entails creating composite images in the mind. As already noted, Goussoin’s insistence on order suggests that reading the manuscript constitutes a process of building in which each successive miniature leads to the next. This kind of diagrammatic composition is made explicit in BnF.fr.2174.\(^{55}\) The manuscript contains a poetic redaction of Goussoin’s text and twenty-two diagrams, most of which are familiar from BnF 574; however, there are some notable alterations.\(^{56}\) The most instructive of these appears in Goussoin’s discussion of the divisions of the world. In BnF 574, these divisions are figured in two parts, with the earth above and the single mandorla-shaped “apple slice” below (Figure 10). In BnF 2174, the same general layout is followed on folio 41 recto (Figure 12), but two additional diagrams have been added on the following page (Figure 13). In the lower right corner of folio 42 verso, a miniature with a blue background shows the full orb of the world—with quadrants demarcated and labeled—nestled into the center of the slice. This image combines the two halves of the previous diagram, thus actualizing the kind of mental manipulation suggested by Goussoin’s text.

At this point, we have completed our own small iterative process that moved successively from viewing in order, to reviewing, to mentally moving and combining. Each of these steps adds a layer to the difficult reading of the L’image du Monde. At the end of the process, when faced again with the map of the cosmos, the hypothetical viewer would no longer see a static image, but instead one of harmonized, spinning totality (Figure 8).

IV. User Engagement: The Reader in the Cosmos

Manuscripts like BnF 574 present a special case in the study of mnemonics because they are particularly haptic objects meant to be held, touched, and manipulated. Existing indices of past owners’ interactions with a manuscript can inflect our understanding of a work’s function and reception. In this section, therefore, I explore the various marks that place BnF 574 into the hands of a medieval reader and, in turn, place the reader into the structures of Goussoin’s cosmology.

To truly function in the service of memory, a book cannot only be looked at, it must be internalized. As Carruthers puts it, “a work is not truly read until one has made it part of oneself.”\(^{57}\) Thus, internalization constitutes integrating texts into the mind through the emotions and the senses. The importance of gaining knowledge through internalization is vividly expressed in the book of Ezekiel when God instructs the prophet to “eat this book and go speak to the children of Israel...thy belly shall be filled with this book.”\(^{58}\) Likewise, in the book of Revelation, John, too, is commanded to “take the book and eat it up.”\(^{59}\) As these examples suggest, it is not enough to simply read; remembering is an act of consumption. This act of consuming a text constitutes a reciprocal relationship between the beholder and the page, where the inner mind of the viewer meets the outer world of the book and the two become enmeshed.\(^{60}\)

In the absence of documentation, we can only surmise how exactly BnF 574 would have been experienced by

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\(^{51}\) For a discussion of how movement is inherently implied in diagrams see Carruthers, “Moving Images,” 295–302. For the circle as a conceptual device see Naomi Reed Klein, Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001); see also Gertsman, The Absent Image, 31.

\(^{52}\) “Pour quoi Dieux fist le monde reont.” Prior, L’image, 99.

\(^{53}\) Both labels are in somewhat unusual places, sitting where one might usually expect to see septentrion (north) and mid(i) (south). It’s possible that, despite their positions at north and south, respectively, the “orient” label could be intended here to gesture to the upper half of the circle and “occident” to the lower half. Since medieval maps are oriented to the east, the medieval viewer would likely have understood this implicitly. The alteration in color between red and dark red in the western half of both T-O maps is also of potential interest, although barring more information I can’t make a definitive claim about its purpose.


\(^{55}\) Hencelforth: BnF 2174.

\(^{56}\) For a digitization of the full manuscript see https://tinyurl.com/2vp94tfj.

\(^{57}\) Carruthers, Book, 11.

\(^{58}\) Ezekiel 3:2-5, DRB. For a discussion of this passage see Carruthers, Book, 44.

\(^{59}\) Revelation 10:9, DRB.

\(^{60}\) Stafford, Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images, 108.
its owners. From a codicological standpoint, however, the book itself offers some evidence from which we can begin to extrapolate. The manuscript has particularly clean pages that are free of the distinctive brown discoloration that often indicates heavy use, yet it is not entirely without traces of its previous owners.61 Numerous owner inscriptions appear throughout the manuscript’s pages, tracing its path from one library to the next.62 The name and title of the book’s likely original owner, Guillaume Flote, Lord of Revel and Chancellor of France, is announced in two lines of neat Gothic script on the top of the verso of flyleaf B. Sometime after Guillaume’s death in 1366 and before 1401, the book passed into the famous collection of Jean, Duke of Berry (1340–1416).63 The duke added his own ownership claims to several pages. The first, on flyleaf A recto, echoes Guillaume’s inscription, reading, “this is the book of the duke of Berry.”64 Beneath this, Jean’s looping signature is visible. The same inscription is written a second time beneath the explicit on folio 139v. Jean’s signature appears for a final time, alone, in the middle of 141r. This same page also bears the mark of a third owner, Dominique de Bourgogne.65 This inscription, written in a fifteenth-century hand, identifies Dominique as a philosopher in the Order of the Golden Fleece.66 Each of these markings documents the manuscript’s provenance, characterizing the book as an object with an afterlife far exceeding its place in Guillaume’s fourteenth-century library. At the same time, they present a moment of what Sand has described as “reflexive self-seeing” by representing the owners to themselves.67 This effect is heightened by the inscriptions’ focus on personal identity.68 By including titles and other details alongside each name, the inscriptions encourage viewers to visualize their own individual place within a microcosm of creation itself. I contend that to Guillaume, Jean, or Dominique, the signatures may have acted as implicit markers of place—small “you are here” signs amid the vast expanse of creation.

The physical evidence of a previous owner’s engagement with BnF 574 is most apparent in an area of damage on the famous Arma Christi page, where stained pink parchment peeks out from behind the missing layer of vermilion at the center of Christ’s wound (Figure 9). The clearly defined area of loss at the heart of the page is particularly stark when compared to the rest of the book, which is in remarkably good condition. The manuscript suffers small losses of pigment throughout—an inevitable result of the ravages of time. The wound, however, is severely abraded, suggesting that it was subject to significant, direct contact—most likely repeated touching or kissing—on the part of a devout owner.69 This page most intimately evokes the internalization and mutual entanglement discussed by Carruthers. Through close, physical contact it becomes both a visual and physical entryway into the book by way of the suffering body of Christ.

The shape of the wound itself first cues its role as a point of entry into the book. As Martha Easton shows, isolated images of the wound recall the liminal spaces of the body, in particular both the mouth and the vagina—openings through which the devotee could reach salvation.70 This conception of the wound as a gateway appears explicitly in the writings of Italian mystic Angela of Foligno (1244–1309), who vividly states that “at times it seems to my soul that it enters into Christ’s side, and this is a source of great joy and delight.”71 A particularly striking visual example appears in the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, completed sometime before 1349 and now held in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (69.86). Near the end of the book, a disembodied wound, similar to that of BnF 574’s, yawns bright red against a blue and gold background populated by various instruments of the Passion (Figure 14). A few folios prior, Bonne herself is shown kneeling at the foot of the cross alongside her husband John, the future King of France (Figure 15). They gaze up at Christ, who stares back and places a finger into the gash in his own side, reminding the viewers it is an imminently permeable opening. A similar dialogue can be constructed between the image of the wound and the devout owners of BnF 574. In this instance, however, it is not their gaze that facilitates the exchange, but direct physical contact with the page.

The materiality of the book itself provides a second, far more visceral, point of entry. As the paint on the page


62 These signatures can be seen in the digitization of the manuscript: https://tinyurl.com/2mntpve


64 “C’est livre fu an duc de Berry”; see Paris, 32.

65 Dominique is designated in the inscription as “philosophe du thosion d’or, roy de Frize et referendaire de l’Apocalipse”; see also Paris, 32.

66 There is also a rather enigmatic drawing of a flowerpot accompanied by the words “Tout si me fait le son venir” on folio 142r. Paulin Paris suggests that the drawing could be associated with Guillaume Flote himself, however this claim is not elaborated on. The flowers that accompany Dominique’s signature suggest another possible connection. Additionally, the seven flowers that hang from the pot are visually reminiscent of diagrammatic images, like those of candelabrum for example. However, barring other information, this would have to remain a point of speculation that could someday be an interesting point in a further study. See Paris, 32.


68 Although this is beyond the scope of the paper, a connection could also be made to genealogical diagrams and the desire to see oneself represented within a broader historical context. See Joan A. Holladay, Genealogy and the Politics of Representation in the High and Late Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

69 See Easton, 406 and Gertsmann, The Absent Image, esp. 93. For devotional touching and kissing in general see Rudy, “Kissing Images.”

70 For discussions of the wound as an entryway into the body see, for example, works by Easton and F. Lewis, as well as Amy Hollywood, “‘That Glorious Slt’: Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ’s Side Wound,” in Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Karma Lochrie, “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies,” in Constructing Medieval Sexuality, eds. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

gradually wore away under the strain of frequent touching, the user was brought ever closer to the bare parchment. Because parchment is made from dried and treated animal hides, it mimetically doubles the reader's own body. When hands or lips touch the page, they touch once-living skin. This moment of connection creates what Sarah Kay has described as a “suture”—a place where the distinction between beholder and object momentarily breaks down. The page becomes, in effect, a second skin that envelops the reader within it, thus entangling them into the world of the manuscript. With this final level of engagement we have moved beyond mere reading to an act that leads viewers to both consume the book and be consumed in turn.

V. Conclusion

At their most basic level, the diagrams of BnF 574 guide the reading of the text, providing visual aids that helpfully explicate Gouissin's words. However, the primary work of the images is not only explication but also creation. As readers struggle through the difficult process of viewing and reviewing, combining and recombining, they construct a complex mnemonic scaffolding upon which to build Gouissin's cosmos and, in turn, to apprehend their own place within it. The sum of these mental manipulations is a successive scaling in and out of the work. The reader expands and contracts their view of the text and its images to cover a range of scopes that tie geography and cosmology together. During this process, the viewer confronts and ultimately overcomes what is otherwise a logical impossibility. In his early-fifth century treatise On the Trinity, Augustine discusses what it means to be able to imagine a black swan, something believed in antiquity to be an impossible contradiction. Although he has never seen such a thing, he states that he can picture it in his mind because he knows both the color black and the shape of a swan. Similarly, Gouissin's Image allows the reader to approach the ungraspable immensity of the cosmos by granting a physical place to ideas which can then be revisited, reinterpreted, and recomposed in the mind's eye. That is to say, the images of BnF 574 are the visual anchors that ultimately tether the viewer to the vastness of Creation.

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Figure 1. Men walking around the world, Gossouin de Metz, L’image du monde, Paris, c. 1320-1325, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, BnF.fr.574, fol. 42r.

Figure 7. Psalter World Map, London, c. 1262-1300, British Library, London, Add. Ms. 28681, fol. 9r.

Figure 15. The Crucifixion, Jean le Noir, The Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, Paris, before 1349, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 69.86, fol. 328r.
Reconsidering the Lacemaker: Analyzing Systems of Class, Gender, and Power in Caspar Netscher's Lacemaker (1662)

Jenna Wendler

Although Dutch genre paintings have garnered increased scholarly attention in recent years, Caspar Netscher's *Lacemaker* (Figure 1) from 1662 is rarely mentioned in the scholarship on seventeenth-century Dutch art.¹ The few published studies of the painting reach the same conclusion: it portrays a middle-class housewife as a straight-forward example of ideal feminine domestic virtue. However, previously overlooked ambiguities in Netscher's painting suggest that the figure and her identity are more complex. The young woman's elegant, red bodice, jeweled hair pin, and embroidered cap or coif point to middle-class status. Yet the bodice appears too large for her. The green skirt paired with it is sturdily rather than fashionable, and her discarded shoes are worn, suggesting the figure is a member of the working class. The environment is clean, as though the woman has made use of the broom at the left, yet two discarded shells—mussels, a Dutch culinary staple—appear in the lower right foreground, as if she missed them.² The landscape print on the back wall is unceremoniously nailed to the wall, and the once-pristine print is creased to suggest that it was once folded. Its hilly terrain and thick woods contrast with the low-lying topography of the northern Netherlands, where forests are scarce.³ On the whole, the scene is a puzzling collection of contrasts, and the compositional details create uncertainty rather than clarity for understanding this space and the woman it depicts.

I contend that these contrasts are crucial for interpreting the image to align most convincingly with the social and cultural concerns of Netscher and his contemporaries. By analyzing the visual evidence provided by the artist within the sociohistorical context of the work, I argue that the *Lacemaker* represents not a Dutch housewife as specialists have maintained, but rather a German immigrant and a maidservant working in a middle-class household. By placing a working-class migrant at the core of this painting, Netscher challenged the conception that Dutch genre paintings should construct and reinforce ideals of feminine domesticity as a singularly middle-class sensibility and achievement, ideals evinced by many works of his contemporaries.⁴ He also challenged biased views about outsider identities in circulation in the Dutch Republic. Given the negative stereotypes of both maidservants and German migrants in the mid-seventeenth century, Netscher portrayed this figure in a revolutionary manner: as a woman who is caught between cultures, yet, like Dutch women, possessive of industriousness and virtue and worthy of the viewer's respect.⁵

The limited scholarship on both Caspar Netscher and his *Lacemaker* highlight the intriguing nature of this frequently overlooked painting. While the popularity of Johannes Vermeer has re-enlivened attention to the artist and some

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¹ For example, Ann Sutherland Harris touches on paintings of virtue that depict housewives and maidservants without mentioning Netscher at all in her survey text of seventeenth-century art. Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art and Architecture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005). One could also note the number of books or exhibitions dedicated to other artists from this time period—Nicolaes Maes, Pieter de Hooch, Gabriel Metsu, countless to Johannes Vermeer, to name a few—while Caspar Netscher has yet to receive such a retrospective since Marjorie Wieseman's catalogue raisonné in 2002.


⁴ Contemporaries such as Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch illustrated the norms and ideals of feminine domesticity that were typical of seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings, examples by both of whom will be discussed in detail throughout this article. Scholars have touched on this quality in genre paintings of this period, such as H. Perry Chapman's discussion of Vermeer's women or Ann Sutherland Harris' commentary on Nicolaes Maes and Pieter de Hooch's paintings as offering models of behavior (positive and negative). H. Perry Chapman, “Women in Vermeer's Home: Mimesis and ideation,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ) / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 51 (2000), 237; Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art and Architecture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 362–4.

⁵ Negative stereotypes of maidservants and the working classes more generally were conveyed through the comedic portrayals of peasants and servants in moralizing genre scenes since the early sixteenth century. Frans Verbeeck's *The Mocking of Human Follies*, for example, offers instruction on moral behavior through a scene of everyday peasant life. While the title suggests these follies as generally human, the actions are performed by working-class peasants, associating so-called “folly” or sin with their poverty and class status. In the seventeenth century, moralizing satires of the working-class shifted from mocking rural peasants to deriding maidservants. For example, Jan Steen's *Dissolute Household* centralizes the maidservant figure as enabling and encouraging her employers to misbehave, pouring wine for the wife while illicitly entangled with the husband. The chaotic disarray of the scene suggests that the servant shirks her duty to maintain the household's cleanliness and organization by tempting her employers to sin. For more information on these stereotypes, see Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585-1718* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996).
of his contemporaries such as Pieter de Hooch in recent years, scholarship on Netscher has remained focused on his portraiture or otherwise on the later parts of his career. Scholarship that does mention Netscher and the Lacemaker are often scant commentary rather than thorough analyses of the nuances of the work that is conducive to themes of ideal feminine domestic behavior. For example, Marjorie Wieseman devoted a single paragraph to the Lacemaker in her catalogue raisonne of Netscher from 2002, acknowledging its “deceptive simplicity” while primarily discussing its similarities with Vermeer’s Milkmaid. Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley provided a more thorough visual analysis of the Lacemaker on behalf of the Wallace Collection, the current owners of Netscher’s painting. While they identified all the visual elements of the painting, they contextualized these details solely in relation to ideals of feminine domesticity, Wayne E. Franits has completed the most extensive analysis of the Lacemaker, utilizing thorough iconographic analysis to connect each visual detail to themes of feminine domesticity and virtuosity. Whether discussing the Lacemaker at length or in passing, previous scholarship conceded Netscher represented a simplistic vision of an ideal housewife. However, I suggest a different interpretation of the Lacemaker through sociohistorical context related to class relations, fashion history, and the activity of lacemaking.

Understanding the distinctions between housewives and maidservants in Dutch culture during this period is crucial to accurately contextualizing Netscher’s Lacemaker. In the Dutch Republic, the role of a housewife originated in the middle-class household, constructed around the expectation that women stayed in the domestic sphere and maintained the home. This ideal was structured by domestic treatises aimed at middle-class women such as Cat’s Houwelyck, which prescribed a housewife as responsible for the maintenance of the household, including tending children and supervising servants. Even though this idealized vision was not attainable for all members of Dutch society such as immigrants and the working-class, Cat’s ideal was widely disseminated through frequent reprinting of his treatise and their transformation into genre imagery. For example, Pieter de Hooch’s Interior with Two Women Beside a Linen Closet (Figure 2) visualizes the housewife’s domestic management abilities through a multigenerational scene. The older woman on the left passes linens to her adult daughter near the center of the painting, illustrating the dissemination of knowledge of both the ideals of feminine domestic virtue and the skills to maintain this expectation and the domestic space. The young girl playing on the right witnesses this exchange and is introduced to the duties of which she will be expected when she reaches marrying age. In addition to genre paintings like de Hooch’s, contemporary domestic manuals and moral treatises reinforced these gendered expectations of feminine domesticity, citing housewifery as the only suitable role for women in Dutch society.

Genre paintings of the period typically constructed an elevated status and leisurely lifestyle for middle-class housewives. This situation was emphasized in some cases by the presence of working-class maidservants, whom the housewife ostensibly supervised. In works such as Gabriel


7 Wieseman, Caspar Netscher, 57.


9 Franits has actually discussed the Lacemaker twice. He first addressed the work in his study of ideal feminine domesticity, Paragons of Virtue. He later revisited the painting in even more detail in his larger text on Dutch seventeenth-century stylistic evolution a decade later. Wayne E. Franits Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1; Wayne E. Franits, Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting, 108–9.

10 Martha Moffitt Peacock’s recent study traced the compelling evolution of the Dutch housewife in visual media from a domineering bully in early farcical prints to a symbol of feminine virtue and ideal domestic behavior by midcentury. While this could seem to relay a growing celebration of domestic labor, Helga Möbius acutely pointed out how this ideal increasingly confined women to solely exist in the private/domestic sphere. Martha Moffitt Peacock, Heroines, Harpies and Housewives: Imaging Women of Consequence in the Dutch Golden Age (Boston: Brill, 2020), 7; Helga Möbius, Woman of the Baroque Age, trans. by Barbara Chrusick Beedham (Montclair, NJ: Abner Schram Ltd., 1982), 31–32.


12 Wayne Franits and Susanna Shaw Romney allude to the legacy of Cat’s manual Houwelyck in their respective essays, acknowledging that while it was first printed in 1625, numerous reprints extended the influence of Cat’s pamphlet throughout the seventeenth century. Franits, Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting, 108; Susanah Shaw Romney, “‘With and alongside his housewife’: Claiming Ground in New Netherland and Early Modern Dutch Empire,” The William and Mary Quarterly 73: 2 (April 2016): 192.

13 Cats, Houwelyck and Wittevrongel, Oeconomia Christiana, referenced in Chapman, “Inside Vermeer’s Women,” 66; Romney, “‘With and alongside his housewife,’” 192.

14 Though previously believed to document everyday life in the Dutch Republic, scholars today agree that Dutch genre paintings construct an ideal vision of domestic life during this period rather than documenting exact reality. See H. Perry Chapman, “Inside Vermeer’s Women,” and Peacock, Heroines, Harpies, and Housewives for a gendered analysis of this phenomenon.
Metsu’s *A Woman Reading a Letter* (Figure 3), the artist contrasts the two figures to connote their different statuses through their apparel and their compositional placement. The peach satin dress, fur-trimmed overcoat or *jack*, and the *nachtaalonders* kerchief covering the hair of the woman on the left convey that she is the mistress of this household, a housewife. The woman on the right is distinguished as a servant. Her clothes are dark and practical. Her cropped skirt, blue apron, and fitted jacket allow for easy movement, while her hair is tucked away under a cap and out of her eyes. Furthermore, the housewife sits on a raised platform, placed physically above the woman on the right, thereby creating a visual hierarchy that prioritizes the housewife. Her shoe is discarded as she relaxes to read her letter, while the woman on the right stands on the tile floor. Metsu depicted a visual and a social hierarchy, in which the middle-class status of the housewife on the left has the literal and figurative higher ground over the working-class servant.

While Metsu and De Hooch utilized multfigural narratives to clarify the class status and role of their figures, the figure in Netscher’s *Lacemaker* lacks a companion and thus presents an ambiguous vision of domestic virtue. It raises questions of who is the figure that exhibits the Dutch ideal of feminine domestic virtue, and from whom would she have learned this behavior.

Metsu’s housewife and servant visualize Cats’s prescription for housewives to constantly supervise their servants to ensure industrious behavior. The solitude of Netscher’s figure suggests that her modesty and diligent attention to her lacemaking reflects more on her personal virtue rather than on the education received from a figure like de Hooch’s mother or Metsu’s housewife.

Netscher utilized the figure’s activity, lacemaking, to further signify her industrious nature, emphasizing its importance by centralizing the pillow on which she makes lace, called a *naakussen* in Dutch. The figure’s gaze is focused fully on her lacemaking, her body angled away from the viewer and the picture plane. These details draw the eye to the figure’s lacemaking, an activity that was gendered feminine but had different connotations depending on a woman’s class status.

In the Dutch Republic, making lace was an activity taught exclusively to girls. Girls of all class backgrounds received instruction in needlework and lacemaking. They learned these skills in orphanages, church schools, or with private tutors or governesses. Lacemaking was taught as a domestic necessity as well as a trade. In this way, making and selling lace was a means of income available solely to women. Lacemaking also carried moral connotations as a productive pastime for women to avoid idleness, symbolic of ideal feminine domesticity and virtue. The relationship between lacemaking, productivity, and domestic propriety is reinforced by the woodcut for the cover page of an instructional pattern book for bobbin lacemaking called *Nûw Modelbuch, Allerley Gattungen Dântelschnûr* (*New Pattern Book of All Kinds of Bobbin Laces*), published in Zurich in 1560 (Figure 4). In the woodcut, two women make lace on their *naakussen*, and their attention is focused fully on their lacemaking. They sit in front of two large windows within a plain domestic interior. The woodcut’s use as the cover for an instructional manual could suggest that the image is educational in nature. Even if this woodcut was not specifically intended to be morally didactic, the scene reinforces the ideal of feminine industry and propriety as situated within and related to domestic life.

In addition to the gendered connotations of lacemaking, this activity and its purpose depended on a woman’s class. While an upper-class woman made lace for leisure, a middle-class woman made lace to decorate her home. A working-class woman might make lace to sell, supplementing her family income or saving towards her own dowry.

Even though lacemakers were a relatively common visual trope in the seventeenth century, Netscher’s *Lacemaker* and the figure’s apparent class status stand in contrast when compared to other depictions of women making lace by the artist’s contemporaries. In Nicolaes Maes’s *Lacemaker* (Figure 5), the figure sits slightly off-center, the tenebristic lighting effect drawing attention to the seated woman. She leans forward over her lacemaking, situated atop books on the floor in front of two large windows within a plain domestic interior.

In this way, making and selling lace was viewed by public institutions as an appropriate activity and occupation for women. Women were expected to maintain the home and raise children while managing the family’s finances. As such, making and selling lace was a means of income available solely to women. Lacemaking also carried moral connotations as a productive pastime for women to avoid idleness, symbolic of ideal feminine domesticity and virtue. The relationship between lacemaking, productivity, and domestic propriety is reinforced by the woodcut for the cover page of an instructional pattern book for bobbin lacemaking called *Nûw Modelbuch, Allerley Gattungen Dântelschnûr* (*New Pattern Book of All Kinds of Bobbin Laces*), published in Zurich in 1560 (Figure 4). In the woodcut, two women make lace on their *naakussen*, and their attention is focused fully on their lacemaking. They sit in front of two large windows within a plain domestic interior. The woodcut’s use as the cover for an instructional manual could suggest that the image is educational in nature. Even if this woodcut was not specifically intended to be morally didactic, the scene reinforces the ideal of feminine industry and propriety as situated within and related to domestic life.

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20 James M. Andersen, *Daily Life During the Reformation* (Oxford: Greenwood, imprint of ABC-CLIO, 2011), 109. Even as genre paintings highlighted women’s presence and domestic toil, Helga Möbius added that the perception of women’s place in the home as “natural,” supported in contemporary writing on theology, philosophy, and nature, was reinforced by an education system that only taught girls skills related to the domestic sphere. Möbius rightly articulated that this created a cycle that increasingly excluded women from public life. Möbius, *Woman of the Baroque Age*, 31–32.


a wooden table. Along with the keys and the pouch in the background, the table connotes a commercial environment of a small business or shopfront, as suggested by Albert Blankert and Louis P. Grijp.24 Whether she is the daughter, wife, or hired servant for the male owner, the setting contextualizes the figure as working-class, her lacemaking indicating the woman’s industriousness and modesty.

In Johannes Vermeer’s Lacemaker (Figure 6), the artist draws attention to the figure through her close proximity to the picture plane. The young woman has carefully-coifed hair, wearing a bright yellow bodice or dress with a white collar or chemise. Rather than the typical pillow, the figure sits at a contraption designed specifically for lacemaking. Though the setting is more limited than Maes or Netscher’s view, the luxurious carpet and pillow to the left and the figure’s appearance designate her upper-class status, making lace as a sign of her ladylike education.25

In these two paintings, Maes and Vermeer use the details in the figure’s setting and appearance to clarify her identity and the painting’s narrative, representing the different classes and reasons that women made lace in the Dutch Republic. Netscher’s Lacemaker lacks such clarity in the visual details, so how can her lacemaking be understood? Contemporary moralists such as Jacob Cats connected lacemaking to maidenhood, suggesting that Netscher’s Lacemaker is not a housewife, but an unmarried woman, and destabilizing prior scholarly interpretations of this painting.

Cat’s domestic treatise for housewives, Houwelyck, described lacemaking as the task of a young maiden preparing for marriage.26 In the first chapter, “Maeght” (Maiden), Cats advised young women to learn lacemaking for its associations with diligence and modesty, the skill both essential in the domestic sphere and symbolic of feminine virtue.27 The engraving for the frontispiece of the treatise (Figure 7) exemplifies young maidens as learners. In the lower left corner, two ladies sit beside each other, with naaikussen for lacemaking on their laps. The younger woman on the right turns to the older woman on the left, perhaps her mother, apparently speaking and pointing towards an older man and woman walking with linked arms, gestures that link the lacemaking of maidenhood to a presumed future marriage. The marital theme is reinforced by the motif at the top of the engraving, in which two doves sit on top of two clasping hands in a roundel held by two putti. Art historian Wayne E. Franits connected this motif to dextrarum iunctio, the clasped hand gesture dating back to Roman times and also associated with seventeenth-century marriage ceremonies, thus a symbol of love and unity.28 Additionally, the placement of the two figures at the bottom left corner of the composition gives the young woman the ideal vantage point to observe the other figures, older women after whom she should model her actions to behave as a proper sweetheart, bride, mother and widow. These stages parallel the organization of Cats’s manual, situated in a clockwise design in this engraving.

Lacemaking is further associated with maidenhood in a 1581 engraving by Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos. From the series “The Seven Planets and Ages of Men,” the print of Venus (Figure 8) shows an allegory of Venus hovering on a cloud above a multi-figural scene below. Two female figures sit on the lower right side of the composition. The woman on the left, larger in scale to suggest adulthood and motherhood compared to the smaller-scale figure of a girl to the right, is shown weaving, her eyes cast down at her loom. The girl holds a naaikussen on her lap, several bobbins of thread hanging towards the viewer. Making lace beside her weaving mother (identified as “Diligentia” by the inscription below the figure), the young girl is instructed in moral, industrious behavior such as lacemaking that will prepare her for when she is older, in her later role as a wife and mother. In the background, a man and woman appear to be courting, shown clasping hands similar to the roundel motif from the frontispiece of Houwelyck. With Venus and Cupid in the clouds above and figures playing lutes in the middle ground, the girl’s lacemaking is clearly linked to love and preparations for marriage.

Both the frontispiece from Houwelyck and the earlier engraving of Venus visualize a clear connection between lacemaking and maidenhood, demanding reconsideration of past scholarly interpretations of Netscher’s Lacemaker as a maiden rather than a housewife. For example, Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley interpreted the figure’s elegant bodice paired with a woolen skirt as connoting the housewife’s lack of vanity.29 However, through carefully analyzing the visual details of this painting, I reached a more convincing conclusion: that Netscher’s Lacemaker represents a working-class maid servant and a German migrant.

Netscher’s sartorial choices are one means by which the artist conveyed the figure’s status. For example, the figure wears a bright red bodice with gold trim along the neckline and shoulders, pleating on the sleeves, and a white chemise underneath. (Figure 9). The garment looks expensive, although it does not appear to fit the figure properly. Costume historian Joan Nunn demonstrated that garments that covered a woman’s upper body at this time were tightly fitted to the body, as exemplified in a print by Caspar Netscher from the same year of a woman sewing (Figure 10). 30 In contrast, the top along the bust protrudes from the lacemaker’s chest rather


29 Duffy and Hedley, The Wallace Collection’s Pictures, 300.

than sitting flat across her collarbone in Netscher’s Lacemaker. The gold trim where the bodice meets the sleeve does not appear to fall where the woman’s shoulder would naturally be, as if the garment is too large for her.

Netscher’s choices for the Lacemaker’s bodice invokes a common practice in the Dutch Republic in which employers gave cast-off clothes to their female employees rather than a livery, as male servants received. The apparel was outdated but still wearable, typical in style and quality for a middle-class housewife. The practice of compensating a servant with garments complicated the identification of figures as maidservants in genre works, as Diane Wolfthal effectively argued. The ill fit of the woman’s bodice appears to portray a maid who has received a cast-off bodice from her mistress, and must make do with the clothes she has, in order to appear respectable and thus positively represent her employer’s home.

In contrast to the red bodice, the figure’s green skirt appears coarse and woolen, sturdy and long-wearing rather than new and fashionable (Figure 11). The green skirt connotes Netscher’s lacemaker as a German migrant. According to art historian Marieke de Winkel, green was not a common color for clothing within the Dutch Republic. A thick green skirt like this was typically associated with German migrants, called a duffle skirt based on the thick wool it was made from (although the material’s name stems from the town from which it originated, Duffel near Antwerp in present-day Belgium). De Winkel admitted it is unclear if green was worn in reality or merely metaphorically of the migrants’ experience upon arriving in the Dutch Republic. However, this association was commonly employed for German migrant characters in contemporary Dutch farces, in which the green duffle skirt was mocked or otherwise a marker of the German character’s humiliation. The bias against German migrants is further exemplified in the differing reaction to regional dress for Dutch country girls compared to Germans. While Dutch girls from areas like Waterland with specific regional dress were admired, German migrants who retained their regional apparel were disparaged. Given that most German migrants to the Dutch Republic were working-class laborers and servants, this prejudice might have been rooted in both classism and anti-immigrant, anti-German sentiments.

The figure’s decorative coif reflects the figure’s liminal societal position, both as a maidservant in a middle-class home and as a German migrant living in the Dutch Republic. The coif is elaborately embroidered, an expensive item above the income of a maidservant. However, this style of coif dates to the early seventeenth century (Figure 12), suggesting it represents another hand-me-down from the maid’s employer. Additionally, the coif’s intricate design shows a pair of clasping hands in a circle, surrounded by vine and floral imagery and a bird on top (Figure 13). Franits related this motif to the clasped hand gesture associated with contemporary marriage ceremonies as well as a symbol of love and unity. Franits also aligned the motif with a similar detail from the frontispiece of Jacob Cats’s treatise. Given my previous connection between the figure’s lacemaking and unmarried status, Netscher’s Lacemaker perhaps represents a maiden imagining her future nuptials. Additionally, since working-class women including maidservants could make and sell lace, that income could go towards her own dowry. In this way, Netscher’s figure actively works towards her own future, as a married woman and an immigrant who aspired to be fully integrated into Dutch society.

While the lacemaker sits tall and appears relaxed in the sparse setting, the ill-fitted bodice and intricate coif—both inherited from her employer—paired with her green skirt suggest a disconnect between the clothing she wears, the space she occupies, and by extension, her status in the liminal space between the Netherlands and Germany. Her apparel and her surroundings reflect this discomfort, displaying a mixture of items with Dutch and German attributes. The mussel shells on the right are particularly Dutch, characteristic of the coastal provinces compared to the German territories. The print on the wall shows a landscape, a rapidly growing genre within the Dutch Republic and signed by the artist below. However, the print presents a forest landscape that is more typical of Germany than the Dutch countryside. In addition, its creased state suggests that the print was folded and held for a long time, perhaps another object inherited from the figure’s employers. The print’s creased state mirrors the wear and tear on the figure’s discarded shoes on the left, as if they have come a long way, just like the figure herself as an immigrant. The broom in the corner could relate to her role as a

maid servant, responsible for the cleanliness of the household, as well as reflecting the Dutch ideals of feminine domestic virtue, defined by industriousness and modesty. \(^{41}\)

The multi-faceted meanings of these visual details relay the revolutionary nature of Netscher’s *Lacemaker*. In her mixture of Dutch and German clothing, surrounded by items that evoke both cultures, the figure represents a woman working hard and apparently choosing to assimilate into a society that seeks to reject her. While maidservants and German migrants were perceived negatively in urban Dutch society, Caspar Netscher portrayed the figure with dignity, worthy of praise rather than scorn. With the *Lacemaker*, Netscher appears to reinforce patriarchal ideals of feminine domesticity on the surface, while the carefully-selected details undermine stereotypes of maidservants and German migrants as well as who is typically perceived as worthy and able to exhibit moral Christian behavior in seventeenth-century Dutch society.

However, this sympathetic view was apparently unpopular in The Hague where Netscher spent the majority of his career. Following 1662 and his painting of the *Lacemaker*, Netscher portrayed increasingly elegant ladies such as the figure shown on the right, before turning exclusively to the highly-profitable market of portraiture. \(^{42}\) Works like *Woman at her Toilette* (Figure 15) reinforced the aspirational desires of Netscher’s primarily middle- and upper-class clientele in The Hague, placing the modest, moralizing *Lacemaker* out of fashion. Despite its lack of traction on the art market, Netscher selected this woman, a working-class German immigrant, as worthy of respect, captured in oil as an embodiment of Dutch social values.

American University

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Figure 2. Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with Two Women Beside a Linen Closet* (1663) oil on canvas, 72 x 77.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
Figure 3. Gabriel Metsu, *A Woman Reading a Letter* (c. 1664-66) oil on wood panel, 52.5 x 40.2 cm, Beit Collection, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.
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Figure 5. Nicolaes Maes, Lacemaker (1655) oil on oak panel, 57.1 x 43.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Figure 6. Johannes Vermeer, *The Lacemaker (La Dentellière)* (1669-70) oil on canvas, 24.5 x 21 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Figure 7. Pieter de Jode after Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, Frontispiece from Jacob Cats’s *Houwelyck. Dat is de gansche gelegentheyt des echten staets* (published originally in Middelburg 1625-6, possibly by “weduwe Jan Pietersz. van de Venne”) engraving, Inv. No. RP-P-1929-86, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
Figure 8. Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos, *Venus* from the “Seven Planets and Ages of Men” series (1581) engraving, De Young and Legion of Honor Museums of Fine Arts, San Francisco.
Figure 9. Caspar Netscher, *Lacemaker* (detail) (1662) oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm, Inv. No. P237, The Wallace Collection, London.

Figure 10. Albert Henry Payne after Caspar Netscher, *A Woman Sewing* (orig. 1662, 19th century copy) engraving, Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague, the Netherlands.
Figure 11. Caspar Netscher, *Lacemaker* (detail) (1662) oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm, Inv. No. P237, The Wallace Collection, London.

Figure 12. Unknown (Great Britain), *Coif* (c. 1570-99) black silk and silver-gilt thread on linen, 41 x 22 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
RECONSIDERING THE LACEMAKER: ANALYZING SYSTEMS OF CLASS, GENDER, AND POWER IN CASPAR NETSCHER’S LACEMAKER (1662)

Figure 13. Caspar Netscher, *Lacemaker* (detail) (1662) oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm, Inv. No. P237, The Wallace Collection, London.

Figure 14. Pieter de Jode after Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, Frontispiece from Jacob Cats’s *Houwelyck. Dat is de gansche gelegentheyt des echten staets* (detail) (published originally in Middelburg 1625-6, possibly by “weduwe Jan Pietersz. van de Venne”) engraving, Inv. No. RP-P-1929-86, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
Figure 15. Netscher, *Woman at Her Toilette* (c. 1665) oil on panel, 42.5 x 33 cm, Private collection of Johnny and Sarah van Haeften, London.
Pissarro at Pontoise: Picturing Infrastructure and the Changing Riverine Environment

Genevieve Westerby

In 1872, Camille Pissarro rendered the water of the Oise River rushing over a low dam with short, dashed brushstrokes of pure color (Figure 1). Painted near his home in the rural French village of Pontoise, it features aspects of daily life on this major tributary of the Seine. Canal barges are moored to the opposite bank, their masts mirroring the slender trees that line a path leading to the riparian village of Saint-Ouen-l’Aumône in the background. With his choice of site, where the river splits into two sections to flow around the small island of Saint-Martin, Pissarro depicts how civil engineering transformed the ecosystem of the Oise River.

Throughout the nineteenth century, a range of new infrastructure projects were undertaken in France’s rivers. These projects aimed to create a predictable and reliable transportation network; to turn what was a mostly natural system into one that would suit the needs of an increasingly industrialized capitalist economy. Nowhere were these projects more visible or more transformative than on the Seine. Riverbeds were dredged and locks and dams were constructed to overcome two major hindrances to the river’s commercial exploitation—its inconsistent depth and its tendency to flood. Canals were dug to form new connections between major river systems to further facilitate the speedy transportation of goods. By midcentury, the Seine was the main artery of the nation’s system of rivers, transporting nearly ninety percent of goods to and from the heart of Paris.

These projects also had a profound effect on the environment, which caught the attention of artists and writers alike. In Émile Zola’s novel L’oeuvre, for example, the author’s protagonist, the struggling painter Claude Lantier, laments that the river and changed the landscape at the village of Bennecourt. Lantier had painted there several years before, but when he later returned to the site, he could scarcely recognize it. Islands were submerged and quiet armlet sections of the river were broadened such that there were “no more pretty nooks, no more rippling alleys to get lost in; a disaster that inclined one to strangle all the river engineers!” Impressionist painters were also drawn to these feats of engineering and the changed environment around them. Gustave Caillebotte included one such dam, at Bezons, in a view of fishing on the Seine in 1888 (Figure 2). The turbulent, white-foamy water of the dam is visible in the background on the upper right, while fishermen in their boats, lashed to anchoring poles, bob in the foreground.

Fluvial infrastructure projects are just one example of the technological, industrial, and social transformations impacting the environment in this period. Coal-powered trains rushed along newly constructed bridges, factories lined the river’s banks and polluted its waters, and fashionable Parisian tourists overwhelmed rural fishing villages and clogged rivers like the Seine with rented boats. Scholars have studied extensively these aspects of modernity and how they manifested in the art of this period. Yet the presence of riverine infrastructure in, or its influence on, the landscape is rarely discussed. Camille Pissarro’s depictions of the Oise River offer a rich entry point to consider how these interventions radically altered the nature of these waterways and how the changed environment was approached by artists, which is to say, the ecocritical possibilities afforded by these images. I place Pissarro’s pictures within the context of the infrastructure projects executed along the river and in dialogue with the naturalist approach of Charles-François Daubigny to this same river.

1 Émile Zola, L’oeuvre (Paris: G. Charpentier et Cie, 1886), 429: “Plus de jolis coins, plus de ruelles mouvantes où se perdre, un désastre à étrangler tous les ingénieurs de la marine!” Lantier further exclaimed at the loss of a specific island: “Tiens! ce bouquet de saules qui émergent encore, à gauche, c’était le Barreux, l’île où nous allions causer dans l’herbe, tu te souviens?...Ah! les misérables!” (Here! This cluster of willow trees that are still visible, to the left, it was the Barreux, the island where we went to chat in the grass, you remember? Ah! The wretches!).

This environmentally-oriented framework brings into focus how Pissarro's work registered the river as no longer a purely natural space, but rather one of human intervention, where the organic forces of nature are entangled with human, and civil engineers in particular, desire for control.

**Canalization of the Oise (1827–1843)**

Like the Seine, the Oise River (Figure 3) was an important waterway for the transportation of goods in the nineteenth century. Even though villages like Pontoise were just a quick one-hour train ride from Paris as early as 1847, the river remained the preferred method of transport. It spans a little over two hundred miles from its source near the Belgian city of Chimay to where it joins the Seine at Andéry. Barges brought hundreds of tons of foodstuffs and products—like cereal grains, wood, coal, and leather—from the valley of the Oise to Paris. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the river's characteristics also made the reliable transportation of these goods increasingly difficult. While it benefited from a steady flow of water, the Oise typically had a shallow depth, a rapid current, sections with high shoals, and intermittent towing paths. Islands and old bridges with low arches presented further hindrances to navigation. All these factors made journeys down river to the confluence with the Seine perilous and trips upriver arduous. Seasonal variations brought further challenges: with alternating periods of low water and high flood waters, or blockages due to ice flows, navigation on the river was only possible for around half of the year. To overcome these challenges the Oise was canalized, a method of river management that aims to improve navigation by regulating the flow of water. In nineteenth-century France, this was primarily achieved with a pair of structures—a barrage, or dam, (either fixed or moveable) to control the level of the water and an écluse, or lock, to provide passage for vessels. These lock-and-dam pairs subdivided a waterway into a series of level segments, called reaches, which gradually lower stepwise along a river’s length to alleviate any change in elevation. The water level was further regulated with a déversoir (or weir), a type of low, fixed dam installed in a non-navigable section of a river that acted like a release valve during periods of high water.

The canalization of the Oise began in 1827 and stretched from the upriver village of Compiègne to the river's confluence with the Seine. Seven dams and locks were built to achieve the engineers’ goals, which included maintaining a minimum water level of six feet and managing a thirty-three-foot drop in elevation. While six of the dams were built quickly, within the first five years, the construction planned for the last site at Pontoise was more complex. Structures were built on either side of the Île Saint-Martin and the engineer’s plan for the site shows how they bracketed the island (Figure 4). Work began first on the masonry weir, which was built on the Pontoise side. Its chevon shape helped to direct the path of the water, which is clearly visible in a late nineteenth-century postcard of the site (Figure 5). Downriver, on the Saint-Ouen-l’Aumône side of the island, a trio of structures comprising a lock, a fixed dam, and a sluice gate (another tool for controlling the flow of water) were erected. Due to the complexity of these structures, and to a series of financial and administrative complications, completion of this final section of the canalization was delayed until 1843.

**Fluid Naturalism: Daubigny on the Oise**

One of the beneficiaries of this now more navigable river was the Barbizon painter Charles-François Daubigny. In 1857, the artist famously purchased a boat that he transformed into a floating studio. Working from his Le Bottin, Daubigny painted his primary subject—views of rural life and nature along the Oise River around his home in Auvers—so frequently that his name became synonymous with the waterway. The artist also piloted Le Bottin along other tributaries, and on the Seine

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7 Other methods of water control were used as well, to a lesser extent. For a discussion of all the various techniques available to French engineers in the nineteenth century, see Charles Talanier, “Travaux publics, La canalisation des fleuves, But et unité, historique, la Seine,” *Le génie civil*, serialized article (Nov. 3, 10, and 17, 1889).


9 Legout, “Histoire de la canalisation,” 187. The navigable depth was increased from 1.8 to 2 meters in 1850 and then to 2.2 meters in 1880, which allowed even heavier, three-hundred-ton barges to pass.

10 On the engineer’s plan for the placement of the structures at the Île Saint-Martin, the dam is labeled déversoir like the weir on the upstream side. This is perhaps because the structure was a fixed dam rather than moveable one. In other archival documents, the structure accompanying the lock is referred to as a barrage, or dam, see Préfecture du Département de Seine-et-Oise, *Ouvrages à exécuter pour la construction d’une écluse et d’un barrage dans la rivière d’Oise*, auprès de Pontoise, April 4, 1834, Box 351 32, Archives Départementales du Val d’Oise, Pontoise, France.

11 Legout, “Histoire de la canalisation,” 187–93; and Bernard Le Sueur, “Navigations d’Oise,” *Annales historiques compiégnoises: Études picardes modernes et contemporaines* 16, no. 55–56 (Winter 1993/94), 50–53. Other projects were completed at Pontoise, and elsewhere along the river, in the decades that followed this initial canalization project to accommodate the need for ever-larger, barges carrying heavier loads.
itself, during his many summer painting campaigns. On one such trip, the riverside village of Glouton, with its chain-operated ferry, caught his attention (Figure 6). Working from his studio-boat afforded Daubigny a low vantage point that immersed him in the river’s environment, such that the Seine fills the foreground, stretches past the village, and off into the distance. Along the bank, the flat-bottom ferry rests awaiting the cattle that are being coaxed onboard. While there is no suggestion here of industrialization or the fluvial interventions of civil engineers, it is worth remembering that to even reach this spot on the Seine from his home at Auvers, Daubigny would have navigated through the recently completed lock at Pontoise and two others on the Seine.

The structures regulating the Oise and the Seine go unrecognized in Daubigny’s many riverine landscapes. Indeed, like his bucolic view of Glouton, his river paintings are instead characterized by a sort of fluid, longue durée naturalism; a tranquil vision of the natural world, untouched by industrialization, that was increasingly sought after by a steady stream of buyers wanting to escape the bustle of urban life. The critic Zacharie Astruc calls attention to this aspect of the artist’s work in his 1859 Salon review, remarking that “the realism, —excuse me, —the nature of Mr. Daubigny is charming and pleases everyone…[his] pure image of the rustic world delights the eye at the same time that it calms the overworked imagination, simplifies the dream, and gives the soul a chaste interior peace which delivers it from the annoyances of our active life.” Casting Daubigny’s approach to nature instead as one of a disinterested observer, Théophile Gautier suggested in his review that “He does not choose, he does not compose, he neither adds nor subtracts, he does not mix his personal feelings with the reproduction of the site…his paintings are pieces of nature cut out and set into a golden frame.”

Gautier’s hyperbolic statement reveals his excitement to welcome this new revolution in French painting—one that unseated the emotional intensity and extremes of nature of the Romantics, with a direct observation of nature that elevated landscape to new prominence. For his river views, however, Daubigny of course chose and composed his scenes. In his view of the Oise at the National Gallery of Art in London (Figure 7), for example, we can clearly see evidence of alterations the artist made to the composition. Here thin strips of riverbank bracket the wide expanse of the river. On the right, a raft of waterlilies, a well-known feature of the river around Auvers, invites the viewer into the picture and to a washerwoman who dips a cloth into the water. Likely begun en plein air on his studio boat, Daubigny later reworked the composition back in his landbound studio. He extensively altered the right bank of the river, moving it, the tree, and the washerwoman further to the right. Due to an unfortunate early overcleaning of the painting, we can see these changes with our naked eye (Figure 7).

12 See Robert Hellebranth, Charles-François Daubigny, 1817–1878 (Morges: Editions Matute, 1976), xi–xiii, for a chronology of Daubigny’s many trips along the Seine and its tributaries. His summer sojourns included trips along the Marne in 1864 and the Yonne in 1874.


15 Zacharie Astruc, Les 14 stations du Salon Août 1859 (Paris: Poulet Malassis et Debroise, 1859), 303; “Le réalisme, —pardon, —la nature de M. Daubigny est charmante et plaît à tous. Cette image pure du monde rustique en même temps qu’elle charme les yeux, repose l’imagination excité, simplifie le rêve et donne à l’âme une chaste paix intérieure qui la délivre des importunités de notre vie active.” Speaking specifically about one of Daubigny’s submissions to this Salon (p. 306)—The Banks of the Oise (1859; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux)—Astruc thought it showed promise but that the artist had yet to realize his full talent: “On y constate des défauts de talent de M. Daubigny qui n’est pas encore sûr de ses effets et tâtonne par défaut d’organisation précise.” (One observes there the failure of Mr. Daubigny’s talent, who is not yet sure of his effects and by default gropes for precise organization.)

16 Théophile Gautier, “Salon de 1859,” Exposition de 1859, eds. Wolfgang Drost and Ulrike Hennings (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992), 192: “Il ne choisit pas, il ne compose pas, il n’ajoute ni n’élabore, il ne mêle pas son sentiment personnel à la reproduction du site…ses tableaux sont des morceaux de nature coupés et entourés d’un cadre d’or.”

17 This example is far from unique in the artist’s career. As René Boitelle has noted in his study of the artist’s later painting techniques, Daubigny often made significant changes to a composition or in some cases completely painted over previous, unfinished pictures. See Boitelle, “‘Tout dans son talent est prime-sautier, sain, ouvert:’ Observations on Daubigny’s Late Painting Techniques,” in Daubigny, Monet, Van Gogh: Impressions of Landscape, eds. Lynne Ambrosini, Frances Fowle and Maite van Dijk (Cincinnati: Taft Museum of Art, 2016), 131–151.

18 In an article on the artist, the writer Charles Yriarte described the features of the Oise and the waterlilies in particular: “...et de grandes nappes de nénuphars font des premiers plans charmants à ces tableaux tout faits et devant lesquels le peintre n’a qu’à s’asseoir, la paroles fiché en terre, la boîte à couleurs sous les genoux.” (a great blanket of water-lilies make charming foregrounds to these ready-made pictures and in front of which the painter has only to sit down, with his umbrella stuck in the ground and his box of colors on his knees). Yriarte, “Courrier de Paris,” Le monde illustré (June 27, 1868), 403.
The flesh tone of the washerwoman and the blue of her cloth can be seen further to the left as can the original tree, still visible through the lighter paint of the sky.

Daubigny often used his oil sketches as a reference for pictures that were worked later entirely in his studio, like for the view of the Oise he exhibited at the Salon of 1863 (Figure 9). Rather than washerwomen working, here local villagers relax on the riverbank, their bright red and yellow hats stand out against the lush green surroundings. In this case, a Salon critic suggested that the artist was more concerned with pleasing his collectors than with forwarding the agenda of naturalism. He lamented that in Daubigny’s better pictures one finds an artist who “goes straight to the simple, to the broad, and achieves greatness by a sobriety of means,” whereas in this picture there “another Daubigny that the crowd understands more easily and likes better: the one who makes a considerable number of the Banks of the Oise in a soft grey tone, or else small appealing farms, with pleasant clusters of trees. That painter, we leave to the dealers of the rue Laffitte ...”

Whether aiming to please his collectors or his own artistic eye, Daubigny was participating in the construction of a certain kind of landscape. More than “pieces of nature cut out and set into a golden frame,” his river landscapes present the fiction of a natural world, and rural life that remained untouched by modernity, what Nicholas Green has termed a “spectacle of nature,” to be consumed visually by the Parisian bourgeoisie. To achieve this, Daubigny’s editing eye not only selected subjects that avoided evidence of the rapid industrialization underway along the rivers he explored in his Le Bottin, he also underplayed how infrastructure projects had changed the nature of the river itself. Nevertheless, even before the artist decided to move the riverbank in his oil sketch, the interventions made by river engineers had already changed the waterway’s width, depth, and speed to benefit humanity’s needs.

**Pissarro’s River: Infrastructure and Impressions of Nature.**

It was in Daubigny’s views of the Oise, like the one he showed at the 1863 Salon, that Camille Pissarro found inspiration. The artist’s earliest experiments with river landscapes coincided with a growing distance between himself and his teacher and mentor, Camille Corot. His view of the Marne at Chennevières (1864/65; Scottish National Gallery), for example, is composed in a manner seemingly to evoke, and therefore please, Daubigny. The elder painter was on the Salon jury at the time and was an active advocate for such vanguard landscape painters. He advocated for the acceptance of Pissarro’s picture of the Marne to the 1865 Salon and the following year successfully campaigned again on Pissarro’s behalf, over the objections of Corot. That same year, 1866, Pissarro moved to Pontoise, no doubt to be close to his new champion and to the picturesque river views Daubigny had made so famous.

Pissarro’s time in Pontoise was one of the most productive and pictorially diverse of his career. During the roughly twelve years he spent there, he produced around 300 paintings, along with countless drawings, pastels, and prints. In his study of Pissarro’s time in Pontoise, Richard Brettell suggests that we should understand the artist’s approach to his choice of subjects as one of a “visual historian,” painting everything from aspects of traditional rural life and activity on the river to the contrasting economies of agriculture and industrial factories. However, we should not take this to mean that the artist was indiscriminate. Indeed, while Pissarro’s attention extended to the relatively new railway bridge, it seems that he did not find the train station, which was inaugurated in 1870, worthy of his visual record.

Pissarro did find inspiration in the modernized riverine environment around the lock, dam, and weir bracketing the Île Saint-Martin, depicting them in a trio of pictures. The artist first approached the subject of the weir in 1868 (Figure 10). Standing on the riverbank on the Pontoise side, he focused on the spot where the Oise splits into two arms to flow around the island. In the background, barges clog the waterway on the upriver side of the lock. Tufted, dark-green trees line the path that leads to the village of Saint-Ouen-l’Aumône in

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20 Jules-Antoine Castagnary, Salons: 1857–1870, vol. 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1892), 145: “...allant droit au simple, au large, et atténuant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens...Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens…Il en est un autre que la foule comprend plus aisément et aime davantage ; qui a fait dans un ton doux et gnanant la grandeur par la sobriété des moyens..."\n
21 Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). For Green (p. 3), “nature” is not a pre-existing given, but should rather be understood as “a social and cultural construct specific to a particular material situation.”
the background, which disappears behind the tree-covered island. The other arm of the river fills the foreground. Here the blue, gray, and green of the relatively calm water shifts to a flurrry of yellow and cream as it rushes over the weir. Thanks to its chevron shape, and our perspective, as the weir extends towards us, only a dark line of its upper most ridge is visible creating a strong diagonal that mirrors that of the receding village in the background.

Pissarro returned to the subject several years later, in 1872, when he settled again in Pontoise following a stay in London during the Franco- Prussian war (Figure 1). Compared with his earlier attempt, Pissarro employed a brighter palette and a looser handling for his second version. With short brushstrokes of luminous whites, greys, and blues, he was able to convey more vividly the impression of shimmering light on the water's surface. Pissarro also made significant changes to the compositional layout. He raised the lower edge of the foreground, lowered the horizon line, and generally extended the scene across a wider canvas, which, together with the strong horizontal geometry of the composition, offers a more panoramic view. A consequence of this new framing is that the weir in the foreground is far less readers. The strong diagonal of the underlying masonry structure was truncated to a strange and seemingly disconnected thick dark line. What does carry over is the weir's turbulent effect on the water, which remains a key focus in both versions.

The third picture features the dam and lock on the Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône side (Figure 11). Standing again on the opposite bank, Pissarro experimented with a dynamic new composition. In the middle ground, barges laden with goods congest the upriver side of the lock. On the far right, another can be seen either entering or exiting the lock itself, the barge's flag-topped mast is visible extending upward behind the stone wall of the lock. Here the river curves around the island and Pissarro's clever choice of framing results in the straightening of the otherwise diagonal dam to create a strong horizontal in the foreground. With this frontal perspective, the artist was able to render the water as it rushed through the dam, its armature still visible at the top, and the resulting frothy-white rapids below.

It is difficult to know Pissarro's intention for undertaking these subjects. The pictures clearly exemplify his shifting artistic approach away from the muted colors of the Barbizon towards the brighter palette and broken brushwork that would later be the hallmarks of the Impressionists. With his selection of site, Pissarro arguably aligns the river itself with other signs of modernity—like riverside factories and new railroad bridges—that were equally a part of the “visual history” of his time in Pontoise. Perhaps he thought such subjects would be appealing to his new art dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, and to his growing number of supporters, who were seeking a different perspective on nature than the one Daubigny was presenting for his collectors. Can we also read an ecological message in these works?

Stephen Eisenman has suggested this as an approach for understanding Pissarro's Cart with Logs (1862/63; Hecht Museum, Haifa)—an early oil sketch that depicts workers loading the thin, straight trunks of pine trees onto a horse-drawn cart. For Eisenman, the sketch reveals the artist's concern with the widespread disappearance of oak trees from the forest of Fontainebleau in favor of this fast-growing construction material. He argues that while Pissarro was not a prominent voice in the campaign to save the forest, like Théodore Rousseau, concern over the deforestation was widespread among the Barbizon group.

In Pissarro's trio of pictures of the weir and dam bracketing the Île Saint-Martin, I think it is possible to approach the works with what Andrew Patrizio has called an "ecological eye,"

28 This formal decision is perhaps in part what led to the confusion in the early twentieth century about how to title the work. It was not exhibited in the artist's lifetime and whether this was one of the pictures bought by the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in 1872 is not certain. It was sold in 1900 with the title Les Chalands au bord de la rivière (The Barges by the River), see Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, Tableaux modernes, pastels, aquarelles, dessins (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, June 11, 1900), p. 60–61, lot no. 60. Today, the Cleveland Museum of Art uses the title The Lock at Pontoise, one given by the 1939 catalogue raisonné that incorrectly identifies this view. The most recent, 2005 catalogue raisonné corrects this error and instead uses the title Le Déversoir de Pontoise (The Weir at Pontoise), see Pissarro and Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, Pissarro: Critical Catalogue of Paintings, vol. 2, p. 199, no. 243.

29 Bord de l'Oise à Pontoise (1872; Private collection, Chicago), for example, was bought almost immediately by Durand-Ruel on November 12, 1872, who then quickly sold it to the influential Impressionist collector Ernest Hoschedé on April 28, 1873, see Anne Distel, “Some Pissarro Collectors in 1874,” in Studies on Camille Pissarro, ed. Christopher Lloyd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 71–72n60. Pissarro meet Durand-Ruel in London where they both fled during the Franco-Prussian war. Pissarro sold at least four pictures to his new dealer while he was there, see John Zarobell, “Durand- Ruel and the Market for Modern Art, from 1870–1873,” in Discovering the Impressionists: Paul Durand-Ruel and the New Painting, ed. Sylvie Patry (London: National Gallery Company, 2015), 87–88.


31 Rousseau petitioned Emperor Napoleon III in 1852 to establish a nature reserve in the forest, which was later achieved in 1861. On Rousseau and the deforestation of Fontainebleau, see Greg M. Thomas, Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Eisenman also suggests that Pissarro may have been familiar with the work of contemporary geographer and social ecologist (and fellow anarchist) Elisée Reclus, Eisenman, “From Corot to Monet: The Ecology of Impressionism,” 20.
or with an environmental reorientation. As we have seen, the canalization of the Oise significantly altered the natural state of the river. With Pissarro’s focus on these elements of river infrastructure, he countered Daubigny’s *longue durée*, geological view of the river, by stressing the impact the projects had on the environment and how engineers were exploiting this natural resource. In so doing, he offered an alternate view of the river, shifting it to the human timescale of immediacy and quotidian events, what French historian Fernand Braudel has termed the *événements*.

As an environmental record of how these projects changed the nature of the river—to one that was more predictable, regulated, and navigable—Pissarro’s subject was almost as fleeting as the effects of light he fixed to canvas. The benefits to navigation that the initial canalization produced were themselves relatively short-lived. The growing amount of traffic on the river was soon more than the locks could handle, leading to the kind of congestion we can see in Pissarro’s pictures. To address this issue, a new lateral canal with an additional, larger lock (a *grande écluse*) was constructed in the 1890s. This was followed by the demolition of the weir and a large section of the Île Saint-Martin to make way for a newer and more efficient style of dam that was completed in 1913. A general plan for this project (Figure 12) shows in a faint gray outline the weir and shape of the island as Pissarro would have seen it, along with the placement of the proposed dam, and the outline of a smaller, more streamlined version of the island. Due to the required reshaping of the island, these projects were executed much to the dismay of the residents. Numerous objections to the project were noted during a public comment period, including one letter in which the author claimed that “It is worth remember that the Île Saint Martin has one of the most beautiful thickets of trees and greenery on the Oise River.”

Returning then to Pissarro’s pictures of the public works bracketing the Île Saint-Martin, whether his interest in these subjects was purely formal, whether he thought they might strike a particular chord with his new dealer and growing group of followers, or whether he aimed to communicate a deeper ecological message, what is clear is that where Daubigny suppressed evidence of the river as an anthropogenic space, Pissarro confronted it. Approaching his depictions of the river infrastructure at Pontoise with an environmentally-oriented framework allows us to move beyond Pissarro’s rendering of the ephemeral effects of light reflected on the water’s surface to acknowledge how the canalization campaign altered the Oise River. Like Lantier in Zola’s novel, Pissarro recognized how canalization was changing the Oise. His rendering of the turbulent, white-frothy water that these structures created, with animated brushwork and pure unmixed paint, literally foregrounds the interventions made by engineers who were trying to control the river by remaking it.

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32 Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019). My approach to Pissarro’s work is equally influenced by Maura Coughlin who has looked to art depicting the nineteenth-century French Atlantic coastline for their “ecocritical possibilities,” see, for example, Coughlin, “Shifting Baselines, or Reading Art through Fish,” 145–157.

33 The *longue durée*, and related concepts like geologic or natural time, are often mentioned in discussions of landscapes by Barbizon and Impressionist artists. Stephen Eisenman, for example, finds in Pissarro’s work “conflicting measures of time and modes of production...the *longue durée* of geography and geology (erosion, the course of rivers, the creation and exhaustion of the soil) versus the brief and halting time of human intercourse (the length of a conversation from farm to market) [or] the hurry-up time of industry...” see Eisenman, “From Corot to Monet: The Ecology of Impressionism,” 17–18.

34 For these frameworks for the analysis of history, see Fernand Braudel, “*La longue durée*,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 13, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1958), 725–53, who sets out a three-tiered conception of historical time comprising the *longue durée*, *conjuncture* (a middle term of decades), and *événements*.

35 There were seven new *grandes écluses* in all, each placed in new diversion (or “lateral”) canals dug alongside the existing infrastructure, Legout, “*Histoire de la canalisation*,” 188–89.

36 Letter from the Société historique du Vexin, June 12, 1907, Archives municipals, Ville de Pontoise, 30 3: “Il est bon de rappeler que l’île St. Martin est l’un des plus beaux massifs d’arbres et de verdure de la rivière d’Oise.”
Bibliography


PISSARRO AT PONTOISE: PICTURING INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE CHANGING RIVERINE ENVIRONMENT


Figure 2. Gustave Caillebotte, *Fishermen on the Seine*, 1888, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Private collection.
Figure 4. Plan for the placement of the lock and dam at Pontoise, 1834–35. Archives départementales du Val-d'Oise, 3S1 32(4).

Figure 5. A late nineteenth-century postcard showing the weir on the Pontoise side of the Île Saint-Martin. Courtesy of the author.
Figure 6. Charles-François Daubigny, *River Scene*, 1859. Oil on panel, 36.2 x 65.4 cm (14 1/4 x 25 3/4 in.). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of William H. Herriman, 21.134.

Figure 7. Charles-François Daubigny, *View on the Oise*, 1873, oil on wood, 38.8 x 67 cm. National Gallery of Art, London, NG6323.
Figure 8. Details of Daubigny’s *View on the Oise* (1873) showing changes the artist made to the placement of the washerwoman and the tree on the right bank.

Figure 9. Charles-François Daubigny, *Banks of the Oise Auvers*, 1863, oil on canvas, 88.9 x 161.3 cm. St. Louis Art Museum, 84:2007.
Figure 10. Camille Pissarro, *The Weir at Pontoise*, c. 1868, oil on canvas, 58.5 x 72 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.
Figure 11. Camille Pissarro, *The Dam and the Lock at Saint-Ouen-l’Aumône*, 1872, oil on canvas, 38.1 x 54.6 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Artefact/Alamy Stock Photo.
Figure 12. General plan for the construction of a mobile dam at Pontoise (detail), 1906. Archives départementales du Val-d'Oise, 351 37.
Intro: Cave-front architecture

A Buddhist cave-temple is more than a rock-cut cave-chamber; the entrances of the decorated caves are often screened by porches, halls, and pavilions, known together as “the cave-front architecture” (kuqian jianzhu窟前建築). Some of the oldest and most complete timber-structured porches are preserved at the Mogao Caves 莫高窟 of Dunhuang (Gansu, China), a major cave site in the Gobi Desert of Northwest China. At the mile-long cave complex, four modest-sized porches of Mogao Caves 427, 431 (Figure 1), 437, and 444, and timber members of Caves 196 and 428 are rare examples of Chinese timber-structured architecture from the first millennium. While thrilled to recognize their historical value, pioneering scholar Liang Sicheng (1901–1972) pitifully comments that “they hardly deserve the name of real buildings, for they are merely porches screening the entrances of the caves.” The prototypical “real buildings” for Liang and many others are the timber-structured, freestanding halls of monumental size, and therefore the Mogao porches seem inferior for their smallness and structural incompleteness.

Nonetheless, one should not ignore their site-altering effect and religious importance. It is because of the cave-front architecture of expansive scales and various types—now largely non-extant—that the medieval pilgrims often viewed the Mogao complex as an architectural spectacle. As a Tang-period (618–907) stele records, “the levels [of caves] above and below appear as soaring clouds, wherein flying pavilions were built. To the north and south are linked [caves] in a long stretch. Reflected on the river are [the images of] multilevel pavilions.” Without seeing “the multilevel pavilions” that connected the levels of caves and the porches “linked in a long stretch,” how can we the modern viewers understand the cave-temples in their totality? What did the Mogao Caves look like at the prime of cave-front architecture construction? And what is the implication of the “unreal” cave-front architecture for this spectacle?

Archaeological and textual evidence of cave-front architecture has been gradually discovered since the mid-twentieth century. Current scholarship mainly focuses on either the technological and stylistic features of the timber structures or the layout of the cave complex. One approach

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4 For more literary descriptions of the appearance of the Mogao Caves from the seventh to the tenth centuries, see Ma De, Dunhuang shiku yingzao shi dadao lun (A Guide to the construction History of the Dunhuang Caves) (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gufen youxian gongsi, 2003), 97–99; and Sha Wutian, Guiyijun shiqi Dunhuang shiku kaogu yanjiu Dunhuang shiku kaogu yanjiu daolun (An Archaeological Study of Dunhuang during the Guizijun Period) (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chuban she, 2017), 4–7.

investigates the timber-structured construction system through the extant porches and theoretical reconstruction of a few more. The other approach surveys the overall distribution of caves on the cliff face and the historical developments. These studies elucidate the historical appearance of Mogao Caves at the micro and macro scales, but a vast middle ground is understudied. Therefore, this paper investigates the typological spectrum of the cave-front architecture and the interplay between the structures in the evolving cave landscape. The first section gives an overview of the roles of cave-front architecture in shaping the space, architecture, and general appearance of the Mogao Caves. The second section, following the chronological order of their advents, analyzes the porch, the colossal image pavilion, and the ante-hall. As the paper will demonstrate, the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the architectural landscape were largely explored in the Sui period (581–618) and the first half of the Tang period (618–907); rows of porched caves were linked in a long stretch and the advent of two colossal image caves (daxiang ku 大像窟) introduced verticality and monumentality to the complex. In the following Guiyijun period (851–1036), the height, depth, and variety of this landscape were significantly upgraded through the reconstruction of the multilevel pavilions screening the colossal image caves and the prevalence of porticoed ante-halls. By investigating the cave-front architecture in spatial contexts and its historical perceptions, the study reveals a collective attempt in the long durée to transform the imagery of the Mogao Caves from a mountain monastery into heavenly palaces.

**Space and Architecture**

Recognizing the cave-front architecture is a crucial step of seeing a cave-temple in integrity. A cave-temple in Dunhuang from the seventh century onwards typically consists of four architecturally defined spaces along the transversal axis. The spaces are respectively, from outermost to innermost, (1) an antechamber that provide room for a transition from outdoor to indoor, (2) a corridor that functions as the threshold to the main chamber, (3) a main chamber where beholders may perform image-involved activities, and finally, (4) a spatial device that enshrines Buddhist images, such as a niche, a niched pillar, or an altar (Figure 2). If the cave is located above the ground level, an overhanging passageway would be built in front of the timber-structured porch to link caves on the same level. As the frontmost part of a cave-temple, the cave-front architecture serves to prevent sand and wind from damaging the interiors, facilitate circulation between caves, and provide more room for religious activities such as copying Buddhist scriptures. Moreover, as architectural historian Xiao Mo aptly points out, the antechamber serves two main aesthetic functions. For one thing, it allows a beholder to “mentally transit” from “the world of humans” to “the world of deities.” For another, the architectural orderliness of the antechamber eliminates the grotesque quality of a cave opening and provides a visual pleasure. In other words, the cave-front architecture is a device for spatial and aesthetic enhancement. The varied cave types and historical circumstances result in a wide range of cave-front architecture. They range from exposed and porched antechambers, to porticoed ante-halls and multileveled pavilions that screen the caves.

The notion of space was introduced to cave-front architecture prior to that of “architecture,” which in the Chinese context often means timber-structured buildings and the imitation of it by masonry or metal buildings. The earliest decorated caves of the Mogao complex were directly

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8 For discussions of general cave distribution based on a mid-tenth century lantern distribution record, see Jin Weinuo, “Dunhuang kukan mingshu kao” (Study of the List of Caves of Dunhuang), Wenwu, 5 (1959): 50–54; and Ma De, “10 shiji zhongqi de mogaoku yanjiu” (On the Date of the Hall in Front of Mogao Caves), Kaogu yu wenwu, 1 (2003): 56–61; and Sun Yihua, “Mogaoku nanqu kuyan jiandian juyi diaocha yanjiu” (A Survey of the Traces of façade Architecture in the Southern Section of the Mogao Grottoes), Dunhuang yanjiu 178, no.6 (2019): 17–23. Both studies are conducted in the quantitative method based on massive data about archaeological materials. A further step of explaining the visual quality and historical reception is not yet explored.

9 Two exceptions are Sha Wutian, “guanyu dunhuang mogao ku kujian di-antang yu kuyan jianzhu de shihai yanjiu” (On the Date of the Hall in Front of Cave and Cave Eaves in Mongao Grottoes), Kaogu yu wenwu, 1 (2003): 56–61; and Sun Yihua, “Mogaoku nanqu kuyan jiandian juyi diaocha yanjiu” (A Survey of the Traces of façade Architecture in the Southern Section of the Mogao Grottoes), Dunhuang yanjiu 178, no.6 (2019): 17–23. Both studies are conducted in the quantitative method based on massive data about archaeological materials. A further step of explaining the visual quality and historical reception is not yet explored.

10 For formal features of the colossal image cave, see Xiao, Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu, 51–54.

11 Chen et al., “kancha baogao,” 61–62; and Sha, Cuiyijun shiqi, 22.

12 Xiao, Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu, 35.

cut into the west-facing cliff, revealing only the entrance corridor, occasionally accompanied by a rock-cut window above. It is not until the second quarter of the sixth century that the larger caves began to acquire a rock-cut, exposed antechamber, known in medieval Dunhuang manuscripts as “kuchang窟檐（攖）” (lit. cave-opening).\(^{14}\) The appearance of the antechamber-less caves and those with rock-cut, exposed antechambers are preserved at the northern section of the Mogao Caves (Figure 3), which consists of about two hundred undecorated, pragmatic caves.\(^{15}\) Traces of timber-structured balconies and roofs are found at only a few image caves.

In contrast, the southern section, comprising some five hundred image caves from the fifth to fourteenth centuries, exhibits prevalent traces of timber structures. They gave early surveyors the impression that “every cave seems to have once had a timber-structured porch.”\(^{16}\) Thirty-three extant facades, including the six aforementioned medieval porches, are spread along the entire southern section and the total height of the cliff.\(^{17}\) According to a quantitative study recently conducted by Sun Yihua, an architectural specialist of the Dunhuang Academy, 345 out of the 487 caves of the southern section used to be covered by 271 timber-structured porches.\(^{18}\) This means over 70 percent of the image caves had an architectural outlook. The drastic contrast between the North and the South Sections testifies to the close connection between the architectural appearance and the ritual function of a cave-temple. To better understand how the architectural spectacle of Mogao took shape, the rest of this paper analyzes three basic types that compose it—porch, colossal image pavilion, and ante-hall—in two peak periods of cave construction.

**Overhanging Porches in the Sui-Tang period**

The first peak period of construction occurred in the Sui and the first half of the Tang period before Dunhuang was seized by the Tibetans in 787.\(^{19}\) At the Mogao Caves, about 110 caves were constructed during each of the two periods, significantly outnumbering some forty caves of the two preceding centuries in quantity.\(^{20}\) As the connections between Dunhuang and the metropolitan areas of the unified Sui and Tang empires were established, new cave designs were introduced and popularized at Dunhuang. Two colossal image caves—each enshrining a colossal Buddha image of 35.5 m or 26 m high—were constructed respectively in 695 and 721–725. They utilized the cliff areas to the south of the preexisting cave clusters. At least a multileveled pavilion was built in front of the larger one of them (Cave 96) and became a landmark of the cave landscape.\(^{21}\) The minor caves—most of which are hall caves (diantang窟堂) with niches—were mostly distributed north to the preexisting caves and in-between the two colossal image caves (Figure 4).\(^{22}\) The cave construction regularly sprawled in two levels in the middle part of the cliff face, and their porches would have been linked by overhanging passageways.

As the most common type of cave-front architecture, the porched antechamber is historically known as “kuyan窟檐” (lit. cave-eave), after the overhanging eaves of the pitched roofs.\(^{23}\) Most of the antechamber has a rectangular plan of one to three bays wide and one bay deep. Judging from the extant examples, the top ridge and the long eaves of its roof—hipped or gabled—are parallel with the cliff surface (Figure 5). An interior space is defined by the rock-cut floor, the rear half of rock-cut walls and ceiling, and the front half of timber-structured walls and roof. The interiorized antechamber provides additional space for murals and statues. Since the threshold is moved to the antechamber, the corridor walls and ceilings are fully available for mural painting. This spatial adjustment had a lasting impact on the pictorial programs of the Dunhuang caves; images of protective deities, donor portraits, offering figures, preaching scenes, and miraculous images were incorporated into the transitional spaces.

While most extant examples and traces result from renovations in the ninth and tenth centuries, the porched antechamber was integrated into cave design at latest during the Sui period and widely applied to the cliff site in the following period.\(^{24}\) As Tang-period Dunhuang manuscripts report, “carved eaves emerged” (diao yan huachu雕著出) and formed the scenic view of “opened thresholds connected for pilgrimage tours” (xukan tonglian, xunli youlan虛腫通連，巡禮遊覽).\(^{25}\) Particularly, two rows of Tang caves connected by linked antechambers were constructed onto the hundred-

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15. Apart from a few image caves, most of the caves in the northern section served as meditation caves, vihara caves (monastic living quarters), funerary caves, and ante-hall—in two peak periods of cave construction.
16. Thirty-three extant facades, including the six aforementioned medieval porches, are spread along the entire southern section and the total height of the cliff.
17. According to a quantitative study recently conducted by Sun Yihua, an architectural specialist of the Dunhuang Academy, 345 out of the 487 caves of the southern section used to be covered by 271 timber-structured porches.
18. This means over 70 percent of the image caves had an architectural outlook. The drastic contrast between the North and the South Sections testifies to the close connection between the architectural appearance and the ritual function of a cave-temple. To better understand how the architectural spectacle of Mogao took shape, the rest of this paper analyzes three basic types that compose it—porch, colossal image pavilion, and ante-hall—in two peak periods of cave construction.
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25. As Tang-period Dunhuang manuscripts report, “carved eaves emerged” (diao yan huachu雕著出) and formed the scenic view of “opened thresholds connected for pilgrimage tours” (xukan tonglian, xunli youlan虚腫通連，巡禮遊覽).
meter-long cliff between the two colossal image caves. They evoke the imagery of “overhanging pavilions and doubled passageways” (xuange chongxuan 房間重軒).27

Such an imagery is represented by a refurbished mural in Mogao Cave 275. Conducted at some point before the late-seventh century, the repainting on the east wall of the fifth-century cave represents a gathering scene in a mountain monastery.28 Despite being severely defaced, the picture clearly depicts a long, two-story building amid mountains and waters as the spatial setting of the gathering (Figure 6). The frontally shown building is sandwiched between two narrow registers of triangular mountain peaks above and a wavy stream below. The building appears to be a timber-and-masonry hybrid structure of a large width. At least six bays of the upper level and five bays of the lower level are represented, and no gable wall is depicted to indicate where the long façade terminates. Architectonic forms are well articulated and proportioned for a believable built environment: the bracket-sets on top of the columns, the rafters represented by two rows of small circles, and the railings articulate a two-storied, timber-structured porch. Moreover, the wooden doorframes embedded into the edge-beveled wall indicate that the wall from which the porch protrudes is thick and solid. The relatively simple types of bracket-sets, doors, and rafters in the painting are echoed in the actual wooden members in a few early caves and the pictorial rafters painted in the ceilings of their antechambers.29

The painting may represent either the cave-front or the standalone architecture, yet it sheds light on the impression of the Mogao cave site before the late-seventh century, especially regarding the built environment and the activities that occurred within. The landscape is not different from that of the Mogao site, which is fronted by the Daquan River and backed by the sand dunes of Mount Mingsha. The long porch matches the main feature of the cave site before the advent of the colossal image caves, namely, horizontal spaws of caves above the ground level. In front of the building are depicted fourteen (originally twenty-one) monks in two rows. The legible words in the cartouches beside the figures, such as “Bikkhu Dao (name) . . .” (比丘道……) and “the image of bikkhu…” (比丘……像),30 indicate they represent specific monks likely from the local Buddhist society. Most of them are seated facing the monk priest in the center of the upper row, toward whom three small figures in the lower register are bowing. The gathering represents the moment of a Buddhist sermon or an ordination ceremony.31 While combining architectural and environmental elements in accord with the actual cave site, the painting renders an ideal seclusion in mountains for concentrated meditation and study that would lead to spiritual accomplishment.

The Colossal Image Pavilion in the Tang Dynasty

The horizontal and relatively even distribution of caves has always been a basic pattern in the architectural appearance of the Mogao Caves. However, they soon became dwarfed by the multilevel pavilion screening the colossal image cave. This kind of structure is historically known as “daxiang tangdian 大像堂殿” (colossal image hall) and now commonly referred to as “colossal image pavilion.”32 The early-Tang version of the colossal image pavilion at Mogao has left little trace, but one can still discern its basic layout and composition based on the rock-cut parts, platform remains, current structure, and textual descriptions. The archaeological remains in front of the two colossal image caves indicate that their front-halls were five bays wide, dwarfing most other porches that are one or three bays wide. The ground-level floor area of each pavilion is no less than 200 square meters, which is comparable to a monumental, freestanding hall (Figure 7).33 The ground level space would have served as a spacious entrance-hall enshrining gigantic images of Buddhist guardians.34 A modernly reconstructed pavilion of the grander Cave 96, despite different in the numbers of cave levels, well illustrates the spatial elements of its medieval predecessor (Figure 8). The carving of a rock-core image of the Future Buddha Maiteya seated with pendent legs produced


27 “Datang zongzi longxi lishi zaixiu gongde bei” (P.4640), Zheng and Zheng, Dunhuang bei ming zan, 229.


30 Fan and Cai, di 266–275 ku, 212. Bikkhu is a Sanskrit word meaning “a fully ordained monk.”

31 Zhao, “di 275ku dongbi.”

32 “Dunhuang lu” (Record of Dunhuang, S.5448). Transcription in Zheng, Dunhuang dili wenshu, 86.

33 The platform fronting Cave 96 is sized about 21.4 m (l.) by 9.2 m (w.) and that of Cave 130 is sized 21.6 m (l.) by 16.3 m (w.) Peng, Wang, and Guo, “jiucenglou kaogu xin faxian”; Pan and Ma, kuqian diantang, 49.

34 Remains of four gigantic statues of the four heavenly kings over six meter tall were excavated in Cave 130. They are dated to the Guiyijin period, but the tradition of furnishing the antechamber with guardians’ statues can trace back to the Sui period, as seen in Cave 427 (Figure 5). Pan and Ma, kuqian diantang, 53–54.
a rock-cut shaft as the main chamber and two corridors one above another. The colossal Buddha is enclosed by an over 40 meters high pavilion of composite materials. The pavilion consists of a thick masonry wall built onto the rock-cut front wall that supports the cantilevered roof and façade structures, a timber-structured pitched roof, and a multilevel pavilion-like porch that screens the corridors opened onto the masonry and rock-cut walls. It is grand in scale, composite in structure, and has a complex history of renovation.

The Dunhuang colossal image pavilion corresponds with the making of colossal image caves in Tang China which prompted a new type of cave-front architecture. In the fifth century, colossal buddha images pervaded the silk road, as major cave sites all were centered around a colossal image cave in Central Asia and China. Yet it is in the Chinese cave sites that the colossal image cave was known to have a terraced building in front of it. The colossal image cave of Shichengsi 石城寺 in Shanxi刻 (Zhejiang province) is an early example reported to have “structured three levels of terraces in front of the niche, and built an entrance-pavilion and hall” in 513–516 CE. If the sixth-century building was relied on terraces, then the construction of a colossal image cave under the Tang imperial patronage, namely the Fengxian Temple 常先寺 of the Longmen Grottoes 龍門石窟 (Henan province) may have marked the maturation of the timber-structured pavilion. Commissioned by Emperor Gao and Empress Wu of the Tang period in 675 CE, the colossal open-air cave enshrines a nine-figure group centered at a 17 meters tall statue of the Cosmic Buddha Vairocana. The high visibility of the colossal images was soon intervened by a set of timber-structured façades and roofs (Figure 9). According to archaeologist Peng Minghao, the modification was made during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (r.712–756), who was the successor and opponent of Empress Wu, in the eighth century. The implication for Dunhuang is not only the transmission of the architecturally screened colossal image cave to the northwest frontier of the Tang Empire, but also the architectural practice as a means of visual control of a cave landscape.

Unlike the single-level façade of the Longmen colossal image, the Dunhuang colossal image pavilion featured a multi-tiered verticality. The Tang-period pavilion of Mogao Cave 96 seemed to have four levels, as a ninth-century renovation record reports that “the old pavilion again had four levels of flying (eaves).” Another tenth-century Dunhuang manuscript mentions three parts of the colossal image pavilion: (1) “daxiang tianwang 大像天王” ([Hall of the Heavenly Kings of the Colossal Image], (2) “daxiang xiānggōng 大像向宮” (the lower level of the Colossal Image), and (3) “daxiang shàngcèng 大像上層” (the upper level(s) of the Colossal Image). The words respectively correspond to the entrance-hall, the second-level porch overhanging from the cliff surface, and the upper level standing above the rock-cut terrace and overhanging from the masonry wall. They give a sense of the multi-tiered composition of structures screening the vertical shaft. By the strategy of subdivision, the colossal image pavilion provides various ground levels for viewing the colossal image’s feet, hand, chest, and head. Moreover, each level of it serves as an intermediate-sized liaison between the colossal cave and the surrounding caves.

The lesser colossal image in Cave 130 has a rock-cut ceiling and front wall onto which three levels of corridors were cut out. The features suggest that its frontal structure would have been similar regarding the multi-tiered composition but lesser in height, less covered by a timber-structured enclosure, and fewer levels. In addition, Cave 130 was excavated at least three meters above the ground level at the time of its construction and therefore its pavilion was added later and no earlier than the late-ninth century. By inference, the Cave 96 pavilion was the singular architectural monument at Mogao by the end of the high-Tang period; due to an unparalleled height, it outstood a horizontal sprawl of some three hundred caves. Even in the following centuries, its visual predominance has not been surpassed by any other gigantic entrance-halls or multilevel pavilions. As art historian Wu Hung insightfully points out, the colossal image cave architecture introduced monumental scale, vertical space, and platformed architecture on the ground level. It henceforth became the symbolic language of power and the crest of a hierarchical spectacle. One remarkable feature of the colossal image pavilion to be further discussed in the next section is the constant renovation. It counteracted the material ephemeralism and reenacted the architectural and social spectacle, especially during the

36 Peng Minghao and Li Ruoshui, “Longmen fengxian si da lushena xiangkan
tangdai de buzao yu jiajian” (Supplementary Construction of the Vairocana
Buddha niche of the Fengxian Temple of the Longmen Grottoes in the Tang
dynasty), Kaogu 233, no.2 (2020): 112–120.
39 “Laba randeng fenpei kukan mingshu 陸八燃燈分配窟龕名數” (List of Caves for Distributing Lanterns during the Light Up on the Eighth Day of the Twelve Month, 951 CE) is in the collection of the Dunhuang Academy
(no.0322). For transcription and analysis, see Jin, “Dunhuang kukan mingshu kao,” and Ma, Mogao ku shi yanjiu, 146–50.
40 Pan and Ma, kuqian diantang, 59.
41 Wu Hung, Kongjian de Dunhuang: zhoujin Mogao ku (Spatial Dunhuang:
Approaching the Mogao Caves) (Beijing: Sanlian chuban she, 2022), 87–91.
second peak period of construction and renovation.

Colossal Image Pavilions and Ante-Halls in the Guiyijun period

Following the intensive cave construction in the Sui and Tang periods, the climax of cave-front architecture occurred in the tenth century. Dunhuang became the seat of a tributary state of the Tang and subsequent dynasties known as guiyijun (lit. Return to Righteousness Army) in 851–1036. Intensive construction activities took place at the Mogao Caves when the Guiyijun Circuit was under the Cao regime since 914. The Cao-family Guiyijun period saw the construction of about a dozen gigantic hall caves and an unprecedented scale of construction and reconstruction of ante-halls and porches, all unified under a half-mile-long strip of exterior mural. In this period, the colossal image cave and their pavilions was systematically renovated. Dunhuang manuscripts record two major renovation of the Cave 96 pavilion commissioned by the Guiyijun Military Governors Zhang Huaiheng 张淮深 (831–890) in the third quarter of the ninth century and Cao Yuanzhong 曹元忠 (d. 974) in 966. The latter renovation, which entailed three hundred builders, patrons of almost all social strata, and feasts, was a spectacle in its own right. Correspondingly, the large platform remains indicates that both pavilions were extravagantly renovated in the late-medieval period, which archaeologists initially suggested to be the Xixia period (1036–1227). A more accepted view predates the renovation of Cave 130 to the end of the Guiyijun period, specifically, during the reign of Cao Zongshou 曹宗壽 in 1002–1014.

New evidence for this dating are some bracket-set components that belonged to the frontal architecture of Cave 130 (Figure 10). In winter 2022, the author and a few scholars of the Exhibition Center of the Dunhuang Academy noticed a bracket-arm and a few bracket-blocks in a storage cave at Mogao. A modern inscription on the bracket-arm identifies that it was found “on the stairs of Cave 130 in 1955.” Since no extant timber members of the colossal image pavilion was known prior to this point, the little discovery is particularly revealing of the architectural style and modernity of the architecture. They were probably taken from timber structures around Cave 130 or left-over materials from the construction. Three arms seem to serve as paving of the stairs in a rock-cut tunnel of Cave 130 for a long period of time, during which one side of the arms was worn down. The arm measures 88 cm (l.) by 12 cm (w.) by 17 cm (h.) and the blocks measure 18 cm (l.) by 18 cm (w.) by 8 cm (h.). The measurement unit (cai 下 材) of the timber members roughly complies with the seventh grade (17.3 x 11.5 cm) as prescribed in Yingzao fashi 营造法式 (Building Standards), architectural treatise compiled in 1103. This module is applied to most extant Mogao timber-structured porches dated between 970–980. The Cave 130 arm’s section size (17 x 12 cm) is close to that of Caves 431 (18.5 x 12 cm) and that of Caves 427 and 196 (18 x 12.5 cm). While all other known examples are concentrated in the central-north part of the southern section, the bracket-set components of Cave 130 demonstrates that the similar timber-façade construction extended to the southern part where Cave 130 is located. By inference, the modularity and the timber-construction system applied to large and small cave-front architecture of the Mogao complex during the late-Guiyijun period were remarkably consistent.

The design of the colossal image pavilion was also reinvented; additional levels and height testify to extended verticality. The Cave 96 pavilion was adapted from a four-level structure to a five-level structure in the late-ninth century. Hence, it was referred to as a “five-story ge-pavilion of the immortals” (wuceng xiange 五層仙閣) in a mid-tenth century Dunhuang manuscript. The rhetoric of “immortal” (xian 仙)
associates the tall building with high spirituality. Meanwhile, an order for the architectural spectacle was needed, especially during an intensive cave construction period. The visual effect of adding the fifth level was that “the high and the low received their places” (gaodi desuo 高低得所).  

The vertical expansion of the Cave 130 pavilion gives us a hint of how “the high and the low received their places.” During a renovation of the upper-level porch in 2004, the remains of a small shrine standing on the cliff top above Cave 130 was excavated. These kinds of cliff-top shrines were not constructed at the Mogao site before the Tibetan period (787–848). It was the advent of a cliff-top pagoda above Cave 161—a neighboring cave in the immediate north of Cave 130—in the Tibetan period that reshaped the skyline of the vicinity (Figure 10). Regarding the typology and style, the cliff-top shrine above Cave 130 seems to be a later construction, because the central altar in it is similar to those in the central-altar caves popular during the Guiyijun period. The cliff-top shrine was most likely constructed when the colossal image pavilion of Cave 130 was renovated. The cliff-top shrine, although being structurally independent from the colossal image pavilion, turned a three-level structure into a four-level one. Based on the cliff’s topography and archaeological remains, I made a theoretical reconstruction of the composite architecture (Figure 11). It consists of three structures, namely, a pitched-roofed shrine standing on the cliff top, a three-bay porch on an elevated rock-cut terrace that screens the top-level corridor, and a five-bay, two-level pavilion on the ground level that screens the two lower levels of corridors. The reconstruction design illustrates the effect of the additional level of a colossal image pavilion: it helps the pavilion to reseize its visual prominence in the cave complex. The pavilion was carefully redesigned to reflect an updated architectural order of the cave landscape.

Not just through the competition of height, but also through correspondence of scale was the architectural spectacle updated during the Guiyijun period. Along with the construction of monumental-scale caves, an enlarged version of the porched antechamber emerged—that is, a porticoed entrance-hall standing on a platform or an elevated terrace. While modern scholars refer to them as “kuqian diantang 宿前殿堂” (ante-hall), 58 medieval cave-makers rendered them as “fenglou 鳳樓” (phoenix lou-pavillons). The historical term gives a sense of the overhanging roof, the polychromatic painting, and the sheering height. An ante-hall is usually three bays wide and two bays deep, and the extra-large ones reach five-bay wide and three bay deep. In comparison to the porched antechambers, an ante-hall is significantly more accessible and spacious, and thereby prolonging the central axis of a cave-temple (Figure 13). Therefore, the ante-hall was less a drastic contrast than a secondary companion to the colossal image pavilion; the advent of ante-hall turned the polarized architectural landscape into a spectrum comprising three scales or even more.

The ante-hall’s impact on the architectural spectacle was significant. Archaeological excavations have uncovered at least twenty-six ante-halls in the southern section. 60 Judging from the remains of their platforms, the ante-halls covered almost the entire length of the southern section. Recognizing the integrated construction of cave and ante-hall in the Guiyijun period, archaeologist Sha Wutian concludes that the bipartite paradigm represents a mature form of Sinicized Buddhist cave architecture. 61 While this statement is reasonable, one should not ignore the site conditions that accelerated the maturation of this building type and subsequently benefited from its wide application. It was following the renovation of the colossal image pavilions that the cave patrons commissioned some of the early ante-halls. 62 Thus it is difficult to deny the possibility that the spacious ground level of the colossal image pavilion set a model for the subsequent ante-hall design. The grandest of the ante-halls were commissioned by the Guiyijun leaders and high-rank officials. They were clustered around the “five-story ge-pavilion” of Cave 96 and their platforms connected

58 Pan and Ma, kuqian diantang.
59 This term appears in, for example, “Zhang Huai shen zaoku gongde bei 祖師造功德碑” (Stele Recording the Merits of Cave Construction by Zhang Huai shen, P.3720, S.5630, ca. 882 CE) and “Hexi dusan tongzhi daguan jiankan shang li wen” (Text on a General Buddhist Commander completing the construction of a cave-temple at Daqian (i.e., the Mogao Caves), P.3302v, 933 CE). Lou and ge 鳳 and 凰 are storiwood buildings. In Tang period, lou-pavilion refers to a multilevel pavilion with waist-eaves on every level, whereas ge-pavilion refers to that without any waist-eaves. But the names have been used interchangeably since the middle period in China. Sun Ruxian and Sun Yihua, Dunhuang shiku jianzhu juan 安雲敦煌石窟建築卷 (A Complete Collection of the Dunhuang Caves: Volume on Architectural Painting), vol.21, ed. Dunhuang Academy (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Commercial Press, 2001), 136.
60 Eighteen ante-halls (Caves 108, 110, 98, 85, 61, 55, 467, 53, 46, 45, 44, 39, 38, 35, 30–27, 25, 22, 21) were discovered during the 1963–66 excavations, three (Caves 130, 152, 146), two (Caves 72, 76), and two ante-halls (Caves 96 and 94) were found in three later excavations in 1979–80, June–July, and October–November 1999. Besides, the 1951 survey indicates Cave 16 has a layer of tile paving a meter below the ground-level of the current ante-hall.
62 As documented in the Zhang Huai shen Stele (P.3720, S.5630, ca. 882 CE), immediate after renovating the pavilion of Cave 96, that Zhang decided to construct a gigantic cave (Cave 94) to the north of it.
In Buddhist cosmology, 28 realms consisting of 4, 18, and 6 levels respectively in the Formless Realm, the Realm of Form, and the Realm of Desire, and the top-level realm in the Formless Realm is further divided into 6 heavens. For a comprehensive overview of Buddhist cosmology, see Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins*, trans. Gaynor Sekimori (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1997).

63 For an acute analysis of the siting of caves commissioned by Guiyijun leaders, see Lee, “Repository of Ingenuity,” 201–205.


66 In Buddhist cosmology, 28 realms consisting of 4, 18, and 6 levels respectively in the Formless Realm, the Realm of Form, and the Realm of Desire, and the top-level realm in the Formless Realm is further divided into 6 heavens. For a comprehensive overview of Buddhist cosmology, see Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins*, trans. Gaynor Sekimori (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1997).

67 For discussion of P.2012v, see Liying Kuo, “Ma fayuan zhulin (Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma), compiled by Daoshi 道世 (Dawangzong 大王宗) as Three Realms and Nine Lands” in Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot chinois 2824.

68 A similar example other than the one introduced here is “the Picture of Three Realms and Nine Lands” in Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot chinois 2824.

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Figure 1. The timber-structured façade of Mogao Cave 431, showing three-step bracket-sets, a three-bay façade, and an overhanging roof. Dated by inscription to 980 CE. 486 cm (w) x 142 cm (d.) x 320 cm (h.). Wood, mud brick, polychromic pigments. Photo by author, January 20, 2022.
Figure 2. Section and plan drawings of Mogao Cave 196, late-Tang period (851–907). Base map after Dunhuang yanjiu yuan ed., Zhongguo shiku: Dunhuang Mogao ku, vol. 4, p. 236; figures and annotations added by author.
Figure 3. A cluster of caves in the northern section of the Mogao Caves, showing three types of treatments regarding the antechamber. Periods varied and some unidentifiable, constructed after the 6th century, and used until the 14th century. Photo by author, October 13, 2021; annotation by author.

Figure 4. Distribution of the Caves by the end of the high-Tang period, the orange frames with rounded corners mark the major area of cave construction during the Sui, the early- and high-Tang periods. Base map after Shi, *Mogao ku xing*, vol. 2, 8–16, fig. 6; image processed and annotation by author.
Figure 5. Sectional perspective of a digital model of Cave 427. Main chamber and statues in antechamber from the Sui period, the reconstructed timber-structured porch is dated by inscription to 970 CE. Drawing by author.

Figure 6. Line drawing of the pavilion scene in Mogao Cave 275. Size of remaining mural: 85–101 cm (h.) x 80–102 cm (w.). Drawing by Zhao Rong. After Zhao, "di 275ku dongbi," 378, fig. 2.
Figure 7. Plan drawings of the bottom-level architectural platform in front of Mogao Caves 96 (left) and 130 (right), respectively dated to the Tang and the Guiyijun periods. Data collected from the Dunhuang Academy and redrawing by author; Pan and Ma, *kuqian diantang*, 50, fig. 32.
Figure 8. Sectional drawing of Mogao Cave 96, initially constructed in 695, façade reconstructed in 1927–35. Drawing by author.
Figure 9. Traces of beam holes in-between the colossal images (left) and a theoretical reconstruction of the timber structure screening the Fengxian Temple of the Longmen Grottoes, showing a double-eave timber porch with two corridors on the sides. Design and drawing by Li Ruoshui. After Peng and Li, “Longmen fengxian si da lushen xiangkan tangdai de buzao yu jiajian,” 114–115, figs. 5, 7.

Figure 10. A bracket-set consisting of an arm and three blocks, of which the arm was discovered near Mogao Cave 130. Photo by author, May 11, 2022.
Figure 11. The area near Mogao Cave 130, arrows pointing at remains of two cliff-top structures. Photo by Paul Pelliot in 1908. After Paul Pelliot, Les grottes de Touen-houang: Peintures et sculptures Boudhiques des époques des Wei, des Tang et des Song, vol. 1 (Paris: Paul Geithner, 1914–24), pl. 5; annotation by author.

Figure 12. Theoretical reconstruction of the composite cave-front architecture of Mogao Cave 130, cave constructed in early 8th century, and pavilion in 10th–11th century. Design and drawing by author.
Figure 13. Sectional perspective of Mogao Cave 53 with the ante-hall reconstructed. Tenth century. Ante-hall reconstruction design by Xiao Mo; drawing by author.

Figure 14. Plan drawing of the ground-level caves near Mogao Cave 96, numbered caves indicating ante-halls built during the Guiyijun period. Drawing by author.
Figure 15. Picture of Mount Sumeru, ink on paper, scroll, ca. 10th century. Found in Mogao Cave 17, in the collection of Bibliothèque nationale de France (Pelliot chinois 2012). Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.