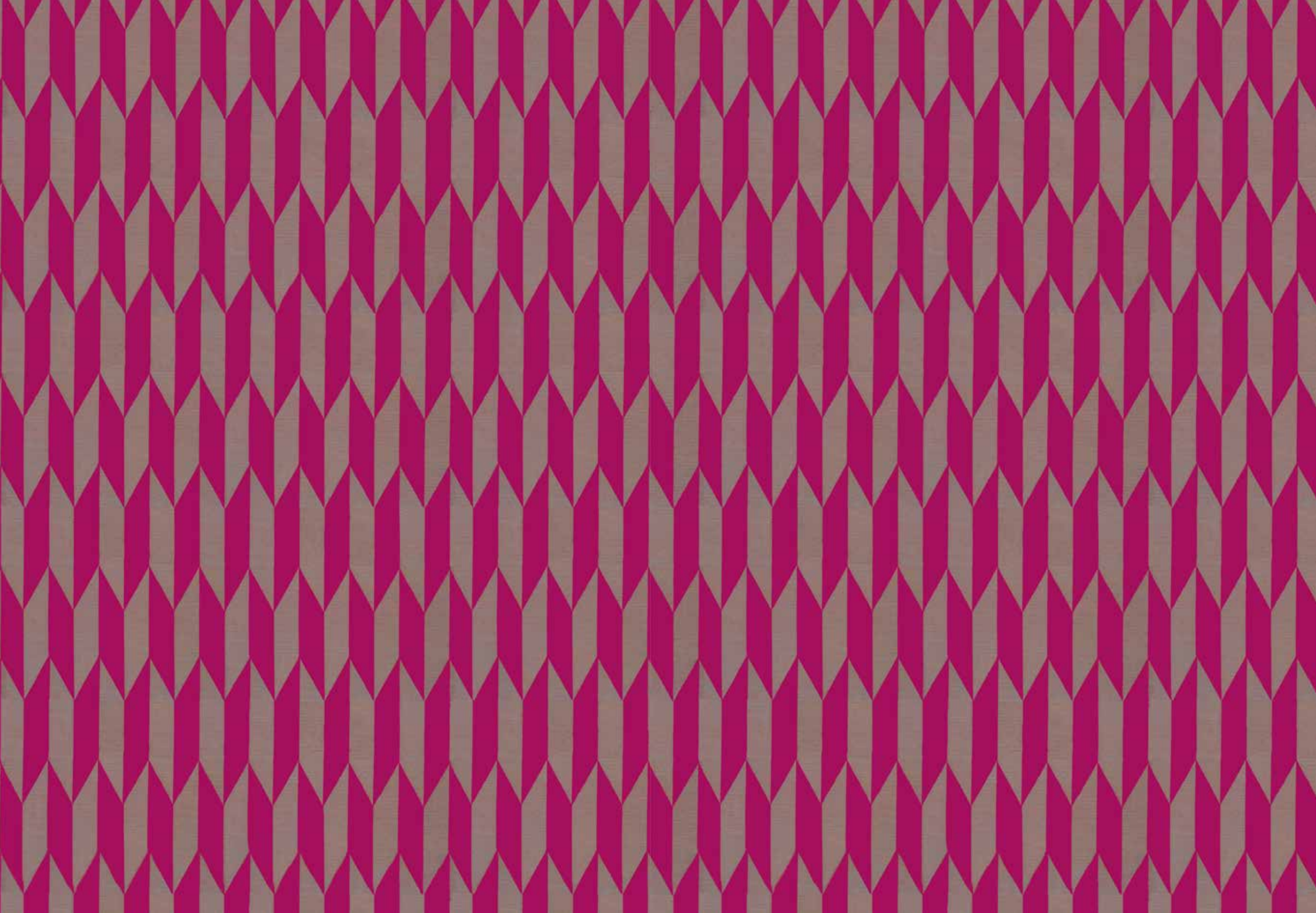


# Losing Venus

MATT SMITH





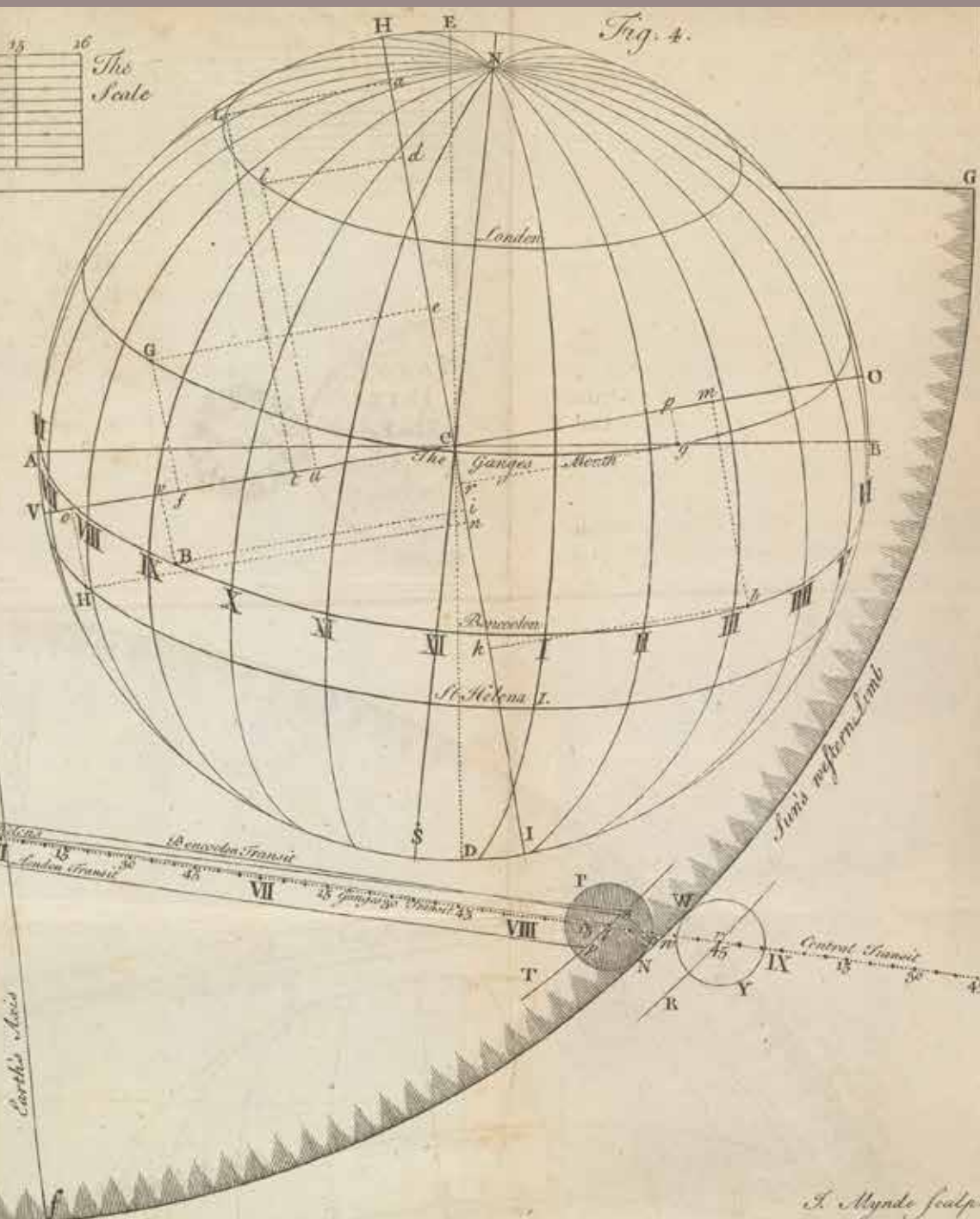
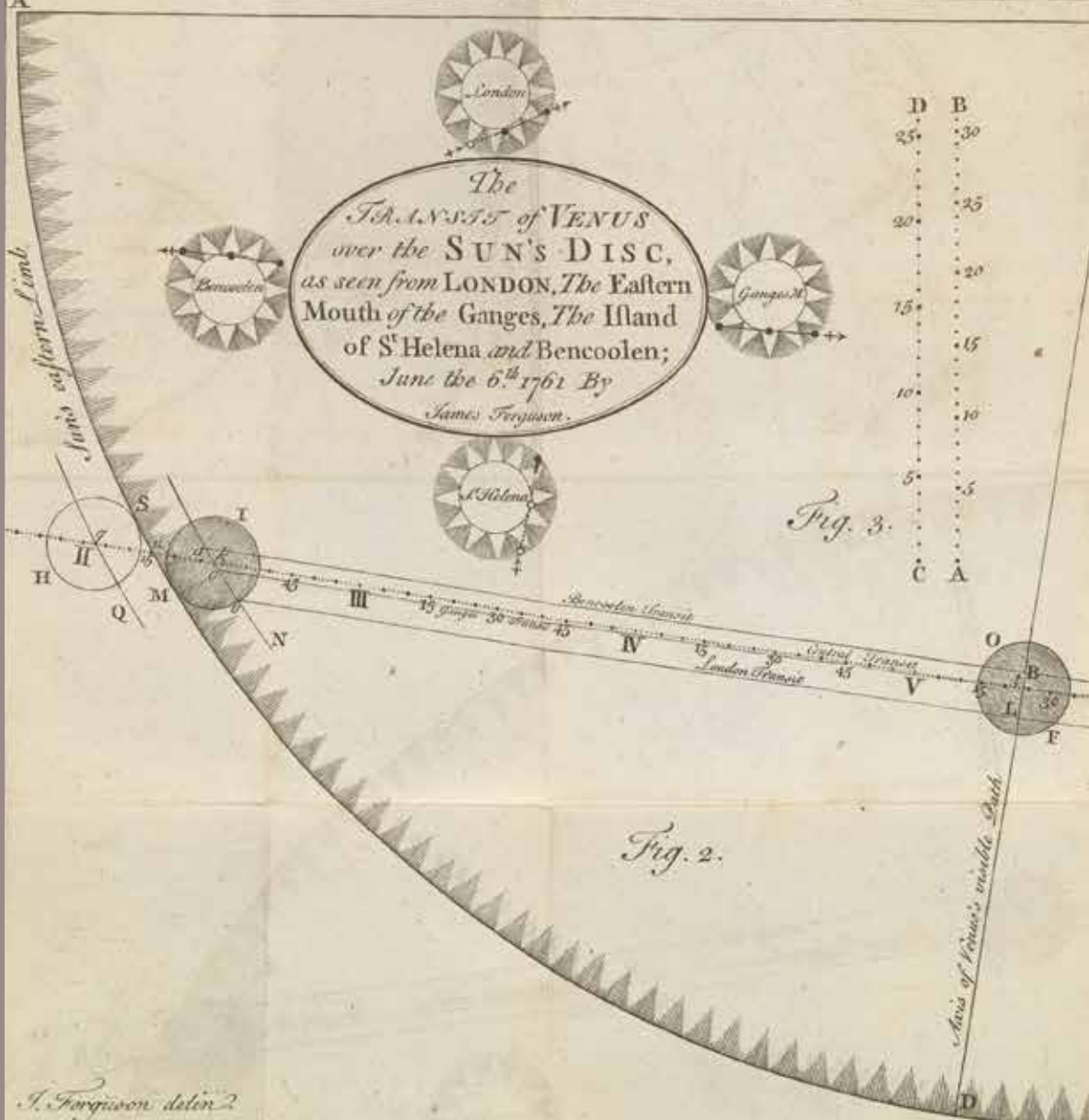


# Losing Venus

MATT SMITH

Published in 2020 to accompany  
the exhibition *Losing Venus* at the Pitt Rivers Museum





J. Ferguson delin<sup>r</sup>

J. Mynde sculp<sup>r</sup>



11	Introduction <i>Laura Van Broekhoven</i>
15	Losing Venus <i>Matt Smith</i>
23	The Dolls
31	Recording the invisible in Matt Smith's photographic re-enactments <i>Cecilia Järdegar</i>
36	The Prints
45	Restoring <i>mana</i> , recovering story <i>Shelley Angelie Saggar</i>
50	The Cook Service









PAKISTAN: SECTION 377

Laura Van Broekhoven  
Director, Pitt Rivers Museum

It is an honour to display the work of Matt Smith, one of the UK's foremost artists to engage with museum spaces through the lens of queerness and colonial entanglements. Finding inspiration in the Pitt Rivers Museum's Victorian-age space, Matt has developed new work including stunning porcelain and mixed media portraits that critically interrogate the iconic aura of the space and collections. As such, the work acts as a critical commentary that interrogates empire's impact on LGBTIQ+ lives and seeks to make queer lives physically manifest within the Museum.

This sort of work is of crucial importance to museums that steward objects that have the ability to tell manifold stories through multiple perspectives but too often have left aspects of queerness and coloniality unaddressed, either through erasures or bias. *Losing Venus* engages not only with what is here, but prominently highlights what is not: the truths untold, the gaps, the silences. The work helps question long-held views of progress and enlightenment that aid exclusion instead of inclusion and "especially where they impact on the ways in which people are allowed to live and love."

A museum matters when it matters to people. And at the Pitt Rivers Museum, we want to matter to as many people as possible and make sure everyone feels welcome. For that to happen, we know we need to make changes to our practices of curation, and principally in the very assemblages that form the Museum's world-famous displays. In the past, certain voices (cis-gendered, white, elite, male) have been prioritised over others. *Losing Venus* subverts, diversifies and challenges our perspectives. As such, it fits seamlessly with the Museum's current strategic plan designed to redress inequity and colonial violence through truth-telling and pluriversality.







TANZANIA: SECTION 377





## Losing Venus

Matt Smith

In 1768, Captain James Cook set sail for the Pacific on the *Endeavour*. For more than 250 years, Europeans had explored the Pacific, but much of it remained unknown to them. Cook's voyage was supported by both the British Admiralty and the Royal Society with the initial aim of recording the transit of the planet Venus — named after the Roman goddess of love — from Tahiti. By observing the passage of Venus between two different points on the Earth's surface, it would be possible to calculate the distance from the Earth to the Sun, and from that, the size of the Solar System.

After recording the transit of Venus, Cook was to open a second set of sealed orders from the Admiralty alone. These instructed him to search for new lands. The journey of discovery to observe the planet of love was thereby altered to become a voyage to claim land and wealth. This voyage would see Cook travel on to New Zealand and the east coast of Australia, famously anchoring on the southern tip. There his crew shot and injured one of the indigenous Gweagal people they met, before sailing up to the northernmost tip of Australia. Here, in the name of George III, Cook 'took possession of the whole Eastern Coast from the above Latitude down to this place by the name of New South Wales.'<sup>1</sup>

In Britain, Cook was seen as a national hero. In Australia and, to a lesser extent in New Zealand, Cook was celebrated in monuments, statues, street names and postage stamps and elevated to the role of founding father.<sup>2</sup> The anniversaries of his landings were commemorated, emphasising the belief that his arrival was the point at which the national story began. This view has been challenged, particularly amongst Aboriginal Australians, who critique the narrative of European 'discovery'.

### The Cook Service

The Cook expeditions were scientific voyages of discovery. The botanist Joseph Banks and the artist John Webber accompanied Cook on his voyages and documented the plants, wildlife and people they encountered, and the land that the explorers claimed.

At the same time as Cook set sail, Josiah Wedgwood was setting up his eponymous ceramics factory. In 1774, Wedgwood completed the Frog Service for Catherine the Great; created in earthenware, it featured views of British buildings and landscapes — conspicuous displays of power, ownership and control over nature.

The Cook Service is the celebratory service that Wedgwood never made, taking landscapes and portraits recorded on the voyages as a starting point.





Jasperware medallion of Captain James Cook, Wedgwood

Wedgwood did however make medallions of Captain Cook in the 1770s, and these continued in production up until the 1970s, a cast from which features on many of the pieces in the dinner service in this exhibition.

Unlike the encounter with the Gweagal people, not all the interactions between Cook's expedition party and indigenous people were violent. In Tahiti, crew members engaged in sexual relationships with women, often in return for European goods; and in New Zealand, local men brought women aboard ship to have sex in return for payment. Cook is quoted as saying:

... such are the consequences of a commerce with Europeans and what is still more to our Shame civilized Christians, we debauch their Morals already too prone to vice and we interduce among them wants and perhaps diseases which they never before knew and which serves only to disturb that happy tranquillity they and their fore Fathers had enjoy'd. If any one denies the truth of this assertion let him tell me what the natives of the whole extent of America have gained by the commerce they have had with Europeans.<sup>3</sup>

On the Cook Service, juxtaposed with images recorded by the Europeans, are images of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. Cook set off to find the planet of love but seems to have been one of the few members of the expedition to remain celibate during the voyages.<sup>4</sup>

Cook's voyages helped establish the British Empire in the Pacific and chart the geography that would guide later European traders, colonisers, missionaries, planters and migrants. This would have a profound impact on sexual expression in the region.

### The Prints

Same-sex love featured in the records of Cook's voyages which recorded the *aikāne* in Hawaii — young men attached to the court who had same-sex sexual, social and political functions<sup>5</sup> and the *'mahu* of Tahiti and Marquesas, young boys who were deliberately brought up to dress and behave as women and as grown men openly practiced transvestism, fellatio and — perhaps — sodomy'.<sup>6</sup> While '... there is no unambiguous evidence that any member of Cook's crew was flogged for sodomy ... two were flogged for "uncleanliness", and the Articles of War, which ostentatiously listed "the unnatural

and detestable sins of buggery and sodomy with man or beast" as a capital offense, were read aboard the ship and on shore on a number of occasions in the course of the voyages."<sup>7</sup>

The expansion of the British Empire which followed Cook's explorations was to severely impact how people would be able to love. From the '1860s onwards, the British Empire spread a specific set of legal codes and common law throughout its colonies ... which specifically criminalized male-to-male sexual relations'<sup>8</sup>, a legacy that lives on today. Of the 72 countries with anti-gay laws in 2018, 'at least 38 of them were once subject to some sort of British colonial rule.'<sup>9</sup>

The Indian Penal Code formed the basis of legislation in many of the countries of the Empire, with section 377 legislating against *unnatural offences*. Fearful that its 'soldiers and colonial administrators — particularly those without wives at hand — would turn to sodomy in these decadent, hot surroundings,' the British Empire drafted the IPC with the intention of both protecting the Christians from 'corruption' as well as correcting and Christianising 'native' custom.<sup>10</sup>

This was particular to Britain. 'Of the great colonial powers of Western Europe — Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain — only Britain left this legacy to its colonies.'<sup>11</sup>

Each of the prints is based on photographs from the collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum. Each photograph was taken in a country where Britain either imposed or maintained homophobic legislation. It has been argued that this legislation was mostly a response to colonial panic about Western behaviour overseas, but the impact on the local population was to change how many societies viewed same-sex love and gender diversity.

While it may be difficult to say whether homosexuality was accepted in pre-colonial societies — and we need to look at regionally or culturally based practice rather than national borders — there are many examples from around the world which challenge the Victorian desire for enforced heteronormativity.

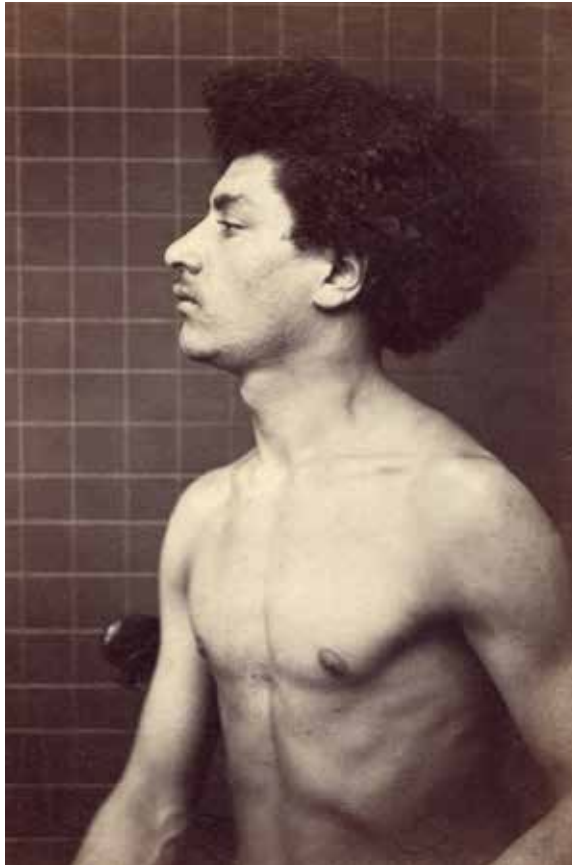
In pre-colonial Africa there were a number of patterns of homosexual relationship which were 'often institutionalized and not uncommon for both males and females before marriage.'<sup>12</sup> The Spanish were 'shocked' by the homosexual acts they witnessed in South America and in pre-modern China, relationships between men were often treated as an intellectual refinement and the general public were indifferent to them.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile in pre-colonial India 'same-sex love and romantic friendships existed without any extended history of overt persecution.'<sup>14</sup>

In England before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, homosexuality was something you did, not a definition of who you were. This started to change so that by the nineteenth century, the 'homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history ... Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality ... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species'<sup>15</sup> and we can see a similar outcome from the implementation of British colonial legislation.

<sup>+</sup> 16

<sup>+</sup> 17





Anthropometric half-length profile of young man from Poland, aged 27, Henry Evans, 1868. 1945.5.97.

The idea of a hetero/homosexual binary is often redundant when looking at pre-colonial societies where for people who performed homosexual acts their sexual orientations were not necessarily their identification<sup>16</sup> — it was something you did, not who you were. Stuart Hall<sup>17</sup> argues that you are only aware of your identity when it is unaligned with those of the people around you — or in this case unaligned with the legislation imposed upon you.

It is all too easy to assume that queerness has no place in the Pitt Rivers Museum, and that looking for queer relevance there is a 21<sup>st</sup> century rereading of the collections. However, the effect of British Victorian heteronormative collectors acquiring objects from countries subject to British homophobic legislation ensured that queer narratives and biographies were unlikely to make it into the museum records.

This intellectual erasure can be seen mirrored in the visual erasure in the prints. Alongside this, the use of geometric backgrounds as foregrounds relates also to the Henry Evans photographic prints in the collection. Based on an anthropometric photographic method developed by John Lamprey, Henry Evans documented naked people against gridded backdrops in the 1860s. While visually comparable with some of Muybridge's photographs which also used gridded backdrops, rather than analysing one body in motion, the photographic technique developed by Lamprey compared diverse bodies in static poses for 'comparative analysis of human variety'.<sup>18</sup> In 1869, Thomas Henry Huxley (in his capacity as President of the Ethnological Society) used a similar system to record human difference which failed 'because of resistance to so brutally dehumanising a scheme in the *realpolitik* of everyday colonial encounter'.<sup>19</sup>

As with the images drawn on the Cook voyages, these photographs try to 'scientifically' document knowledge: recording physical appearance without gathering information about the lives, loves and emotions of the subjects. When searching for photographs to work with, from the many thousands in the archive, I subconsciously tried to unpick this — looking for images which would not only work compositionally, but which also

sparked an emotional response. Unintentionally, four of the seven source images I chose were taken by the same photographer.

The man who took these photographs was travel writer and explorer Wilfred Thesiger (1910–2003). Thesiger spent five decades exploring and documenting Africa and the Arabian peninsula. In his writing, Thesiger describes meeting Salim bin Ghabaisha, a Bedu boy with a 'smooth, pliant body'<sup>20</sup> and 'a face of classic beauty ... which lit up when he smiled, like a pool touched by the sun',<sup>21</sup> likening the encounter to the moment when Hadrian first saw his lover Antinous.<sup>22</sup> Within the museum we often rely solely on written evidence to validate our knowledge, and with histories of homophobia, queer knowledge was seldom recorded or preserved. We are therefore left with 'gay and lesbian history as a repressed archive and the historian as an intrepid archaeologist digging through homophobic erasure to find the truth'.<sup>23</sup> That I was repeatedly drawn to Thesiger's images with no prior knowledge of his biography, lends weight to Robert Mills's assertion that 'our encounters with archives are saturated with desire'<sup>24</sup> and sometimes we should believe that — regardless of the documentation — when we know, we know.

Queer love is just one of the many intimacies that the museum has traditionally disregarded. There are twelve love tokens catalogued in the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum. Each of them is described in detail, for example:

[1923.85.360] Love token ornament of one of a pair of ear studs of abrus seeds and feathers. The ear ornament has seven red abrus seeds in a circle surrounding a cross of yellow orchid stem strips in the centre. Three thin black feathers are stuck between the seeds. The seeds are mounted on a wooden stick with black resin and the stick is bound with black yarn.

None of the entries describe who they were given to, or by whom. While each object is described in detail, the human relationships have been erased. Museums tend to avoid talking about relationships. When objects come in to museums they are usually divorced from their former owners and fitted into the taxonomies of the institution. Certain collectors or curators are remembered, but the personal is sidelined in the pursuit of 'scientific objectivity'. When the physicality of love tokens is recorded but the emotional reason for their being is lost, we should be questioning the mechanics of museums.

This is not new thinking. In a mildly overdramatic turn of phrase, the Egyptologist Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) described museums as "ghastly charnel houses of murdered evidence", alluding to museums' tendency to strip objects from the contexts that gave them meaning'.<sup>25</sup> This stripping away of context and meaning is particularly ubiquitous with queer histories and narratives, either because of intentional homophobic erasure or because the queer resonance of the objects was unknown to the people who collected and catalogued the objects; connections so far outside their morality and understanding as to be unidentifiable. The Pitt Rivers Museum reflected Victorian morality and a colonial point of view — a view that excluded queer ways of being.

+ 18

+ 19



## The Dolls

It is important to recognise and respond to the Pitt Rivers Museum's legacy of Victorian morality, since it not only collects and displays, it also educates, and shapes culture. Within the displays is a case whose label reads: '[a] common use for dolls is to teach children about adult life, roles, and beliefs'. Centuries of heteropatriarchy, from Victorian morals through to Clause 28,<sup>26</sup> have ensured that children have only been taught about certain adult (heteronormative) lives, a view imposed through British colonisation around the world. I was interested in what dolls we might use if we were to teach children about four different experiences of LGBTQ+ adult life around the world.

Historically and geographically other ways of being have been accepted, and sometimes celebrated. From the acceptance of gender diversity in Samoa through to the historic acceptance of same-sex intimacy amongst Samurai, queerness has always been there, whether Europeans were willing to see it or not. Cultures respond and adapt to difference in subtle and nuanced ways. That the number 24 brings with it queer resonance in Brazil requires cultural knowledge and argues for the need to allow those immersed in a culture to interpret their own objects, bypassing a Western European lens.

In several countries, LGBTQ+ people are being imprisoned for loving members of the same sex. Brutally, in September 2011, three men were executed for sodomy in Iran; no doll can prepare a child to learn that this will be their adult life.

## Remapping Venus

While the Pitt Rivers Museum's public reputation is of an institution preserved in amber,<sup>27</sup> the reality is that the Museum has constantly evolved since its inception. Although best known as a world culture or anthropological museum, almost sixty percent of the original founding collection donated by General Pitt Rivers comprised European artefacts.<sup>28</sup> Pitt Rivers had a very specific view of the world, and 'thought his own way of displaying artefacts — by form or type — was of "greater sociological value", enabling the viewer, as he thought, to trace "the succession of ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed from the simple to the complex, and from the homogenous to the heterogeneous"'.<sup>29</sup> In direct contrast to his beliefs, by closing down ways of being through legislation and morality, British Victorians encouraged sexuality and gender to move from the heterogeneous to the homogenous. This has caused immense suffering and persecution, both at home and abroad.

'Curatorship of [anthropological] collections, once a scholarly backwater, has moved into the front line of cultural disputes'<sup>30</sup> and the Pitt Rivers Museum engages in a constant negotiation and dialogue between its collections, visitors and source communities. It is a site of dialogue and exchange, albeit one masquerading as a static Victorian time capsule. This masquerade brings with

it responsibilities — to both respect and address the thing it imitates and to recognise the issues that are associated with it.

That we bring multiple viewpoints to bear on these collections is a positive and overdue change. Work is being done to address the injustices that allowed artefacts from indigenous people to be brought to the West. Possibly our next challenge is to address the legacy of colonial ways of thinking.

It is all too easy in Europe for us to rest on our newfound tolerance and berate countries with less progressive regimes. However, when homosexual activity remains illegal in 34 of the 54 sovereign states of the Commonwealth of Nations (formerly known as the British Commonwealth), it becomes clear that this is a situation for which the British share responsibility. There is certainly an argument that, after exporting homophobic legislation, the British face a unique moral obligation to promote legal change and support queer refugees. We also need to address our part in the systematic epistemicide which erased queer ways of being, and see what we can salvage and learn from cultures which were traditionally more accepting of difference than our own.

- 1 Captain James Cook, quoted in William Frame and Laura Walker, *James Cook, The Voyages* (London: The British Library, 2018), p. 85
- 2 William Frame and Laura Walker, *James Cook, The Voyages* (London: The British Library, 2018), p. 11
- 3 Captain James Cook, quoted in Frame and Walker, *James Cook*, p. 127
- 4 *Ibid*, p. 39
- 5 Robert J. Morris, 'Aikāne: Accounts of Hawaiian Same-Sex Relationships in the Journals of Captain Cook's Third Voyage (1776–80),' *Journal of Homosexuality* Vol. 19, Issue 4 (1990), p. 21-54
- 6 Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003) p. 195
- 7 *Ibid*, p. 177
- 8 Enze Han and Joseph O'Mahoney, *British Colonialism and the Criminalization of Homosexuality: Queens, Crime and Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) p. 3
- 9 *Ibid*, p. 2
- 10 Alok Gupta, *This Alien Legacy: The Origins of 'Sodomy' Laws in British Colonialism* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008) 16, quoted in Han and O'Mahoney, *British Colonialism*, p. 4
- 11 Douglas E. Sanders, '377 and the Unnatural Afterlife of British Colonialism in Asia,' *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* Vol. 4 (2009): 1, quoted in Han and O'Mahoney, *British Colonialism*, p. 4
- 12 Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* (New York: Palgrave, 1998), quoted in Han and O'Mahoney, *British Colonialism*, p. 6
- 13 Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 315-16



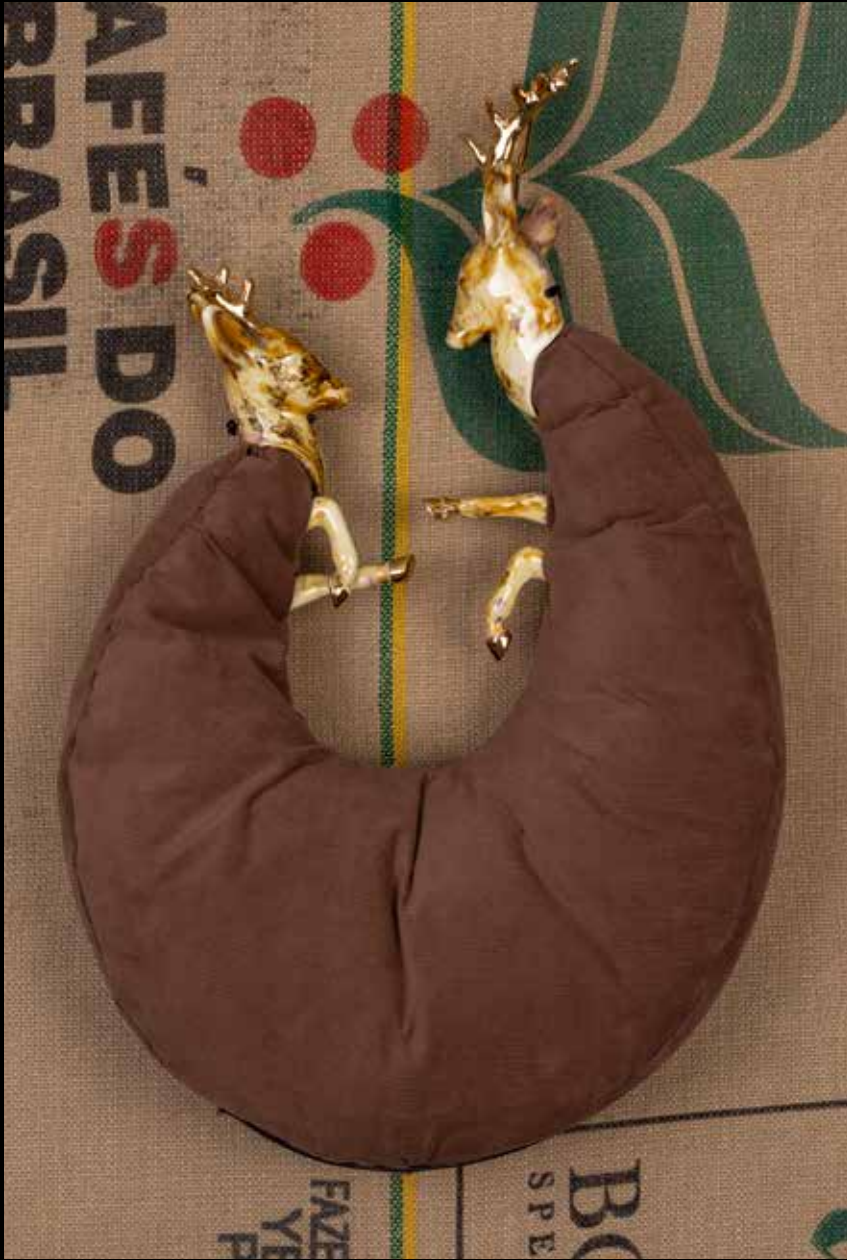
- 14 Ruth Vania, 'Homosexuality in India: Past and Present', *IIAS Newsletter* (1 November 2002), p. 10-11
- 15 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 43
- 16 Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, eds., *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. xx
- 17 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 222-237
- 18 John Falconer and Louise Hide, *Points of View: Capturing the 19th Century in Photographs* (London: British Library, 2009), p. 130
- 19 Elizabeth Edwards, 'Evolving Images: Photography, Race and Popular Darwinism,' *Endless Form: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts*, eds. Diana Donald and Jane Munro (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum; New Haven: Yale Centre for British Art, 2009), p. 190
- 20 Wilfred Thesiger and Alexander Maitland (eds), *My Life and Travels: An Anthology* (Hammersmith: Flamingo, 2003), p.139
- 21 *Ibid*, p.139
- 22 *Ibid*, p.139
- 23 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 147-148
- 24 Robert Mills, 'Queer is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture,' *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums* ed. Amy K. Levin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 86
- 25 Michael O'Hanlon, *The Pitt Rivers Museum: A World Within* (London: Scala, 2014), p. 116
- 26 Clause 28/Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 stated that a local authority 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. It was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in the rest of the United Kingdom in 2003.
- 27 Michael O'Hanlon, foreword, *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum 1884-1945*, Chris Gosden and Frances Larson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. xvii
- 28 O'Hanlon, *The Pitt Rivers Museum*, p. 158
- 29 *Ibid*, p. 35
- 30 *Ibid*, p. 133

+ 22



+ 23





In Brazil, the word deer - veado - is commonly used as a slang term to insult gay men. Its association is so strong that because the number 24 represents the deer in a popular Brazilian numbers game, many football teams and players, to avoid abuse or innuendo, refuse to use the number 24 shirt.



Sexual relationships between male Samurai were common in Japan, and documented from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. *Wakashudo* involved adult men and adolescent boys having relationships. These often moved into platonic relationships when the youths came of age; and did not prevent the Samurai from marrying women.





There are still 72 countries that criminalise homosexual relations. In Uganda it can lead to life imprisonment and in Iran gay men are routinely executed for consensual sex. When this is what happens should you fall in love, no doll can adequately prepare you for adulthood.



In Samoan culture, there is a third gender — fa'afafine. Traditionally, families without female children would sometimes choose a male child to take on female duties and raise them as if they were female. Today, being a fa'afafine is usually the choice of the child and often linked to homosexuality.





CYPRUS: SECTION 171





## Recording the invisible in Matt Smith's photographic re-enactments *Cecilia Järde mar*

*What is no longer there performs upon us and we perform upon it.  
It bereaves us and we bereave it.*

Carol Mavor<sup>1</sup>

Two large, colourful, semi-translucent banners are suspended in the cathedral-like main space of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Human figures, photographed at half-length, bring the classical conventions of anthropological photography to mind. But where we would expect to see skin, a face, eyes that look back at us, and perhaps fragments of a landscape giving clues to the location of the photograph, the image is erased and replaced by generic colourful patterns, leaving only clothing and artefacts still visible.

At first glance there is a consistency between the museum display and the images, as display cases filled with utensils, clothing and other artefacts line the walls and fill the floor space of the large exhibition hall. We know that the material heritage present in the museum was once elsewhere, that the objects we are looking at, were once made by someone, perhaps used by somebody. But seeing the characters erased so brutally, so definitely, from artist Matt Smith's images, makes the human absence in the museum more present, more pressing.

The starting point of Smith's work is the vast photographic archives of the Pitt Rivers Museum, where viewers are invited to encounter the world, as collected by British anthropologists, travellers, explorers and various others. After the rapid spread of photographic techniques in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the camera soon became an inherent part of the construction of empire, with its ability to collect and construct the world. Portraits of colonised people cast them in subordinate and stereotypical roles as ethnographic objects of study. This helped to underpin beliefs in European superiority.<sup>2,3</sup> Visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that 'the right to look without being looked at' defines colonial order,<sup>4</sup> and these dynamics are still at play when we enter the ethnographic museum today — 'that utopian site for the collection of the world'.<sup>5</sup>

The suspended images return again, this time as part of a framed series of screenprints, all using the same technique of erasure, but now with text underneath: Tanzania, Section 377; Cyprus, Section 171; Kenya, Article 162. The photographs that form the basis of Smith's series were captured between 1864 and 1981, but have remained largely unchanged in the way that the depicted persons posed for the camera. As a matter of fact, none



of the authors of the original images used by Smith defined themselves as photographers. The most prolific, Wilfred Thesiger<sup>6</sup>, who left approximately 38,000 negatives to the museum archive, and who photographed four of the seven re-imagined images shown here, stated that for him, 'Photography was ... merely a tool for recording the reality of his own experience.'<sup>7</sup>

This echoes what Smith says about his encounter with Thesiger's images: rather than seeing the subjects that once faced Thesiger, he sees instead faces reflecting Thesiger's own expectations and desires.<sup>8</sup> So, in Smith's radical act of removal, is he in fact erasing Thesiger and the other male European scientists? And if the face is the principal tool of communication between humans — a 'membrane of encounter'<sup>9</sup> of the self and the other and the world — what is it that Smith obscures from view by removing this membrane, this skin that envelops us and shapes so much of how we are seen in the world? To leave only the material objects worn and used by the subjects — clothes, jewellery, the odd tool — is to leave a comment on what traces are retained from individual lives in the museum, and the role of material objects in establishing those traces.

Smith is an artist preoccupied with objects. He is concerned with museums, collections; with what they try to tell us about the world that surrounds us, and about ourselves. His work inscribes itself into postcolonial memory practice, using archival techniques to reanimate eradicated histories. It shows us new ways to conceive both of our past and of our present. Ariella Azoulay writes that 'traces of the constituent violence preserved in the archive can either be preserved untouched, preserving the law of the archive, or be reconfigured and re-conceptualised through a new grid, whose consequences affect the way one is governed, as well as the ways one shares the world with others.'<sup>10</sup> By juxtaposing portraits of subjects in former British colonies with a set of legal codes criminalising male-to-male gay sexual relations, Smith asks us to consider links between the contemporary discrimination of LGBTQ lives and the British Empire, responsible for disseminating these laws from the 1860s onwards. The works therefore consider how museum collections can be seen and re-seen — looking, then erasing, as opposed to the original photographer's act of looking and recording. In this way, Smith creates an echo of the erasure of LGBTQ lives, questioning past and ongoing injustices.

Over the last few decades we have seen how missing stories can begin to emerge from the colonial photographic archive. Historians of photography Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton, call this process photography's 'random inclusiveness,'<sup>11</sup> meaning that the contents of images can never be controlled to such a degree that reinterpretation becomes impossible. But Smith is more interested in the invisible absences of the archive, where the epistemic violence underpinning the collections has erased ways of life and individual subjectivities. Krista Thompson, when writing about the work of artist Alexa Chung, who similarly removes human figures from colonial archival photographs, argues that 'we might and should read absences in images for what they make present.'<sup>12</sup> She implores us to consider what removing certain figures in photographic images tells us about the knowledge we are

able to glean from the photographic archive, and the knowledge we cannot find there. What has been obscured in the creation of the photographic archive, and by extension, the creation of the ethnographic museum?

Through the radical act of removing both the photographed person and the landscape behind them, Smith forces us to reconsider not only the ethnographic photographic archive but also the collection of artefacts and clothing displayed in the vitrines lining the walls and filling the floors of the exhibition hall. Making the absence explicit, this forces us to question our own role within the museum, and how it has taught us to conceive of the world around us. Andreas Huyssen speaks of 'our complicity and responsibility to at least remember'<sup>13</sup> but Smith is not only asking us to remember — he is asking us to consider the implications of British imperial rule for the lives of all of those who suffer sexual discrimination today. What does a country need to do to make amends?

- 1 Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 4
- 2 Ferdinand de Jong, 'At work in the archive: introduction to special issue', *World Art Vol 6, Issue 1* (2016), p. 3–17
- 3 Christopher Morton, 'Photography, anthropology of', *International Encyclopaedia of Anthropology: Anthropology Beyond Text*, ed. H. Callan (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018)
- 4 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The right to look. A counterhistory of visibility*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 107
- 5 de Jong (2016), p. 5
- 6 Thesiger, described by the Pitt Rivers website as 'probably the greatest traveler of the 20<sup>th</sup> century', wrote a series of books describing his travels in Africa and the Middle East. 5 March 2020. <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/thesiger/>
- 7 Sholto Byrnes, 'Wilfred Thesiger in Africa', *New Statesman*, 12 July 2010. 8 April 2020. <https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/07/wilfred-thesiger-british>
- 8 Conversation with Matt Smith, 20 March 2020
- 9 Anne Krauter, 'Pictures Many – Original (N)one? Aspects of the Portrait Today,' *Abbild: Recent Portraiture and Depiction*, ed. Peter Pakesch (New York: Springer, 2001), p. 17
- 10 Ariella Azoulay, 'Archive,' *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* (Online: 2012). 8 April 2020. <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/issue1/archive/>
- 11 Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton, 'Introduction. Between art and Information: towards a collecting history of photographs,' *Photographs, Museums, Collections: Between Art and Information* eds. Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2015), p. 10
- 12 Krista Thompson, 'The Evidence of Things Not Photographed: Slavery and Historical Memory in the British West Indies', *Representations Vol 113, No 1* (2011), p. 55
- 13 International Conference, *Memory, Archive, Document*, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018





KENYA: ARTICLE 162





KENYA: ARTICLE 162



PAKISTAN: SECTION 377



TANZANIA: SECTION 377



BAHRAIN: ARTICLE 171





BHUTAN: ARTICLE 213



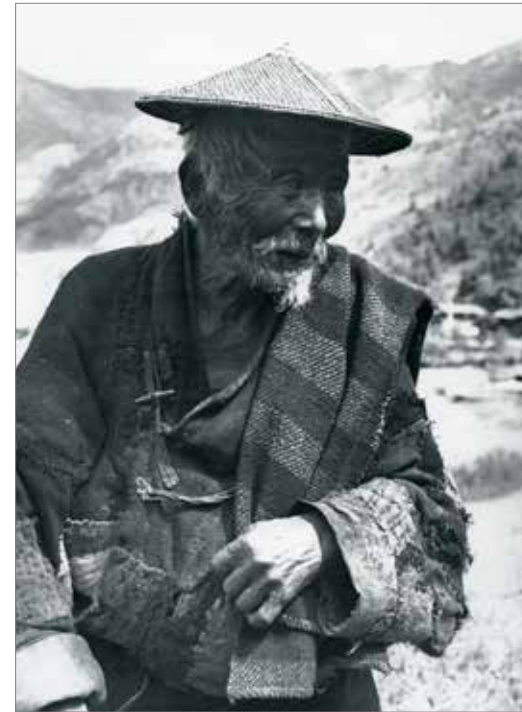
S. AFRICA: VENUS MONSTROSA



CYPRUS: SECTION 171

Each screenprinted on handmade,  
Indian, Khadi cotton rag paper  
74cm x 54cm  
Editions of 20





*Top row left to right:*

Portrait of Lawi's wife, Kenya, Wilfred Thesiger, 1981. 2004.130.26033.1

Portrait of a young man, Pakistan, Wilfred Thesiger, 1953. 2004.130.7382.1

Man wearing conical bamboo hat and patched clothing, Bhutan, George Sheriff, c.1949. 2002.75.3.87

Portrait of Rosalie Schlinger, Gustav Theodor Fritsch, South Africa, 1864. 1998.307.97

*Bottom row left to right:*

Portrait of an Endo man, Tanzania, Wilfred Thesiger, 1963. 2004.130.1922.1

Sheikh Mubarak bin Muhammad, Wilfred Thesiger, Bahrain, 1948. 2004.130.17348.1

Portrait of a boy, Leonard Halford Dudley Buxton, Cyprus, c.1913. 2004.135.1.142





S. AFRICA: VENUS MONSTROSA



## Restoring *mana*, recovering story

Shelley Angelie Saggar

Contestations over how the story of the past is told and who owns it, characterise our current cultural debates, with museums often at the centre of these public discussions. As hosts of history, museum collections bear witness to stories of human endeavour, but also to those of conquest, violence and dispossession. Practices of research and curation are, of course, not neutral, and the stories attached to displayed objects echo with inherited assumptions as well as facts. Furthermore, traditional curatorial models reduce collected items to artistic or ethnographic examples. This creates an academic distance that struggles to find space for these items to be understood as ancestors, spiritual beings and utilitarian objects. This essay will argue that these models of heritage practice have limited utility, even when critical methods are applied.

Through a case study, I will consider what it means for a museum to embark on the material and metaphorical work of healing the wounds of (post)colonial history. This study will discuss a plaster cast of the face of a Māori man, on display in *Medicine Man*, a permanent exhibition at Wellcome Collection.

Henry Wellcome is remembered as the founding father of the Wellcome Trust, a major research funder across the health sciences and the medical humanities. A pharmacist by training, Wellcome had a canny instinct for creative marketing and made his fortune through patenting the tabloid, a form of medication that heralded the modernisation of western pharmaceutical practice. Wellcome also lends his name to Wellcome Collection, a museum and library whose mission seeks to 'challenge how we all think and feel about health.' Although he was in some ways a fairly typical 19th-century collector of curios, Wellcome's vision was to tell an expansive story of humankind's approach to healthcare through artefacts. In his mind, this took the form of a teleological narrative starting from the Hall of Primitive Medicine right up to the most mechanised remedial technologies of the day. Whilst to us this curatorial methodology is clearly limited, in his own time, Wellcome was considered something of a radical, determined as he was to incorporate extra-European healing practices into the wider narrative of the development of medicine. Whilst Wellcome Collection today houses some of the items originally collected by its founder, Henry Wellcome's significance as a collector has largely been eclipsed by the success of the Trust.







Face cast of Te Taupua, catalogued on the Wellcome Collection website as follows: "Plaster cast of the face of Tauque Te Whanoa, a Rotorua native, of the Arawa tribe showing Maori tattooing, 'Moko', performed with a serrated chisel and mallet with soot rubbed into the open wound to provide colouring."

This essay seeks to reveal hidden histories of colonial violence, Indigenous agency and possibilities for reconnection and reconciliation through items that remain in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum collection today. These items are housed at the Science Museum on a long-term loan. In my research practice, I have sought to focus on items that, although they may not hold religious or societal patrimony, were acquired in a colonial context, and are therefore made sensitive by virtue of their removal from source communities and the power they hold as potential points of engagement in postcolonial cultural revitalisation efforts. In so

doing, I have found ways that the items themselves can tell more nuanced stories about the practice of healing, the history of collecting and the means of restoring narratives of agency to those who have historically been cast as 'the collected'.

I'll now outline my case study of a plaster cast life mask of a Māori man named Te Taupua. I will argue that postcolonial methods offer potential for museums to host and hold conversations around healing contested histories.

This cast, which is currently on display in Wellcome Collection's permanent exhibition *Medicine Man*, professes simply to be a 'plaster cast of a man from the Arawa tribe, showing facial tattooing'. This rather reductive descriptor removes any sense of personhood, relational belonging or historical journey, leaving the item difficult to interpret as anything other than a colonial curio. The cast is displayed next to a piece of tattooed human skin from a French sailor; which points to the stories of both sacred and decorative tattooing as an artform, as body modification practice, and as a marker of identity. The fact that the tattooed skin comes from a French sailor, also signals the colonial encounter – with European sailors fascinated by the varied and vibrant practices of tattooing that they encountered in the South Pacific. This insight into the early European fascination with Pasifika tattooing gives us a clue as to how the plaster cast of the 'man from the Arawa tribe' made its way into Wellcome's collection.

+ 46

Life masks of Māori peoples in museum collections have a troubling history that I want to unpack in my profile of this item. Although this copy cast appears to have been cast from a living person, many of the plaster casts held in museums and private collections are directly related to the violent trade in *mokomokai*. *Mokomokai* are the preserved heads of Māori peoples, and served various purposes in Māori society, from a practice observed to honour ancestors to a procedure for treating vanquished enemies. *Mokomokai* were first introduced to British collections in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As the story goes, it was Joseph Banks – the celebrated naturalist whose vision cemented Kew Gardens' reputation as the premier botanical science collection in the world – who purchased the first recorded *mokomokai* in 1770. Whereas institutions often use language that obscures the power imbalances and violence of colonialism, Frances Larson, in her work on the cultural history of severed heads, points to the method Banks used when he tried to acquire a *mokomokai* from an elderly man. When the man resisted, Banks forced him at musket-point to relinquish the artefact.<sup>1</sup> Banks's combination of fear and fascination reflected an attitude that went on to ripple through European markets. Excitement over the heads as curiosities, drove the market for them. In a particularly gruesome account of British colonial manipulation, at the height of the Land Wars, the price allegedly rose to two *mokomokai* in exchange for one musket. The Land Wars lasted from 1845–1872 and led to the deaths of several thousand, most of whom were Māori. As the demand for *mokomokai* (and plaster cast copies of them) as tradable items grew, *ta moko* (the facial tattooing which the original label describes) was applied post mortem, often to the remains of enslaved people. This was done in order to spare loved ones from being bought, trafficked and potentially displayed in this way.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst the relationship between life masks and *mokomokai* is crucial to understanding why life masks and their cast copies are today held in museums such as Wellcome Collection, this plaster cast copy (SMG object number: A642970) actually reveals a story of Indigenous agency, colonial navigation and 18<sup>th</sup>-century cosmopolitanism that is often obscured by the pressure for museums to be more honest in their acknowledgement of colonial power relations. This pressure is correct in identifying the deliberate obfuscations of major collections but it is equally important for museums to recognise the complex set of relations that characterise colonialism. They need to be attentive to the spaces of agency and navigation carved out by Indigenous peoples within the context of invasion, and militarised and administrative rule. Wellcome's cast is a copy of the original life mask given to the British Museum by Governor Sir George Grey. The plaster cast represents Te Taupua, not 'Tauque Te Whanoa' as the website currently states. Te Taupua was the eldest son of Te Whanoa and a descendant of Pukaki of Ngati Whakaeu, Rotorua. Te Arawa, the 'Arawa tribe' which the original description names, is a confederation of iwi and hapu (tribes and subtribes) in the Rotorua region, and although this term is used by some, more can be done to restore Te Taupua's particular relational affiliations and potentially connect with his descendants. A research enquiry made to Te Papa Tongarewa (the national

+ 47



museum of Aotearoa/New Zealand) confirms the genealogy and has provided further information. According to this, Te Taupua was a renowned carver who lived in Ohinemutu and met with Sir George Grey in late December 1849 at Te Ngae (Bay of Plenty). He was persuaded to have his tattooed face cast and had no issue with the cast being taken.<sup>3</sup> Sadiah Qureshi, in her 2011 study, *Peoples on Parade*, incisively challenges preconceptions of colonial power dynamics in order to recover instances of agency, navigation and assertiveness on the part of displayed peoples who were brought to the UK to be exhibited to paying customers. As Qureshi states: '[e]ven within the confines of evidently restrictive situations, displayed peoples created ways to maintain their agency'.<sup>4</sup> Te Taupua, in his hybrid status as an historical figure and displayed representation, certainly strategised in order to exercise his agency. This item points to the complicated entanglements of colonial history but crucially, restores the agency of Te Taupua in consenting to have his likeness transported to the other side of the world. With this information, we can read Te Taupua as a cosmopolitan traveller, rather than what Qureshi would term a 'displayed person', as is often the rather troubling case with Māori life masks. In this way, we can restore Te Taupua's *mana*, or earned prestige and power, to the object on display. By telling the full story, an inanimate representation becomes revitalised with *mauri* or 'life force', thus demonstrating how curation guided by Indigenous principles can create more honest and engaging collection stories.

#### Conclusion: Decolonisation is also a metaphor

In their article 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', critical race theorists Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang insist that the term 'decolonisation', which has become ubiquitous in everything from medicine and museums, should remain focused on the central reparation of Indigenous lands and lifeways. Whilst I concur with Tuck and Yang's argument, I want to consider the particular responsibilities of the UK context in which we are working – a context not covered by Tuck and Yang's piece, which necessarily focuses on the specificity of the U.S. settler state. For Tuck and Yang, metaphorisation is defined by the invocation of decolonisation as an 'empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation'.<sup>5</sup> The idea of decolonisation as an empty signifier is neatly encapsulated in diversity initiatives, which range from corporate recruitment strategies to creative and thoughtful interventions that seek to make curriculums and exhibitions more representative and inclusive. However, Tuck and Yang would argue that whilst progressive in nature, these initiatives are not part of the project of 'decolonisation', which, at its core, centres on the restoration of Indigenous lands and lifeways. The absence of material action renders these kinds of initiatives moot, as they fail to address the core problem of settler colonialism – that of sovereignty. However, there are metaphorical questions around memorialisation, monuments and museums that we must also contend with if we are to rigorously address the post-imperial condition we have inherited, particularly in the United Kingdom. In considering the place of museums, I would contend that these institutions are uniquely placed to address *both* the material *and* metaphorical questions thrown up by discourses of

'decolonisation'. In being attentive to the kinds of inherited narratives our exhibitions, catalogue records and communications convey, museums can productively engage with their institutional histories, whilst spearheading efforts towards becoming more inclusive. Simultaneously, whilst the restoration of Indigenous land is something UK museums are necessarily distanced from, the restoration of lifeways is something we can certainly address. Whether through reconnection initiatives aimed at collaborating equitably with source communities or through the return of cultural heritage, there are myriad ways in which museums can avoid the metaphorisation of decolonisation in favour of more transformative methods. And as the decolonisation debate evolves to take on more nuanced interpretations and applications in terms of how we think about our history and current practices, the understanding of material, as well as metaphoric invocations, will become ubiquitous, as museums grasp them fully and humbly.

- 1 Frances Larson, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* (New York: Liveright Corporation, 2014), p. 14
- 2 Horatio Robley, 'Tradition, History and Incidents' in *Moko or Māori Tattooing*, (London and Bungay: Richard Clay and Sons Ltd, 1896), p. 139
- 3 I am especially grateful to Dougal Austin, Acting Senior Curator of Māori taonga at Te Papa and Paul Tapsell, descendent of Pukaki, for sharing this information with me and assisting me with my research enquiries.
- 4 Sadiah Qureshi, 'Metropolitan Encounters', in *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 135
- 5 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1, (1), 2012, p. 7









































BHUTAN: ARTICLE 213



# Matt Smith

Professor at Konstfack University, Stockholm and Fellow of the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester.



+ 75

## EDUCATION

2010–2015  
AHRC-funded PhD, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Art's use of Craft to signify LGBT identities*, University of Brighton

2005–2006  
BA Hons, Ceramics, University of Westminster

2002–2005  
Dip HE, Fine and Applied Arts, City Lit

1996–1998  
MA, Museum Studies, University of Leicester

1989–1993  
BSc Hons, Business Studies, Aston University

## EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED) SOLO

2020 *Losing Venus*, Pitt Rivers Museum

2018 *Flux: Parian Unpacked*, Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge

2015 *Trouble with History*, Ink-d Gallery

2012 *Other Stories*, Leeds University Art Collection

2010 *Queering the Museum*, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

2010 *Milk*, ASPEX Gallery

## EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED) GROUP

2021 *For the Love of the Master: Piranesi*, Dublin Castle

2020 *Maker's Eye*, Crafts Council Gallery, London

2019 *Cultural Icons*, The Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent

2019 *Fabrik*, Gustavsberg Konsthall, Stockholm

2017 *This World is Chaos*, Hanbury Hall Commission, National Trust

2015 *Nature Morte*, Guildhall Art Gallery, and international tour

2014 *A Place at the Table*, Pallant House Gallery

2014 *Reclaim/Repurpose*, CultureCraft, Derry

2014 *Unravelling Uppark*, Uppark House, The National Trust

2013–14 *Subversive Design*, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery

2013 *Unravelling the Vyne*, The Vyne, National Trust

2012 *Unravelling Nymans*, Nymans House, National Trust

2010 *DIY a Craft Revolution*, Society for Contemporary Craft, Pittsburgh

2010 *Unravelling the Manor House*, Preston Manor

**SELECTED AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES**

- 2020 Brookfield Properties Crafts Council Award
- 2018 Object of the Show at *Collect*, selected by Ekow Eshun
- 2016 Artist in Residence, Victoria and Albert Museum
- 2016 Commission, Hanbury Hall, National Trust
- 2014 Winner of Young Masters Ceramics Prize
- 2011 Arts Council England Grant for *Unravelling*: three-year funding for craft interventions at National Trust Properties

**BIBLIOGRAPHY AND CATALOGUES (SELECTED)**

- 2020 *Fabrik*, Gustavsberg Konsthall
- 2018 *Flux: Parian Unpacked*, Fitzwilliam Museum  
*Prejudice and Pride*, RCMG — The University of Leicester  
*Sexuality and Gender at Home*, Bloomsbury  
'Disobedient Curating', *Art Journal*
- 2016 *Contemporary Clay and Museum Practice*, Routledge  
*The Ceramics Reader*, Bloomsbury
- 2015 *Institutional Critique: Artists, museums, ethics*, Routledge

- 2014 *Reclaim/Repurpose*, CultureCraft  
*Unravelling Uppark*, Unravelling Arts
- 2013 *Unravelling the Vyne*, Unravelling Arts  
*Nature Morte*, Thames and Hudson
- 2012 *Unravelling Nymans*, Unravelling Arts  
*Other Stories*, Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery
- 2010 *Unravelling the Manor House*, Unravelling Arts  
*Queering the Museum*, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

**PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

- Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (funded by the Art Fund and the Contemporary Art Society)  
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery  
Brighton and Hove Museum and Art Gallery  
Crafts Council Collection

**MEMBERSHIP**

- Honorary Visiting Fellow, School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester  
Associate member of the Royal Society of Sculptors







BAHRAIN: ARTICLE 171



Published in 2020 to accompany the exhibition

## LOSING VENUS

at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 4 March – 29 November 2020

Design: Oonagh Young, Design HQ

Photography: William Pearce except where indicated

### Acknowledgements

Catalogue made possible by the generosity of Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm, Sweden.

Thanks go to the staff at the Pitt Rivers Museum, and in particular to Andrew McLellan, Zozie Kettle, Christopher Morton, Philip Grover and Adrian Vizor. Thanks also to Whistleblower Gallery and Tin Dogs Fine Art, for the production of the screenprints. I would also like to thank Mark Beswick at the Meteorological Library and Archive for his help with sourcing illustrations from the *Atlas to accompany Captain James Cook's account of his voyages to the Pacific Ocean in the years 1776–1780*.

ISBN: 978-1-9163865-0-1

Matt Smith is represented by Cynthia Corbett Gallery  
[www.mattjsmith.com](http://www.mattjsmith.com)

© Matt Smith unless otherwise stated

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the copyright owners and of the publisher.

### Picture Credits

#### Front Cover

The Medici Venus, engraving by F. Piranesi, 1781, after T. Piroli. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

Astronomy explained upon Sir Isaac Newton's principles. And made easy to those who have not studied mathematics / To which are added, a plain method of finding the distances of all the planets from the sun, by the transit of Venus over the sun's disc, in the year 1761. An account of Mr. Horrox's observation of the transit of Venus in the year 1639; and, of the distances of all the planets from the sun, as deduced from observations of the transit in the year 1761. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

#### Opposite half title page

Illustration from the *Atlas to accompany Captain James Cook's account of his voyages to the Pacific Ocean in the years 1776–1780*. Information provided by the National Meteorological Library and Archive — Met Office, UK.

#### Pages 2 & 3

Astronomy explained upon Sir Isaac Newton's principles. And made easy to those who have not studied mathematics / To which are added, a plain method of finding the distances of all the planets from the sun, by the transit of Venus over the sun's disc, in the year 1761. An account of Mr. Horrox's observation of the transit of Venus in the year 1639; and, of the distances of all the planets from the sun, as deduced from observations of the transit in the year 1761. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

#### Page 18

Anthropometric profile © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

#### Pages 40 & 41

All images © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

#### Page 44

© Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

#### Page 46

Plaster cast, man of the Arawa tribe showing Maori tattooing. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

#### Page 80

© Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

#### Back Cover

Originally published as part of *Observations Made, by Appointment of the Royal Society, at King George's Island in the South Sea*; by Mr. Charles Green, Formerly Assistant at the Royal Observatory at Greenwich and Lieut. James Cook, of His Majesty's Ship the Endeavour.

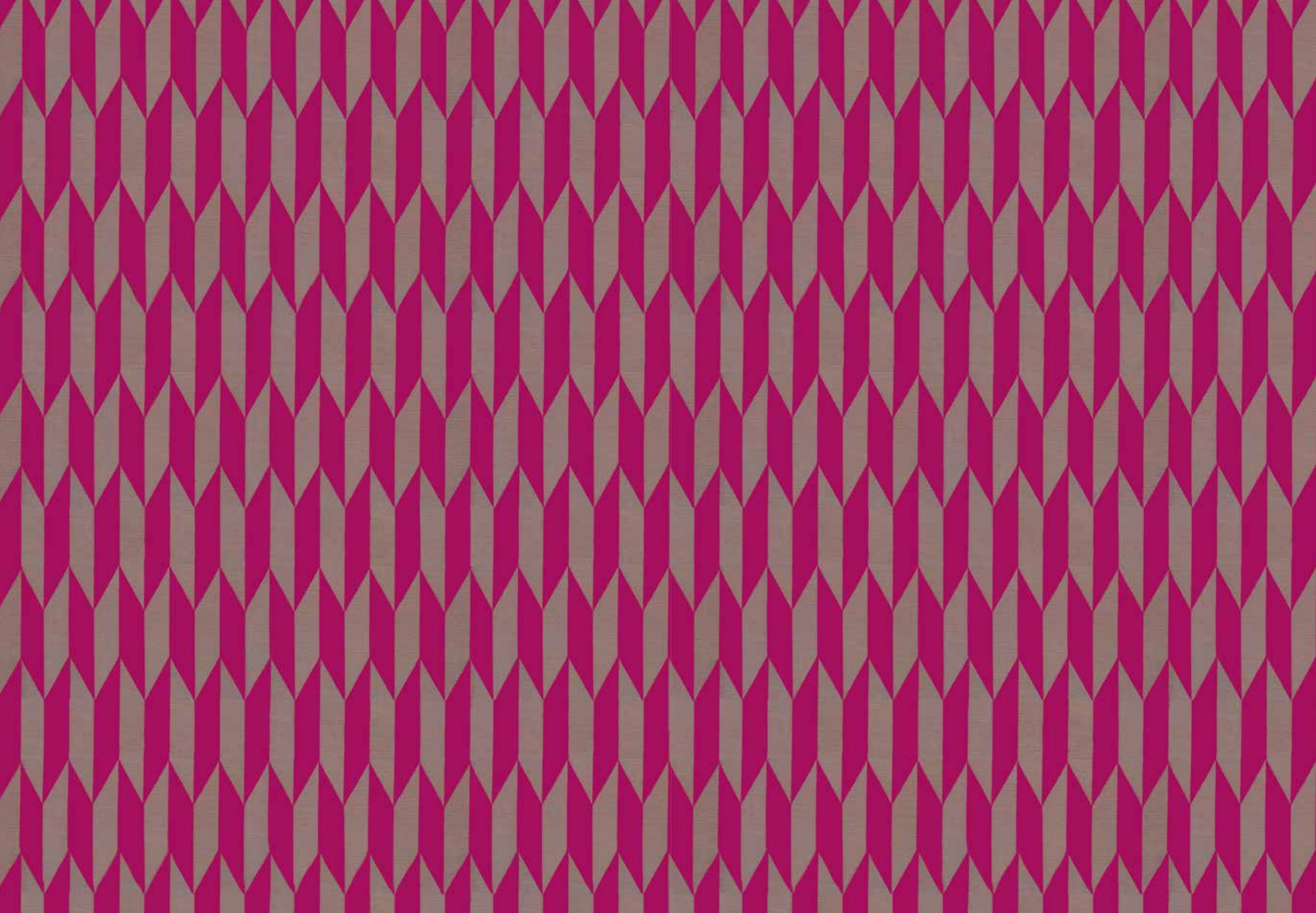


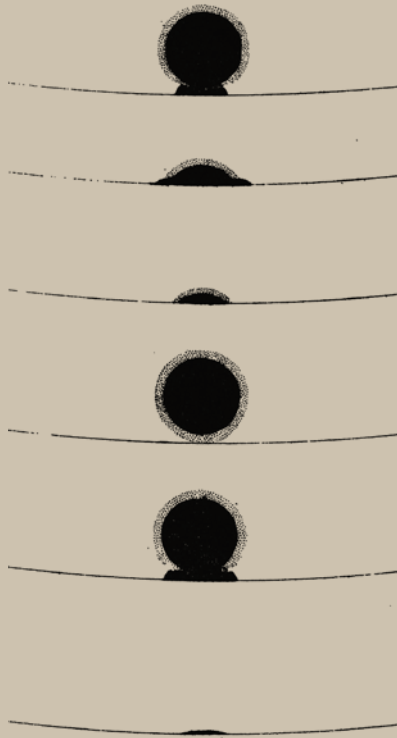
**KONSTFACK**  
University of Arts, Crafts and Design

**Pitt Rivers Museum**  
Anthropology and World Archaeology

Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND**







*Appearances of Venus by Cap. Cook.*