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# Material Ways of Looking: A Methodological Proposal for Visual and Material Culture Studies

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### Résumé de l'article

A problem facing art historians and scholars of visual and material culture studies is the white patriarchy that undergirds most visual culture produced in the western world, at least until recent times: whether paintings, book illustration, sculpture, advertising, or the environments that nourish and house these creations, both the producer and the intended viewer for the most part came from one demographic category. Building upon the concept of affordance, this essay questions object-human interactions to propose methodological approaches to visual culture that privilege the inclusion of otherwise siloed or marginalized people (women and people of colour, but also non-western people). By centering on the object represented in or through an image, this essay explores ways of detecting marginalized presence so to foment a more inclusive visual culture while formulating new types of questions that can be asked of our visualized world.

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### *Material Ways of Looking: A Methodological Proposal for Visual and Material Culture Studies*

Material ways of looking privilege the knowledge and experiences of the objects contained in a visual or material representation – from the contents of a work of art, book illustration or statue, to a vase, advert, or puzzle – as well as those of the objects’ producers and their identity-related and cultural contexts. By drawing material culture into the realm of visual culture, we attempt to overcome an evident flaw in western visuality –that it has been created primarily by and for white men, at least until recent decades – by associating identity with material objects represented within a book illustration, painting, and so on. Such an approach fundamentally requires us to ask new questions of visual representations. In tandem, its methodological moorings from anthropology, cultural studies, and critical race studies complicate visual objects in novel ways that allow us to make visual culture of the past more inclusive and relevant to a broader range of demographics.

This essay explores several material ways of looking so to demonstrate methodologies that can be brought to any work of art or visual representation while forging critical pathways that help overcome the

whiteness of western visual culture, particularly in the past.

#### **The Beneficiaries of Visual Culture**

Whether in a gallery devoted to renaissance art or a park filled with commemorations of a country’s founding fathers, in visual and material culture studies we as scholars tend to limit any assessment of identity to the demographic represented by the work’s human subject or that of its creator. Until recent decades, entire demographics were excluded from or only featured in particular moments of representation, for example, Black people performing labour in a nineteenth-century engraving or women posing for the male viewer. As a consequence, we have trouble seeing marginalized groups in positions of power, asserting knowledge, or dominating those who have marginalized them. As Ananda Cohen-Aponte has observed, it can also be difficult to trace information about marginalized peoples’ contributions to producing art objects, for instance the labour conditions under which colonial Andean art was produced and how Indigenous and mestizo artists engaged in their creative and professional practices (Cohen-Aponte 2017, 67-94).

Instead, we tend to see the final product – the colonial-era cathedral with its baroque-style paintings, hybrid façade, and locally-sourced building components, all of which serve as a beacon for Catholic faith. The focus on Catholic infrastructure hides the more complex cultural and ethnic identity of the building’s creators.

For bell hooks, providing marginalized groups with the tools required to produce images increases their ability to contribute to and shape visual culture, leading to its decolonization. She notes that “Before racial integration there was a constant struggle on the part of black folks to create a counterhegemonic world of images that would stand as visual resistance, challenging racist images” (hooks 1995, 57). In addition to mythologies that shape visibility, which predispose white men in their fulfillment and performance of heroic or leadership roles in visual contexts, the exclusion of diverse groups as the producers or subjects of book illustration, photography, painting, cinema, and advertising inherently limits our ability to study visual culture trans-historically because until recent decades people of colour have not been celebrated as image producers or considered worthy of being depicted in an array of contexts. These limitations also restrict the history of western visibility accorded to any demographic group other than white men.

Many attempts to find and see diversity in visual culture rely heavily on skin-deep assumptions that usually require the presence of marginalized groups, or objects overtly associated with them, in the frame. In his 2005 book, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture*, Martin A. Berger insists that we must look more deeply at images: “Genre

paintings depicting white farmers, landscape photographs of the western frontier, fine arts museums, and early action films were made intelligible in part through racialized viewing practices of which European-Americans were utterly unaware. [... We must] probe beneath the narrative surface of images [...] to comprehend, and potentially dislodge, [racial] power in American culture” (Berger 2005, 7-8). In this light, object-based inquiries lay bare the interconnectedness of different parts of the world through global production and transmission processes that existed hundreds of years ago, much as they do now. Globalization and commodification play important roles in connecting one part of the world to another, and many objects reify these connections and allow us to draw into a composition some discussion of and context for marginalized presence. By thinking about objects within the frame differently, we answer Berger’s call to look more deeply at images so to see people otherwise obviated by the image.

Images and objects imply beneficiaries, who are their implicit and incidental audiences whose gaze is attracted and with whom the images and objects interact. Until recently, that audience was conceived as white and usually male. Building on James Gibson’s theory of affordances, we can understand visual culture as being structurally shaped by and for white patriarchy, adjusted to suit his tastes, needs, and worldviews, as “an affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer” (Gibson 1986, 129). Until recently, the male gaze has significantly impacted our visual culture, which has ensured that much of our research centres on what he sees and from what he benefits. Nowhere is this clearer than in a

national gallery anywhere in the western world where images of white male leadership project from the curated walls of institutions that often serve a second purpose as reflections of national identity (Said 1978, 141-142). Joining them are cohorts of women in various states of undress, in contrast to how men tend to be presented, and almost always absent are people of colour, except in certain predictable ways as servants or “losers” in the shadow of white greatness (Mirzoeff 1995, 3). In 1989 this reality gave rise to the New York-based protest art titled “Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?” (Guerrilla Girls 1989). Through this project, the clothed state of museum-goers’ contrasts against the propensity to nudity women and not men, and to denude women of humanity by casting them as allegorical concepts (John Gast’s 1872 painting, *American Progress*, being an excellent example). White coded objects, such as a European crown, explored in due course, also exhibit valued qualities or characteristics of whiteness (Berger 2005, 57). Similarly, the white gaze expects to see Black or Indigenous peoples performing certain tasks and not others. Black labour and its products, statuesque women whose appearance pleases his eye, male leadership domestically or abroad in the propagation of the settler-colonial enterprise example visual categories that also serve as affordances to white men that pervade western visual culture.

### Seeing Presence

From a material perspective, however, and by working with thing theory as a means of understanding object-human interactions, we can propose new methodological approaches to visual culture

that allow us to see marginalized presence through an object’s biography and its affordances with humanity (Brown 2003). Of interest here is not only how an oriental rug that sits under my feet insulates me from the cold through its material composition – or in the case of Miss Zélia serves as a species of platform that both marks her place and displays her to the viewer – but also the consideration of how the carpet’s existence affords its creator his or her livelihood or status as its producer (figure 1). Objects that are commodities have an array of entanglements that result in many affordances (Hodder 2012, 115). By defining an object as having both external and internal relationships with humanity, moreover, we broaden the spectrum of questions being asked of visual objects (a lithograph, a carpet) and their contents (the stools that elevate the male acrobats, the carpets depicted under their feet, the weaving techniques used to create the carpet). Informing ourselves about the knowledge and use vectors that intersect with things, whether objects and manufactured goods or flora and fauna, will allow us to challenge the ways our visual culture excludes.<sup>1</sup>

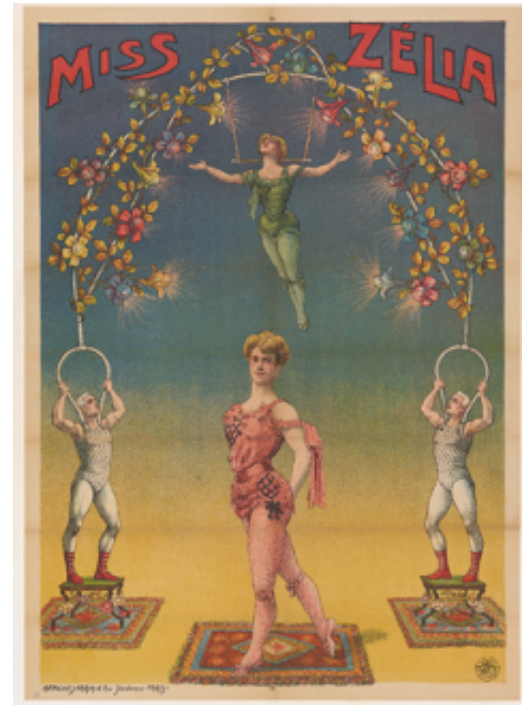
Our intention to focus on objects intersects with the viewer’s capacity and desire to gaze. The western appetite for looking considerably grew from the eighteenth century to today, as evidenced by the creation and institutionalization of places where the gaze could consume objects and people, whether in the form of recreations of life-size people to model ethnic types or craftspeople creating traditional objects, which later become protected as museum culture and even educational material. Supriya Chaudhuri observes that “Objects of material culture,

denuded of social context and use-value, were accessible for consumption as spectacles” (2018, 59) in world fairs or exhibitions, as well as museums, art galleries, and in both public and private spaces. Miss Zélia’s performance poster demonstrates how commercial venues increasingly made use of similar objects to attract the gaze of clients and spectators. This form of displaying sometimes quotidian, other times culturally specific objects, commoditized them and their producers as *exotica* or *preternaturalia* to western eyes.

### Things and Their Biographies

There are many benefits in considering the biographies of the objects in the frame. Objects such as cloth, as well as cloth production, signify specific populations as their producers. India clothed the nineteenth-century western world, and specialized products such as brocades required the expertise of craftsmen from that country as well as raw materials for the cloth trade such as cotton. At world exhibitions, however, these forms of industry found themselves non-industrialized and their labour relegated to the exotic crafting of objects deemed material culture worthy of looking at but not categorized as fine art (Chaudhuri 2018, 63). Objects displayed at exhibitions, such as those that gave rise to the trend of *chinoiserie*, and which made their way into museums, were trafficked by the colonial officials who obtained vases, pieces of furniture, and silks, and then traded them as commodities, which even today has cemented them into a circulating display network as objects move from one institution or place to another. These objects are usually portrayed as old, traditional, or representing lost knowledge, which rari-

fies them and increases their value in western eyes (Chaudhuri 2018, 65-66). It is this linkage with exoticism and the concept of a rare spectacle that oriental rugs become a seemingly natural pedestal for Miss Zélia and her companions.



**Figure 1**  
Miss Zélia (Paris: Affiches Faria, c. 1890-1900). New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division, b20732857. This lithograph publicity poster for the aerialist displays her and her co-performers upon small oriental rugs.

The frame containing the engraving’s contents, just like the edges of a photograph, defines the venue of our gaze’s consumption of the work, and the people and things it represents, much like the cabinet or museum gallery. Many objects in illustrations are displayed, held aloft by individuals, or positioned on surfaces

designed to display objects, such as a platform or table; for Miss Zélia, it is she who is on display as an objectified woman and performer. This practice of attracting the gaze, of enabled looking, characterises visual culture in general as manifested in any medium that technologizes the gaze. The posture involved in display ensures a form of feedback loop between the viewer and the object. The act of looking may stimulate pleasure in some, but not in others, being one of the affordances that the artist programmed into the image. The image producer, by attracting the gaze and along with it the consumer's wallet, enjoys an entirely different affordance, as do the image producers, which range from the artist and engraver to the publisher and colorist.

Beyond these relationships between image producer and consumer, we must contemplate the colonial careers of objects held in museums or featured in images, as objects of this variety tend to exhibit ruptured biographies and transforming affordances as the relationship between object producer and the viewer-consumer evolves. Objects such as the oriental carpet exist in regimes of value that fluctuate over time and space. In the western world, regimes of value have become associated with groups of people; this assessment gave rise to burning witches and enslaving Black people predicated on the belief that certain humans have less value than others. We can ask ourselves how objects associated with people exist within this commoditized regime of identity as more or less valued within western society. The production of objects, moreover, requires supporting industries, their materials, and producers, which points to a network of things that comprises an ecosystem enveloping one

or more of their socio-cultural biographies. To better understand the value of things, Arjun Appadurai advises that “we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things” (1986, 6).

Being less interested in how humans imbue things with significance and value will allow for a reorientation of research centred on the visual and material world by considering, from a methodological perspective, how things shine light on humanity. In this way, “The commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’ [can] be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (Appadurai 1986, 13). We can study a thing's social life as a commodity, but also its life before becoming a commodity, in addition to the environments in which the thing was traded or groomed for trade. After about 1500, objects, once commodified, existed within commodity ecumenes covering most of the world: cotton for British clothing coming from India and North America example the intercontinental and connected social worlds of things whose chrysalis is, in this case, the British empire. When we see muslin in the frame modeled by a white woman who is meant to attract not only the female but through her the male gaze (figure 2), chances are we think about some gendered or client-customer relationship, and not the international source of the good and its affordances.

As we have observed with respect to movements for social change, the early

modern period experienced economic, political, and philosophical ruptures that gave rise to the middle class, ended feudalism, elevated the individual's free will, and eventually this extended to human rights for many of the otherwise unempowered demographics. Increasingly during the modern period, "fashion became a driving force for the upper classes, satiated only by ever-increasing quantities and ever-differentiated qualities of articles for consumption" (Appadurai 1986, 36-37). With the rising middle class, this thirst for things ranging from muslin to oriental carpets expands exponentially, buffeted by capitalism and industrialization. Beyond luxury goods, which themselves comprise status symbols pointing to race, gender, and certainly class, commoditized goods originating from outside of the west, and once exposed to its gaze, become machined by their status as new, innovative, or exotic, which propels the viewer-consumer's desire to see and potentially obtain them. To be considered a commodity, the object must be subjected to one or more conditions: its price or law restricts who can obtain it; the item can be difficult to acquire due to scarcity or obstacles to acquisition; the item emblemizes significant cultural codes (as silk does in fashion); and specialized knowledge might be required to use, assess the value of, or consume the item. Complex commodities exhibit distance between their producers and their consumers in terms of the region or country from which they originate (Appadurai 1986, 38-45). When the distance between them shrinks, an object's exclusivity as a signifier of class or luxury becomes replaced by its authenticity.



**Figure 2**  
 "Wm. H. Burns & Co. Manufacturer of Corset Covers and Muslin Underwear," c. 1887. Library of Congress, Washington, DC., Prints and Photographs Division. This clothing advertisement features muslin as the fabric used for the model's underskirt.

Historically, western illustrations of elsewhere, and publishers' choice to provide them in books and magazines in order to entice consumers to purchase their publications, depend upon the commodity of distance. These faraway lands, peoples, and things, the phenomenon of the armchair traveler in an era in which extensive travel was both costly and dangerous, made the use of book illustration and the venue of the published book an ideal product through which the world could

be seen from the comfort of one's home for those who could afford to buy books or knew someone who could.<sup>2</sup> Both the book and its illustrations, as well as their contents, gave the reader access to (claims the publisher) authentic and novel knowledge about lands they would never see themselves. Increasingly, book titles helped to brand their contents by claiming that travel relations and descriptions of non-western peoples and cultures were authentic and true, and the images 'taken from the life.' Middle and upper-class readers desiring to know more about the world were enticed by this quality of authenticity, as opposed to exclusivity, although the book trade also operated on that premise by offering leather bindings, gilded pages, hand-colouring, among other ways a book owner could make his acquisition distinct from others.

From a more recent perspective, a class of objects appears in western visual culture that comprise cultural signifiers of the non-western world and which have nonetheless been appropriated by the west and commoditized in some fashion. As bell hooks points out, "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 1992, 21). Blackness and the exotic other easily make their way into western visual culture as a means of highlighting whiteness, as background scenery, as providing the supporting context so that white people can indulge in an exotic world. hooks points to advertising campaigns such as *Tweeds* launched by clothing company United Colors of Benetton for characterizing Black people and in this case Egyptian scenery as unmodern. The campaign employed rural backgrounds upon which to feature the latest fashions adorning

white models that collectively synthesize a sense of cultural alterity meant to encourage the consumer to purchase these articles of clothing in order to experience, possess, or exude a similar exotic air (hooks 1992, 28-29). Absent from the advert in question is a mutual moment of connecting between Black and white people, exemplified by making eye contact and equal moments of touching. Rather, the campaign contrasts shots featuring Black women in traditional clothing and white women in Benetton's latest offerings; their proximity betrays a power imbalance exemplified by a white model holding a Black child aloft and through the contrasting dress of white and Black women. At the same time, the clothing itself implies a global chain of production that draws in producers, labourers, materials, and spaces in China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, among other locations.

The study of how things can illuminate the presence of people who themselves are excluded from either the contents or production process of visual objects merits serious attention. Consider the example of human slavery through which individuals have their utility often as labourers evaluated and then commoditized, while their social identities become layered upon new ones in the enslaver's culture. The association of enslaved or trafficked people with commodities yields no novel observation by itself, as scholars have well studied this form of dehumanization. Yet, the association of trafficked people with commodities reinforces their humanity by affirming their lived experiences through those of the things with which they interacted.<sup>3</sup> Put another way, when certain identities are excluded from the frame, as they have been in the images



considered thus far and which feature carpets and muslin, objects nonetheless inhere their presence. Human trafficking and low wage labour make the cotton industry possible throughout the modern period, which points to a particular set of affordances that benefit the colonizer and western world in general.

We already associate things with the life trajectories of people, for instance while describing inheritance and the passing of real estate and possessions from a parent to their child. These objects possess biographies that document where the objects spent time, who interacted with them, but also how much they cost to produce, from whom and where did they originate, what sort of lived conditions sustained or imperiled their existence, what became of these objects after their original functions cease, and what was their status as things in the context of a society's complex identity matrix. Using the example of a hut, Igor Kopytoff outlines its creation to house a family, and as it ages, the shelter's use adjusts accordingly, first becoming a guesthouse or a place for the children's leisure time, then a kitchen, and finally a place for chickens and goats, after which the structure collapses. Housing a visitor in a hut used for the kitchen comments on the visitor's status (Kopytoff 1986, 66-72). Things, therefore, have nuanced and plural biographies that account for their lives from financial, technical, political, and ownership perspectives.

When analyzing the contents of an image, we might also think about the things that are missing. Like Kopytoff's hut, the role of objects evolves over the course of an image's existence. For Miss Zélia, the page and not a carnival or stage forms the background of the image; we and not a

group of paying spectators are the audience. These decisions were intended to convert us into paying spectators, to transform the page into the stage where her performance would be experienced and viewed. For the muslin underwear advert, which features quotidian objects that are usually hidden away from plain sight, the underwear is meant to obscure what lies beneath, making the image a multi-layered composition with different states, as we know that a human body will be found under the clothing on offer in the advert, and that a dress will be layered on top of the corset featured on the model's bodice. For the *Tweeds* campaign, the average Egyptian's experience of the landscape is obviated, as is his or her presence; to western eyes, the landscape shown behind the models could be from any undetermined location made exotic by the western gaze – only the presence of Black women wearing traditional clothing anchors an elsewhere to somewhere (but nowhere in particular) in Africa.

Objects can also be cleaved away from the commodity chain as singularities that visually symbolize status, for example when monarchs reserve their right to collect certain animal products, such as ivory, and exclude others from doing the same, or in the case of a cherished family heirloom that one could not imagine selling. Therefore, some objects are coded to reify certain groups of people and not others, and they are valued differently than commodities such as an oriental carpet (Kopytoff 1986, 73-80). The oriental carpets shown beneath Miss Zélia and her companions provide a curious example of an object that, once othered as an exotic rarity, becomes a commodity that in medieval and later times denoted its

owner's status. Today, it has transformed into an object that can be procured cheaply in mass-produced form, or more expensively as a hand-made speciality item with natural, as opposed to chemical, dyes, or even as an antique. Global markets further entrench this variety of carpet as a product of Asia, which reinforces the geographical and essentialized character of the carpet's origin story. They appear in works of art, such as painting, can be found in private collections and in museums as examples of art or historical (treasured) objects, or in a wide array of stores designed for a similarly broad range of budgets. Yet, as a floor covering, stomped on and abraded by our dirty shoes or feet, the oriental rug compels us to consider the identity-related complexity associated with its varied lives as an object of display, a status symbol of varying sorts, and its range of other affordances. For the carpet's creator, the object represents his or her source of income and means of supporting a family, whereas for the carpet's possessor, it either performs a practical or symbolic function.

As Brian Spooner observes about the oriental rug, in its transit to the west from Pakistan or some place in the unspecific "eastern" world, the carpet itself does not change much, yet it arrives divorced from its social, economic, and historical origins, appearing in western visual contexts in this state. The context and story that arrives with it can be reinterpreted for each transaction, for instance from dealer to client and from museum curator to spectator, and its function as a stage prop or an element of a lithograph also changes through time. This ability to reinterpret the object also can result in affirming the object's authenticity and

cultural history as a means of increasing its value as a commodity (Spooner 1986, 198). By recognizing the origin of this variety of rug, we see Pakistani presence in the frame, which is one element of the analysis that will result in diversifying the questions scholars ask of images.

Eschewing the skin-deep identities expressed in an image offers other benefits. As bell hooks observes, in western visual culture, and despite the achievements of the Civil Rights and related movements, the representation of African Americans continues to reinforce and even perpetuate white supremacy. In part, she theorizes, white image producers or Black ones who configure their output through the lens of whiteness can be held responsible for the enduringly problematic visualization of Blackness. To deal with centuries of trauma and a seeming lack of control over how Black people see themselves represented in visual contexts, "progressive black people and our allies in struggle must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority of place in our political movements of liberation and self-determination (be they anti-imperialist, feminist, gay rights, black liberation, or all of the above and more)" (hooks 1992, 1-4). She calls for a revisioning of how we write and think about images in order to redress this critical issue, to move away from a positive-negative binary of what images mean. This positive-negative binary goes beyond freedom-enslavement or white-Black; it also applies to presence-absence, such that Blackness and enslavement are thought to explain why Black and other marginalized groups are excluded historically from or present in limited ways in western

visual culture. A similar corollary extends to women and other people of colour. While we cannot understand the origin of the carpets that inspired the image producer, in the case of Miss Zélia, we can nonetheless perform an analysis of how oriental carpets feature in images. Such a case study – an inquiry for another day – would allow us to compile an object-centred biography through overlapping linkages that emerge from such a dataset: are oriental rugs present in overtly feminine images; are other signifiers of the ‘Orient’ present in the frame; what colours are most commonly seen in representations of oriental rugs; are carpets racialized and gendered in some way; and who benefits from the rugs internally (within the image) and externally (in the context of a rug or image’s production). Object analysis can be relatively difficult to perform due to the interdisciplinarity required to study its production (and the technologies, methods, skills, workers, and materials that go into this process), the image-object’s lifespan, its design (from an art historical or applied perspective, which implies the contributions of artists, producers, machines, as well as some appraisal of an object’s aesthetic and practical functions, and the histories of these, not to mention the target and eventual consumer), its intellectual history and trajectory, including the economic and political or legal knowledge needed to analyse its value, and its social impact, all of which can undergird local, national, and international trade. Objects may convey status, but they also point to the status of a range of people.

Curiously, this relationship between the object’s producer and their creation attracts greater attention for particular lines of work, for example painters such as

Picasso, where the profession has gained an ascendancy in western culture associated with name recognition. While having ‘a Picasso’ increases the status and demonstrates the financial means of the painting’s owner, the object also signifies the painter’s fame and perceived talent in his field. The status of object producers is not always easily apparent, particularly when we tend not to consider, in the case of a carpet, its producer. While an oriental rug also points to the status of its owner in complex ways, the western viewer would not normally meditate on the status of its creator while gazing upon a painting, engraving, or photograph that contained this object. In Turkmen society, like painting in the west, the carpet also has social value as an esteemed furnishing and thus its producer, whether male or female, enjoys an elevated social status that remains entirely disconnected from the object once acquired or reproduced by westerners. Spooner observes that imitating and assimilating the designs of oriental carpets reflect past trends in eighteenth-century imitations of Chinese designs. The tension between authentically produced products and ones manufactured by the non-traditional makers of the product, signals the decreasing quality and value of the product the farther its producer gets from its original making context and the lower the status of the non-traditional makers (Spooner 1986, 209-215). In the end, these non-western producers influence western visual and material culture in significant ways, giving rise to styles of production such as chinoiserie that become broadly imitated and incorporated across the visual spectrum. Appropriation when it comes to objects involves the acquisitive procedures of commodification and its significance for our identities. At the level of the

object associated with our identities, therefore, appropriation takes the contradictory form of either colonization or inclusion.

An object-centred approach to institutional collections is not a new method of contextualizing art or cultural objects stolen or procured along the networks of colonization and introduced into the western world as artifacts of another, sometimes bygone culture. Curators and researchers in recent years have attempted to decolonise how exhibited materials are viewed, studied, and displayed, which entails disenfranchising objects from colonial power structures and replacing them with new structures that give agency to and even empower their original cultural context. By recontextualizing these objects, new stories radiate from them (Giblin et al. 2019, 471-486). By being sensitive to the curatorial and art historical challenges arising from decolonization, we can focus on the collected object's life, why and how it came to reside in the museum's collections or in an image, who made it and their reasons for doing so, as well as the material composition of the object, whether it is a vase, a painting, or a table. Here we are taking this approach one step further so to recontextualize the contents of an image in a similar fashion.

### Objects and Intermediality

Ekphrasis comprises another way of studying the biography of an object as described in textual form. When John Keats published "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in 1820, his 50 lines of verse analysed the images found on a particular vase located in the collections of the Louvre as represented in an engraving published in

Henry Moses's *A Collection of Antique Vases, Alters, Paterae, Tripods, Candelabra, Sarcophagi, etc., from Various Museums and Collections* (1814) (figure 3). The Sosibios vase dates from approximately 50 BC and was confiscated from the French monarchy after its late eighteenth-century fall. Readers of Keats's poem learn about the vase's material structure, about the scenes featured on it and his narrativizing interpretations of them, and the value of the urn as an art historical object. The poem positions the reader as both the viewer and aesthetic assessor of a material object that we know the poet viewed in absentia through an engraved simulacrum. At the same time, Keats questions the artist's ability to represent truly a real urn, having himself prepared a drawing of it based on the engraving, which dismisses any interest in the object's existence while inscribing art as part of the object's identity. In doing so, he invents narratives that go beyond the content featured on the urn, for instance by creating characters for the bodies represented on the vase, giving them names and identities, along with an agency otherwise not associated with the vase by its creator, Sosibios.

This process of *ut pictura poesis* examples how material existence, in this case in the form of the vase residing in the Louvre's collections, anchors to visual (engraved and sketched) and textual (poetic) interpretations of materiality. The poem and engraving furthermore define in absentia the vase's existence but only scratch at the surface of another story that bears witness to that existence – that of the vase's creator and his cultural context, as well as the object's biography as it made its way to the Louvre and found itself reproduced over the course of nearly two millennia. Keats's poem now forms part

of the vase's biography, and as an object its affordances have also transformed over time: from a container for holding things to a prize unmoored from its original location to a treasure emblematic of empire and later into an art historical object deemed worthy of preservation and display. Second order affordances also exist depending on the viewer's perspective – the vase may issue ripples of shared or national identity when viewed by a Greek person who understands the object's history and sees it as a material projection of her own, experiencing nonetheless some sense of loss while standing in the Louvre in Paris where the object remains today.

Ian Hodder points out that the meaning of objects, whether everyday or culturally specific ones, signify meanings based on the individual who views or interacts with them: were a bottle of whiskey featured in a painting, a recovering alcoholic's senses might respond to seeing it or someone imbibing this substance; the bottle elicits a physical and emotional response from that viewer that his companion may not experience (Hodder 2012, 18). Using the example of a photograph of an empty bed that exposes through the vacancy of its occupants their presences through the rumpled sheets they left behind that emphasise their absence, hooks further demonstrates how material objects assert different meanings for the viewer depending on their lived experiences through the bed as a place of shared human experience: grief for loved ones, waning passions or love, a feeling of loss or hope. The empty bed signifies a range of stories, and its own biography will change depending upon its occupants and the viewer's perspective (hooks 1995, 51-52). It is this action that Keats

performed when he expanded the vase's biography so to include stories about the otherwise unknown people featured on its surface. By examining objects as sites of shared human experience, we embrace a range of human diversities that exceed the limits of skin-deep analysis.



**Figure 3**  
**“A Vase in the Musée Napoleon,”** in Henry Moses, *A Collection of Antique Vases, Altars, Paterae, Tripods, Candelabra, Sacophagi, etc., from Various Museums and Collections, Engraved on 170 Plates* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1814), pl. 38. This copperplate engraving reproduces the Sosibios vase located in the Louvre Museum (then called the Musée Napoléon) in Paris; Keats drew a sketch of the engraving and used the sketch to prepare his poem.

Other questions can be asked of objects that function as projections of our

identity. Franz Fanon points to the serum of denegritification whose properties convince users that their skin can be lightened through some beauty ritual, but also through other whitewashing products or activities typically associated with white people, as opposed to Black (Fanon 1986, 111). A Black man holding a crown might example how the serum of denegritification works and its process of signification through the crown as a symbol of white patriarchy and regal power. These are, for the most part, silent discourses that bubble beneath the surface of images; they example identity-guided interpretations that have become inscribed within western visual culture and associated with objects.

Stuart Hall identifies an ambivalence about how cultural or identity-driven stereotypes such as the white crown are viewed by white people, particularly in mass media. While positive and negative attributes associated with mediatized representations of Indigenous and Black peoples, or object-based projections of them (bows and arrows, teepees, and plantations), get updated through the ages, Hall argues that each of them nonetheless contributes to an historical archive of objects that is known to the viewer. This 'ancient grammar' informs persisting worldviews that prevent inclusion and limit the range of objects associated with marginalized groups in visual culture, reinforcing the disassociation of the rug from its Pakistani producer or its presence in the bedchamber of a Black woman represented in an image (Hall 1995, 22). From another perspective, common objects such as beds and rugs are used by nearly everybody, yet in western visual contexts over the last few hundred years, white people are

overwhelmingly depicted using or benefiting from these objects, even though the affordances they offer humanity are universal.

Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn's definition of hybridity allows us to contextualize this grammar and reorient the reception of western visual culture through a material focus on its contents and the conscious decision to locate marginalized people. They posit that "contrary to common presumptions, hybridity neither inheres within, nor describes, specific objects or activities. Rather hybridity is produced and enacted when particular kinds of things and practices are brought together that in some way challenge presumptive norms" (Dean and Leibsohn 2003, 6). Hybridity in this way is borne of intolerance and discrimination; it applies to the exception and not the norm for the purpose of recognizing difference – the European-style crown held aloft in a Black rather than white man's hand; an Indigenous woman reclining on a four-poster bed rather than on a mat. Hybridity requires assumptions that can be essentializing and steeped in stereotype.

In theory, hybridity allows objects to live multi-dimensional lives, much as Keats's Grecian urn takes on a literary life with new steps in its biographical trajectory that were not reflected in its sketched or engraved lives nor in the original object's life as it came to rest at the Louvre. The object's duality as an artifact of colonization and an artwork in multiple modalities underlines the complexity of hybridity from an identity perspective. By locating objects within a painting or a field of vision and considering them images or pictures with stories of their own, we alight on what W.J.T. Mitchell terms a

metapicture, an image that refers to itself and offers up its own metalanguage, being “a second-order discourse that tells us – or at least shows us – something about pictures” (Mitchell 1994, 38).

Time further complicates the significance of an object, much as it does the valuation of a commodity. Art historical categorizations and the practice of tracing styles and their origins (and intercultural mixes) in architecture and painting point to this problem. Consider the rhetorical impacts of *casta* paintings, an eighteenth-century genre intended to document the origins of interracial mixing in the Spanish Americas by making visible the result of interracial sexual relationships (figure 4). These works objectify racialized people, associate objects with them that reflect their class and position in society, and were meant to dissuade interracial mixing. They did not make their way into the average Latin American household; rather, only the wealthy – who were usually white – could possess them, and so we can imagine servants gazing upon these paintings and seeing themselves reflected in strange and haunting ways. Using text, the paintings also affix definitions to each racial typology, which has ever since linked textual and visual denominators of race. Dean and Leibsohn find the way this genre of painting is categorized problematic because the racialized ordering of people from *casta* paintings is reinforced through the art historical categorization of the genre whose creators were themselves mixed (Indigenous, African, and/or European). Recognizing hybridity under these conditions does not reflect how people living in the culture that produced the art objects under study viewed these objects or their ekphrastically objectified racial categories,

suggesting that objects with heterogeneous influences or origins did not merit comment because they were unremarkable and acceptable at the time. To modern viewers, however, this mixing catches the eye and seems pronounced, hence attracting a discipline’s need to categorize and label its difference.



**Figure 4**  
*De español, y Morisca: Albina*, by Miguel de Cabrera (*casta* painting #6 of 16 *casta* paintings), 1763. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Cabrera’s painting features the offspring (an albino girl) of a Spanish man and a mixed blood woman as a means of disincentivizing interracial relationships.

The painting as an object also points to greater and authentic forms of diversity, for its creator, Miguel de Cabrera, was *mestizo* (mixed blood), his godparents *mullatos*; they lived in a highly stratified society where one’s blood quantum usually

determined his or her lived experience. Unlike 'a Picasso,' which materially embodies the creator through a work of his art, Cabrera's work does not signify him even though his painting style is also distinct. He undergoes some process similar to Fanon's denegrification; as a painter, he enjoys today a status that seems separate from his mestizo identity. Yet, the painting itself comprises a significant affordance to Cabrera in the socio-cultural context of eighteenth-century New Spain despite the prevailing racism of its contents. From another perspective, paintings such as this one were not intended for people who already possessed mixed backgrounds, even though they portrayed different racialized couples that excluded white people altogether, for instance a Black and Indigenous couple. And for anyone who has walked the galleries of the Museo de América in Madrid, the overwhelming array of uncontextualized *casta* paintings located in the former metropole serves as a reminder that these works of art continue to reify Spanish identity as a former global empire.

While our object analysis within the frame may linger on hybridity and betray our recognition of difference, we must also consider how marginalized groups produced, supported, used, and destroyed the quotidian objects in the frame. Even more significant is that this recognition of difference seems to pervade and has resulted in an exclusionary visual culture in the western world. Textual records about possessions of mixed origins owned by Indigenous people offer no comment about the status of these objects whereas Europeans actively collected and found objects with non-European influences fascinating. They associate their acquisition and display with their

value, moreover, while excluding the presence of their creators or distancing the objects from the cultures from which they were obtained. Hybridity in this way reinforces the armature of colonization by engaging orientalism with collecting and display practices, on the one hand; and by reproducing this model in scholarly contexts in ways that intensify the binary between the visibility and invisibility of an image's contents, on the other (Dean and Leibsohn 2003, 12-13). Our questions about the people behind an image and its objects allow us to understand, through people otherwise obviated from the image, a thing's biography, and the people with whom it interacted.

The visibility of difference can also be obscured by western style categorizations and the presumptions that they inscribe. Transatlantic trade introduced commodities from the Americas that transformed European society, from the tomato to indigo pigment. An analysis of commodity origins provides another means of diversifying an image. Similarly, colonial buildings erected by Indigenous labourers using their traditional materials, technologies, and architectural practices have their Andean character effaced by Spanish masons who ensure the building conforms better with the look of a European church, being a deception of visibility. For the western gaze, hybridity represented by the building's Andeanness has been erased from the church and the Indigenous contribution goes unacknowledged. Art historical evaluation of works as Indigenous or hybrid favours the final appearance of the object and tends to ignore the processes of its creation, silencing the homogenous Indigenous manufacture of art objects in favour of the heterogeneous appearance of the final



creation whose affordances almost entirely exclude the people who built and maintained the structure, or who manufactured pigments used to colour an image (Dean and Leibsohn 2003, 16-19). Hybridity is also often assessed, in the case of the Americas, when pre-invasion qualities are detected; their absence obscures the object's hybridity, which erroneously means that Indigenous people in the Americas tend to be characterized by pre-European visual signifiers. When these signifiers are absent, Indigenous peoples disappear even though they thrive.

### Final Considerations

Materiality offers an intriguing way to de-centre heteronormative masculinity in our visual culture over time and space because objects are not necessarily made by or intended for men, even if they were conjured into the visual realm by male producers, artists, sculptors, photographers, and graphic designers. When brought into dialogue with efforts to support diversity and inclusion, moreover, studying the material culture of the world around us offers us a unique opportunity to see more than male power and dominance over the last five centuries. Objects exert powerful influence over all viewer-spectators; they transform into sources of desire or loathing according to one's perspective, as informed by their identity; their valuation fluctuates according to the eye of the beholder and their socio-cultural reality; and some objects develop gendered and racialized characters.

Lurking below the surface of any object included in an image, regardless of the appearance of its cultural origins, are the complicated identities of painters,

sculptors, architects, builders, labourers, textile makers, among others, even more so in the colonial and imperial milieux where outward and authentic signs for marginalized groups can easily be censored. By considering and accounting for the affordances tying these objects to people who are marginalized both from within and outside of the frame, we will discover presence in the same visual work that otherwise may only example colonialism or white patriarchy, or their effects. The diversity behind these objects often goes undetected. While this discussion focuses on art objects located within the frame, scholarly attention must be brought to the production processes of objects so to challenge us to look at non-art objects featured in works of art and visual culture more generally to interrogate hybridity and otherwise to detect obscured presence. This approach engages with what Walter D. Mignolo calls the "loci of enunciation" (Mignolo 1999, 238-239), a concept that helps tie together the politics of location with colonial difference against the grain of both prevailing and marginalized epistemologies.

As we have explored, the study of objects, whether material ones or their representation within the frame, promises a rich archive of knowledges and experiences beyond those of white men, particularly from a historical perspective where the presence of marginalized groups is difficult to trace in visual materials. Objects imply commodity chains, with complex networks of affordances, and themselves embody ecumenes that can stretch across continents yet become moored to an image in ways that include marginalized people, but not necessarily through essentialized objects and skin-deep

presence. This methodological shift will entail interdisciplinary research, but it will also yield incredibly important insight into marginalized presence, especially in the settler-colonial milieu.

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<sup>1</sup> This approach, but not our general definition of what is implied by “thing,” presumes that objects are entities and is inspired by Hodder (2012, 10).

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term armchair traveler from Kagan (2000, 71).

<sup>3</sup> This approach has been used elsewhere to understand, through the accounting books that list and contextualize expenditures, the lived and material experience of slaves in the early modern period according to the objects with which they interacted. See Beck (2018).