

Paul Scott's *New American Scenery*: Creating a Conceptual Space for Reflection and Reconciliation

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British artist Paul Scott creates artworks by printing images onto commercial china, playing with tropes and conventions of transfer-printed tableware, which was once common in middle class homes. The ceramic objects on which his work is based originated, for the most part, in Staffordshire, England, where, by the early nineteenth century, the technology of transfer printing on earthenware was widely used to imitate more expensive decorated porcelain from China. The very objects on which Scott's work is based—meat platters, dinner plates, tea cups and saucers—call to mind family meals consumed within institutions governed by patriarchal norms of gender, race, and class. Mimicking these examples, Scott's work feels familiar, decorative, even anodyne, yet it is by slipping under viewers' guard that the work makes powerful points.

Scott's series *New American Scenery* draws on wares produced in Staffordshire for the American market. By the end of the eighteenth century, European travel to North America became less dangerous and more frequent. Illustrated travel books describing people's experiences became popular, and, by 1820, wares destined for the American market were printed with scenes based on illustrations found in these travel books.¹ Often referred to as "Historical China,"² these items featured images of people, events, and buildings of significance to the young country. Dinner sets with portraits of famous persons, views of civic buildings, and depictions of infrastructure served as popular manifestations of patriotic pride.³

Scott contests and updates these patriotic and historic images, noting their bias and inviting consideration instead of painful issues such as slavery, environmental degradation, injustice, and trauma. His series comprises images of landscapes once wild and beautiful but now devastated by industrial blight, cities suffering under neglect and abandonment, infrastructure rotting and falling into decay, roadways burdened by traffic, and sites where miscarriages of justice have marred promises of equality and fairness for all. Despite the distressing content, the plates, jugs, and platters that make up *New American Scenery* are beautiful, following as they do in the tradition of blue and white transferware. The disjunction between beauty and villainy is jarring, but productive of meaning.⁴

While individual artworks deserve consideration, the series gains integrity when viewed as a whole, installed in a museum setting alongside original examples of historical china.⁵ Such a setting invites reflection and appreciation for the complex historical, material and ideological forces that shape contemporary realities. Viewed as a whole, Scott's work lays out a conceptual matrix that reaches back from the present to the founding of the American nation. It stretches geographically from the Eastern Seaboard to the Pacific Coast, with points in the heartland noted along the way. This matrix embodies the perspective of a foreign traveler, who looks not with dispassion upon an alien environment but with the engaged attention of a world citizen shaped by and implicated in the events and trauma he observes.

The significance of this matrix is that it creates a space within which the difficult and painful realities broached by *New American Scenery* can be confronted by viewers coming from diverse experiences and backgrounds. Given the dangers of polarization and the real challenges facing the world today, such spaces offer real opportunities for learning and reconciliation.

An early proponent of American transferware, William C. Prime wrote in 1878:

. . . the day will come when ceramic specimens showing our first steamboats, our first railways, the portraits of our distinguished statesmen, soldiers, and sailors, the openings of our canals, the various events of our wars, and our triumphs in peace, will rank in historical collections with the vases of Greece. And whatever then be the estimate of the art they exemplify, men will say: “These show the tastes, these illustrate the home life, of the men and women who were the founders and rulers of the American Republic.”⁶

From an early date, the political or partisan nature of many of these images was noted—occasionally with displeasure. Although printed pottery was marketed in both Canada and the United States, the more lucrative market in America meant that events and views depicted generally favored the American point of view. For example, images of naval battles in the War of 1812 celebrated American victories and found little market among Canadians, for whom the war held distressing memories.⁷ Of some sixty North American landscape views produced by Enoch Wood & Sons in the first half of the nineteenth century, only three featured Canadian scenes, including the city of Québec and Montmorency Falls, destinations favored by American tourists.⁸ A third Canadian subject, a view of Table Rock, Niagara, was classified as an American subject, although, prior to its collapse in 1850, it was located on the Canadian side of the border.⁹

Interpretations of events and ideas of what merits public representation continue to be contentious. For example, during commemorations for the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, a memorial service was held in Toronto honoring the 10,000 First Nations who lost their lives in the war, something not widely noted until recently.¹⁰ Debates surrounding the removal of Confederate monuments have raised questions about whose history is commemorated by these structures.¹¹ Most Confederate monuments were erected after 1890 in support of white supremacy and the Jim Crow system that disenfranchised African Americans. Citing Carl Becker, who suggested “history is what the present chooses to remember about the past,” Eric Foner notes that “Historical monuments are, among other things, an expression of power—an indication of who has the power to choose how history is remembered in public places.”¹² The debate has sharpened as a number of state legislatures have banned the teaching in public schools of anything relating to systemic racism or slavery.¹³

Scott questions the whitewashing of history on the early plates, noting their misrepresentations and lacunae. He seeks to rebalance the narrative by producing images that better reflect his experience as an outsider traveling through and observing the country.¹⁴ To this end, he incorporates historical objects into his *New American Scenery*, printing on blanks scavenged from shuttered factories; erasing and printing over images on vintage pieces; commissioning new forms based on historical models such as cup plates and large jugs; collaborating with master engraver Paul Holdway to create new images; and printing on commercial blanks. As did nineteenth-century engravers, who drew from a wide range of print media circulating in their day, Scott gathers and “confects” his images from examples found on the Internet, vintage tissue transfers, collaborative endeavors, and from his own photographs.

In a number of cases, Scott responds directly to specific examples of transferware. The deep, blue tint of American transferware differentiates it from what was marketed in Britain, a factor that captured his attention when he first encountered the work in American collections.¹⁵ What unnerved him, however, was that such attractive objects could incorporate devastating images of human cruelty. For example, a large platter featuring American-flag-bearing ships in African waters, *Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast*

Africa Platter, c. 1840, provides evidence of the slave trade so vital to early American enterprise. That such an image would appear on a platter used to serve food, possibly even by an enslaved person, shocked him, leading him to create images in direct response.¹⁶

In *Souvenir of Providence, Cape Coast Castle*, an image of the platter is superimposed across a late nineteenth-century *Souvenir of Providence* rolled-rim plate. Rhode Island dominated and benefitted immensely from the Atlantic slave trade throughout the eighteenth century, a fact not celebrated in the historical vignettes of grand civic buildings and monuments that surround the central image of the imposing Statehouse on the plate. During the colonial period, Rhode Island sent some 514 slave ships to the coast of West Africa, leading the historian Jay Coughtry to claim “the Rhode Island slave trade and the American slave trade were virtually synonymous.”¹⁷ Scott’s layering the image of Cape Coast Castle across a plate promoting the wealth and civic progress of Providence, Rhode Island, makes it impossible to avoid acknowledging this fact. Examples of this plate are in the collections of the Rhode Island School of Design and Brown University, both of which are in Providence.¹⁸

Noting the tendency for commemorative plates to include portraits of renowned citizens—invariably white males—with images celebrating their achievements, Scott created pieces commemorating Black and Native Americans victimized by corrupt legal systems. *Angola 3*, 2019, and *Pipelines and Peltier*, 2019, draw attention to individuals unfairly incarcerated by means of fabricated evidence and false testimony. *Angola 3* depicts the Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola Prison, with the portraits of Herman Wallace, Albert Woodfox and Robert King. Wallace and Woodfox were falsely accused of murdering a prison guard, and King of a separate murder, while all were serving sentences in the prison. Wallace and Woodfox were kept in solitary confinement for over 40 years, and King for 29.¹⁹ Native American activist Leonard Peltier was falsely accused of murdering two FBI special agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Despite pleas from Amnesty International, Desmond Tutu, the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, and others, for whom he is considered a political prisoner, he has been imprisoned in Florida since 1977.²⁰ The stories of these men are told on the backs to the plates so they cannot ever be forgotten.

A positive and inspiring example of civic virtue, the delivery of clean water to the city of Philadelphia, is used to foil a shameful example of corrupt local politics. In line with William C. Prime extolling the illustration of public achievements on transferware, a beautiful plate in the RISD Museum collection depicts *The Dam and Water Works* outside Philadelphia around 1835. (RISD Museum 35.091) In *Flint, near Detroit*, 2019, Scott printed an image of the Flint Water Works onto a piece of salvaged Syracuse china. In 2014, authorities diverted highly corrosive water from the Flint River as a cost-saving measure, which resulted in toxic levels of lead and other pollutants in the drinking water. Politicians consistently downplayed and ignored their constituents’ complaints in what has been cited as an example of systemic racism, as the majority of Flint’s residents are Black.²¹ Scott fired a chunk of lead onto the surface of the plate, which ate through the glaze and left a ghostly, watery mark.

By referencing or physically incorporating examples of nineteenth-century transferware into his work, Scott establishes an historical dimension to the matrix constructed by this series. This dimension is reinforced by the installation of his work in museum settings alongside historical examples from the museums’ collections. The geographical axis by which the series extends its purview across the country is established through referencing and remediating later examples of transferware. Many of these were

produced in Staffordshire but imported and distributed by American companies such as Rowland & Marcellus, which was active in New York between 1893 and 1937.²² Most took the form of “Souvenirs of,” and, following standard formats for promoting a given city or state, featured a large central image surrounded by smaller cartouches with individual vignettes. Noting that promotions rarely included images of black and brown people, Scott subverted the original plates by supplying alternative narratives.

Across the Borderline consists of four souvenir plates from states bordering Mexico: California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. The vintage plates were produced by Vernon Kilns, a company active between 1931 and 1958 in Vernon, California, which produced special-order transfer-printed ware.²³ Scott’s plates are further identified as being part of the *Trumpian Campaigne*, a play on a nineteenth-century series depicting the war between Texas and Mexico. Marketed as “The Texian Campaigne,” these wares were produced in Staffordshire and introduced around 1837.²⁴ In Scott’s version, onglaze decals depicting part of the border wall promoted by Donald Trump obscure the nostalgic and patriotic images that grace the souvenir plates, countering the sanitized tourist version with contemporary reality.

A further example of the *Trumpian Campaigne*, *Souvenir of Portland, Or., Black Lives Matter (After Killen & Howard)/Trumpian Campaigne, No: 6*, 2021, consists of a partially erased image from a Rowland & Marcellus souvenir plate. That plate depicts, among other things, the *Coming of the White Man*, a bronze statue of two Native American men erected in Washington Park, Portland, in 1905.²⁵ The statue, which promotes manifest destiny and white supremacy, points to an aspect of Oregon’s shameful racist past often obscured by its current reputation as a bastion of liberalism. In 2020, Donald Trump deployed paramilitary forces in camouflage gear to attack and beat protesters marching against police brutality in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. Conflating narratives of violence and state overreach spanning a century, Scott printed an image across the erased lower portion of the plate of armed law enforcement officers patrolling amidst what appear to be clouds of tear gas (in reality, clouds cloned from Spode’s Italian pattern).²⁶ The image of armed men, specific to the Portland incident, proved sufficiently powerful and universal to be used on a separate Staffordshire platter from 1850.²⁷

The most devastating of Scott’s geographically specific works examine uranium mining on the Navajo Nation. *Souvenir of Shiprock*, 2019; *The Uranium Series No. 1, Messa No: 1, Mine Road, Cove, AZ*, 2019; and *The Uranium Series No. 2, Farmstead Cover, AZ*, 2019, all centre on the shocking history of the US government’s exploitation of the Navajo people. In the interests of developing nuclear weapons at the height of the Cold War, government agencies cheated the Navajo out of their land and worked them at sub-standard wages, under appalling conditions, in the uranium mines. The dust from the mining led to widespread incidences of cancer among workers and their families, a situation that was only at long last begrudgingly acknowledged by the government.²⁸ As with *Flint, near Detroit*, Scott fired small fragments of uranium glass, two of which are printed onto antique pearlware platters. The tranquil scenes are transformed by the melted pool of ore, which physically records this dangerous situation.

What is significant about these geographically specific works and others is that Scott travelled to these sites associated with incarceration, conflict, oppression and trauma. Leisure travel to such sites raises multiple psychological and ethical issues, which attract the theoretical attention of academics in a developing field of tourism studies referred to variously as “dark tourism,” “thanatourism,” or “dissonant heritage.”²⁹ The commemoration of traumatic sites such as prisons or battlefields reveals “as much about

how a nation imagines and narrates stories of conflict to itself as it does about the perceptions of external travelers.”³⁰ Commemoration activates “multiple layers of contested historical and cultural meaning,” which engage “complex visitor motivations and responses.”³¹ Sites involving testimonies of victims are particularly important for understanding “a shared past.”³² While Scott’s travels belong more to the realm of research than tourism, this area of academic study nonetheless provides theoretically useful models for understanding what is at stake with representations of traumatic sites.

As noted with the differing receptions of transferware printed with images of the War of 1812, the interpretation of history is always contested and subject to competing ideologies, interests, and concepts of truth. The concept of heritage incorporates notions of identity, memory, history, and place; it is “never a stable, finally completed process but a constantly evolving process of accommodation, adjustment and contestation.”³³ In most cases, it is only through the concerted efforts of victims’ descendants who challenge “grand colonial narratives” that competing voices and interpretations are acknowledged, as happened in Montana, in 1991, when, after pressure from the American Indian Movement, the *Custer Battlefield National Monument* was renamed the *Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument* in recognition of all actors involved in the battle.³⁴

By substituting art museums for heritage sites, and exhibition visitors for tourists, opportunities open to mine dark tourism and dissonant heritage studies for insight into how viewers encounter and process painful or conflicting narratives. The very term “dissonant heritage” implies that different communities experience events differently and have different interests, interpretations, and responses to how an event is represented. Descendants of perpetrators might experience guilt for the actions of their forebears; descendants of victims might seek to process their grief, and empathetic bystanders might wish to better understand how history has shaped current conflicts.

Discussing Danish tourists travelling to Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, which was in Swedish and Danish hands for a short time in the seventeenth-century,³⁵ Lill-Ann Körber emphasizes the importance of “memory sites,” which tell stories of Danish colonialism “not as national glory or nostalgia, but as products of entangled histories.” Such narratives emphasize not simply the injustices of the past, but illuminate “how the death and labor of enslaved Africans and their descendants impact Scandinavians’ lives and privilege to the present day.”³⁶

Paul Scott’s work consorts with “entangled histories,” pointing to situations and injustices that are American in their particulars, but global in their import. His re-working of the *Cape Coast Castle* platter connects participation in the slave trade to Rhode Island’s historical and continued prosperity, but tentacles extend outward to other nations’ colonial histories and privilege. His analyses of injustice and environmental exploitation have unfortunate parallels throughout the world. How history is remembered and marked involves selective processes of interpretation. J. John Lennon stresses that interpretation is a “process of creating multiple constructions of the past whereby history is never an objective recall of the past, rather a selective interpretation based on the way in which we view ourselves in the present.”³⁷ Interpretations that allow for moral complexity can become learning experiences leading to greater understanding and reconciliation.

At this time, many educational and cultural institutions are reexamining their staffing, collecting, exhibiting, and organizational priorities. Because most museums were established through private—largely white—philanthropy, values of wealth and privilege have, perhaps unintentionally, prevailed.

Increasingly, institutions are recognizing their complicity with white supremacy and acknowledging the damage this has done.³⁸ More progressive institutions are embracing the diversity of their audiences and seizing opportunities to be part of a restorative process. Errol Francis, the director of an arts and heritage diversity charity, suggests that acknowledging grief and trauma within an institutional space “can have a powerful healing effect.”³⁹

With his series *New American Scenery*, Paul Scott opens up a space for confronting the complex and disturbing realities he encountered as an outsider travelling throughout the United States during a particularly fraught and contentious time. Grounding his work in historical transferware, he presents a long view, which encourages understanding of systemic inequities that have shaped nations across time. In casting his gaze across a continent, he reveals the degree to which conflicts have multiplied and concatenated well beyond individual communities, marking and shaping generations. By establishing this multi-dimensional conceptual space, he opens the way for slow looking and self-reflection, which will hopefully lead to a greater willingness to accept collective responsibility for damage done, and a commitment to work for a better, more just, and more equitable future.

¹ R.T. Haines Halsey, *Pictures of Early New York on Dark Blue Staffordshire Pottery* (1899), Dover Publications (New York: 1974), 19.

² Elizabeth Collard, *Nineteenth-Century Pottery and Porcelain in Canada*, McGill-Queen's University Press (Kingston and Montreal, Second ed. 1984), 201.

³ Halsey, 7.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. (New York, Schocken Books, 1968; paperback ed. 1969) p. 256.

⁵ For example, *Raid the Icebox Now with Paul Scott: New American Scenery* at the RISD Museum, Providence, RI, September 13, 2019 - December 30, 2021; or *Paul Scott: New American Scenery* at the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham, UK, September 26, 2020 to January 9, 2022.

⁶ Quoted in Halsey, 22.

⁷ Collard, 202.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰ Raynald Harvey Lemelin, Kelsey M. Johansen, Kyle Powys Whyte, Frey Higgins-Desbiolles, "Conflicts, battlefields, indigenous peoples and tourism: Addressing dissonant heritage in warfare tourism in Australia and North America in the twenty-first century," *International Journal of Culture Tourism and Hospitality Research*, vol 7 no. 3 (2013), 260.

¹¹ Gwendolyn W. Saul and Diana E. Marsh, "In Whose Honor? On Monuments, Public Spaces, Historical Narratives, and Memory," *Museum Anthropology*, vol 41, no 2 (2018), 117-120.

¹² Eric Foner, "Confederate Statues and 'Our' History," *New York Times*, August 20, 2017, online <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/opinion/confederate-statues-american-history.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>. Accessed August 3, 2021.

¹³ Marisa Iati, "What is critical race theory, and why do Republicans want to ban it in schools?" *Washington Post*, May 29, 2021. online <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/> Accessed 3 August, 2021.

¹⁴ Paul Scott (Interview with Elizabeth Williams, RISD Museum Curator), "Raid the Icebox Now: New American Scenery," RISD Museum, online <https://publications.risdmuseum.org/raid-icebox-now/paul-scott-new-american-scenery>. Accessed 12 August, 2021.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also, Jo Dahn, "The Cape Coast Castle Platter," *Ceramics in America*, 2020, (need full citation). The Cape Coast Castle in Ghana today receives some 157,000 visitors per year and is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List and in the UNESCO Slave Route project. See Lill-Ann Körber, "Danish Ex-Colony Travel: Paradise Discourse, Commemoration, and (Not Quite) Dark Tourism," *Scandinavian Studies* vol 89 no. 4 (Winter, 2017), p 501.

¹⁷ Quoted in Fred Zillian, "Rhode Island Dominates North American Slave Trade in 18th Century," *The Online Review of Rhode Island History*, June 28, 2020. <http://smallstatebighistory.com/rhode-island-dominates-north-american-slave-trade-in-18th-century/> Accessed August 12, 2021

¹⁸ Paul Scott, Raid the Icebox Now: New American Scenery.

¹⁹ "All of the Angola 3 are now Free," *The Angola 3*, May 13, 2016, online, <https://angola3.org/>. Accessed August 3, 2021.

²⁰ "Quick Facts: Case of Leonard Peltier," *Free Leonard.Org*, (Buffalo, NY.), online <https://freeleonard.org/case/> Accessed August 1, 2021.

²¹ Melissa Denchak, "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know," *Natural Resources Defense Council*, November 8, 2018. Online, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/flint-water-crisis-everything-you-need-know>. Accessed August 12, 2021.

²² "Rowland & Marsllus Co." *A-Z of Stoke-on-Trent Potters*. Online, <http://www.thepotteries.org/allpotters/844a.htm>. Accessed August 12, 2021.

²³ Wikipedia contributors. "Vernon Kilns." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, August 6, 2021. Web. Accessed 14 Aug. 2021.

²⁴ Wayne and Linda Henrich,, "Staffordshire Texian Campaigne Plate," blog post, *Primping Your Home*, August 11, 2017. <https://primpingyourhome.com/blogs/the-vintage-blog/staffordshire-texian-campaigne-plate> Accessed August 14, 2021.

²⁵ "Coming of the White Man," *Portland Public Art*, blogpost November 27, 2005, <https://portlandpublicart.wordpress.com/2005/11/27/coming-of-the-white-man/>. Accessed August 8, 2021)

²⁶ "Paul Scott: New American Scenery Series," *The Scottish Gallery*, April 28, 2021. Online, <https://scottish-gallery.co.uk/news/2021/paul-scott-new-american-scenery-series>. Accessed August 3, 2021.

²⁷ Paul Scott, *Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Souvenir of Portland & Washington, Black Lives Matter (After Killen & Howard)/Trumpian Legacy No:2*, 2021, in-glaze screen print (decal) on Staffordshire platter by W Davenport & co. c 1850, with fired repair staples and kintsugi, H41 x W48.5 x D4.6 cm. This plate is illustrated in the Scottish Gallery's brochure for the exhibition *Scenery, Samplers & Souvenirs*, April 29 – May 29, 2021, online, <https://scottish-gallery.co.uk/news/2021/paul-scott-new-american-scenery-series>. Accessed August 15, 2021.

²⁸ Paul Scott, Raid the Icebox Now: New American Scenery.

²⁹ See the Institute for Dark Tourism Research (IDTR), Dr. Philip Stone, Executive Director, University of Central Lancashire, which is a centre for this research. Online, <https://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/activity/dark-tourism>. Accessed August 12, 2021.

³⁰ Anthony Carrigan, "Dark tourism and postcolonial studies: critical intersections," *Postcolonial Studies*, vol 17 no. 3 (2014), 240.

³¹ Carrigan, 241, quoting Jacqueline Z. Wilson, "Dark Tourism and National Identity in the Australian History Curriculum: Unexamined Questions Regarding Education Visits to Sites of Human Suffering," in Elspeth Frew and Leanne White (eds), *Tourism and National Identities: An International Perspective*, London: Routledge, 2011, p. 202.

³² J. John Lennon, "Dark Tourism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice* (2017), 2. Online, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/293881866.pdf> Accessed August 3, 2021.

³³ Lennon, quoting A. V. Seaton, "Sources of Slavery – Destinations of Slavery: The Silences and Disclosures of Slavery Heritage in the UK and US," in Eds G. Dann, and A. V. Seaton, *Slavery, Contested Heritage and Thanatourism*, (New York: Haworth Hospitality Press, 2001), 126.

³⁴ Lemelin et al., 261.

³⁵ Körber, 501.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 508

³⁷ Lennon, 31-32.

³⁸ Nancy Kenney, "What Progress have US Museums made on diversity after a year of racial reckoning?" *The Art Newspaper*, May 25, 2021, online, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/a-realisation-of-what-damage-we-ve-done-a-year-of-racial-reckoning-for-us-museums>. Accessed August 12, 2021.

³⁹ quoted in Geraldine Kendall Adams, "Black Lives Matter: One Year On," *Museums Association*, London, England, online, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/analysis/2021/05/black-lives-matter-protests-one-year-on/>. Accessed 12 July, 2021