

Traveling Mermaids, Traveling Materials

Museum Objects and the Decentering of the Histories of Knowledge

▼ **FORUM ARTICLE** in *Decentering the History of Knowledge*

▼ **ABSTRACT** This article—which is mostly based on secondary literature following the questions suggested by a visit to the Victoria & Albert Museum—proposes how a decentering of the history of knowledge can be achieved by thinking with museum objects. I chose a particular Leitmotiv, distributed through international trade and scientific networks, which, in the *longue durée*, brought together a variety of people and connected the most diverse geographies. It follows the itineraries of the Mediterranean mermaid transformed in Latin America into a mermaid musician/guitarist, a character displayed in textiles, ceramics, and furniture and which is featured today in collections of popular culture, ethnography, and decorative arts. Using this example, this paper explores the cross-cultural transfers that shaped and cross-linked cultures to remind us that such objects were the result of multiple exchanges happening in several places and that, to understand them, historians have to cross national and disciplinary borders, languages, and, finally, those chronological periods that make us forget the centrality to history of change and continuity.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Cochineal dye; Mermaids; Collecting; Latin America

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BREPOLS

Venus d'ailleurs. Matériaux et objets voyageurs was the beautiful title of an exhibition organized in 2021 at the Musée du Louvre's Petite Galerie.¹ This exhibition showed that the history of the world and its peoples can be told through materials and objects that evoke the exchanges between distant worlds. It proposed that land and sea routes, merchants, and merchandise were inextricably and routinely linked to create new things, knowledge, and skills in what today we perceive as unexpected spaces. Stones, bones, ivory, shells, pearls, live plants, and animals traveled between continents. Ordinary folk and artists alike discovered extraordinary things such as armadillos, coconuts, and cacti, which became real subjects of inspiration and trade. Precious things, techniques, and beings that came from afar, loaded with myths about their origin, were transformed into a manifestation of prestige, and were enriched through modification into new objects that followed the same and different routes to weave much more complex stories than those constrained by contemporary national borders.² In that sense, the exhibition was just a reminder of the need to cross geographical and temporal borders, and that a global approach to the history of knowledge means to be attentive to those transactions and travels, in which knowledge is produced by movements across the globe.

In response to that prompt and to the aims of this *JHOK* forum, this article suggests how a decentering of the history of knowledge can be achieved by thinking with museum objects "*venus d'ailleurs*." Mostly based on secondary literature, it follows the questions inspired by a visit to the Victoria & Albert Museum and by a character depicted in a tapestry, made in the colonial city of Cuzco in the former Kingdom of Peru, displayed in its galleries: a mermaid musician. While the tapestry is exhibited amidst European objects, it had no particular prominence, nor did the mermaid occupy the center of the piece either. Originating in a provincial city from contemporary Peru, it seems indeed to epitomize the incarnation of all kind of peripheries: geographical, museological, and iconographical. Therefore, as a sort of experiment, this paper decided to put at center stage the mermaid musician, a "Mediterranean" character, which is widely depicted in Ibero-American colonial craft and architecture, as well as in contemporary ceramics. As such, the mermaid is featured today in collections of colonial and recent Latin America popular culture, ethnography, and decorative arts, showing how the categories of area studies in museums and academia help to obscure the complexities of history.

I. London, January 31, 2020. A visit to the Victoria & Albert Museum on the night preceding Brexit. Music in the main halls, nothing in the air predicting the events that the days of March would bring very soon. It happened exactly 40 days before the World Health Organization made the assessment that COVID-19 could be characterized as a pandemic, the first sparked by a

1 Malgouyres and Martinez, *Venus d'ailleurs*.

2 Allsen, *The Steppe*; Podgorny, "The Elk"; Podgorny, "A horse cloth"; Podgorny, *Desubicados*.

coronavirus. A health crisis that early that year was affecting 114 countries and showing how our lives are shaped by global exchanges, travels, and connectivity. But that night, no one was thinking of a virus, still perceived as a remote reality. The rooms were full of people and the uncertainties about what was going to happen with the United Kingdom out of the European Union. There were still no masks, no social distancing in those galleries, where the objects remind us how artificial borders can separate things and people.

II. The Sheikha Amna Bint Mohammed Al Thani Gallery is devoted to Europe between 1600 and 1815. Around 1,100 objects are displayed across seven galleries, including some of the most magnificent works held by the Victoria & Albert. In Room 7, Level -1, close to the exit, there is a red tapestry labeled as follows:

Portion of a tapestry. 1650–1720. This tapestry was made with Chinese silk imported to Mexico via Manila. The red colour was made from crushed cochineal insects, which were native to South America [*sic*].³ The bird in the centre is the mythical Asian phoenix, which is shown with the brand wing-span of the Andean condor. The mermaids play lute, and some of the flowers resemble Chinese chrysanthemums. Peru—Coloured wools, silks and gilded thread, tapestry woven. Museum No. 933–1901.

While the center of the tapestry is occupied by a mythical bird, the mermaids and their musical instruments are mentioned only en passant. However, these few descriptive lines condense the complexity of the materials and components that make up the warp and weft of this singular textile.⁴ On the one hand, the tapestry is witness to the economic history of the early modern success of a carmine dye from the Americas. This red is obtained from the females of *Dactylopius coccus*, a scale insect native to North and Central America that lives on cacti of the genus *Opuntia* and which feeds on the plant's nutrients. As Marichal Salinas remarks, the history of this dye is "a key chapter in the origins of early modern globalization, both cultural and economic, [...] this dye was the most expensive in the world from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries as a result of the consistent demand for luxury textiles by monarchs, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and aristocrats in Europe, as well as amongst the very wealthy almost everywhere."⁵ As the tapestry demonstrates, this trade connected the most distant geographies—a network that modified the most distant landscapes. In fact, it was partially responsible for the introduction of *Opuntia* to the Mediterranean regions, where several attempts were made to cultivate both the plant and the insect by transferring the expertise from New

3 The cochineal is native to Mexico, which in fact is part of North America. See Clavijero, *Historia antigua*, 84; Phipps, "Cochineal Red."

4 Phipps et al., *The Colonial Andes*.

5 Marichal Salinas, "Cochineal," 255.

Spain (current Mexico). Today—as global tourists know—*Opuntia* is an icon of the Italian Riviera and populates both sides of the Mediterranean, from where the Indian figs are exported worldwide.⁶



Figure 1. Peruvian tapestry. Dimensions: Height: 173 cm; Width: 90.1cm; Current frame height: 1820 mm; Current frame width: 1020 mm; Current frame depth: 55 mm, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O84904/tapestry-unknown/>. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

⁶ Podgorny, “Bonpland’s Cactus.”

III. On the other hand, the history of this textile is interwoven with the fragmentation of museum collections. Exceptional as this tapestry is, this portion is not the only one in a museum.⁷



Figure 2. Peruvian tapestry with figurative scenes, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/227918>. Public domain, Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

To connect the pieces scattered over the world required crossing the borders created by dealers and the divisions of museum departments. Similar pieces depicting mermaid musicians, dyed and made using similar techniques, had been acquired from different providers and distributed to different museums in Europe and the Americas. The following section will explore how this tapestry brought as a textile from Portuguese India became an object “made in Peru.”

⁷ Peck, *Interwoven Globe*; Phipps et al., *The Colonial Andes*.

IV. Fragmenting and Recombining

The Peruvian tapestry from the Victoria & Albert Museum was acquired in 1901 from Vital Benguiat (1865–1937), a dealer in oriental rugs, rare textiles, and jewels; art expert; and importer. His shop, located in Bond Street, was a very well-known address to connoisseurs, collectors, and curators. In 1901, Benguiat offered a lot to the Victoria & Albert museum, and in June, the acquisition committee authorized the purchase of 33 pieces sent on approval. Among them was piece No. 933-1901, described as “2 pieces of Goa Tapestry” and valued at £80, one of the most valuable pieces in his catalogue.

The five Benguiat brothers had acquired a reputation in London, Paris, and New York as one of the main dealers in tapestries and embroideries.⁸ They supplied the principal museums and textile collectors from both continents, including American millionaires. The Benguiats were part of an integrated network of connoisseurs’ associations and auction houses. Vital Benguiat, for instance, partnered with the Art Sales Corporation, a subsidiary of the American Art Association and precursor to Sotheby’s, which funded Benguiat’s scouring of Europe and the Near East to find carpets and textiles. The Benguiats’ catalogues, however, did not include textiles from the Americas, and the provenance of their stock tended to be vague.

The Goa tapestry sold in 1901 was woven mainly in silk with colored wools and silver-gilt thread. Today it is believed it would probably have been used as a wall hanging or bed curtain in Peru, where it would also have been made. This new provenance was the unexpected result of the appearance of similar pieces on the market and their arrival at the British Museum. At the same time, this new origin speaks of the difficulties posed by a piece characterized by hybrid motifs that could be attributed to different traditions, such as the variety of Asian-derived creatures and flowers and, notably, the mermaids and mermen playing instruments similar to lutes.

Thus, in June 1913, the British anthropologist Thomas Athol Joyce (1878–1942) published a note in the *Burlington Magazine*, describing a Peruvian tapestry presumably dating from the seventeenth century.⁹

Joyce, an Oxford alumnus, had joined the British Museum in 1902 to work as an assistant to the archeologist Charles Hercules Read (1857–1929), responsible for British antiquities and the medieval and ethnographic collections, a division that included ethnographic and “oriental” collections beyond Egypt and the Near East, as well as post-medieval European glass and pottery. Joyce devoted himself to ethnographic artifacts, becoming increasingly interested in American anthropology. In 1913, the tapestry was part of the ethnographic collections he was in charge of at the British Museum, and had arrived thanks to Louis Colville Gray Clarke (1881–1960), an archeologist at Cambridge University who had acquired this lot in Cuzco, Peru. It was rare, with those

⁸ Craven, *Stanford White*.

⁹ Joyce, “A Peruvian Tapestry.”

colors characteristic of Peruvian dyes. The central panel contained a heraldic design, representing an escutcheon of arms surmounted by a motto: “Si dios es por nos quien será contra nos,” unknown in Spanish noble families and not belonging to any of the sixteenth-century conquistadors. It was, in fact, a verse from the New Testament epistle to the Romans, attributed to the apostle Paul, something that any of them could have identified. Instead, Joyce looked for similar emblems, motifs, and coats of arms of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Iberian houses.

The main field of the tapestry was occupied with a design of trees with flowers and fruit, birds, beasts, and mermaids playing guitars and harps. Birds and animals were uncommon in the fabrics dating from pre-Spanish times, but there was a hunting scene that was described as of Peruvian style. The central border panel showed a series of Inca nobles and their wives with attendants of lower rank, all in the costume of the highlands. But many details were borrowed from European art: the mermaids, the musical instruments, the maned lion, the hunters with guns. The technique, however, was typically pre-Columbian. Joyce did not go much further, suggesting a date in the seventeenth century, not very long after the conquest—that gave an interval that would have given the native artist time to incorporate European motifs while maintaining ancestral weaving techniques.

A decade later, the historian Albert Frank Kendrick (1872–1954), keeper of the Textiles Department of the Victoria & Albert Museum in the years 1897–1924, exhumed Joyce’s article to compare it with the piece purchased in 1901—Benguiat’s Goa tapestry—which until then had been left out of all the catalogues. For his part, Louis Clarke continued to supply South American archeological and ethnographic objects to the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers at Oxford University, and the Fitzwilliam at Cambridge, separating and fragmenting, and contributing to the creation of that fractured panorama that Egyptologist William Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) portrayed as the creation of “ossuaries of murdered evidence.”

Kendrick had been involved in the organization of the Textiles Department during the renovation of the Victoria & Albert Museum that ended with its reopening in 1909. During this period, he gradually became a specialist in tapestries from all over the world. He retired in 1924 but continued to publish, aware of every auction catalogue and seller. Among them was the Islamic art collector and dealer Dikran Kelekian (1867–1951). He was the son of an Armenian banker, who, together with his brother, had set up his antiquities house in Istanbul in 1892. From there, he projected himself to the world through universal exhibitions as a representative of the Persian Shah. Kendrick also kept up with the work of Isabella Goldschmidt-Franchetti de Errera, the Belgian specialist in Egyptian textiles, and daughter, sister-in-law, and niece of a family of collectors, politicians, and Jewish intellectuals, whose collection spanned several centuries and regions, including the contemporary

avant-garde.¹⁰ Errera's catalogues were works of reference for scholars and also for Kendrick, who recognized that to understand the history of textiles, the time had come to cross disciplinary, geographical, and, above all, those boundaries that defined the arbitrary configurations of museum holdings. Thus, in 1925, he wrote: "The history of post-conquest Peruvian craftsmanship is in danger of falling between the two stools of ethnography and art ... In truth, it is time that the barrier between these two departments of activity—already strained at so many points—were removed altogether as an encumbrance."¹¹

Kendrick demonstrated that a small group of woven tapestries showing relationship with the Goa tapestry and the British Museum Peruvian piece were all Peruvian, not Indo-Portuguese, Coptic, or German, as had been suggested. All had the same origin and were the hybridization of oriental elements and ideas, skills, and materials from the Americas.¹² The mermaids served as weighty evidence linking the panels from the two museums. Both were linked to the pieces owned by Kelekian and Errera, as well as one presented at the Munich exhibition from 1910. Kendrick related these objects to the trade with Asia undertaken by the Spanish through the Philippines. He was certainly right, but the musician mermaids and the gun-carrying men from the Goa tapestry are two crucial elements of the so-called "Portuguese" colchas from the same period.¹³ Moreover, the mermaids with their guitars had left the threads of Pacific commerce and become stitched into other objects, crafts, and thoughts.¹⁴ As Bolivian architect Teresa Gilbert¹⁵ and Peruvian art historian Francisco Stastny¹⁶ showed in the 1980s, the mermaids continued their travels and settled in the colonial furniture, pottery, handicrafts, and architecture of today's North and South American highlands,¹⁷ where in the handicraft workshops in Mexico and Peru and in the Andean churches, they still play their guitars and welcome the customers and parishioners. Far from the sea, they are there, disconnected from their original histories, and now observed and consumed—as is also the case with Indian figs in the Mediterranean regions—as something native to the place. They remind us that they—as objects—were the result of multiple exchanges happening in several places. But they remind us also that to understand these and similar objects of diverse ancestries, historians have to cross national and disciplinary borders, languages, and, finally, those chronological periods that make us forget the centrality to history of change, superposition, and continuity.

10 Errera, *Catalogue*.

11 Kendrick, "A Peruvian tapestry."

12 Cammann, "Chinese Influence."

13 Antunes, "A vida social"; Karl, "Marvellous things."

14 Priyadarshini, *Chinese porcelain*.

15 Gisbert, *Iconografía*.

16 Stastny, *Las Artes Populares*; Stastny, *Síntomas medievales*.

17 Thiemer-Sachse, "Sirenas en el arte."

It is true that for a discussion of how to decenter our understanding of the world, I could have used any object from everyday life: a mixer, a cell phone, a vase. I chose instead the musician mermaid, a particular Leitmotiv distributed through international trade and scientific networks, which, in the *longue durée*, brought together a variety of people and connected the most diverse geographies. I did so, in part, to show the cross-cultural transfers and trade that shaped and cross-linked, and perhaps cross-fertilized, cultures, and to reveal, as Soto Laveaga and Gómez said, the “complexities of multi-sided knowledge making without specific centers of computation.”¹⁸ However, I also wanted to undertake an exercise that would challenge any idea of the “pristine cultures” that museums—and the arbitrariness of collections—have created.

About the Author

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¹⁸ Soto Laveaga and Gómez, “Thinking with the World,” 6.

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