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# The Heart of Cities seen through the Making of Objects

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AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT Arizona USA  
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## CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The Heart of Cities seen through the Making of Objects' CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT Arizona USA 2-/-0/20183-/-0/2018AMPS PROCEEDINGS SERIES. ISSN 2398-9467

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### • Abstract (300 words):

In the late eighteenth century, the Plymouth Porcelain Factory produced sets of figures designed to represent what were then known as the four Continents: Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. As objects of middle-class consumption, they were designed not only to represent current ideas about the qualities of these continents, but also to allow consumers to have a relationship with places of which they had no first-hand knowledge, creating a geographical experience. Taking the historical nature of these figurines into consideration, this research considers whether it is possible to co-opt such artefacts into a twenty-first century geographical experience. Using a multi-modal, experiential approach to design research that includes not only looking at the original context of objects, but also displaying the artefacts through the lens of twenty-first century mapping technologies and asking individuals to respond creatively to the figurines, this paper explores how an interaction with past experiences of geography/city making might help us to understand our current perceptions of the world. The historical context is critical to these figures, and they cannot be separated from it, but as Susan Pearce (1994), amongst others, has argued, treating an object as an active constituent of the consumer's experience implies that its importance is not limited to its moment of conception, but that their function can be re-framed as they continue to act upon consumers in the context of a collection and a city. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett (2010) takes this a step further, arguing that objects, by acting upon consumers, and in concert with one another, gain a social and psychological power that transcends their physical forms. This means that these figures, and the geographical metaphors they represent, are constantly being re-experienced in a global context that is very different to their original setting, and that they can affect a change in the mind of the contemporary consumer.

• **Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**

Director of the MA Postgraduate programmes in Design, incorporating, Design Products, Maker and Materials, Service Design, Spatial Design and Sustainable Futures. Responsible for BA Undergraduate//MA Post Graduate teaching in Design Culture/Design Thinking/Sustainable Futures, within the School of Art, Design and Architecture. Research Leader for Design Knowledge. Qualifications Cardiff College of Art and Design: Royal College of Art: Fellow of the Higher Education Authority: Professional Membership: Member of the Higher Education Academy: Design History Journal: Design Society; Design Research: Writing Pads: RCA Alum, Learning Institute, Fellow of Royal Society of Arts, Group for Learning in Art and Design, Research Drawing Network, RSA, Craft Action Network. European Academy of Design. DRS. Research Concerns: The research concerns reflect the multiple contexts of art and design as it has evolved through the twentieth century and into the twentieth first century. The research reflects a high level of relativism, contextualization and pragmatism. I have published on the nature of creativity/drawing/and the design process; the new practices emerging in sustainable design debates and how this relates to the education for design and its relationship to universities, cities, markets and business. I am interested in ideas of personal identity/how this contributes to place-making, artifact manufacture and the understanding of heritage, through the industrial and post-industrial ages. I also work outside the university in other sectors, schools, forums, councils and institutions.

**Introduction:**

Do our institutions, the fabric of design schools, need to hang on to the legacy of the past or break away to foster new links and new discipline connections. One of the most significant discussions in design and design thinking currently is the change in the future of our design education our research and our practice. With this said it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the changes of monumental proportions within the world such as climate, urbanization, overpopulation, nationalism and questions about the dissatisfaction around capitalism. Each of these transitions is altering the human experience on an international scale. These changes therefore dictate trends within our global design communities our education structures and our current research strategies.

A global revolution in design thinking and a more holistic approach to design education and research could provide imaginative and far-reaching solutions to the issues we are faced with in a rapidly changing world. This track will explore the premise that art/design is being challenged to redefine itself and that artists/designers must assume new roles and commit themselves to developing solutions in order to secure a sustainable future. Good art/design has the power to connect people emotionally, psychologically, rationally, and scientifically. That is why it is ideally placed to play a leading role in reshaping our understanding of how we will move forward realistically into the 21st century in our institutions in our research and in our practice.

This piece is a temporal / geographical examination of cultural meaning in the consumption and re-consumption (presumably as historical object) of the material porcelain, specifically in the UK. It offers a cultural history type analysis of these objects and the spaces they represent in the context of globalized consumption. The author suggests 'they can affect a change in the mind of the contemporary consumer'.

Produced between 1769 and 1772, a series of four figurines from the Plymouth Porcelain Factory were made, run by William Cookworthy, they represented the four continents, or quarters, of the known world in the eighteenth century: Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. It is possible to see how the symbolism of these geographical places has been expressed in the porcelain, from the crocodile perched at the side of Africa to the Roman armour laid at the feet of Europe. It is similarly easy to incorporate the figures into a well-established visual trend for allegory in eighteenth-century porcelain, in which sets of the Seasons, Tastes and Elements were also popular (see Bradshaw, 1981, and Savage, 1952). These particular figures are also important in a narrative of English design because of the technical experimentations that William Cookworthy was conducting at Plymouth UK with the aim of 'bringing ... the Manufacture of Porcelain, equal to any in the world, to perfection in England (G. H., 1854, p. 207), and in this respect they feature in technical histories such as those by Adams (2016) and Bradshaw (1981). These readings can help us to understand the representational and technical characteristics of these figurines, and to establish their place in histories of eighteenth-century design.



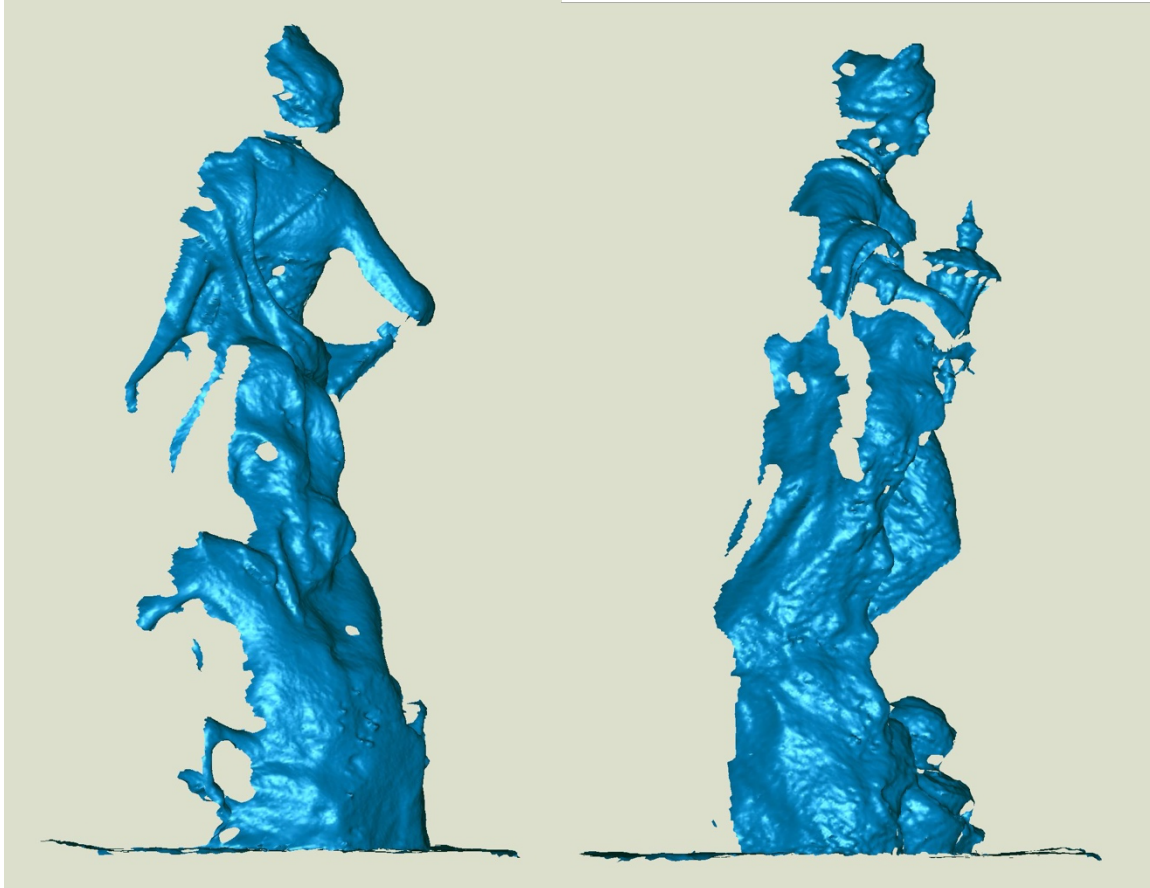
*'Four Continents' Courtesy of Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery Fig1*

The historical context is critical to these figures, and they cannot be separated from it, but as Susan Pearce (1994), amongst others, has argued, treating an object as an active constituent of the consumer's experience implies that its importance is not limited to its moment of conception, but that their function can be re-framed as they continue to act upon consumers in the context of a collection. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett (2010) takes this a step further, arguing that objects, by acting upon consumers, and in

concert with one another, gain a social and psychological power that transcends their physical forms. This means that these figures, and the geographical metaphors they represent, are constantly being re-experienced in a global context that is very different to their original setting, and that they can affect a change in the mind of the contemporary consumer. The second part of this research therefore focuses on using these four figures, created in eighteenth century Plymouth, as an active part of the contemporary design process. It thinks about whether it is possible to use these figures to explore our own inherited proclivities, prejudices and yearning by asking how, if we use these figures as a means of asking or posing questions instead of answering them, we can create something convergent and different, a catalyst for a contemporary debate about imperialism and colonialism in the context of this century, and of taste and trend.

### **Looking at the Continents**

William Cookworthy's Plymouth Porcelain factory was only in operation for five to ten years in the third quarter of the eighteenth century (c.1768-1773), his work has been consistently included alongside that of the more prominent porcelain manufactories such as those at Bow, Derby, and Chelsea in histories of English Porcelain in the eighteenth century (Church, 1911; Savage, 1952; Cushion, 1974; Bradshaw, 1981; Young, 1999a) because of his experiments with the manufacture of porcelain using a Cornish equivalent of kaolin ('china clay'), as opposed to the imitation porcelain ('soft paste') used by other English producers. As a result, Cookworthy porcelain is often examined purely on its material and technical merits, and contextualised in terms of manufacturing processes.



*Pete Quinn Davis, 3D Scan and Rendering of Cookworthy's Asia, 2014. Fig2*

The first step in a re-examination of the Cookworthy figurines in a contemporary context was therefore to think about this process of perception, and how designers respond visually to the work of others. Ceramic objects form a major part of museum collections, with connections to anthropology, archaeology and other disciplines that engage with

the cultural and social history of humankind and have provided the impetus for a number cutting edge examples design and artistic practice see Lubna Chowdury's residency at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2017).

This formed part of our first design-led exposure to the Cookworthy porcelain sets, and as an example of what was possible, we treated them simply as forms, much as the original model makers would have done when they created the negative-form moulds that Cookworthy mistook for the 'Four Seasons' (see Adams) Initially, we looked at using hand-held scanners and photogrammetry to capture the figurines as a 3D scan, but these were not capturing the details of the models. Instead, therefore, we created images of each of the figurines, by using a 365° turntable, and AICON's fixed 3D digitization and measuring system, which is more effective at dealing with complex surface structures.

Rather than patching the reflected light in the scan, we exploited the variations in surface where the light bounced off the white porcelain to produce voids in the original scans, and then coloured and contoured the images to give them the moulded form, which show the front and back of Cookworthy's *Asia* (see *Image fig2*). These scans not only gave us a way of transforming the physical object into a digital form, but also of altering the object visually by selecting some elements and discarding others. In some way, this is similar to the work of the eighteenth-century modeller, who selected some elements of earlier models and discarded others when recreating the figurines, in our case the selection has been done by the scanner; the eye of the modeller has been digitised.

Thinking about the way contemporary viewers engage with historical artefacts, Prown (2001) has written persuasively of going beyond the mind's intellectual contact with the past and engaging the senses in different ways in museum contexts, an 'affective mode' of engagement that allows the viewer, figuratively speaking, to more closely engage with those who made, used, and enjoyed these objects without the barrier imposed by historical presuppositions. Roy (2016) extends this discussion to think about affective modes in terms of museum soundscapes, and following this, the form of the figurines was further abstracted through a musicological lens, with the data points turned into sounds. To achieve this, the objects were flipped laterally so the scan data could be read from left to right. Using a high precision distance measuring laser from Micro-Epsilon, and rotating the scan, a custom-programmed translator and controller module was then used to transform the measured distance values into audible frequencies, notes and scales, with the result that the silhouettes are used to define loops, melodies and rhythms, and the resulting musical piece was transcribed for performance via *Scorecloud*. These notes, arranged into musical phrases, were assigned instruments, and layered together so that in effect the public could hear read the objects visually and hear them as a musical score. One particularly interesting consequence of this mode of display is that it allows the contemporary viewer to perceive the object as innovative and new in much the same way that the original consumer might have viewed porcelain figurines, which in their original form now arguably look dated to the modern eye.

### **Hegemonic Geographies for Contemporary Tastes**

The process of copying, recopying and modification is interesting in its own right, but as Schwartz (1998) noted in his influential and wide-ranging study of copying in fine art,

conscious copying is rarely done for purely formal reasons; rather, it is usually because the specific object to be copied has some wider relevance at the moment that the copy is produced. Similarly, Bennett (2010) states that the agency of things is maximised not in the effect of one individual object on an individual consumer, but in 'assemblages ... [that] conglomerate or form heterogeneous groupings'. In this case, the grouping of the four continents, themselves part of a larger grouping of images of the world in the eighteenth century, are interesting in the historical context because they represented a hierarchical world order that was very much to the taste of Cookworthy's contemporaries, and were chosen for our contemporary study because that world order, with its undertones of imperialist

colonialism and racial stereotyping, and Europe-centric world view, are particularly problematic in terms of the taste of the modern consumer.

It is important to recognise that while 'Taste' can be composed of aesthetic features, 'good taste' also reflects social and ideological mores, and this is particularly interesting in the creation of porcelain figurines because while the display of porcelain in the home was seen as a proxy for the aesthetic taste of its owners, it also, due to its affordability, performed a secondary function as a cornerstone of a burgeoning middle-class consumer culture, hinged on the perception of respectability.

This is probably testament not only to an academic interest in their materiality, and a visual interest in their aesthetic finish, but also to their subject, as the geographical knowledge they represented was in accordance with a temporary ideological 'Taste', a cornerstone of middle-class education and part of a burgeoning definition of what it meant to be cultured in the eighteenth century (Brewer, 2013, pp.144-160).

This geographical knowledge, as represented by the 'assemblage' of the continents, consisted of a world view, probably familiar to the eighteenth-century consumer, that was less concerned with realistic representation than with a hierarchical idea of world order. In *Inventing Exoticism*, Schmidt (2015) describes the crossover between images of the continents and material goods in the Early Modern period, saying that these images were designed to both distinguish geographical regions and conflate them on the basis of three themes; religion, natural histories, and the production of material goods.

As mentioned above, one of the reasons for choosing Cookworthy's 'four continents' as a basis for this study of re-interpreting and experiencing historic objects was that the hegemonic geographical view represented by these figures, is deemed particularly problematic, both politically and culturally, for the 'Taste' of the contemporary viewer. This is something that Childs (2016) has recognised in her study of Blackamoor porcelain figures from this period, and Barringer & Flynn (1998) have argued persuasively that objects in museum collections, such as the Cookworthy figurines, provide a unique opportunity to investigate, tease out, and reassess historic colonialism for the contemporary viewer. Similarly, Karp & Kratz (2000) stresses the authoritative voice of the museum as important in the dynamic of displaying, and countering, historic narratives of otherness for a consuming public. However, the display of objects such as these continents is not a simple matter of rejecting the colonialist attitudes of the past, but of recognising that this historic geographical hegemony is also an 'other' against which we contrast ourselves, and that our geographical viewpoint is similarly hegemonic, although we now think of it under the terms of globalisation. We therefore decided to recontextualise these objects not only in terms of the hegemonic geographical model of their making, but also by deducing a contemporary hegemonic geography, changing the function of the work within the gallery space from one of representing the historic other to reflecting our own cultural standpoint.

### **Local Building Blocks**





*Pete Quinn Davis, 3D Scan and Rendering of Cookworthy's America, 2014. Fig3*

This idea, of the local, material context of the Plymouth Porcelain figurines, to be set alongside a global reading of the figures in terms of geographical representation is one that is crucial to our re-interpretation of the artefacts. In partnership with British Clays, we are currently engaged in reconstituting the original clay body from the 1766 recipe. Using the original 3D scans, which capture the 'global' form of the continents, and the reconstituted 'local' clay as building blocks, the intention is to form an enlarged series of casts of the four continents, and to alter them to constitute a new historical narrative within the context of modern craft. Not only will this help us to investigate what role the past plays in contemporary making, but also how a historical narrative of craftsmanship can be integrated with contemporary technologies of design. Taking this further, the project will also investigate how producing other objects, some of which may be functional, from the models of figurines, and finally reframing the objects in various online formats, can help the contemporary consumer to re-integrate a problematic

historic artefact within the framework of contemporary tastes and experiences. With each subtle change, whether of scale or surface or medium, the emotional interaction of the viewer or consumer with these objects, and the conveyed understanding of a geographical model, will change, and one of the aims of this research is to use these changing understandings to speculate how the changing forms of the original objects might have impacted upon contemporary consumers.

### **Conclusion**

The idea that a museum is a guardian of the past has shaped renowned institutions the world over, but whether that idea still serve us now in an era of smartphones and institutional critique is debatable. If the intersections between institutionalised geographic ideas, and individual experience and emotion is key to thinking about how these objects convey knowledge and understanding, then the contemporary individual experience of their handling, and its subsequent impact on institutionalised geographies is equally important. The museum can be a public platform for its community and a catalyst for creativity, where visitors are treated as participants and engaged in interactive experiences, and presenting our re-interpreted Cookworth figurines in this way would erode the separation between the museum's historical artefacts and its contemporary audiences. We hope to juxtapose seemingly unrelated things to encourage new connections; artefacts would be treated as 'dialogical prototypes that would be a trigger for future concepts and mediation.' (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) In re-experiencing Cookworthy's continents therefore, we can appreciate them as historical artefacts but also as a catalyst for questioning our own perceptions of objects and the world that contains them.

**PQD 2018**

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