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American art's Western horizons

J. M. Mancini and Dana Leibsohn

- 1 Writing at the turn of the current century, the historian David Armitage proclaimed, “We are all Atlanticists now.”¹ His claim evinces bravado, but carries a good deal of truth. When at its best, Atlantic Studies sought (and still seeks) to open methodological and historical perspectives onto the networks – be they physical, imagined, or some combination thereof – that connected people and goods of the Americas and Africa with those of Western Europe. There has been a pronounced hemispheric slant to this project, such that histories of the North have been more commonly written and fully developed than those of the South. Yet Atlantic Studies has been successful in pressing Americanists to grapple with the Atlantic as both lived space and metaphor, not merely as continental boundary.² Today, Atlantic Studies still exerts more sway among those who study the United States and Great Britain than, say, Brazil or Ghana, but its intellectual project is now familiar. When it comes to the west, and more specifically, the Pacific, however, there is no parallel.
- 2 While it is not difficult to chart an uptick in scholarship on histories of the Pacific Rim and of transpacific exchange, there has been no “Pacific turn” that aligns with (or even counters) that of Atlantic Studies.³ In fact, for those who study American history and art, and especially amongst scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America, the Pacific remains, without question, “the other ocean.” Perhaps this is inevitable. For the ties that bound New England to West Africa and the Caribbean to Western Europe are quite different – in their material, cultural, economic and bodily qualities – than those that tethered the islands of Hawai’i or the Philippines to the Americas.⁴ In the reflection that follows, we respect rather than minimize these differences, and therefore make no argument for a strict parallel between Atlantic Studies and “Pacific Studies.” Instead, we wish to take an inquisitive tack and ask how histories of American art might shift, in focus and implication, if the Pacific were understood as hinge rather than “western border.”
- 3 Amongst scholars of the material and visual culture of colonial Latin America, a bounded, continental framework has been displaced by perspectives that take transpacific

exchange as integral to their subject.⁵ In part, this stems from an increasing interest in charting the cosmopolitanism of urban centers like Mexico City and Lima (but also Santa Fe de Bogotá and Puebla) where imports, and at times immigrants and slaves, from East Asia were deeply embedded in the material, visual and sensory cultures of daily life. The choir screen in Mexico City's cathedral may be the most famous example of transpacific art from New Spain, but the Parián, an elaborate architectural setting for the selling of Asian imports established in Mexico City's central plaza and named after the Parián market district of Manila, has also become a key trope for exploring how practices of desire, consumption, and trade fueled both the lived and imagined experiences of residents in New Spain.⁶ For instance, in a now-famous painting by Cristobál de Villalpando, the Parián of Mexico City takes center stage as part of the city's bustling architecture. Well-dressed shoppers stroll along straight, grid-like paths. Their postures imply that shopping here involved more pleasure than brute necessity. In the Manila Parián, a multitude of goods were also on offer. Whilst some shops functioned as joint ventures between Chinese and Spanish residents of Manila,⁷ this Parián was a setting primarily of, and for, foreigners; for Chinese and Spanish residents of Manila alike, it was also a site of potential danger. In crossing the Pacific, the term "Parián" created evocative but imaginary parallels amongst Chinese bodies, labor, and goods in urban Spanish America, and the ocean itself became both sign and site of the transformative power of long-distance travel. Alongside such comparative histories, are studies of the ways in which imports and people from Asia filtered northward and inland from the Pacific port of Acapulco into small towns and pueblos in New Mexico and the missions of California and Arizona.⁸ Amongst Latin Americanists, these objects and immigrants redefine the reach of early modern globalization, challenging traditional ideas about how worldly was the American "frontier" and, indeed, the Spanish Empire, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

- 4 However, amongst academic historians of "American art" (that is, scholars focused on the visual culture of the United States and its colonial antecedents), a transpacific viewpoint has yet to emerge.⁹ Rather, perhaps precisely because the American West has been both the historical terminus of Manifest Destiny and the focus of critical art and architectural writing that seeks to challenge the US "legacy of conquest," it has been difficult for scholars to escape the boundaries of continentalist ways of thinking. Thus American art- and cultural scholarship with a Western reference point has been transformed by interventions that began in the 1980s and early 1990s, a period which saw not only the exhibition and publication of *The West as America*, but also the participation of scholars who primarily worked on Mexico¹⁰. Notable among them is the late historian David Weber, a scholar of New Spain and post-Independence Mexico who served as President of the largely Anglophone, US-based Western History Association, and who used his departing article in the *Western Historical Quarterly* to integrate three disparate but intersecting strands of analysis that challenged familiar accounts of "the West" and its place in US culture: Anglo-American Hispanophobia, the significance of "the arts, artifacts, and architecture" to the US relationship with the historical Spanish Empire, particularly in California, and the need to recover Indigenous perspectives (by, as he put it, "taking us into the missions and reimagining them from Indian angles of vision").¹¹ Despite performing such an intricate scholarly balancing act, Weber was not able to overcome a continentalism in which the frame for such inquiry stopped at "the southern rim of the United States, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, [where] aged buildings stand as mute reminders of an earlier Spanish America that has vanished." Moreover, although

more recent scholarship in both Atlanticist and hemispheric modes has chipped away much of this “rim,” continentalism’s Pacific edge remains largely intact.¹²

- 5 The continued employment of a continental perspective has had a number of consequences for American art scholarship. One of the more obvious of these regards the traces of the “Pacific world” which remain within “the aged buildings [...] of an earlier Spanish America that has vanished.”¹³ For example, San Francisco’s Mission Dolores contains, within its built fabric and its collections, evidence of the eighteenth-century transpacific. Its original fonts for holy water, set into niches within the Mission’s walls, are blue and white Chinese plates; its current and historical objects include a Philippine carved, gilt and painted tabernacle; and its façade and proportions appear to have been redesigned in a more “Philippine” mode following the transpacific voyage of its architect, the Franciscan Pedro Benito Cambón. Yet, until recently, these traces – and the complex processes of transpacific interaction underpinning them – were essentially invisible to Americanist art historians.¹⁴ And, even among the recent compelling histories of collecting and seafaring that address, loosely speaking, the “East Indies trade,” far less is said about any transpacific world than about the wealth, habits and tastes of those living in New England.¹⁵ This interest in the “Pacific as exotic land” may well be a question of sources, but it is also a question of perspective: for scholars of visual culture, “early America” more often means Philadelphia and Boston than it does Havana, Santa Fe or Manila.
- 6 Our point is not that American art histories are marked by exclusions (such is the condition of every history). Rather, it is the implications of these particular exclusions that interest us. Consider, for example, the impact of continentalism on the periodization of “American art” in the West. Here, it would seem that geographical continentalism has fuelled what we call *temporal continentalism*, in which, for example, the period of “Manifest Destiny” is partitioned from prior or subsequent episodes of Anglo-American empire. Thus David Weber and others have discussed, at great length, the nostalgic refurbishment of the California missions that proceeded in the generations following the US-Mexican War.¹⁶ Yet, these discussions eclipse study of the simultaneous US conquest of the Philippines – and its intersection with US engagement with the “arts, artifacts, and architecture” there. That is to say, at exactly the same moment that Californians were creating a new visual culture based on reimagining the “days of the dons,” US troops (mainly in volunteer regiments from western states) were embarking (largely out of San Francisco) to wage war across the Pacific against Spain and, later, the fledgling Philippine state.¹⁷ Furthermore, even from their very arrival in Manila, Americans – in the first instance, military personnel such as the naval officer Bradley A. Fiske – visualized conquest in artistic and architectural terms. Writing in his memoirs about his first trip on shore in the days following the Spanish surrender, Fiske provided a detailed account of what he thought was “the residence, or palace, of the Governor-General”: “The splendid marble columns that we saw and the handsome, enormous paintings, and the great gilded lions, each with his paw on a globe, and the frescoed ceilings, and the magnificent draperies, and the quiet and elegance of everything, filled me at least, with awe. And when I saw a United States soldier, walking carelessly about amid these splendors of ancient Spain, and when I saw my friends and myself standing there, who but a few years before had been little boys in a country that Spain had not thought about at all, reading of the glories of Charles the Fifth, and the conquests of Pizarro and Cortez, I had a confused feeling that there was a mistake somewhere. How could it be that six small ships had

overawed such great magnificence; and that ten thousand unprofessional American soldiers had taken possession of it all?"¹⁸

- 7 This confluence of art and empire was not limited to critical interactions such as Fiske's. US photographers and artists, including many directly attached to the military, frequently took Spanish imperial architecture as their subject, not only to measure what the United States was gaining (as in Fiske's case), but also to disparage Spanish rule. For example, James D. Givens, the military's post photographer at San Francisco's Presidio (a repurposed Spanish fort that was itself a prime example of a "mute reminder of an earlier Spanish America that has vanished" in California) put two photographs of Manila's ossuary in his *Scenes Taken in the Philippines and on the Pacific Relating to Soldiers*, one of which he captioned "Bone Pit of the Manila Cemetery. The Accumulation of Years of Spanish Rule in the Philippines".¹⁹ In this visual association of Spanish architecture and Spanish (mis)rule, Givens pursued a strategy that was common amongst Americans, who flocked to represent Manila's cemeteries as "picturesque and gruesome" sites that could convey the horrors of the old regime (and cast US rule as superior).²⁰ Troops from western states also engaged with Philippine architecture and objects in more direct ways: notably the quasi-iconoclastic treatment of provincial Manila's Catholic architecture and landscapes by California and Washington Volunteers.²¹
- 8 Yet, US Empire in the Philippines tends not to feature in the literature on the art of the American west. And, although specialists in American visual culture have recently begun to write about the Philippines (with great delay, it might be added, compared to colleagues in American literature, history, or the historical social sciences – and compared to scholars of other empires), they have tended not to be especially concerned with the American West or with the Pacific.²²
- 9 In order for historians of American art to develop a fuller account of how art featured in US empire, transpacific perspectives – which are open to the historical nuances that bound, and indeed still bind, "America" to the Philippines, Hawai'i and other islands – are vital to future scholarship. Such perspectives, we suggest, need not be limited to moments of first contact or "islands and beaches" (to invoke Greg Dening's evocative work). Rather, this kind of thinking has the potential to open new ways of understanding art and architecture across the "American west," if not also its north and east.²³
- 10 In the early 1820s, on the cusp of Mexico's independence from Spain, in the mission of San Buenaventura, María Marta wove a basket that bore upon its interior the design of a Spanish silver coin. The basket is unusual because it bears the name of its maker, a Chumash woman who had converted to Christianity and moved to one of the many Franciscan missions established along the spine of California.²⁴ Precisely why she wove the basket we do not know, but her work left the mission and became a collectible – an early form of indigenous tourist art – soon after it was made. Across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it traveled to Mexico City, New York City and San Francisco; it now lives in the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley, an institution that also (in an earlier incarnation) served as a "home" for Ishi, "the last of the Yahi." The indigeneity of California's art and architecture does not often impinge upon histories of the Pacific.²⁵ Yet María Marta's basket, with its design lifted and reworked from an *ocho real*, reminds us that coins minted in Mexico were not just mission-bound, they also made their appearance and were translated into all manner of things in Macao and Manila, Zanzibar and Boston. Moreover, coins minted in Mexico were sometimes held for many years in California missions, but so too were they used and reused in communities in the

Philippines and China. And so, perhaps, we might be well served to think about indigenous objects and their use of coinage alongside the objects created by people in East Asia, or even further north in the Americas, in what is today British Columbia or Alaska. Beyond the flow of silver, the Christian, colonizing ambitions that tangled María Marta and her kin in programs of conversion and resettlement can be charted, *mutatis mutandis*, on the islands of Luzon and Cebu.²⁶ She may never have considered herself a resident of the Pacific Rim (indeed, of this we can be quite sure), but is there a good reason we should not consider her one today?

- 11 It was almost thirty years ago that Jean Baudrillard described the consumerist, fantastical life of California. Apart from Disneyland he found, “The freeways, the Safeways, the skylines, speed, and deserts – these are America, not the galleries, churches, and culture”.²⁷ While his tropes may be a bit tired, they have not yet lost their bite. For it is still hard to see California apart from the global economies that, in the twentieth century, bound its residents into extraordinary practices driven by desire and motivated by consumption. Yet these economies and desires have long histories, and it on this point we wish to end. A more serious engagement with the Pacific in American art history – and particularly art histories concerned with the “early Americas” writ large – seems to us both long overdue and a long way from where we write. This is not merely because such work requires new kinds of thinking about “who” is American, and “where” America took shape. Nor is it because there remains hard work to be done in archives and languages that Americanists do not usually use. To be sure, precisely this kind of work is necessary, because to cross American art’s western limit it will be necessary to imagine the difference an ocean makes.

NOTES

1. David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in David Armitage, Michael Braddick eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, Houndsmills/New York, 2002, p. 11.
2. See, for example, the influence of “Atlantic World” approaches in the 2011 special double volume of *Winterthur Portfolio*: Wendy Bellion, Monica Domínguez Torres eds., “Objects in Motion: Visual and Material Culture across North America.”
3. See, for example, the special issue on “Pacific Routes” in *Common-Place: The Journal of Early American Life*, 5/2, January 2005, www.common-place-archives.org/vol-05/no-02/ (viewed on November 1, 2015). Scholarship from a Latin American Studies perspective includes the special issue of the *Colonial Latin American Review* focused on the Pacific (forthcoming), whose introductory essay by Dana Leibsohn and Meha Priyadarshini, “Beyond Silk and Silver,” includes a summary of work on the Pacific for the early modern period; see also Edward Slack, “Philippines Under Spanish Rule, 1571-1898,” Dennis Carr, “Asian Art and its Impact in the Americas, 1565-1840,” and Jerry Garcia, “Japanese Presence in Latin America” : all available in *Oxford Bibliography Series of Latin American Studies*, www.oxfordbibliographies.com/obo/page/latin-american-studies (viewed on November 1, 2015). From an American art perspective, see discussion in J. M. Mancini, “Pedro Cambón’s Asian Objects: A Transpacific Approach to Eighteenth-Century California,” in *American Art*, 25/1, 2011, p. 28-51, and “The Pacific World and

American Art,” in John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, Jason D. LaFountain eds., *A Companion to American Art*, Malden/Oxford, 2015, p. 228-245.

4. The “American-ness” of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hawai’i is (as with the Philippines) a topic more often treated as a question of empire and nationhood than visual culture, and therefore addressed by historians and anthropologists, rather than art or architectural historians. Exceptions include Eleanor C. Nordyke, *Pacific Images: Views from Captain Cook’s Third Voyage*, Honolulu, 2008; and Stacy Kamehiro, *The Arts of Kingship: Hawaiian Art and National Culture of the Kalakaua Era*, Honolulu, 2009.

5. See, for instance, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, “Asia in the Arts of Colonial Latin America,” in *The Arts in Latin America, 1492-1820*, Joseph J. Rishel, Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, eds., (exh. cat., Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006), New Haven/London, 2006, p. 56-69; Gustavo Curiel, “Al remedio de la China: el lenguaje achinado y la formación de un gusto dentro de las casas novohispanas,” in Gustavo Curiel ed., *Orientes y Occidentes: El arte y la mirada del otro*, Mexico City, 2007, p. 299-317; Donna Pierce, Ronald Otsuka, eds. *Asia & Spanish America: Trans-Pacific Artistic and Cultural Exchange, 1500-1800*, Denver, 2006; Meha Priyadarshini, “From the Chinese Guan to the Mexican Chocolatero: A Tactile History of the Transpacific Trade, 1571-1815,” PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2014; Sofia Sanabrais, “‘The Spaniards of Asia’: The Japanese Presence in Colonial Mexico,” in *Bulletin of Portuguese/Japanese Studies*, 18/19, 2009, p. 223-251.

6. The choir screen was commissioned in the early eighteenth century from a well-established painter from New Spain, designs were shipped to Manila and then to Macao for casting in bronze; the fabricated pieces were returned across the Pacific to Mexico City via Acapulco (Bailey, 2006, cited n. 5, p. 60). On the evocative function of the *Parián* in Manila and/or Mexico City, see, for instance, Immaculada Alva Rodríguez, *Vida municipal en Manila, siglos XVI-XVII*, Córdoba, 1997; Richard Kagan, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493-1793*, New Haven, 2000; Gustavo Curiel, Juana Gutiérrez, Rogelio Ruiz Gomar, “El *Parián*,” in *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, 78, 2001, p. 215-220; and Dana Leibsohn, “Made in China, Made in Mexico,” in Donna Pierce, Ronald Otsuka eds., *At the Crossroads: the Arts of Spanish America and Early Global Trade, 1492-1850*, Denver, 2012.

7. See Juan Gil, *Los chinos en Manila, siglos XVI y XVII*, Lisbon, 2011.

8. See, for instance, Donna Pierce, Cordelia Thomas Snow, “A Harp for Playing,” in June-el Piper ed., *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*, Santa Fe, 1999, p. 56-71; and Donna Pierce, “Popular and Prevalent: Asian Trade Goods in Northern New Spain, 1570-1850,” in *Colonial Latin American Review*, forthcoming. On the Asian presence in Latin America more broadly, there is a growing body of important scholarship in English, including that of historians Richard Chu, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, and Tatiana Seijas.

9. As a counterpoint, it should be observed that the trends evident in colonial Latin American art scholarship have begun to exert influence within US museums, notably in the recent exhibition and accompanying catalogue assembled by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, *Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia*, (August 2015-February 2016). In this exhibit, the Pacific is drawn into a hemispheric art history, bearing imports that leave their mark in the objects and aesthetic tastes of convents in New France, merchants in New England, and churches in New Spain; *Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia*, Dennis Carr et al. eds., (exh. cat., Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 2015), Boston/New York, 2015.

10. William H. Truettner, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, Washington, D.C., 1991.

11. William H. Truettner, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, Washington, D.C., 1991. David Weber, “The Spanish Legacy in North America and the Historical Imagination,” in *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 23/1, February 1992, p. 4-24. The phrase “legacy of conquest” is from Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the*

American West, New York, 1987, an example of the “New Western History” that influenced American art during this period.

12. For “hemispheric” conceptualizations of American art see, for instance, the 2012 special feature in *American Art*, “Encuentros: Rethinking America through Artistic Exchange” (26/2, summer 2012), which originated in a symposium of the same name at the Smithsonian American Art Museum; as Chon A. Noriega observed in his commentary in that volume, *Encuentros* is only one project amongst several, notably University of California, Los Angeles’s *A Ver: Revisioning Art History* and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art*, which are currently “expanding the foundation on which we can base a history of American art that considers America as both nation and continent.” It is notable here that the subject of nearly all of these projects is twentieth- and twenty-first-century art.

13. Weber, 1992, cited n. 11, p. 6.

14. For discussion see Mancini, 2011, cited n. 3.

15. See the recent collection of essays on this theme, Patricia Johnston, Caroline Frank eds., *Global Trade and Visual Arts in Federal New England*, Durham, 2014; and Caroline Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America*, Chicago, 2011.

16. See James J. Rawls, “The California Mission as Symbol and Myth,” in *California History*, 71/3, Fall, 1992, p. 342-361; David Gebhard, “Architectural Imagery, The Mission and California,” in *Harvard Architectural Review*, 1, Spring 1980, p. 137-45; Weber, 1992, cited n. 11.

17. Although the focus here is on US empire in the Pacific after the period of continental conquest (and its intersection with art and architectural practices), a similar point could also be made about continuities between Anglo-American empire in its continental phase and prior instances of Anglo-Spanish imperial conflict, notably in the case of the British invasions of Manila and Cuba in 1762. For discussion of art- and architectural aspects of these events see J. M. Mancini, “Siege Mentalities: Objects in Motion, British imperial expansion, and the Pacific turn,” in *Winterthur Portfolio*, 45/2-3, Summer/Fall 2011, p. 125-140 and “Disrupting the Transpacific,” in *Colonial Latin American Review*, forthcoming. Relationships between these events and the US interventions of the 1890s are further discussed in J. M. Mancini, *Art and War in the Pacific World*, forthcoming.

18. Bradley A. Fiske, *War Time in Manila*, Boston, 1913, p. 141-142.

19. James D. Givens, *Scenes Taken in the Philippines and on the Pacific Relating to Soldiers*, San Francisco, 1912.

20. The phrase “Picturesque and gruesome” is taken from George Amos Miller, *Interesting Manila*, Manila, 1906, p. 238.

21. On iconoclasm: see Mancini, 2015, cited n. 3.

22. Design historian David Brody’s *Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism and Imperialism in the Philippines*, Chicago, 2010, for example, largely ignores both longer-term Pacific contexts and the interconnections between US empire in the Philippines and US empire in the American West in favor of Saidian modes of interpretation and East-coast “orientalist” touchstones such as Charles Longfellow.

23. Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land: Marquesas, 1774-1880*, Wadsworth, 1988. For an example of work that draws Pacific immigration into the Northeast, see Anthony Lee, *A Shoe-maker’s Story: Being Chiefly about French Canadian Immigrants, Enterprising Photographers, Rascal Yankees and Chinese Cobblers in a Nineteenth-Century Factory Town*, Princeton, 2008.

24. Few individuals, especially those who were indigenous Americans, signed their creations, and even more infrequently did women sign their works. On this and related baskets see Lillian Smith, “Three Inscribed Chumash Baskets with designs from Spanish colonial coins,” in *American Indian Art Magazine*, 7, Summer 1982, p. 62-68; Zelia Nuttall, “Two Remarkable California Baskets,” in *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 2/4, 1924, p. 341-343; Jan Timbrook, “Six Chumash Presentation Baskets,” in *American Indian Art Magazine*, 39, 2014, p. 50-57, and Dana Leibsohn,

“Exchange and Value: the Material Culture of a Chumash Basket,” in Anne Gerritsen, Giorgio Riello eds., *Writing Material Culture History*, London, 2014, p. 101-108.

25. Even the work of Barbara Voss, which goes a long way towards creatively addressing the material and architectural histories of distinct ethnic groups and their lived experiences in colonial California, rarely brings together analysis of indigenous people and overseas Chinese.

26. For a provocative essay on coinage, see for instance, Byron Hamann, “Counterfeit Money, Starring Patty Hearst,” in *Colonial Latin American Review*, forthcoming.

27. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, London/New York, p. 104.

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