



THE NATURE OF CURIOUS OBJECTS
SUE JOHNSON'S PAPER MUSEUM



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24 JANUARY TO 10 JUNE 2012

PITT RIVERS MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



Traveller's Tree

SUE JOHNSON'S PAPER MUSEUM: A CURATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

When they work in museums artists frequently bring new ways of imagining and engaging with artefacts. Just occasionally, an artist comes to work with the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum with such a sympathetic but different take that it changes everyone's way of seeing. Such an artist is Sue Johnson.

The fifteen works in *The Nature of Curious Objects* have been selected from more than twice that number that Johnson has produced in response to the illustrations in the manuscript catalogue of General Pitt-Rivers's 'second' collection. This manuscript catalogue has been one of the major focuses of the three-year research project 'Rethinking Pitt-Rivers: Analysing the Activities of a Nineteenth-Century Collector' (2009–2012), funded by a grant from The Leverhulme Trust.

It has been of enormous value to us to have an artist of Sue Johnson's intelligence, skill, and wit engaging with the project over such a sustained period of time. Johnson's extensive knowledge of the history of illustration—of natural history, antiquarian, and museum specimens—has helped us to a deeper appreciation of the work of those members of Pitt-Rivers's staff who set about illustrating his varied acquisitions as they entered his second collection.

Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers was born in 1827. Known as Lane Fox until 1880, he adopted the name Pitt-Rivers when he inherited the extensive Rivers estates. Pitt-Rivers had begun collecting in the early 1850s—beginning with firearms, but quickly moving on to other types of weapons and, eventually, to pretty much all forms of human material culture. So by the early 1880s he had already acquired a collection of more than 20,000 anthropological, antiquarian, archaeological, ethnological, folklore, and historical artefacts. These he gave in 1884 to the University of Oxford, where they remain to this day. However, he did not, as one might have expected, stop collecting; indeed, he amassed another collection, which by the time of his death in 1900 amounted to another 20,000 items. This ‘second’ collection was held at his private museum in Farnham, Dorset, and in his various houses and other properties.

Retained in the Pitt-Rivers family until the mid twentieth century, the collection was broken up thereafter, so that these ‘Pitt-Rivers’ items are now scattered around the world in public and private collections. Fortunately, however, for much of the period 1880–1900 the General arranged for members of his

staff to record his acquisitions and to illustrate many of them in gorgeous detail in what eventually comprised a nine-volume manuscript catalogue. Thanks to the generosity of the General’s great-grandson Anthony Pitt-Rivers, for some years now the catalogue has been available to researchers in the Department of Manuscripts and University Archives at the Cambridge University Library (MS Add.9455); and thanks to the support of The Leverhulme Trust and the cooperation of Anthony Pitt-Rivers and our colleagues in Cambridge, the catalogue has now been digitized, databased, and made publicly available on the website of the ‘Rethinking Pitt-Rivers’ project at <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/>.





Illustrated title pages by W. H. Evans from volume 9 (far left) and volume 5 of the manuscript catalogue of General Pitt-Rivers's second collection.



Left: detail of page 1,360 in volume 4 of the manuscript catalogue of General Pitt-Rivers's second collection, featuring two views by G. F. Waldo Johnson of two fishing-floats from the Papuan Gulf, Papua New Guinea, purchased by General Pitt-Rivers from W. D. Webster, Oxford House, Bicester, on 1 January 1898 (Pitt-Rivers paid £1 for them). During Pitt-Rivers's life the floats were displayed in Case 62 in Room 7 in his private museum in Farnham. Their present whereabouts are unknown.

Right: *Goldfishing Bowl*



In October 2009 Sue Johnson visited the Pitt Rivers Museum to discuss with me how she might engage with the museum, its staff, and its work during her 2010–2011 residency at the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies in Oxford. It did not take long for both of us to realize how Pitt-Rivers's manuscript catalogue could provide further inspiration for her ongoing work around illustration, collections, catalogues, and archives—and how it might help project researcher Alison Petch and myself further our understanding of the catalogue as a cultural artefact in its own right, not just as a source of data concerning Pitt-Rivers's acquisitions.

And so it has proved. Through Sue Johnson's work, we have been inspired to 'rethink' the aesthetic and artistic aspects of the General's collecting activities, and through her involvement with the project, Sue has been inspired to deepen her response to nineteenth-century illustration in anthropological and archaeological contexts.

As all good art does, Sue Johnson's paintings make us see the world anew. For myself, my colleagues, and most of the museum's visitors, I expect, the initial response to 'Sue Johnson's Paper Museum' will be amusement at

the reimaginings of familiar types of ethnographic and archaeological objects in new renditions and new contexts and juxtapositions. This was certainly the case with her earlier exhibition, *The Curious Nature of Objects*, in which four works were displayed on the museum's lower gallery from 28 January to 19 June 2011.

In those works Johnson's focus was on natural history and on blurring the boundaries between the natural and cultural worlds, with her taking on the role of a quasi-naturalist as she imagined new species of flora and fauna. At first glance, her watercolours appeared to be authentic natural history illustrations documenting newly discovered plants and animals. On closer inspection, however, it became clear that each vision depicted a hybrid organism.

Johnson creates a transformative space in which inanimate objects—pots, lamps, masks, weapons, shields, smoking paraphernalia, ceremonial objects, musical instruments, canoe paddles—become animate. In her hands, objects that have been made in nature's image—by mimicking shapes and patterns—morph into plants and animals.

The paintings Johnson has created in this project serve to re-document artefacts in the 'second' collection whose current locations are in the main now unknown, whilst at the same time imagining new lives for them. And as I can testify, once manifested in Johnson's paintings these new lives do not exist in *her* imagination alone. For anyone who saw them will know that once one has seen *Domesticated Gourd Plant* or *Paddling Bush* it is no longer possible to come across a decorated gourd in the museum without imagining it hanging fully formed and decorated on a bush ready to be plucked, or to see an assortment of decorated paddles—from West Africa, North America, and Papua New Guinea—without imagining them paddling furiously together in some sort of fantastical regatta.

With the new work, I expect visitors will have similar reactions. For example, anyone who has studied anthropology for any length of time will recognize the form of the Trobriand dance-shield in Johnson's *Elaborate Defences* (see page 10) from the images of the *kaydiba* dance that Bronislaw Malinowski published in 1922 in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and will be amused by her witty anthropomorphic rendering.





Left: *Domesticated Gourd Plant* (not exhibited)

Far left: *Paddling Bush* (not exhibited)



Above: *Elaborate Defences*

Right: page 1,972 in volume 6 of the manuscript catalogue of General Pitt-Rivers's second collection, featuring (at bottom right) an illustration by G. F. Waldo Johnson of a dance shield from the Trobriand Islands in Papua New Guinea, purchased by General Pitt-Rivers from an unknown source on 25 May 1898 (Pitt-Rivers paid £1 for it). During the General's life the shield was displayed above Case 64 in Room 7 in his private museum in Farnham. Its present whereabouts are unknown.

| DATE. | DRAWING AND DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT. | PRICE. | DEPOSITED AT. | REMOVED TO. |
|--|--|---|---------------|---|
| <p>A. June 7 1898.</p> <p>Sr Sr</p> <p>B. + C. Jan. 23, 1899.</p> <p>Sr</p> <p>D. May 25 1898.</p> | <p>Wooden Skull Holder (Gagoy) from Samerapura, Mouth of Fly River, New Guinea.</p> <p>Room VII Museum 64</p> <p>B. + C. New Guinea carved wooden ceremonial tablets.</p> <p>Room VII Museum 64</p> <p>Room VII Museum 64</p> <p>New Guinea parrying shield.</p> | <p>A. £4</p> <p>B. 30/-</p> <p>C. £5/-</p> <p>D. £1</p> | | <p>Small room ahead of Room 7.</p> <p>Indexed</p> |



Arabesque with Black Lacquer Teapot

For Johnson, of course, the work she has been doing, though inspired by the catalogue of the second collection and the Pitt Rivers Museum itself, is a continuation of an artistic career in which she has engaged with numerous archives, galleries, and museums. Indeed, in my view the success of the collaboration that has led to the current exhibition is directly related to the fact that Johnson was able 'to hit the ground running'.

She was already sensitized to the type of material we were presenting to her, and ready to engage with both it and the wider issues it raises. It is thus Johnson's perspective to which I now turn, paraphrasing and quoting from a number of email exchanges that she and I have had over the last couple of years and, in particular, in the run-up to the present exhibition.

Johnson has worked collaboratively with museums and rare book libraries for many years, creating exhibitions based on works from such collections as those of the Museum of the American Philosophical Society and the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Since 1995, her work has comprised an episodic project under the loose conceptual umbrella

of 'The Alternate Encyclopedia', which has been manifested in a series of exhibitions in museums, galleries, and alternative spaces throughout the USA. For this work she has created fictitious publications and artefacts based on authentic materials, the overall amalgam comprising a 'cabinet of curiosities' to be constructed and held in the mind. Individual series of her works have explored genetic engineering and environmental crises, consumer culture in history, the role of women in science, as well as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and other literary works. Throughout this work, the role of the artist in picturing new forms of knowledge has been underscored.

In her paintings for *The Nature of Curious Objects* Johnson has shifted her focus from imagining new life forms to creating animated landscapes composed on the shelves of still life paintings. Rare and unusual objects from across the world are juxtaposed with botanical and zoological images culled from both famous natural history publications and anonymous amateur portfolios of birds and flowers.

As Johnson puts it, 'rhyming and morphologic pairs and triads signal unexpected resonances between living creatures and functional and ritual objects'. As in the works in the first exhibition, objects from the 'second' collection are rendered with a high degree of verisimilitude and can thus be identified with their 'originals' in the illustrated catalogue.

Johnson sees Pitt-Rivers's catalogue as a form of *Wunderkammer* or 'cabinet of curiosities' that 'inspires wonder in those who have the rare opportunity to see it in person'. Overwhelmed by the 'vast array of objects logged into these inventory books', she is struck by the fact that 'there is little evidence of taxonomic order to the progress of the volumes, except perhaps as a record of groups of objects being delivered to Pitt-Rivers's estate following a successful auction outing or other collecting spree'. From Johnson's perspective, 'some pages reveal the miscellany that might be found in a catch-all drawer, while other sections devote page after page to items of a type (lamps, locks, figurines, stone tools, weapons, jewellery) or diverse items from a singular geographic location or culture'.

Johnson is also struck by the skill and dedication of the artists that Pitt-Rivers employed: 'The illustrations themselves are increasingly marvellous as the volumes progress, becoming more elaborate and refined, and show a kind of devotion to capturing the object with a sublime naturalism that would have appealed to John Ruskin's sensibilities.' She also notes how Pitt-Rivers seems to have shunned, for this purpose at least, the possibilities of photography for documenting his collection, preferring to continue with his 'project of hand-wrought illustrated documentation'.





Above: *Sideways with Daffodil*

Left: detail of page 831 in volume 3 of the manuscript catalogue of General Pitt-Rivers's second collection, featuring (to the right) an illustration by Charles E. Flower, A. Peacock, or G. F. Waldo Johnson of an eighteenth-century vase from Satsuma in Japan purchased by General Pitt-Rivers from J. Sparks, 15 Duke Street, Manchester Square, London on 26 May 1892 (Pitt-Rivers paid £12.00 for it and the vase to the left). During the General's life the vase was displayed in Rushmore House. Its present whereabouts are unknown.



Gesner's Tulip

Given her long engagement with the history of illustration, it is no surprise that Johnson sees the Pitt-Rivers catalogue 'as a nineteenth-century equivalent of the pictorial records of the collections of such famous figures as Ulisse Aldrovandi of Bologna (1522–1605) and Rudolph II of Prague (1552–1612)'. Johnson shares in the feelings of regret that such a collection should have been dispersed, but rejoices in what remains; that is, 'these nine magical volumes'.

Viewed as a cultural artefact in its own right, the catalogue can be seen as picturing 'a miniature world of objects' in which 'some are rendered so small and with such precision that they could perch on shelves and tables inside an elaborate doll's house'. Others, painted at a slightly larger scale yet still much smaller than life-size, 'would seem at home in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* still-life paintings that picture opulent table-top displays of imported foodstuffs nestled next to jewel-encrusted goblets, platters of gold, and delicate porcelain vessels, or bouquets of flowers featuring rare specimens of the famous tulip'.

From Johnson's perspective: 'Like the objects inventoried in these early still life paintings—and as in cabinets

of curiosities—the objects collected by Pitt-Rivers and illustrated in his catalogue pay homage to masterful and ingenious objects from around the globe'.

Johnson's method has been to work with the pictorial record in the form of digitized images of each page, drawing on her artistic experience 'to imagine new ways to display and order the objects'. As she puts it, 'like the now lost objects themselves, the shelves I depict are phantoms, a mere indication of the idea of a shelf or display surface. The objects have been recast into a new ephemeral situation, a paper museum.' The recast objects are combined and juxtaposed with representations of flora and fauna 'that have their origins in the published documents from famous expeditions that set out to discover new worlds beyond the Old World'. Thus, on the same shelves as Pitt-Rivers's objects are her 're-renderings of prints and watercolours of plants and birds culled from old auction catalogues and other assorted natural history documents'.

Some of these images are familiar from the work of such artist-naturalists as John James Audubon (1785–1851) and from documents of the expeditions of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), while others are ‘more obscure with origins in unique portfolios of watercolours and prints made by lesser-known or anonymous artists’. In particular, working with images in old auction catalogues appealed to Johnson, for like the works illustrated in the Pitt-Rivers catalogue, the works they illustrate have been dispersed and are now—for the most part—in ‘unknown hands’; for Johnson, ‘the images of collectable objects in the auction catalogues are being held in another kind of “paper museum”’. So when she happened on an illustration of a sixth-century BC Etruscan Bucchero ware pottery kantharos from Pitt-Rivers’s second collection in a catalogue of a sale of ‘Antiquities and Souvenirs of the Grand Tour’ held at Christie’s in London in October 1993, this was for her ‘a kind of closing of the circle of what I was doing intuitively by working with the catalogues’.

This accidental discovery led to the painting *Commencement of the Baroque* featuring Johnson’s rendering of an image of the same—or at least a very

similar—item from its illustration in Pitt-Rivers’s catalogue. Overall, throughout her ‘paper museum’ her *modus operandi* has been to become a collector herself, ‘to sort and organize objects, and re-present these marvellous things from collections that can no longer be seen by contemporary audiences, ultimately reframing them within a new system of relationships that is more metaphysical than ethnographic or scientific in nature’.





Above: photograph from page 19 of the catalogue of the sale of *Antiquities and Souvenirs of the Grand Tour* held at Christie's, South Kensington, London on Wednesday 27 October 1993. The Etruscan kantharos in the centre (part of lot 72) is from General Pitt-Rivers's second collection. Happening on this illustration, Sue Johnson was inspired to draw on the very similar example illustrated in the manuscript catalogue to paint *Commencement of the Baroque* (illustrated overleaf).

Left: page 2,095 in volume 7 of the manuscript catalogue of General Pitt-Rivers's second collection, featuring (below) an illustration by Courtney Shepherd or G. F. Waldo Johnson of an Etruscan Bucchero-ware pottery kantharos, or two-handled drinking cup, dating to the sixth century BC, purchased by General Pitt-Rivers from G. F. Lawrence (date and price unknown). During the General's life, the vessel was displayed in Case 16 in Room 4 in his private museum in Farnham. Its present whereabouts are unknown.



Commencement of the Baroque

As its name suggests, the major aim of the 'Rethinking Pitt-Rivers' project is to *rethink* the General's collecting activities. Without doubt, Johnson's engagement has enabled us to rethink many aspects of his life and work, not least his commitment to capturing in inspired detail the visual—aesthetic, artistic—and physical qualities of many of the objects he acquired. Moreover, one of the aims of an ethnographic and archaeological museum is to make the curious normal and the normal curious. In Johnson's hands, Pitt-Rivers's specimens may have become curious objects, but her own creations—that is, the works in this exhibition—have themselves become specimens: numbered, catalogued, photographed, and reproduced online and in this publication—so that they may be the subjects of contemplation, enjoyment, and study. During the process of preparing this exhibition, I have been struck a number of times by the thought that the images of objects that appear in these pages have been reproduced from electronically copied versions of cleaned and trimmed versions of digital photographs of hand-painted watercolours copied from digital scans of pages in a bound paper catalogue illustrated with hand-painted watercolour paintings of objects—with the various digital files involved having been passed from computer to computer via memory-sticks, DVDs, email, and at least one FTP site. It is thus pleasing to conclude both that the world gets curiouiser and curiouiser and that even with all the new technology at our disposal it is still objects that hold our attention.

JEREMY COOTE

Curator and Joint Head of Collections

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sue Johnson is a Professor of Art in the Department of Art and Art History at St Mary's College of Maryland, where she has taught since 1993. Born in San Francisco in 1957, she received a BFA in studio art from Syracuse University in upstate New York in 1979 and an MFA in painting and printmaking from Columbia University, New York City, in 1981.

Johnson has participated in many group shows and has had more than thirty solo exhibitions at venues throughout the USA. These include: *Sue Johnson: Cabinet of Wonder, Marvelous Transformations, and Other Accidental Images*, at the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, in 2007; *Eating Wonderland: Recent Work by Sue Johnson*, at the Lora Robins Gallery of Design from Nature, University of Richmond Museums, Richmond, Virginia, in 2008; and *Moore Adventures in Wonderland: A Project by Sue Johnson*, at The Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 2009–10. Her previous exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum, *The Curious Nature of Objects: New Paintings by Sue Johnson*, was held on the lower gallery from 24 January to 2 May 2011.

Her work is also held in numerous public collections, including the Franklin Furnace Archive at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Yale University Library, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum Library. She has received four Individual Artist awards from the Maryland State Arts Council as well as grants from, amongst others, the Pollock–Krasner Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts / Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation. Reviews of her work have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *New Art Examiner*, and *Art Papers*. She has held a number of residencies and fellowships. Most recently, in 2010–11 she was Visiting Scholar in Residence at the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies in Oxford. Also in 2011, she was a Resident Fellow at CAMAC (Centre d'Art Marnay Art Centre) in Marnay-sur-Seine and was a Visiting Artist at the American Academy in Rome. She continues to be an honorary research associate of the 'Rethinking Pitt-Rivers' project based at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. For further details, visit the artist's website at www.suejohnson1.com.

LIST OF EXHIBITS

All works are gouache, watercolour, and pencil on paper, signed on the verso, and dated 2011.

1. *Goldfishing Bowl*, 76 x 56 cm.
2. *Sideways with Daffodil*, 56 x 76 cm.
3. *Commencement of the Baroque*, 56 x 76 cm.
4. *New World Spoonbill with the Bronze Camel*, 76 x 56 cm.
5. *Traveller's Tree*, 56 x 76 cm.
6. *Bird and Flower Painting*, 56 x 76 cm.
7. *Uncontained*, 56 x 76 cm.
8. *Arabesque with Black Lacquer Teapot*, 56 x 76 cm.
9. *Mirror*, 38 x 48 cm.
10. *The Art of Mimicry*, 38 x 48 cm.
11. *Gesner's Tulip*, 38 x 48 cm.
12. *Elaborate Defences*, 38 x 48 cm.
13. *The Pinkish Camellia*, 38 x 48 cm.
14. *Returning to Holland*, 38 x 48 cm.
15. *Two Birds*, 76 x 56 cm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Nature of Curious Objects: Sue Johnson's Paper Museum

Long Gallery, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 24 January to 10 June 2012

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Catalogue design, press and publicity by Kate Webber

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Images of paintings © Sue Johnson, 2011

Images from the catalogue of Pitt-Rivers's second collection (see pages 4, 5, 6, 11, 14, and 18), reproduced by kind permission of Anthony Pitt-Rivers and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library (MS Add.9455)

Image from sale catalogue (page 19), courtesy and © Christie's / Bridgeman Art Library

Cover image: *Uncontained*

Inside front cover: *Mirror* (detail)

Right: *Two Birds* (detail)

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