

Tête-à-tête With the Exhibition *Le monde en tête*

Sabrina Smith

A Thesis Draft
in
The Department
of
Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Art History) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

March 2023

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ABSTRACT

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The display of anthropomorphic objects such as headdresses in museum exhibition blurs the boundaries of objecthood and personhood. The Musée des Confluences' (Lyon, France) 2019 exhibition, *Le monde en tête: la donation des coiffes Antoine de Galbert*, stages a slippage between subject and so-called "primitive" art objects. *Le monde en tête* showcased over 500 headdresses mainly from Asia, Africa, South America, and Oceania, donated from the private art collection of Antoine de Galbert (1955-). The exhibition's curators elided the headdresses' historical contexts and provenances, instead concentrating on their aesthetic qualities and the collector. Their curatorial strategies foreground de Galbert's collecting psychology, which provocatively sets up a binary between Western "self" and cultural "other." Through a close analysis of the exhibition, this thesis analyzes a fantasy of personhood as inextricably linked to objecthood. Relying on a multidisciplinary methodology, I focus on the emergence of two figures: the European collector as "self" and the Asiatic female as "Other." I begin my two-part investigation by using critical whiteness studies and museology to expose how racialization becomes structured through the collector's fabrication as a mythic figure. In Part II, I draw from the conceptual framework of ornamentalism to examine the exhibition layout, which emphasizes the porosity of things and people. Additionally, I use ornamentalism as an object-based approach to analyze a Timorese headdress created by the Tetum-speaking Indigenous community from East Timor Island, Indonesia, and the female figure who haunts its surface. At once present and absent, material and abstract, embodied and disembodied, these figures invite us to rethink the hybrid conditions of objecthood and personhood. My project weaves together art historical analysis, curatorial critiques, and theoretical perspectives that inquire into the very object conditions through which personhood is realized.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to warmly thank my supervisor, Dr. John Potvin, whose meticulous edits, patience, and commitment made this project possible. It is with my deepest gratitude that I thank you for your feedback, knowledge, and encouragement that you so generously shared with me. I am so very grateful for your dedication to your students, and the research techniques and writing skills you shared with me over the course of my degree.

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff from the Department of Art History for their teachings and support. A sincere and enthusiastic thanks to my colleagues and friends at the Graduate Students' Association and the Gina Cody School of Engineering and Computer Science. Our inter-faculty discussions inspired directions in my project I never knew I would take. It takes a community to graduate a Master's student, and I am so fortunate to have found a community of such genuine, supportive, and inspiring people.

I would like to conclude by expressing my utmost gratitude to my family. To my parents who accompanied me on this journey through long telephone calls learning alongside me about Canadian history and culture. To my sisters for taking the time to visit and care for me and to my thammudus for always uplifting me. To my aunt and my uncle for helping make this endeavour financially possible. Thank you for your unwavering support and for always believing that I could do this even when I did not. A special thank you to Dakota for attending *Le monde en tête* with me in Montréal. Thank you for sharing your interest in the headdresses.

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INTRODUCTION

However, what Ariel describes is not the disappearance of human agency but an emerging minoritarian colonial conception of agency by which human beings are made richer and stranger through their entwinement with the operations of corals and, over the course of the play, other colonial climatological forces as well as plant and animal bodies.

Monique Allewaert ¹

The controversial 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, “*Primitivism*” in 20th-Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated by William Rubin,² threatened to transform so-called “primitive” art into a specular Western code.³ Attempting to illustrate “primitive” art’s influence on artist groups including Cubists and Surrealists,⁴ the exhibit recast Indigenous objects from Africa, Oceania, and North America as modern pieces through their physical and conceptual decontextualization. Upon their relocation to New York, the objects were cleaned, altered, and displayed without any information pertaining to their original contexts.⁵ The show elided the agency of the artworks themselves and effectuated a series of theoretical encounters attempting to restore agency.

¹ Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013: 1.

² Sponsored by Philip Morris, this exhibition featured around 150 modern and 200 “primitive” objects often juxtaposed side by side. William Rubin, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, collaborated with Kirk Varnedoe of the Institute of Fine Arts, to produce this show. In addition to the exhibit, a two-volume catalogue with nineteen essays by sixteen scholars covering a variety of topics related to “primitivism” was published. (See Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October*, vol. 34, 1985).

³ Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October*, vol. 34, 1985: 47.

⁴ Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art And Other Tales of Progress*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998: 3.

⁵ Jonathan Hay, “Primitivism reconsidered (Part 1): A question of attitude,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 67-8, issue 1, 2017: 67.

The 2019 temporary exhibition, *Le monde en tête: la donation des coiffes Antoine de Galbert*, rehearsed a similar curatorial dynamic of exhibiting so-called “primitive” art. *Le monde en tête* celebrated the donation of over 500 headdresses mainly from Asia, Africa, South America, and Oceania, from the private art collection of Antoine de Galbert (1955). Through a pervasive stripping away the contexts of his headdress collection, a concentrated focus on aesthetics, and an extensive engagement with the binary of Western self versus Other, *Le monde en tête* remained deeply entrenched in Western-centric politics of exhibiting “primitive” art. Emerging from tensions raised by its investment in a curatorial approach to Indigenous cultural objects reminiscent of the 1984 exhibition, *Le monde en tête* raises the following questions. What does it mean for the headdresses to simultaneously represent both the European collector as “Western self” and non-European peoples as “cultural Other?” What, then, are the curatorial conditions that allow for these representations to appear in the exhibition space? This thesis responds to these questions through a close analysis of the exhibition’s introductory space, which stages a fantasy of personhood as inextricably linked to objecthood. Relying on a multidisciplinary methodology, I uncover the concurrent emergence of two figures: the European collector as “self” and the Asiatic female as “Other.”

One theoretical term that I continually apply from Cheng’s work is Asiatic female/feminine to refer to the young girl in de Galbert’s dream. For Cheng, Asiatic female/feminine is closely related to how she uses “yellow woman”: “Even as the label of the ‘yellow woman’ fades from contemporary parlance, the Asiatic figure that it denotes still stimulates passion and derision in multiple sectors of everyday life.”⁶ However, in separating the two, Cheng notes that her use of the term “yellow woman” is deliberately

⁶ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism*. Oxford: University Press, 2019: ix.

employed to “denote the racialization of Asiatic women.”⁷ I use Asiatic female/feminine to emphasize the French colonial fantasy of Asian cultures, histories, and peoples that de Galbert draws from when dreaming up the young girl. She is never given a specific national, ethnic, or racial identity other than “young” and “girl.” However, de Galbert’s treatment of her as a subject in his dream including his excessive focus on her purple caftan and Timorese headdress builds on Orientalist logic, which associates race and femininity with ornament. Therefore, I use Asiatic female to denote the difference between de Galbert’s representation of Asiatic femininity and personhood, which is completely unconcerned with the lived experiences and histories of Asian women.⁸

Living on the Eastern half of Timor Island, Indigenous Tetum-speaking communities make up part of the ethnically diverse island population. As early as 500 BCE, sailors from the Asian mainland reached Timor Island in search of the sandalwood forests.⁹ Bringing with them bronze drums by the Dong Son culture of Vietnam, the traders introduced rice cultivation and the backstrap loom to Timor.¹⁰ Much later, sixteenth century colonization by the Portuguese and Dutch destroyed the sandalwood forests of which very little remain today.¹¹ In East Timor, both Portuguese and Tetum are still the official languages.¹²

⁷ Salomé Gómez-Upegui, “Anne Anlin Cheng on the Importance of Discussing Beauty and Aesthetics to Dismantle Systems of Oppression,” *Harvard University Graduate School of Design*, October 20, 2021. Accessed 06 February 2023. <https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/2021/10/anne-anlin-cheng-on-the-importance-of-discussing-beauty-and-aesthetics-to-dismantle-systems-of-oppression/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Threads of Life, “Timor,” *Threads of Life*, n.d., 2023. Accessed 21 March 2023. https://threadsoflife.com/pages/timor_

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jean A. Berlie, *East Timor's Independence, Indonesia, and ASEAN*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Press, 2018: 3.

Although in exhibition catalogues the Timorese headdress was previously listed as an Atoni headdress,¹³ it was most likely created by Tetum-speaking artisans in the 19th century.¹⁴ Atoni, the largest Indigenous group on Timor Island living in the Western region, do not work with metal and import their tools and silver and gold jewelry.¹⁵ Although appearing gold in color, the Timorese headdress was forged from silver and copper [Figure 1]. Two delicate curved pieces of metal rest underneath five symmetrical leaf-like pieces pointing upward. Smaller diamond-shaped pieces dangle underneath the curved pieces of metal contributing to an overall sense of fragility. Despite the heavy weight of copper and silver metals, the headdress looks convincingly lightweight through its presentation of thinly worked metal and curved shapes devoid of any rigidity.

I first begin my two-part investigation by using critical whiteness studies and critical museology to expose how racialization is structured through the fabrication of the collector as a mythical figure. Second, I draw from Anne Cheng's theory of ornamentalism to consider how the curatorial layout highlights the porosity of things and people. I use ornamentalism as an object-based approach to analyze a Timorese headdress created by the Tetum-speaking Indigenous community from East Timor Island, Indonesia, and the female figure who haunts its surface. At once present and absent, material and abstract, embodied and disembodied, these figures invite us to rethink the hybrid conditions of objecthood and personhood. My project weaves together art historical analysis, curatorial critiques, and theoretical perspectives that inquire into the very object conditions through which personhood is realized.

¹³ Antoine de Galbert, Gérard Wajcman, and Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter, (eds.), *Voyage dans ma tête: la collection de coiffes ethniques d'Antoine de Galbert*. Lyon: Éditions Fage, 2010: 164.

¹⁴ Wall text for *Le Monde en Tête, la collection Antoine de Galbert* by the Pointe-À-Callière. *Le Monde en Tête*, 17 November, 2022-12 March, 2023, Pointe-À-Callière, Montréal.

¹⁵ Clarke E. Cunningham, "Atoni," *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*. Accessed 21 March 2023. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/atoni>.

Contextual Premises: The Exhibition

A well-known arts patron and heir of the French retailer, the Carrefour group, de Galbert started his collection in Grenoble, France in the 1980s¹⁶ expanding it over thirty years to include objects loosely categorized as “primitive” art, contemporary art, art brut, and religious art [Figure 2].¹⁷ In 2017, he gifted his entire “primitive” headdress collection to the larger permanent collection of the Musée des Confluences, an anthropological, ethnographic, and natural history museum in Lyon, France.¹⁸ The exhibition was curated by a large team including Dierdre Emmons, Head of the Asia collections at the Musée, Maïning Le Bacquer, project manager of the exhibition, and more than forty experts including de Galbert himself and museum professionals from the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.¹⁹

A total of 334 headdresses, masks, and hats were displayed in the largest gallery space of the Musée [Figure 3].²⁰ Ranging in scale, color, and form, each headdress offered an astonishing level of detail while simultaneously capturing museum visitors’ attention from across the gallery space. Feathers, beads, animal skins, metal, woven cloth, and hair made up just some of the microcosms of the featured headdresses, hats, and masks. Delicately set on concentric tables organized by conceptual themes including “objects of communication, “objects of power,” and “physical and symbolic protection,” each headdress featured aesthetic components distinct from the next. Warm boutique under lighting and highly reflective vitrines offered up each headdress as both a holy relic for spiritual edification and a marvelous object not for sale, yet at one time sold and

¹⁶ De Galbert, Wajcman, and Geoffroy-Schneiter. *Voyage dans ma tête*, 9.

¹⁷ Musée des Confluences. Press release of the exhibition *Le monde en tête: la donation des coiffes Antoine de Galbert*, Musée des Confluences, Lyon, June 6, 2019-August 23, 2020: 7.

¹⁸ Ibid, 4.

¹⁹ Ibid, 11.

²⁰ Ibid.

collected. Through the association with commercial lighting and glass storefront windows, these staging techniques simultaneously evoked and eliminated museum visitors' desires to possess the headdresses.²¹ Within this dark, echoing chamber, museum visitors experienced a vertiginous array of headdresses beckoning them to approach captivating iridescent and fractal surfaces produced by a fusion of object and glass encasements.

The Musée's resplendent exhibition of headdresses recited the core tenets of nineteenth-century Orientalism. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said famously introduces Orientalism as a practice "by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post Enlightenment period."²² According to Said, the Orient ambiguously describes large swaths of geographies mainly situated in the continents of Asia and Africa. Likewise, a majority of the exhibition headdresses were from Africa and Asia, and the Musée framed the headdresses through similar concepts and terms despite their culturally diverse provenances. According to Cheng, Orientalism as an ideology claims that "opulence and sensuality are the principal components of Asiatic character" and that "Asia is always ancient, excessive, feminine, open for use, and decadent..."²³ Although Cheng focuses on Orientalism and its relationship to Asia, Orientalism is also at work in the Musée's racialization of African cultures and people in which personhood was constructed and represented through adornments such as headdresses, masks, and outfits. Orientalism can inform our understanding of French racial personhood as built

²¹ For a full analysis on the relationship between museum display strategies and commerce, see Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Politics and Poetics of Museum Display*. London and Washington DC: Smithsonian Press, 1991: 49.

²² Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979: 3.

²³ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 88.

upon notions of ornament, artifice, and objecthood. In the exhibition introduction, no attention was paid to the localized contexts or historical specificities of the headdresses. Above all, this exhibition insisted that what lies outside of European culture is ornament.²⁴ The Musée conveyed this message through its own ornamental undertakings such as hanging twenty-five foot tall decorative screens complete with colorful digitized images of headdresses blended into a forest of tropical foliage including palm fronds, immense fern leaves as well as peacock feathers [Figure 4].

Forty-four of the headdresses were displayed in the exhibition's introduction, a unique section staged at the entry point of the gallery space [Figure 5]. Here, the Musée featured a hallucinatory dream de Galbert had about his headdress collection as a text projected onto a basin around which selected headdresses were arranged [Figure 6]. No information about the headdresses accompanied this portion of the exhibition aside from one didactic panel that read: "As collector Antoine de Galbert suffers an inflammation of the "rotator cuff" (a set of tendons in the shoulder joint), he takes an imaginary inventory of his collection."²⁵ Much like the infamous 1984 MoMA exhibition, which decontextualized the Indigenous objects on display and recontextualized them as quasi-modern art, the Musée transformed the headdresses from Indigenous cultural objects into by-products of de Galbert's psyche.

De Galbert's second wife, Aline Vidal, transcribed his feverish dream into a text, which first appeared in the 2010 exhibition catalogue, *Voyage dans ma tête: la collection de coiffes ethniques d'Antoine de Galbert*.²⁶ In her undated transcription, de Galbert

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Wall text for *La coiffe des rotateurs*, by the Musée des Confluences. *Le Monde en Tête*, 6 June, 2019- 23 August, 2020, Le Musée des Confluences, Lyon.

²⁶ The transcription first appeared as a text in the 2010 exhibition catalogue, Antoine de Galbert, Gérard Wajcman, and Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter, (eds.), *Voyage dans ma tête: la collection de coiffes ethniques d'Antoine de Galbert*.

describes himself laying in bed paralyzed by excruciating pain. Confined to his living quarters, de Galbert dreams of escaping to geographical locations such as Istanbul, the Yucatan Plateau, Java, Bali, etc. and other places such as jungles, beaches, and forests. In these real and imagined locations, de Galbert fantasizes about re-discovering the headdresses in his collection through encounters with their original creators and owners. In one sequence, de Galbert imagines following a young Asiatic girl as she walks through the streets of Istanbul wearing the Timorese headdress from his collection. My thesis focuses on this particular scene not only because it demonstrates how French colonialism relies on Orientalism to construct the Asiatic female, but it also reveals how white personhood can be ornamental. The framework of a dream, which relies on a combination of imagination, fantasy, and narration, allowed de Galbert to facilitate an idealized relationship with his headdress collection, one that could not be realized through the act of collecting, arranging, and displaying alone.

To represent this dream, the Musée staged a portion of the headdress collection over a large basin about waist height onto which the dream was projected as a text. A recording by Fantazio, a French comedian and artist, featured an oral re-telling of the dream text against a background track of percussive instrumentals. A colorful rotating background appeared behind the text featuring foliage and digital impressions of headdresses from the collection. As the digital headdresses slid into view behind their textual descriptions conjuring images of de Galbert and the imagined artists and wearers, the boundaries between person and headdress, subject and object, real and unreal, became obscure. Who or what was the subject of the dream? Or, to put it more simply, who is the

Lyon: Éditions Fage, 2010, and then again in the 2019 exhibition catalogue, Musée des Confluences. *Le monde en tête: la donation des coiffes Antoine de Galbert*. Lyon: Éditions Le Seuil, 2019.

observer and who is the observed? The scene is difficult to parse out because it contains so many gazes: the gaze between the characters in the dream, the omnipresent perspective of de Galbert as the dreamer “looking” at himself, the audience staring at the physical headdresses and their digital projections, and even the audience observing each other across the basin.

The sensorial barrage of three-dimensional and two-dimensional, organic and inorganic, digital and material, light and sound, did not intentionally aim to overwhelm or confuse our senses. Rather, this curatorial sequence is compelling because of the slippage it creates between subject and object, person and thing, observer and observed. It is the pervious border/boundary between person and object that makes the exhibition introduction a particularly rich case study for my research. Through the case study of the exhibition introduction, I explore how the figures of the collector and the Asiatic female emerge from the threshold of object and subject. Although both figures emerge from a shared imagined relationship to the headdresses in the dream, I have separated my investigation of them into two sections to avoid neutralizing any differences between their subjectivities.

Part I specifically examines the exhibition’s introduction and how it frames de Galbert’s subjectivity while transforming his public persona into a mythical figure. I draw from the theories of Duncan F. Cameron and Richard Dyer to investigate how the Musée allows for and centres representations of whiteness through the curatorial scheme. Cameron helps us understand how the exhibition “cannonizes” de Galbert while obscuring the work of the headdresses’ artists. Dyer specifically looks at representations of whiteness in film, and his analysis illuminates the ways in which the exhibition frames

and constructs whiteness through cinematic technologies such as mise-en-scène, lighting, diegetic sound, etc. Discussing how contexts of colonialism and imperialism propagated a wider ‘culture of light’ in Western media, Dyer’s work is particularly useful for my theoretical framing of de Galbert’s dream as I analyze how legacies of imperialism and colonialism shaped his dream narrative and its cinematic translation into the exhibition. My use of the term whiteness²⁷ is not intended to view whiteness as a uniform terrain that cuts across time and space nor suggest that as a discursive practice it was produced in a vacuum, but rather to decentre whiteness as a dominant, unmarked category.²⁸ Dyer points out the risk in continuing to view whiteness as a dominant, cultural norm: “There is something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery. As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.”²⁹ By naming the expressions of whiteness in the exhibition, I aim to question and delimit its authority, and point out the ways in which curatorial decisions are made that sometimes wittingly or unwittingly centre whiteness.³⁰

Part II is a two-part investigation. First, I begin by examining the exhibition layout as a promenade in which the boundaries between subject and object and person and thing are blurred. Second, I study the emergence of the young Asiatic girl in de Galbert’s dream through the display and textual description of a Timorese headdress in the exhibition introduction. My investigation reveals how personhood emerges from

²⁷ In examining whiteness, I align myself with Dyer’s definition, which looks at “how white people are represented, how we represent ourselves - images of white people, or the cultural construction of white people, to use two standard formulations for such work.” In my research, I examine how de Galbert represents himself as a white collector and how the Musée spotlights these self-representations. (See Richard Dyer, *White*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997: 1).

²⁸ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 233.

²⁹ Richard Dyer, *White*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997: 1.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

things and how things are made into persons³¹ through the lens of Cheng's ornamentalism. My work is indebted to and deeply engages with the thinking and theories of feminist scholar, Anne Anlin Cheng. My project builds on her foundation expanding the repertoire of objects and exhibitions we can examine through her theory of ornamentalism. Therefore, I draw from Cheng's terminology when describing the relationship between personhood and objecthood in the exhibition in order to reveal how the logic of ornamentalism underscores the historical and on-going dynamics of French colonialism.

Since ornamentalism draws on the theories of Orientalism, I engage with both throughout. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism is fundamental to my research as it gets at the core issues of *Le monde en tête*, revealing the ways in which Europeans project their fantasies and desires onto non-European cultures while performing a disavowal of these cultures as the "Other."³² However, while Said's Orientalism is predicated on binaries of colonizer/colonized, subject/object, ornamentalism allows for a theorization of subject-object relations that moves beyond these binaries locating figures who exist at the borders of subject and object, flesh and ornament.³³ While both Orientalism as a critique and ornamentalism as "a theory of being"³⁴ are highly relevant here, ornamentalism looks at this fantasy of turning things into persons to explore what thingness can tell us about personhood.³⁵ As a result, I use ornamentalism to tease out the life of the synthetic being animated through the margins of subject and object.³⁶

³¹ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 156.

³² Said, *Orientalism*, 21-2.

³³ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 16.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

Since my analysis includes a close investigation of de Galbert's dream, it is crucial to acknowledge the role dreams as a methodology are employed for personal myth-making. Carl Jung, a psychoanalyst best known for his extensive work on dreams and myths, theorized that dreams were expressions of a collective unconscious and personal myth-making.³⁷ In my analysis, I examine the images presented in de Galbert's dream, both of himself and of others. My reasoning for this examination stems from a desire to examine how racial personhood³⁸ is fabricated through the imaginary rather than the corporeal. My thinking is in line with Cheng who argues that: "[t]o attend to ornamentality is to ask how racial personhood can be assembled not through organic flesh but instead through synthetic inventions and designs, not through corporeal embodiment but rather through attachments that are metonymic and hence superficial, detachable, and migratory."³⁹ Ornamentality challenges us to move beyond theories of the objectification of racialized flesh and examine how human figures can emerge *as* and *through* ornament.⁴⁰

What, then, can ornamentality tell us about the dynamics of "primitivism" in the exhibition? How can we use ornamentality to examine "primitivism" without neutralizing differences between African and Asian histories? Cheng's argument rests on the insistence of the "promiscuousness" of both racialized modes of representation suggesting that both Orientalism and "primitivism" draw from the same technologies.⁴¹ She argues that ornamentality challenges us to rethink Orientalism and "primitivism" as categories: "Similarly, ornamentality applies tremendous pressure on the temporality of

³⁷ Hall and Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology*. New York: New American Library, 1973: 123.

³⁸ Cheng, *Ornamentality*, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

known categories such as Orientalism, primitivism, and modernism, and on their accepted subjects and objects. I hope the archaeology I am building here will reveal ornamental personhood to be not an exception to modern personhood, but its intimate sister.”⁴² Ornamentalism gets at the core of flesh as aesthetic objectness, an issue not reducible to Orientalism or “primitivism” alone. It helps us question how objectness has come to support and become an integral part of personhood.

Contextual Premises: “Primitive” Art

At this juncture, I wish to address my use of the word “primitive” in quotation marks. Although many sources only refer to de Galbert’s headdresses as objects within his larger collection, de Galbert self-identifies as a “primitive” art collector and his headdresses as “primitive” objects.⁴³ I preserve de Galbert’s categorization because it strongly influenced his orientation towards the headdresses and the collection’s eventual formation. However, I recognize the deeply problematic history of the word and the past and present-day scholarly debates about its use. As Frances Connelly argues, “[t]he derogatory connotations of the term ‘primitive’ have provoked efforts to find less value-laden substitutes. The real need is not for neutralized substitutes but for recognition that the term does not describe a Yoruba figure or an Egyptian relief, but a set of ideas belonging to Europeans.”⁴⁴ My aim is not to reenact oppressive and racist power dynamics, although I do recognize that as a white scholar whose training comes from a Eurocentric background, I am at risk of doing so. Rather, my intention is to highlight an important context that greatly shaped de Galbert’s collection and his identity as a

⁴² Ibid, 25.

⁴³ De Galbert, Wajcman, and Geoffroy-Schneiter. *Voyage dans ma tête*, 5.

⁴⁴ Frances Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725–1907*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995: 5.

collector. As a result, I have decided to use the word “primitive” in quotation marks to bring attention to de Galbert’s voice and to the ways in which “primitive” art is a European construction that describes a set of ideals about non-Western peoples and cultures instead of providing accurate cultural representations.⁴⁵

Here it is useful to consider the context of “primitive” art collecting and de Galbert’s position within this context not only as a practice rooted in history, but as a current day collecting practice that scholars often overlook.⁴⁶ In the latter half of the twentieth century, “primitive” art, loosely understood as objects from Africa, Oceania, South East Asia, and the Americas, rose in popularity as museums and galleries in Europe and North America exhibited and sold these objects to audiences who wanted to experience their imagined exotic qualities.⁴⁷ We can date Europe’s fascination with displaying objects perceived as exotic as far back as to the emergence of Renaissance-era cabinets des curiosités.⁴⁸ European expeditions resulted in the looting, stealing, and forced seizure of artifacts from Africa’s oldest empires. These artifacts were used to fund Europe’s cost of war, enforce colonial governments, and were linked to the violent history of the Transatlantic slave trade. Many of these artifacts arrived in Europe to be sold to galleries and museums, and many remain in the halls of these European institutions today with little to no promise of repatriation. Historian and curator Oforiatta Ayim argues that “[y]ou kill my parents, and then take objects from me [...] when I come to you and say this has been a really traumatic event for me and I want those objects back

⁴⁵ Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, xxvvi.

⁴⁶ Brigitte Derlon and Monique Jeudy-Ballini, “Domestication and the Preservation of Wildness: The Self and the Other in Primitive Art Collecting,” *Material Culture Review* vol. 79, 2014: 93.

⁴⁷ See: Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, 1; Corbey, 2000; Monroe, 2012; 2019; Price, 1989.

⁴⁸ Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, 9.

you say to me, ‘well they are mine now maybe I’ll lend them to you.’”⁴⁹ Ayim’s argument points to the ways in which repatriation at its core is a moral issue about the “continued romanticism of imperial violence that ignores its ruinous effects on generations.”⁵⁰

In some cases, collecting and displaying “primitive” art propagated and in de Galbert’s case, continues to promote a continued romanticism of imperial violence and colonial history. In their ethnographic survey of Parisian “primitive” art collectors, Brigitte Derlon and Monique Jeudy-Ballini discovered that many of the collectors rejected available ethnographic scholarship about the provenance and production of their objects. Instead, the collectors preferred to ignore the objects’ original contexts and functions. Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini conclude that “[t]he desire for knowledge thus represents a reductive, reifying process which, by binding the object to its society of origin, inevitably threatens the mystical (“magical,” “poetic”) bond that its owner wants to forge with it.”⁵¹ This dynamic reflects a need not only to seek objects that provide a sense of the unknown to “primitive” art collectors, but also an urge to actively preserve this sense of mystery. Collecting “primitive” art has little to do with the historical and cultural contexts that gave rise to these objects and all to do with European projections and myth-making.

As is the case with many “primitive” art objects, my analysis of the exhibition as a whole as well as my focus on the Timorese headdress is extremely limited by the missing contexts and histories of these objects. I recognize that my analysis and

⁴⁹ Nosmot Gbadamosi, “Stealing Africa: How Britain looted the continent’s art,” Al Jazeera, October 12, 2021. Accessed 11 January 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/10/12/stealing-africa-how-britain-looted-the-continents-art>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini, “Domestication and the Preservation of Wildness,” 98.

interpretations of the Indigenous headdresses can only go so far before I arrive at a place where I do not have the authority to speak definitively. However, in dismissing the lack of information about the headdresses' histories, we may miss an important point.⁵² Why is it impossible to fully restore these contexts? The answer seems almost too obvious and summons destructive histories of colonial and imperial expansion in which objects were violently looted and seized from colonies and overseas territories. However, this history has set a precedent for how we expect to see objects from former colonies and overseas territories displayed in museums today. Whiteness in museums takes the form of an expectation - an expectation of how we anticipate encountering non-European objects and histories in museum settings. As my research demonstrates, anthropological and ethnographic museums such as the Musée des Confluences continue to affirm an expectation that the contexts of non-European objects cannot be recovered or presented within a museum context. As a result, I take the time to continuously point out the loss of the headdresses' localized contexts and histories. My aim here is to demonstrate the ways in which whiteness emerges as an expectation of what we will see or not see in a museum and the ways in which the museum as an institution protects these expectations. It is important to continue to point out the loss of contexts, even if it is seemingly impossible for museums to fully restore them.

⁵² Kenneth Hudson provides an excellent critique of ethnographic museums tendencies to mislead through missing or fragmentary contextualization of objects. (See Kenneth Hudson, "How Misleading Does an Ethnographic Museum Have to Be?" in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Politics and Poetics of Museum Display*. London and Washington DC: Smithsonian Press, 1991: 457-464.

PART I

Unfolding the Exhibition Through the Collector

“Whiteness was an ‘object’ over which continued control was - and is - expected.”

Cheryl I. Harris⁵³

Upon entering *Le monde en tête*, the first thing visitors encountered was a large display physically and thematically centered around de Galbert’s dream. Emanating light and sound, this dynamic curatorial display featured a large oval basin onto which de Galbert’s transcribed text of his dream was projected along with digital images of the headdresses. Sequestered to the back of the basin, an array of forty-four headdresses were suspended over the virtual display [Figure 7]. Minimal lighting rendered the objects as tenebrous forms levitating over the luminous, multicolored surface of the basin [Figure 8]. On the basin’s surface, de Galbert’s dream was projected along with digital images of the headdresses in the background. Organized by scene, the dream narrative was accompanied by an audio recording of French artist Fantazio reading the dream aloud. One didactic panel contextualized the display as an interpretation of de Galbert’s dream, but in the introduction, no other information accompanied the headdresses. To the right of this section, a wall text introduced the exhibition through a quote from de Galbert and an overview of his collecting career spotlighting his generous donation. These curatorial choices legitimized and foregrounded de Galbert while eliding the headdresses’ histories as objects once worn and used.

⁵³ Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1730.

This following discussion shows how de Galbert's public and private personae were woven into the exhibition in ways that complicated how visitors experienced the collection itself. De Galbert emerged through and yet transcended the very "thingness"⁵⁴ of the exhibition as a hyper-visible yet seemingly absent subject. In the following section, I use Cameron's theory of the museum as a temple to explore how de Galbert's persona is "canonized." I then turn to representations of whiteness in film and literature as ways to analyze de Galbert's self-portrayal in his dream text. Dyer illuminates the ways in which whiteness is associated with legacies of imperialism in imagining what kinds of bodies are allowed to perform the work of the empire based on their perceived inherent embodiment of perseverance and hardness. Both Cameron and Dyer not only reveal how the collector emerges through the exhibition introduction, but also help us understand how this dynamic obscures the headdresses, leaving their artistic origins to disappear into the exhibition's background.

Canonizing the Collector

Le monde en tête purported to be a space where visitors could meet the public and private personae of de Galbert. By staging the exhibition as de Galbert's donation, the Musée highlighted de Galbert's career as a collector and now, generous museum donor. In contrast to the public persona, de Galbert's private self-materialized through the curation of his dream. Visitors were promised an intimate view of de Galbert desires and anxieties.

⁵⁴ Although I do not engage with a thing theory based case study per se, Bill Brown's theory of thingness is especially helpful in thinking through our relationships to objects and their materiality. He argues: "(w)e look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us..." (See Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, issue 1, Autumn 2001: 4).

However, the site we arrived at has lost the total spontaneity of an encounter with the unconscious through the dream's oral retelling from de Galbert to his wife, the editing that transformed this transcription into a public text, and the Musée's staged curation of the dream turned text. The resulting product fabricated an illusion of meeting de Galbert's private persona proportional to his public one.

By centering the exhibition's introductory section on de Galbert's dream, the Musée foregrounded the white collector's experience while denying the narratives of the non-white makers of the headdresses a place. The Musée accepted the challenge of curating a non-material hallucinatory dream, but declined the task of researching and displaying the histories of the headdresses. This refusal reflects the ways in which the exhibition is built on white imperialist logic. As an anthropological, ethnographic and natural history museum, the Musée des Confluences has historically been a space equipped to receive and display the spoils and narratives of violent colonialist and imperialist expansion, including objects seized and stolen from former colonies and territories. Sara Ahmed illuminates this process: "Colonialism makes the world 'white,' which is of course a world 'ready' for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach."⁵⁵ This ongoing and un-finished history continues to orient bodies towards whiteness.⁵⁶ These frameworks also influence how the Musée appears as an institution. As Ahmed proposes: "We can also consider 'institutions' as orientation devices, which take the shape of 'what' resides within them."⁵⁷ The Musée adopted de Galbert's gaze as a collector by offering up the headdresses as something to be attracted to through aesthetic pleasure alone rather than providing historical and localized contexts.

⁵⁵ Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory*, vol.8, issue 2, 2007: 154.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 150.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 157.

The exhibition affirmed de Galbert's public role as an arts patron while establishing an ambiguous relationship to the headdresses. The full exhibition title, *Le monde en tête: la donation des coiffes d'Antoine de Galbert*, entirely divorced the headdresses from their contexts prior to de Galbert's collection. The Musée claimed that by donating his collection to Lyon where de Galbert first discovered "tribal art," de Galbert is "getting back in touch with his region of origin."⁵⁸ The headdresses were staged as objects that refer back to de Galbert's own history. This rewrites what Arjun Appadurai refers to as the "social life of things": the social contexts through which objects pass and acquire new meanings.⁵⁹ The Musée relocated the objects into a French context by only describing their movement from de Galbert's collection in France to the exhibition in Lyon, omitting their prior contexts outside of France.

The Musée's curatorial strategies mirrored de Galbert's collecting behavior, which is centred on an appreciation first and foremost of aesthetics. According to the Musée's press release, the exhibition layout was designed to allow visitors to see all the headdresses displayed at once when they entered the gallery space in order to appreciate "the great variety of objects."⁶⁰ The overall effect produced a vantage point at the gallery's entrance from which visitors could experience a sensory onslaught of colors, textures, and forms prompting them to form a first impression of the headdresses based on aesthetics alone. This was the Musée's intention: "First attracted by the beauty of the objects, visitors are invited to freely explore them [...]"⁶¹ By designing an exhibition layout that recreates de Galbert's relationship to collecting, the Musée prompted visitors

⁵⁸ Musée des Confluences. Press release of the exhibition *Le monde en tête*, 7.

⁵⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986: 3.

⁶⁰ Musée des Confluences. Press release of the exhibition *Le monde en tête*, 13.

⁶¹ Ibid.

to reaffirm this core tenet of de Galbert's collection: one can derive pleasure from both a focus on the headdresses' aesthetic qualities and an omission of their histories.

In interviews, de Galbert has characterized his thematic approach to collecting as instinctive and spontaneous with special attention paid to the objects' aesthetics. In his interview with H el ene Lafont-Couturier, Directrice of the Mus e des Confluences, De Galbert recalls: "J'ai tr s souvent d laiss  l'histoire des objets, par paresse ou manque des temps, pour finalement n' tre fascine que par leurs formes."⁶² Similarly, in his 2010 interview with B r nice Geoffroy-Schneiter, de Galbert's colleague and co-curator of the 2010 exhibition of his headdresses,⁶³ De Galbert notes: "Mon rapport aux coiffes est instinctif, ludique, spontan . Je ne m'encombre pas du discours intellectuel propre   l'analyse des autres formes d'art."⁶⁴ De Galbert prefers to ignore or leave aside ethnographic scholarship about his headdress collection, which would only interrupt his instinctive relationship to his headdresses, which was built around his attraction to their visual qualities.

Although the exhibition title and layout legitimized de Galbert's public persona as arts donor and collector, the exhibition introduction promised to reveal his private persona through the curation of his dream. The introduction transformed de Galbert's dream into an exhibition object, effectively relocating his experience into the rarefied realm of art. The large basin where de Galbert's dream is projected as a text overtook the headdresses in size, and the rotating digital backgrounds, sounds, and dramatic lighting competed for the visitors' attention. As the headdresses' digital reproductions slowly emerged lagging behind their descriptions on the basin, they appeared as products of de

⁶² Mus e des Confluences. *Le monde en t te: la donation des coiffes Antoine de Galbert*. Lyon:  ditions Le Seuil, 2019: 17.

⁶³ De Galbert, Wajcman, and Geoffroy-Schneiter. *Voyage Dans ma T te*, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 20.

Galbert's narrative, images conjured up by de Galbert rather than objects that had existed before the dream and had inspired it. De Galbert's unconscious power as the dream narrative's author took precedence over the creative genius of those who crafted the headdresses. Instead of presenting the basin as a prop to aid in the visitors' understanding of the headdresses, de Galbert's dream became the primary focus of the exhibition. The headdresses reinforced the visitors' aesthetic experiences of the dream. These curatorial strategies resulted in a multisensorial display intended to convince visitors of his mythic status.

The headdresses' connection to de Galbert's unconscious power rendered them as deeply psychological objects. The museum affirmed this connection through its curation of the dream and thus institutionalized de Galbert's belief systems. Cameron identifies the ways in which museums can act like a religious institution in confirming beliefs: "The museum, sociologically, is much closer in function to the church than it is to the school. The museum provides opportunity for reaffirmation of the faith; it is a place for private and intimate experience, although it is shared with many others."⁶⁵ By displaying objects deemed valuable by the museum as an institution and the elite private collector, the museum has come to represent a temple in which objects are enshrined.⁶⁶

Le monde en tête produced a space akin to the museum-temple described by Cameron. Latent social codes and scenographic cues required ritualistic performances by museum visitors including wandering through the exhibition quietly and meditatively while experiencing dramatic changes in lighting, sounds, and music that were all intended to inform and intensify visitors' experiences of the headdresses. The introduction is the

⁶⁵ Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," 17.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

most psychologically charged part of the exhibition. It staged the headdresses as entities that had crossed over from the realm of de Galbert's dream world only to arrive at the exhibition as artifacts of this passage. These curatorial strategies created an aura around the headdresses; their relationship to the past moment of de Galbert's dream intensified and enhanced their presence in the exhibition as psychologically potent objects.

The introduction activated de Galbert's personal myth-making and effectively canonized his private persona as a figure of mythic proportions. The carefully orchestrated and visually impressive curatorial framework of the dream emphasized de Galbert's unconscious creative power. However, his esoteric status is defined by and can only function through a dynamic of denial. In his dream, de Galbert reclaims the performative functions of the headdresses that are continuously denied to the visitors. He wears the headdresses, which now remain behind panes of glass reminding visitors that their touch is not permitted. His imaginary travels to the geographic origins of the headdresses to meet the original makers and wearers, including the young Asiatic girl, demonstrates his own privilege of knowing or understanding the headdress's original contexts (whether real or imagined). The figure of the Asiatic female within this imaginary voyage legitimizes de Galbert's relationship to the headdresses as one enmeshed in travels and adventures. However, eighty percent of his headdress collection was purchased in France.⁶⁷ Ironically, or not, this information is once again denied to the visitors.

Curating a space for transcendental experiences that require ritualistic practices of devotion is more than just an act of creation; it is also an act of erasure, in which

⁶⁷ Le Progrès, "Pourquoi il faut absolument aller voir Le Monde en tête," *Le Progrès*, April 3, 2020. Accessed 06 February 2023. <https://www.leprogres.fr/rhone-69-edition-lyon-metropole/2019/06/08/pourquoi-il-faut-absolument-aller-voir-le-monde-en-tete>.

narratives are ignored, removed, and denied a place in the museum-temple. Cameron argues that by sacrificing historical, social, and cultural contexts in order to create space for a spiritual experience for visitors, museums do a great disservice to ourselves as visitors and to the objects they purport to care for. He continues: “By failing to provide meaningful interpretation of the collections, museums are, by that omission, guilty of misrepresentation, distortion of fact, and the encouragement of attitudes toward cultures other than our own that are dangerous and destructive in what [Marshall] McLuhan has called today’s “global village.””⁶⁸ The exhibition introduction resonates with Cameron’s observations, as it attempted to produce a spiritual experience of the headdresses through de Galbert’s dream. The headdresses’ functional, ritualistic, performative, and ceremonial histories and contexts were suppressed to allow de Galbert to emerge as a mythic figure.

Expanding his public image as a private collector and generous arts patron, de Galbert’s private persona emerged through the dream’s curation as an otherworldly figure arriving from his dream realm. Through the dream’s curation, de Galbert transcended thresholds of private and public, interiority and exteriority demonstrating the ways in which “whiteness aspires to *dis*-embodiedness.”⁶⁹ As we shall see in Part II, the young Asiatic girl is embodied as a commodified and fetishized subject. She is presented both as material headdress and naked body simultaneously dressed up and stripped down by de Galbert’s gaze. She remains bound to the surface of the Timorese headdress for de Galbert to encounter and re-encounter with every loop of the dream projection. In the dream, he not only collects the headdress, but records and collects her image her over and over. While she remains caught in the scopophilic narrative eye of de Galbert, he remains

⁶⁸ Ibid, 18.

⁶⁹ Dyer, *White*, 39.

safely outside of his own omnipresent gaze never revealing a specific, corporeal form to the visitors.

Whereas the Asiatic female figure binds flesh and ornamental headdress, de Galbert emerges as a figure that attains “the position of being without properties, unmarked, universal, just human.”⁷⁰ As Dyer has pointed out: “To be without properties also suggests not being at all. This may be thought of as pure spirit, but it also hints at non-existence, or death.”⁷¹ De Galbert’s canonization reflects back the ways in which whiteness as death is at the forefront of white identity.⁷² The exhibition introduction positioned de Galbert as the over-seeing subject of the dream. As an omnipresent rhetorical figure, he was without corporeal form and instead characterized by his immateriality. He opposed the material thingness of the headdresses and curatorial props, which pointed towards his absence. De Galbert’s canonization points not to his own death, but the ways in which whiteness paradoxically encompasses life and death.⁷³

The Collector as a Literary Figure

De Galbert situates his collecting passion at the intersection of nostalgia and nineteenth-century romanticism. In his descriptions and interviews, de Galbert projects images, desires, and memories onto his collected objects. According to de Galbert, the headdresses function as a catalyst summoning childhood memories of reading nineteenth-century colonial adventure stories. In an interview with Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter, de Galbert’s colleague and co-curator of the 2010 exhibition of his headdresses,⁷⁴ Geoffrey-

⁷⁰ Ibid, 38.

⁷¹ Ibid, 39.

⁷² Ibid, 207.

⁷³ Ibid, 39.

⁷⁴ De Galbert, Wajcman, and Geoffroy-Schneiter. *Voyage dans ma tête*, 5.

Schneider asked de Galbert to describe the intimate relationship with his headdresses. He responded:

En contemplant ma collection de coiffes, j'ai le sentiment jubilatoire de faire le tour du monde, d'accomplir une sorte de voyage immobile, d'aventure intérieure et mentale comme celle que l'on fait parfois du fond de son lit. En fait, cette collection reflète une certaine forme de romantisme, nourri par les lectures des récits des grands voyageurs, Monfreid, Kipling, Loti... Je me souviens aussi de La Féerie cinghalaise de Ferdinand de Croisset. J'ai aimé le XIX siècle, le romantisme, l'orientalisme, le temps de grandes expéditions, bien avant de me tourner vers l'art contemporain.⁷⁵

De Galbert relates his collection to images conjured up by colonial writers who exoticized non-European people, cultures, and places. Rather than merely recalling these memories, de Galbert recreates these experiences through his dream. His reference to the “aventure intérieure et mentale comme celle que l'on fait parfois du fond de son lit”⁷⁶ not only alludes to his imaginary childhood adventures, but also the opening scene of his dream, where he lays in bed. Through his dream, De Galbert recreates the experience of having an “aventure intérieure et mentale” by inserting himself into his own colonial adventure story as both narrator and main character.

I dissect these dynamics of cultural myth making and image projection in the dream focusing on the characteristics de Galbert adopts as the story's narrator/subject. Dyer locates self-representations of whiteness residing in “narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes, and habits of perception.”⁷⁷ Concentrating on the Western film genre, he analyzes representations of imagined characteristics of whiteness. These films “take the (implicitly white) viewer on trips to exotic lands”⁷⁸ wherein white imperialism was re-enacted violently, and with enthusiasm. De Galbert also takes an implicitly white

⁷⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Dyer, *White*, 14.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 47.

viewer on a trip through the exotic landscapes of his dream wherein his own white subjectivity emerges through his double role of narrator-subject.

I focus on the only sequence in his dream in which de Galbert frames the dream as a memory. He begins the dream with “[j]e me souviens[...]⁷⁹” as he recalls following a young girl wearing the Timorese headdress from his collection. De Galbert’s recollection implicates himself as the dreamer. In this scene, de Galbert imagines discovering the Timorese headdress on the body of a young girl rather than as an object for sale at an auction, gallery house, or flea market where he most likely purchased it. He follows the young girl through the streets of Istanbul to the Bosphorus Strait. The Musée strategically displayed the Timorese headdress over the basin and behind the text as a digital impression [Figure 10]. This section reads:

Je me souviens d’avoir suivi cette fille, dans les rues d’Istanbul. Cette fille, pieds nus, vêtue d’un caftan pourpre, les yeux dissimulés derrière une voile plongeant sur sa tête, picorant les grelots suspendus par des fils. Elle portait au sommet de son front une sorte de lyre, et un halo de plumes blanches auréolait sa démarche dans une musique divine.⁸⁰

Within this scene, de Galbert’s narrative eye inventories bodies and headdresses alike as he moves between recording land, people, and objects without differentiation. His role as the subject/narrator positions his white subjectivity as the “over-seeing subject without properties.”⁸¹ He never describes his body and dress in the same manner as the headdresses and other people he encounters, follows, and documents. Instead, he moves anonymously through the scene as a “neutral” subject not distinguished by race or ethnicity. His mobility as an invisible, over-seeing narrator without properties gliding through the scene contrasts with the young girl whose movement is bound to her

⁷⁹ Musée des Confluences, *Le monde en tête*, 10.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Dyer, *White*, 207.

corporeality and the material headdress. Her headdress and the divine music surrounding her announce every step she takes, rendering her a highly sensorial subject.

We can compare de Galbert's role in the dream as narrator/subject to the explorer/scientist in the Western film genre. Dyer argues that this role entails "giv[ing] the spectator knowledge of land of which he is emphatically not a part, and the role of images of maps and globes in fixing this within a comprehensive, scientific ambit."⁸² However, rather than fixing the land through images of maps and globes, de Galbert uses his headdresses to mark the space and people he encounters. Much like the maps and globes produced by early explorers, the headdresses too are representational of de Galbert's imagination of these places rather than accurate geographic markers. Hence, a Timorese headdress from an island off the coast of Indonesia might be used to represent a scene in Istanbul. Within the dream, the Timorese headdress refers back to de Galbert's subjective system of knowledge and its fixed position as a cultural marker of the young girl's "otherness."

We can frame this scene as de Galbert's urge to replace the Timorese headdress's acquisition narrative with a fantasy of discovery. Acquisition narratives anchor the objects in the collection while signifying the collector's labour and great fortune. Susan Stewart illuminates this process: "The souvenir magically transports us to the scene of origin, but the collection is magically and serially transported to the scene of acquisition, its proper destination [...] If [collected objects] are 'made,' it is by a process that seems to invent itself for the pleasure of the acquirer."⁸³ The Timorese headdress authenticates de Galbert's narrative of discovery. It represents what is external and foreign to de

⁸² Ibid, 47.

⁸³ Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1984: 165.

Galbert through its position on the young girl's body yet arises out of his own interior, imagined experience.

This fantasy of discovery also exemplifies Dyer's concept of whiteness as an imagined practice of enterprise. Here, enterprise refers to "an unprecedented horizon of expansion, of dangers to face, of materials - goods, terrain, people - to organise."⁸⁴ The headdresses are the material goods organized through the frame of the collection, which brings order and borders to the objects. The very concept of an inventory, on which the dream is based,⁸⁵ suggests the act of organizing and recording an otherwise unorganized assemblage of objects.

Visitors also became complicit as intrusive voyeurs following the young girl through de Galbert's narration and inventorying the headdresses along with him. The exhibition introduction attempted to recreate the opening scene of the dream in which de Galbert lies in bed imagining the headdresses hovering over him. The exhibition introduction tried to reproduce the spatial relationship between de Galbert and the headdresses by positioning the headdresses over the basin so they hover over the curatorial props intended to represent de Galbert's narrative voice. The exhibition added mis-en-scène elements including dramatic lighting and sound to recreate the intensity of the dream. De Galbert's voice emerged both as the text projected onto the basin and as the disembodied voice of Fantazio reading the text aloud. By including diegetic and asynchronous sounds in the form of Fantazio's recording, the Musée encouraged visitors to assume de Galbert's position within the dream by experiencing the same auditory cues he imagined hearing. The asynchronous instrumentals intensified this experience. Rather

⁸⁴ Dyer, *White*, 31.

⁸⁵ Wall text for *La coiffé des rotateurs*, by the Musée des Confluences. *Le Monde en Tête*, 6 June, 2019- 23 August, 2020, Le Musée des Confluences, Lyon.

than merely presenting the scene, the Musée's curation attempted to insert visitors into the scene in the position of de Galbert so they could experience being in his body and consciousness. However, in doing so, visitors became complicit in de Galbert's colonial project. As American literary scholar, Jane Tompkins, reminds us, "[t]he openness of the space means that domination can take place virtually through the act of opening one's eyes, through the act, even, of watching a representation on screen."⁸⁶ Visitors were not merely watching de Galbert's domination through the dream's curation, they were participating in it as well.

Moreover, the dream's curation allowed whiteness to become "worldly."⁸⁷ Rather than presenting de Galbert's dream as a personally psychological and subjective experience, the exhibition introduction recast his interiority as an avenue through which all visitors can interpret the headdresses. His individualized perspective as a collector disappeared as a category only to re-emerge as an ontological and phenomenological given of the exhibition; he was the point at which the world of the exhibition unfolded.⁸⁸ However, this unfolding only works if the visitors forgo the histories and localized contexts of the headdresses in order to replace them with the context of the dream. Art historian Dorothea Von Hantelmann describes this curatorial shift: "The synchronic museum—if we can call it that—would forgo history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial."⁸⁹ The introduction eschewed the headdresses' histories, which would only subtract from the dream's curation by rupturing the images conjured by de Galbert.

⁸⁶ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Oxford: University Press, 1993: 74.

⁸⁷ Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 150.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 151.

⁸⁹ Dorothea von Hantelmann, "The Experiential Turn," in Elizabeth Carpenter (ed.), *On Performativity*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014.

The curation of the introduction functioned through dynamics of denial; the original context and narratives must be suppressed and removed for the projections to work.

As a result, the headdresses were caught in an unresolved and unresolvable tension between the spectatorship of the exhibition and their appearances in de Galbert's dream. Within the exhibition introduction, the headdresses continuously referred back to images of landscapes, performances, and people that only existed in the imaginary. In this way, we can understand the introduction as a *representation* of the images of the headdresses as they have been already presented in his dream. Yet, as a part of the larger exhibition, the headdresses were also presented to us as "a window on to our world's huge cultural diversity, both past and present."⁹⁰ The headdresses were intended to act as windows into their functional, ceremonial, ritualistic, and performative uses, yet their intrinsic connection to the body was denied. Ultimately, their materiality was continuously activated and retracted never fully embracing their "thingness" or functioning solely as images in the dream. The headdresses remained frozen in the heterotopic landscapes of de Galbert's dream unable to perform in the exhibition. They were caught in a continuous push and a pull between presence and absence, the imaginary and the material, past and present.

Within the frame of *Le monde en tête*, visitors' staged actions came to outline the exhibition's mechanisms. These productive tools canonized de Galbert by transforming his public person into a mythic figure whose "realness" stood in opposition to the "thingness" of the exhibition. Unlike the spectral figure of the Asiatic woman who I discuss in Part II, de Galbert's personhood is "realised in and yet is not reducible to the

⁹⁰ Musée des Confluences. Press release of the exhibition *Le monde en tête*, 7.

corporeal, or racial.”⁹¹ The introduction’s curatorial framework allowed de Galbert to emerge as an overseeing subject exemplified in his role as the dream’s narrator.

⁹¹ Dyer, *White*, 14-5.

PART II

A Promenade Through a Headless Garden

And the pleasure afforded by this scene—the piquant insistence of nonliving live things—is not fleshly indulgence but rather the naughty porousness between persons and things, the alluring satisfaction of ontological shallowness. It makes us wonder whether we enjoy still life because it imitates or eschews life.

Anne Anlin Cheng⁹²

Part II examines the exhibition with a particular focus on the introduction in order to engage with its unique curatorial scheme. I investigate how the curation staged a fantasy in which objects represented personhood, which allowed visitors to fantasize about their own self-objectification through the concept of an exhibition promenade. I then examine how personhood emerged from things by studying the figure of the Asiatic female who wears the Timorese headdress in de Galbert's dream. My analysis utilizes the overlapping lenses of ornamentalism and museology to closely study the Musée's curatorial strategies, which draw from an on-going history of exoticizing non-European people and cultural objects.

Le monde en tête demonstrated an intersection of anthropology, ethnography, and tourism by encouraging visitors to feel as though they were traveling around the world while looking at fragments of non-Western cultures (headdresses) in the context of an anthropological and natural history museum. The Musée described their “dual approach”

⁹² Ibid, 22.

to the headdresses as that of, “a collector, inspired by their beauty, strangeness and exoticism, and that of a museum, which looks at their history, peoples and actual uses in order to understand these objects in their living context.”⁹³ However, this approach raises questions: where does the exoticizing gaze of the collector stop and the anthropological gaze of the Musée begin? Film and media studies scholar Alison Griffiths highlights the problematic ambiguity in the double gaze of the museum through her analysis of ethnographic films: “There is also a problem of how to respond to films that seem to be as much about the pleasures of looking as they are about anthropological explication.”⁹⁴ Anthropological museums demonstrated this concept as they oscillated between science and art, spectacle and pedagogy, and difference and familiarity.⁹⁵ Griffiths labels this ambivalence “wondrous difference,”⁹⁶ which she argues can still be seen in anthropological and natural history museums today.

Fluctuating between visual pleasure and anthropological interpretation, *Le monde en tête* rehearsed this dynamic of “wondrous difference.” The Musée encouraged visitors first and foremost to build a relationship with the headdresses based on wandering through the exhibition space and admiring the objects for their visual pleasure alone.

According to the exhibition website:

Au sein de la plus vaste salle du musée, l’exposition vous invite à une déambulation libre, telle une promenade dans un jardin, autour d’une vingtaine de tables, regroupant les coiffes par thématique - plumes d’Amazonie, coiffes de mariages, symboles de pouvoir, etc. - avant d’en comprendre les usages.⁹⁷

⁹³ Musée des Confluences. Press release of the exhibition *Le monde en tête*, 9.

⁹⁴ Griffiths, Alison. *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002: xxviii.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 257.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, xix.

⁹⁷ Musée des Confluences. “Le monde en tête: la donation Antoine de Galbert.” Expositions temporaires. <https://www.museedesconfluences.fr/fr/expositions/expositions-temporaires/le-monde-en-tete-la-donation-antoine-de-galbert>. Accessed on January 10, 2023.

The exhibition invited visitors to enjoy a promenade through a “garden”⁹⁸ filled with petrified artifacts curated to evoke organic forms found in nature. With no exhibition trail markers or signage directing visitors to move through the exhibition in a specific order, visitors were free to stroll through the gallery admiring the different groupings of headdresses at their leisure. By placing the objects at waist-height and lighting them only from underneath, the Musée encouraged visitors to look down at each grouping admiring both the overall arrangement of headdresses and their distinct forms. The Musée achieved its desired effect of mimicking a garden promenade in which visitors peer down at different plots to appreciate both the overall botanical arrangement and the singularity of each flower.

Through the comparison of the exhibition space to a garden, this highly artificial dream-like environment suggested that Eastern artifice could substitute for Eastern nature.⁹⁹ Reflective of Orientalist logic, there was no room for the objects’ specific histories and localized contexts in an exhibition space that prided itself on staging an aesthetic experience that must be emptied of meaning if it is to be filled with sensory pleasure. The exhibition disaggregated form from function, headdress from history, and pleasure from learning. By initially keeping the headdress’s histories a mystery, the Musée suggested that these headdresses can be enjoyed for their mysterious and “exotic” qualities. Performance studies scholar Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett critiques the Museum of African Art for relying on “secrecy” to understand African art in particular: “In a word, secrecy is inherently performative. The Museum of African Art performs a secret encounter by deferring the meaning of particular secrets indefinitely. That visitors

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 89.

should find that deferral pleasurable, rather than frustrating, is enabled by the history of how these objects have come to be exhibited as art.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the obscuring of the headdresses’ histories in the introduction produced a performative secrecy. Visitors were meant to find pleasure in both the lack of information and focus on object-immanence.

While there is much to criticize on the grounds of racial and cultural appropriation, to the best of my knowledge, a critical review of the exhibition has yet to be published. Of the exhibition reviews researched for this project, a majority praised the Musée for presenting a diverse range of objects within one gallery space. This absence speaks profoundly to the ways in which Orientalism as a framework is so deeply embedded in how we expect to perceive and experience non-European art in museums. Audiences and critics alike received this display of headdresses in an artificial garden as an acceptable if not an unassuming curatorial framework. Through film and media studies scholar Alison Griffiths’ research of the fraught history and development of anthropological and natural history museums such as the Musée des Confluences, I aim to outline the ways in which we have come to naturalize a specific mode of seeing and experiencing Indigenous objects in museums.

The Musée’s use of the promenade serves as an ideal metaphor for framing and unpacking the exhibition dynamic of “wondrous difference.” According to archaeologist, Joanna Brück, “the promenade helped to inscribe a particular moral and social order onto the urban landscape, embodying the values of the middle and upper classes through displays of taste, fashion, and decorum.”¹⁰¹ Brück argues that the promenade created bodies as objects of visual consumption and through it colonial, class, and gender

¹⁰⁰ Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998: 256.

¹⁰¹ Joanna Brück. “Landscapes of Desire: Parks, Colonialism, and Identity in Victorian and Edwardian Ireland,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, vol. 17, issue 1, 2013: 219.

identities were signified for display.¹⁰² Similarly, museums create regulated spaces of display and consumption in which cultural artistic forms can be “objectified, domesticated, and their worth evaluated.”¹⁰³ Key discourses played out through the promenade and *Le monde en tête* include tensions between public and private spheres, order and freedom, and tradition and modernity.¹⁰⁴

While the Musée’s conceptualization of the exhibition as a promenade may appear unique at first glance, a closer investigation reveals an intertwined history between exhibitions and promenades. In her book examining both the emergence of ethnographic film and anthropological museum exhibitions, Griffiths argues that twentieth century anthropological museums recreated the promenade in their exhibition halls, which she calls the “promenade [of] ethnographic cinema.”¹⁰⁵ As described by Griffiths, the visitors’ movement through museum exhibition halls, often described in curatorial terms as the exhibition trail, “replicates that of the anthropologist-explorer who traverses the physical and cultural landscape, encountering assorted scenes of Indigenous life.”¹⁰⁶ Visitors encountered headdresses and masks as well as non-material forms including performances and artistic practices on the exhibition trail, which were transformed from expressions of cultural identity into markers of cultural identities. In her interpretation of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s work, Griffiths argues that this ethnographic gaze transforms Indigenous practices into “frozen, canonical artifacts,” which defy the conditions in which these performances and objects are intended to be produced.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, 41.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid 52.

Much like the bodies encountered on the promenade, visitors performed a visual analysis to determine the cultural identity of the objects encountered in the exhibition space. Anthropological exhibitions encouraged museum visitor to take up these scopophilic roles of virtual ethnographer and tourist using fragmentary exhibition information (didactic panels, wall texts, etc.) about non-Western cultures to frame and understand cultural differences, similar to the ways in which tourists use travel guidebooks.¹⁰⁸ *Le monde en tête* not only asked visitors to perform a visual analysis of the headdresses with little to no information about the objects themselves, but also encouraged visitors to re-imagine the original wearers of the headdresses just as de Galbert did in his dream. The preface of the catalogue best summarizes the fantasies the Musée asks the visitors to create: “Quand les frontières s’effacent de la sorte, chaque visiteur peut réinventer un imaginaire des peuples et des cultures.”¹⁰⁹ By imagining the people and origins of the headdresses, the visitors validated the Musée as an institution, which recused itself of its responsibility to research and provide the historical and localized contexts of the headdresses instead facilitating a further process of exoticization and fantasy. The spectral human was used to reinvent the headdresses’ cultures and contexts. The invisible fantasies of imagining the people underneath the headdresses also affirmed de Galbert’s dream as a legitimate methodology for knowing and understanding the headdresses. It historicized the mythology surrounding de Galbert and affirmed his relationship to the headdresses.

As a result, the headdresses act as portals through which personhood is simultaneously triggered and denied, and “powerful ideas of race and objectness are

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 195

¹⁰⁹ Musée des Confluences, *Le monde en tête*, 1.

transferred.”¹¹⁰ By creating a space where visitors are meant to imagine the persons underneath the headdresses, the exhibition enacted dynamics of ornamentalism, “a fantasy of turning things into persons through the conduit of racial meaning in order, paradoxically, to allow the human to escape his or her own humanness.”¹¹¹ However, the dynamic of imagining people underneath the headdresses only worked because it was constructed through the technologies of Orientalism and “primitivism”.¹¹² Because Orientalist and primitivist logic views non-white bodies as interchangeable with things, the Musée sent a message to visitors that it is pleasurable to imagine the non-European wearers underneath the headdresses as both subject *and* object. The exhibition’s “enchantment with the inhuman” draws our attention to how the headdress becomes a precondition of the human figure, rather than a product of it.¹¹³

In the exhibition as promenade, people experienced the fantasy of seeing others as objects of desire and of *being* that object of desire. How can we apply this dynamic to the exhibition? From Griffiths’ research, we understand the objectifying gaze of the museum and visitor, which transforms Indigenous artistic forms into objects of desire. However, did visitors also experience a fantasy of self-objectification through the exhibition? Using ornamentalism as a theoretical framework, I argue that the exhibition allowed for such a fantasy to take place.

By transforming the headdresses into objects for display and visual pleasure alone, the Musée accentuated our own dialectic relation to thingness. There was an uneasy disconnect between the bodily uses of the headdresses and how they were being presented to us in the exhibition as unusable objects protected behind glass, a standard

¹¹⁰ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 92.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 98.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 7.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 98.

museum practice intended to prevent contact with skin and bodies for the sake of preserving the pieces. Although the exhibition showcased headdresses, the objects themselves did not invite wearability or suggest function. These objects were made to connect with bodies through their contact with the wearer's skin, hair, and head, but the headdresses' decontextualized display as museum objects for admiration only severed their connection to the body. Cheng argues: "We cannot fill these voids, because they are easily occupied without us. They only seem to offer the promises of anthropomorphic possibilities as a compensation for making us confront their (and our own) thingness. This is perhaps why one feels so essentially alone in a beautiful room filled with things presumably meant to enhance us."¹¹⁴ *Le monde en tête* elicited similar feelings of isolation as visitors walked around the exhibition space filled with 334 headdresses, hats, masks, and outfits whose forms recalled the outline of human figures. However, these silhouettes were now presented to us as an object on display revealing a slippage between human and thing. Visitors were confronted with our own reliance on objects to produce personhood rather than using objects to supplement ourselves.

The structure of fascination not only allows us to take pleasure in marveling at objects, but also provides us with the fantasy of being objects.¹¹⁵ Those moments when we approach the glass vitrine and catch sight of our own reflection in the variegated surfaces throws us back into our own gazing. The headdresses' prismatic surfaces amplified by the under-lighting of the exposition draw us into a seductive state of objectness.¹¹⁶ Cheng argues that "fascination enables contact with objectness: it lubricates the empathy for the imagined pleasure of self-objectification, that relished slide from *me*

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 98.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 70.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

to *it*.”¹¹⁷ Within the exhibition space, pleasure was derived not only from admiring a room full of beautiful headdresses, but through the fantasy of applying this objectness to ourselves. What is the true pleasure of fascination if not to be held by another’s gaze?

The Headdress as Human

While we have arrived at the ways in which the exhibition turns people and cultures into things for consumption, I now consider how the reverse process takes place in which things adopt personhood.¹¹⁸ In the interest of creating an in-depth analysis of the transformative process whereby things gain personhood, I focus on one sequence in the exhibition introduction. I limit my focus to a specific moment in which the Timorese headdress is reproduced discursively and digitally. My investigation is motivated by the significance and singularity of this moment in which the headdress emerges as a constitutive component of the human. As Cheng points out: “It is not only that bodies leave their residue in the things they produce [...], but also that objectness reveals the complex and hybrid preconditions of personhood.”¹¹⁹ I focus on the ways in which the Timorese headdress extends the surfaces of and animates the body of the young Asiatic girl.

While many of the digital images of the headdresses did not match the physical headdresses featured in the introduction, one in particular did. For a brief moment, the Timorese headdress was suspended over the screen onto which its magnified, digital impression appears behind the text [Figure 9]. The text projected over the headdress

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 156.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 157.

reproduction is the end of a particular dream sequence in which de Galbert imagines himself following a girl through the streets of Istanbul. I revisit this section:

Je me souviens d'avoir suivi cette fille, dans les rues d'Istanbul. Cette fille, pieds nus, vêtue d'un caftan pourpre, les yeux dissimulés derrière une voile huppée. Elle longeait les rives du Bosphore en compagnie des mouettes qui plongeaient sur sa tête, picorant les grelots suspendus par des fils. Elle portait au sommet de son front une sorte de lyre, et un halo de plumes blanches auréolait sa démarche dans une musique divine.¹²⁰

We are immediately confronted by a male gaze, which follows the young girl undetected as she moves across Istanbul to the Bosphorus strait. Through this male gaze the girl is simultaneously dressed up in caftan and headdress, and stripped down to her body, observed and identified as “young” and “girl.” She appears in the dream not through body or ornament alone, but through the fusion of both. Cheng argues: “The evidence of an overmaterialized and scopically available body emerges not out of bare flesh or real ornaments, but instead from their phantasmic conflation, an overlapping of surfaces located in teasing peripheries.”¹²¹ The surfaces of the caftan and headdress that brush up against the young girl objectify and extend her body. She is presented to us as both girl and headdress animated through the synthesis of body and object.

This collision of flesh and ornament characterizes Asiatic femininity. Cheng proposes that “[s]imultaneously consecrated and desecrated as an inherently aesthetic object, the yellow woman calls for a theorization of persons and things that considers a human ontology inextricable from synthetic extensions, art, and commodity.”¹²²

Although de Galbert does not assign a national, ethnic, or racial identity to the young girl, his rhetorical framing of her rehearses associations of race, femininity, and objecthood.

¹²⁰ Musée des Confluences, *Le monde en tête*, 10.

¹²¹ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 35.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 2.

In examining these associations, ornamentalism provides an ideal theoretical lens through which we can view this scene to excavate a personhood inseparable from objecthood.

De Galbert's dream narrative draws our attention to the ways in which Asiatic femininity as ornament ambiguously appears at various thresholds. The young Asiatic girl is presented as a display open to the gaze of the audience through her ornament and yet she remains a mystery with no substantial narrative details about her identity. Cheng states that "[t]he Asian female body, by virtue of what is on its sartorial surface, is posed teasingly as liminality itself, connoting both inaccessible interiority and inviting exteriority, inscrutable and yet all too legible."¹²³ Likewise, the young girl appears as a figure of de Galbert's own interiority, yet she is relegated to the exterior spaces of the public streets leading to the open shoreline where the narrator leaves her as a fragment of a dream. Even the dream itself is located as a threshold of the exhibition; the introduction ushers visitors from the "out there" beyond the four exhibition walls into the otherworldly, dream-like space of the exhibition [Figure 9].

The young girl reenacts tensions between mobility and entrapment, isolation and ornamentation, interiority and exteriority. Her display of caftan, headdress, and musical procession juxtaposes her muteness as a subject always seen and never speaking. Analyzing Arnold Genthe's nineteenth-century photographs of Chinatown subjects, Cheng observes that the younger and older women photographed "tend to tread this fine line between mobility and claustrophobic enclosure, between festive display and mute self-effacement."¹²⁴ The young girl in the dream replicates these characteristics as a mobile subject traveling through the streets of Istanbul to the banks of the Bosphorus, yet

¹²³ Ibid, 56.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

remains caught in the gaze of the narrator whom she cannot escape. She is presented to us as a character the narrator briefly encounters and then dismisses, a fleeting scene in a series of short sequences that make up the larger dream narrative. Cheng also notes that Genthe liked to photograph his Chinese female subjects in thresholds such as door frames, windows, and alleyways.¹²⁵ Like his subjects, the young girl in the Timorese headdress is assigned to thresholds in the dream: the streets of Istanbul, which represent the convergence of public and private, indoors and outdoors, and the shoreline, where the sea and land meet. She is caught in the frame of the dream and can never free herself from it to fully enter the exhibition. She exemplifies the ways in which ornamented Asian femininity is presented ambiguously.

De Galbert's dream of the young girl also replaces intimacy with theatricality and subjectivity with surface.¹²⁶ The scene has unsettling erotic overtones made evident in the first line, "Je me souviens d'avoir suivi cette fille"¹²⁷ and exacerbated by de Galbert's fixation on the young girl's body ("pieds nus") and what is covering her body (the purple caftan and headdress). His ownership over her as a character in his dream gives him confidence in his right to survey her body, but his desire to objectify her keeps her at a distance required for his project of surveillance. She exists as a nameless character who appears only briefly and fleetingly from afar before de Galbert continues on to encounter a new location, a new headdress, a new subject. She generates tensions between hyper-visibility and anonymity, subject and object, and intimacy and distance.

De Galbert's dream narrative reenacts the Orientalist trope of woman as ornament given the excessive focus on her dress, her lack of voice which serves only to

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Musée des Confluences, *Le monde en tête*, 10.

dehumanize her further, and her inability to return the gaze of the narrator that stalks her through the streets of Istanbul to the Bosphorus strait. The exhibition illuminated the discursive production of the young girl as the cultural “other” and the narrator as the Western “self” both of whose “realness” is complexly constructed.¹²⁸ However, how does our relationship to the Timorese headdress change through the curation?

Through the exhibition’s curatorial strategies, the Timorese headdress hovered between person and thing. By reproducing the headdress through textual descriptions and digital image, the exhibition produced “an animated and multisensorial surface that decorporealizes and extends her body.”¹²⁹ We are attracted to the surfaces presented to us in this sequence: the surfaces of the young girl represented through caftan and headdress, the surface of the screen lit up with the phantasmic impression of the headdress, and the headdress’s metallic surface which animates the object through the dispersion and refraction of light. It is not the body of the young girl that assumes a fantasy of subjectivity, but the surfaces that cover, extend, and animate.¹³⁰ Although the scene re-enacted the Orientalist trope of woman as ornament, the headdress expanded the young girl’s presence into the exhibition space as its materiality is released through its dispersion across multiple surfaces.¹³¹ Even the references to divine music and birds suggest that materiality is disseminated through the auditory and living as well.

The exhibition’s curation introduced a fantasy of interiority through the intimate recreation of de Galbert’s dream. The poly-chromatic pools of light and the sonorous voice of Fantazio quite literally drew visitors into the basin as they leaned over it to read the alternating dream text. In this section, the headdresses transformed from exhibition

¹²⁸ Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 16-7.

¹²⁹ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 78.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

objects into relics from the otherworldly dream realm. They had survived this profound event only to arrive at the exhibition. The Timorese headdress added to this fantasy of intimacy appearing as an extension of the young girl's body yet positioned across the large basin at a distance from the visitors. The young girl in the Timorese headdress captures an "extradiegetic quality: the way she appears to be for and not for the audience; the way her performances seem suspended between being seen and self-seeing, between spectacle and reverie, between being an object on display and a subject hiding in plain sight."¹³² She is incorporeal and immaterial yet de Galbert's descriptions focus entirely on her body and the material headdresses covering her. She remained invisible and fantastical to us yet made scopically available through the real and material forms of the headdresses.

However, fantasy can only function so long as it can never be properly fulfilled. The positioning of the visitors over the basin distorted de Galbert into subject and object, and made visitors all the more aware of their position as audiences to this spectacle. As visitors were positioned over the basin, they also become objectified, reduced to the status of another headdress hovering over de Galbert. The mesh screen, which divides the gaze, separated visitors from the world of de Galbert's dream and set up the dream as a film projection pushing museum visitors into the role of an observant audience. The exhibition created a fantasy of singular intimacy with the dream and the headdresses, but it was a fantasy based on prior connections de Galbert already created through his own imaginary world and memories.

In summary, the exhibition introduction demonstrated how objecthood and personhood allowed for the spectral figure of the Asiatic woman to emerge. Perhaps the

¹³² Ibid, 72.

most perfect metaphor for the exhibition introduction lies in the digital representation of the headdress behind its descriptive text. Here, the headdress did not just represent a personhood emerging from the surface of an object, but rather, the headdress *became* the surface. The digital headdress expressed tensions between surface and inviting interiority, ornament and flesh, person and representation. The Asiatic female represents a figure whose existence does not merely materialize through the surface, but rather became the surface uniting the aesthetic components of the digital presentation and the ornamental headdress.¹³³

¹³³ Ibid, 144.

CONCLUSION

We have arrived at the ways in which the exhibition introduction of *Le monde en tête* allowed for things to emerge as people and people to emerge through and transcend the very objects intended to represent them. I have demonstrated how de Galbert's public and personal personae appeared through the curation, and how the exhibition "canonized" de Galbert. Through the exhibition's focus on the headdresses' former contexts as objects within his collection, de Galbert emerged ambiguously as an overarching subject with mythic qualities. The Musée also took the shape of de Galbert's subjectivity, the point at which the rest of the exhibition unfolded.¹³⁴ By examining how spaces are oriented around whiteness, Ahmed argues that whiteness is something that is assumed to be given and is not seen.¹³⁵ It is precisely the invisible and unmarked characteristics of whiteness that gives it its representational power to act as an absent centre and claim what Dyer calls the "powerful position [...] that of being 'just human.'"¹³⁶ By identifying the ways in which de Galbert emerged as a mythic figure whose representational power stems from his ability to act as the centre of the exhibition, we have uncovered the unmarked characteristics of whiteness rooted in ongoing colonial and imperialist legacies.

In my investigation of the introduction, I also addressed the exhibition layout as a promenade in which visitors experienced the fantasy of seeing others as objects and in return were seen as such. Cheng's theory of ornamentalism has greatly facilitated this journey; ornamentalism "reveals the fundamental logic of abstracted decoration

¹³⁴ Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 151.

¹³⁵ Ibid 157.

¹³⁶ Dyer, *White*, 2.

constituting the category of personhood in the first place.”¹³⁷ Through its display of anthropomorphic headdresses as representations of peoples and cultures, the exhibition as promenade puts tremendous pressure on the dichotomy of subject and object obscuring the boundaries between person and things. Similarly, the Asiatic female figure who emerges from the Timorese headdress also teases out tensions between subject and object, presence and absence, and person and thing. She represents the ways in which flesh persists *as* ornament,¹³⁸ and demonstrates how ornament can extend and animate the body.¹³⁹ She does not merely represent the possibility of object-life, she is object-life.

One exhibition dynamic that I have continuously revisited is the lack of information about the headdresses’ histories and localized contexts in the introduction. Regarding the 1984 MoMA exhibition, Foster argues against a contextualist criticism: “Based on the aesthetic concerns of the modern artists, the “Primitivism” show cannot be condemned on ethnological grounds alone. Too often the contextualist rebuke is facile, a compensatory expression of a liberal-humanist remorse for what cannot be restored.”¹⁴⁰ Foster’s argument highlights a fantasy that museums can fully restore the original contexts and histories of the objects and represent them through neat displays and succinct labels. However, is it possible for the objects themselves to speak of their histories despite the lack of curatorial support from didactic panels and wall texts?

Cheng’s theory of ornamentalism prepares us to explore such questions by challenging us to not view these objects solely through a binary lens of contextualized/decontextualized, present/absent. As Cheng argues: “For mortified racialized flesh, ornamentalism points us to what it might take to reconceptualize

¹³⁷ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 156.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 78.

¹⁴⁰ Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” 52.

personhood for persons who have been undone, challenging us to ask how to make discernible the peripheral, how to work the edges, how to enhance presence in the face of absence.”¹⁴¹ As Cheng demonstrates, it is equally important to acknowledge the potential for alternative life forms to emerge from these decontextualized objects. What does it mean for these objects to be insistently present in the face of absence? How does their very presence and material life disrupt the exhibition? And how can these objects point us towards histories and contexts that have been purposely removed or forgotten from the exhibition’s framework? Finally, in thinking about the headdresses themselves and their decontextualized displays, I am reminded of Cheng’s poignant question; “[c]an the object think or speak as object?”¹⁴² While these research questions prompt further future research on the curatorial strategies used in the rest of the exhibition, I nonetheless outline my initial response to these larger questions.

By placing all the headdresses in one space where visitors can see them clearly, the exhibition layout performs a double gesture. Visitors are presented with a gallery full of distinct headdresses, which they are supposed to identify as a group under the conceptual framework of “the exhibition.” Yet, they are expected to appreciate each object for its singularity. Ultimately, however, what visitors are presented with is a room full of fragmented objects that speak to a multiplicity of time peoples, periods, geographies, and histories. The juxtaposition of visually distinct headdresses intended to highlight the collections’ “diversity”¹⁴³ ruptures the sense of hermetic wholeness the exhibition tries to achieve and draws viewers into intimate, individualized encounters

¹⁴¹ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 156.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 174.

¹⁴³ Musée des Confluences. Press release of the exhibition *Le monde en tête*, 4.

with the headdresses rather than experiencing them as mere parts of their intended groupings.

This tension continues throughout the exhibition as the curation attempts to reconcile the unstable relationship between parts and whole by staging the headdresses as parts of the larger framework of de Galbert's dream. The headdresses appear fleetingly in brief scenes set in a variety of geographical locations including Istanbul, the Yucatan Plateau, Java, Bali, etc. However, the dream itself does not cohesively bring together the headdresses. For the most part, the descriptions of the headdresses in the dream do not match the headdresses on display as we have seen with the Timorese headdress. The headdresses remain frozen in spontaneous sequences disconnected from their descriptions and only related to one another through the categorization as part of a larger narrative, the "dream."

This dynamic between the dreamer and the headdresses parallels that of the collector and the collection. Just as de Galbert uses the dream as a narrative to bring together the headdresses, so too does the collector use storytelling, arrangement, and display as teleological strategies that attempt to bring a disparate array of objects into a self-enclosed whole with which the collector can identify. The end product of both is an illusory whole: the dream and the collection. In the case of de Galbert as both the dreamer and the collector, he draws from the narrative structure of colonial adventure stories to locate connections between the headdresses in both his dream and his initial attraction to the headdresses.

However, rather than looking at this collection solely as another example of "primitive" art collector and anthropological museum's conflation of African, Asian,

Oceanic, and North American Indigenous cultures, we might ask what possibilities this congregation of stranded objects presents? By assembling all these objects into one room, their re-collection does not guarantee a restoration of their histories.¹⁴⁴ Instead, their capacity to reject notions of wholeness and communicate to the “world *as* a fragmented world”¹⁴⁵ makes them effective agents in remapping the exhibition. They disrupt the exhibition’s temporal relationship to the headdresses as collection and donation instead recalling their continued departures and arrivals as they pass through shifting contexts only to arrive at the exhibition.

Nineteenth century art theorist Gottfried Semper helps us to rethink the headdresses as more than Indigenous cultural markers. He referred to bodily adornments as a kind of “portable ecology.”¹⁴⁶ Using the example of a so-called South African “Kaffir chain” assembled from vegetal roots, bird feathers, glass, hair, twigs, and a tobacco pipe, Semper argued that the chain is not a representation of the cosmos but *is* the cosmos because it gathers fragments from different worlds.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, the headdresses in *Le monde en tête* do not represent ecologies, they are these ecologies, and they bring them along as they are transplanted into the exhibition space.

However, it is not only the headdresses which are transplanted in the exhibition space. By displaying the headdresses on round tables that visitors must circle in order to see each headdress, the visitors are also continuously relocated and transplanted.¹⁴⁸ By directing the visitors’ movement, the headdresses become the enigmatic centre of the exhibition that causes the world to orbit around it. They remap the exhibition’s geography

¹⁴⁴ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 80.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Spyros Papapetros, “The legacy of Gottfried Semper’s 1856 lecture on adornment,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 57-8, 2010: 321.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 81.

by uprooting the figure of the collector as the centre of the exhibition. Instead, they captivate audiences pulling them in hypnotic circles around their displays.

Rather than examining the exhibition entirely through the dichotomy of present and absent, we can look at the ways in which the headdresses record loss through their presence. We could say that the headdresses “enact[] and memorialize[] a shoring of fragments as fragments.”¹⁴⁹ They rupture any notion of the exhibition structures as a seamless whole revealing the ambivalence and contradictions requiring constant curatorial editing attempting to usher them under frameworks such as the dream. We can look at this as a de-colonial moment comparable to the ways in which the colonized subject reveals the ambivalence and contradictions of the colonizer. Rather than looking at the exhibition with de Galbert at the seat of the empire, the headdresses draw visitors’ attention to the different parts that make up de Galbert’s concept of the “elsewhere,” and pulls the empire apart into fragments.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 80.

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FIGURES



Figure 1. Timorese Headdress (on upper right hand side). Source: Antoine de Galbert, Gérard Wajcman, and Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter, (eds.), *Voyage dans ma tête: la collection de coiffes ethniques d'Antoine de Galbert*. Lyon: Éditions Fage, 2010: 164.



Figure 2. Musée des Confluences, Antoine de Galbert, n.d., Photo Credits: Denis Vinçon.



Figure 3. Musée des Confluences. Untitled. n.d. (Courtesy of the Musée des Confluences).



Figure 4. Musée des Confluences. Untitled. n.d. (Courtesy of the Musée des Confluences).



Figure 5. Musée des Confluences. Untitled. n.d. (Courtesy of the Musée des Confluences).

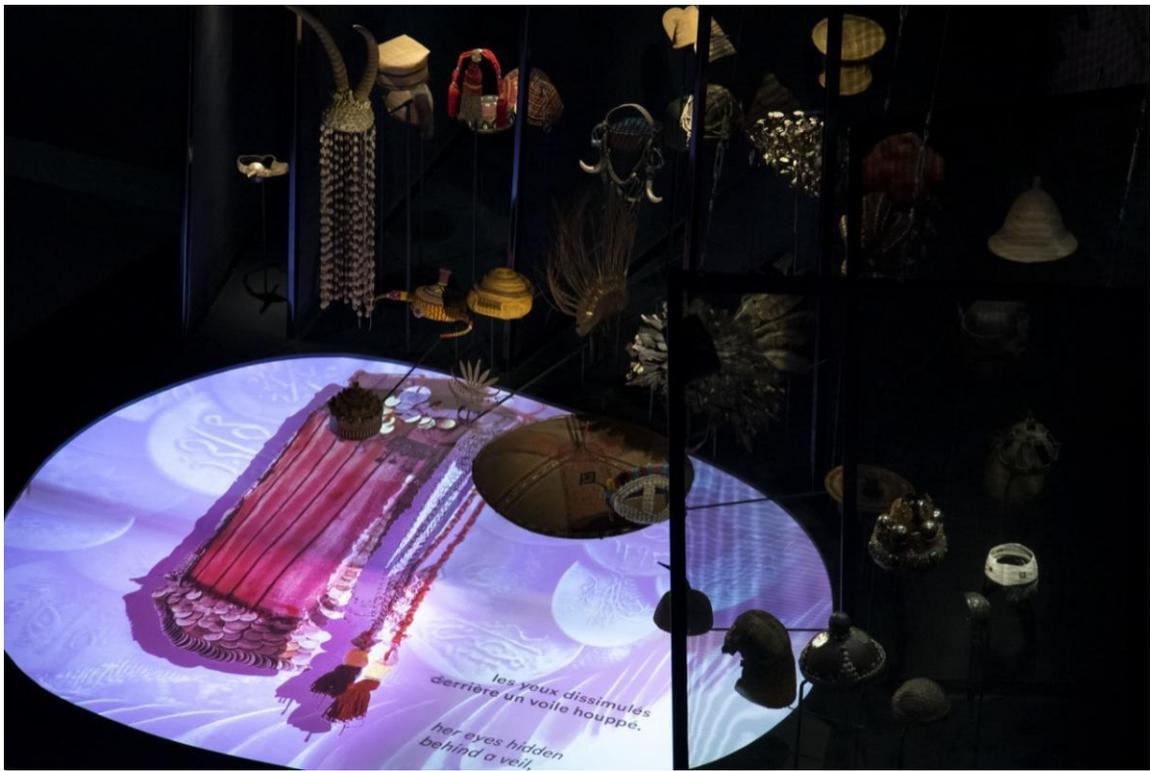


Figure 6. Musée des Confluences. Untitled. n.d. (Courtesy of the Musée des Confluences).



Figure 7. Musée des Confluences. Untitled. n.d. (Courtesy of the Musée des Confluences).



Figure 8. Musée des Confluences. Untitled. n.d. (Courtesy of the Musée des Confluences).



Figure 9. Musée des Confluences. Untitled. n.d. (Courtesy of the Musée des Confluences).



Figure 10. Musée des Confluences. Untitled. n.d. (Courtesy of the Musée des Confluences).