Re-Casting Difference: Charles Cordier’s Ethnographic Sculptures

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Abstract

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Examining Cordier’s nineteenth-century ethnographic busts, I argue that their contemporary exhibition must include the contexts of their creation and early display. Curators in the twenty-first century approach his works as celebrations of visual difference motivated by curiosity and artistic search for beauty. Yet Cordier showed these works in different types of venues, considering the sculptures both artistic and scientific. He worked from live models, traveling to Algeria to make busts of different racial types. Given these issues, discourses of Orientalism, anthropological racial theories, and colonial movement frame my analysis of his choice of non-French subjects, his sculptural process, and his use of multimedia and polychromy. I analyze these works looking at both historical and contemporary displays and aspects of Cordier’s biography, as well as journals and travel guides.
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Introduction: Ethnographic Sculpture

Charles Cordier’s first ethnographic bust *Said Abdallah* (1848; Figure 1) portrays the African model Seïd Enkess.\(^1\) It includes a significant portion of Enkess’s torso, focusing attention on his elaborate shirt and robes. The detailed embroidery across the chest of Enkess’s garment, framed by folds gathered at the left shoulder, take up more of the overall composition than the subject’s face. The non-French cut of this garment reveals the muscular flesh of Enkess’s neck and chest, in sharp contrast to the austere high collars common in French men’s fashion of the time. Enkess is wearing a soft cylindrical hat with a flourish hanging from it that also contrasts greatly with the tall, rigid top hats common in nineteenth-century France. Beneath it his hair is visible in tightly coiled locks, swept back to show his hairline. This effect, combined with his cleft beard and facial hair, frames the model’s large forehead and mouth and emphasizes the slender shape of his face, prominent cheekbones, and wide nose. The high polish of the bronze, uniform in patina throughout, and the varied textures of embroidery, skin, and hair emphasize Enkess’s visual difference.

From an early age I saw *Said Abdallah*, along with Cordier’s *Venus Africaine* in a series of small rooms off the main nineteenth-century hall at the Art Institute of Chicago, where they were surrounded by paintings of North Africa and the Middle East. This contextualization left me with a lot of questions, since the museum provided no didactic material to explain the sudden appearance of people of color in this part of the museum.

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\(^1\)Charles Henri Joseph Cordier (1827-1905)
By displaying Orientalist works, which frequently depict people of color and Muslims, in side rooms, curators make this type of genre painting and its subjects marginal to the “European painting and sculpture” hung in central galleries, which largely depicts Caucasians. I have since discovered the complexities of the early creation and display of Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures, which reflect nineteenth-century theories of art and racial difference. In this thesis I historicize these works within discourses of Orientalism, anthropology and colonialism, and in the development of theories of contemporary museum display. Cordier’s works reflect the elision of art objects with anthropological racial theories used to justify colonialism, yet their display in contemporary museums does not address these issues, limiting the works to a depoliticized, aesthetic context.

Attention to features like hair texture and nose shape was not just the realm of Orientalist artists; European ethnographers in the nineteenth century also used garments and physiognomic features to demonstrate the racial differences by which they categorized humanity into hierarchical racial types. Fine artists were uniquely positioned to collect visual data, and many Orientalists considered their works ethnographic. These works are distinct from portraiture, because they do not represent a particular individual, but an emblem of a geographic space. Cordier’s sculptures were useful for anthropologists as a record of racial difference in a natural history setting because they were visual representations in three dimensions, evoking the types of facial measurements used by ethnographers to determine race.
Cordier’s sculpture of Seïd Enkess began a series of bronze and marble “ethnographic” busts depicting people of other races. As the series progressed, and as Cordier encountered non-French people in his travels to Algeria, he carved the figures’ drapery out of increasingly lavish and colorful marbles (See Figures 2 and 3). He included copper, enamel, and cabochons in the decoration of these subjects’ clothes. Using dark bronze patination next to bright marble, Cordier used contrast to emphasize and color his sculptures’ skin and hair. In this way, Cordier used multimedia to highlight physiognomic difference, and particularly color difference. He treated French individual subjects in another way during the same period, creating white marble portraits that were all one material and revealed a limited portion of the models’ shoulders and chest. By contrast, he represented ethnic and cultural others in multicolored, multimedia types, informed by nineteenth-century French Orientalism, anthropological theory, and the relationship of each of these to colonialism.

Enkess was a former slave who worked as a professional artist’s model in Paris. Cordier displayed a painted plaster version of this bust at the Salon of 1848 using the title *Saïd Abdallah, of the Mayac Tribe, Kingdom of Darfur.* By altering Enkess’s last name and locating him by a tribe and kingdom, Cordier made the subject of the work an imaginary representative of a place in Africa, rather than Enkess, a contemporary African living in Paris. This title connects Enkess to Darfur, implying that the model served as an

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3Cordier met Enkess in the studio of François Rude, who had been Cordier’s mentor for two years. Laure de Margerie, “Chronology,” *Facing the Other*, 129.

4The 1848 Salon was unjuried.
authentic specimen of his place of origin, an example of his racial and geographic type. This typing highlights an important tension in Cordier’s work. By exhibiting this in the Salon, Cordier positions this sculpture as fine art. Works of art are an artifice, an image that stands in for a real person, place or event, yet Cordier presents these busts as though they are documents of specimens. The representation of individuals as racial types is embedded in Cordier’s word “ethnographic,” which situates his works in the realms of scientific inquiry and French colonialism. In the 1830s and 40s the term ethnographic was closely tied to the term racial. Anthropology in the nineteenth century considered “problems of human physical diversity,” or why people looked different from one another, as well as the general study of physical and spiritual aspects of humanity. As ethnographic documents, these works circulate in a realm of scientific inquiry with notions of objective truth based in observable reality. The French colonial assertion of power was based on levels of civilization that were judged by geographical, physiognomic and cultural difference, and believed to be observable and measurable by skin color, facial features and elements of culture.

Queen Victoria purchased a copy of the bust of Enkess from the 1851 Great International Exhibition, where it was exhibited under the title *A Negro from Timbuctoo*, showing the ease with which the work’s geographical subject could shift from one African locale to another. The Queen also commissioned a pendant for the bust called

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5Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 119.

6Ibid, 38. Williams ties the development of anthropology to colonization by describing the focus of early physical anthropology on cultures considered primitive in an attempt to stratify the development of civilizations.
Venus Africaine (Figure 4), both of which she gave as gifts to Prince Albert. The same year, copies of these two works were purchased by the French government for the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris. The Muséum presented these works among anthropological skulls and ethnographic artifacts in the Gallery of Anatomy. By displaying sculptures, which represent an artist’s interpretation of a subject, along with skulls and cultural objects, which themselves focus on particular aspects of difference, curators at the Muséum underscored the scientific aspects of the works, situating them in the realm of artifact and scientific evidence. This further allied Cordier’s works with the anthropological establishment of difference that was used to justify colonization and discrimination.

Displaying Cordier

Cordier’s membership in anthropological societies and his display of busts at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle relate these works to debates about racial theory in France. These colonial theories of racial difference were also present in the Salon in the form of Orientalist genre painting. Cordier made a number of casts from his original molds, selling some of these to the Muséum, while continuing to exhibit the same works in Paris Salons. In addition, many of Cordier’s works were commissioned by the government as part of official missions to Algeria and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, connecting them more explicitly to colonialist discourse. Cordier’s ethnographic busts represented French colonies and material technologies at world’s fairs and universal expositions. These exhibitionary tensions and the circulation of these sculptures in the realms of art and science continue beyond the life of Cordier himself. The Musée de l’Homme inherited a

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7Laure de Margerie, “Catalogue Raisonné,” Facing the Other, 205. Records show they were given by the Queen to Prince Albert for his birthday and Christmas the same year.
number of Cordier’s sculptures, and continues to display them in a natural history context, complicating the meaning of Cordier’s body of ethnographic sculptures and affecting the meaning of works presented elsewhere as fine art.

A renewed curatorial interest in Cordier in the twenty-first century has caused a re-evaluation of the works beyond the fields of Orientalism and nineteenth-century sculpture. Catalog entries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Musée d’Orsay have acknowledged the interaction of Cordier’s works with issues of racial difference. In 2004, the Musée d’Orsay exhibited the ethnographic sculptures along with a selection of Cordier’s French portraits, decorative works and maquettes for monuments in a monographic exhibition called *Facing The Other*. Though the exhibition was temporary, the exhibition catalog, which includes a catalogue raisonné, represents the most comprehensive published source of information related to Cordier’s life and works. In the catalog entries and in *Facing the Other*, curators treated these sculptures as celebrations of otherness, appropriating the language of scholarly discourses of racial and cultural difference. This appropriation appears to acknowledge the works’ associations with colonialist and anthropological systems of racial hierarchy. Yet these exhibitions construct Cordier as seeking out difference in order to celebrate its beauty, denying his alignment with the practices of Orientalist artists and with ethnographic research. These roles contributed to theories of visual racial difference that justified French positions of power.

*Cordier in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries*

I begin the following analysis with a comparison of Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures to other Orientalist images displayed at Salons, world’s fairs and museums in
the late 1840s and the 1850s. This period represents the genesis of the ethnographic works, when Cordier was beginning his career and first traveled to Algeria. I focus on depictions of Algerians, though I argue that Cordier’s sculptures of all non-French ethnic groups share Orientalizing motifs and were created out of colonial motives. In examining primary sources including travel guides, journals and works of art, I provide a historicized context for Cordier’s representations of Mediterranean peoples, framing my analysis in the discourse of Orientalism.

I then turn to the particular relationship of the three-dimensional medium of sculpture to nineteenth-century racial theories and early approaches to anthropology. Though paintings make up much of Orientalist art, sculpture has a clearer affinity to ethnography. Cordier himself described the similarity between his sculptural process and anthropological methods of recording physiognomy. I compare Cordier’s busts to anthropological life casts and ethnographic photographs displayed along with his sculptures in the nineteenth century and again in 2004. Considering the multiplicity and three-dimensionality of sculpture, I further compare Cordier’s works to nineteenth-century human displays and racial typing in order to establish the particular efficacy of sculpture as a medium for recording difference.

The third chapter considers the creation of Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures in the context of his contribution to colonialist missions. Cordier actively participated in the discourse and migration of colonization, expressing anxiety about disappearing Algerian races and a belief that he could preserve them in sculptural form through firsthand observation. On his missions he created ethnographic busts and inspected marble quarries for the French government. The conflation of human with geological resources evident in
these simultaneous projects is demonstrated by Cordier’s use of local materials in sculpting ethnic types from particular regions, a practice that collapses the models’ physiognomic and sartorial features with characteristics of their particular landscapes.

Finally, I discuss the way the twenty-first century installation of the ethnographic sculptures at the Musée d’Orsay and at the Musée de l’Homme evokes the history of their display in both aesthetic and scientific contexts. These exhibitions raise complex issues of categorization and allocation present in the contemporary configuration of the French national collections in Paris that relate to interpretations of French history and empire. By circumscribing these themes with the terms beauty, curiosity, and movement, the Musée d’Orsay and the Musée de l’Homme both provide incomplete histories of Cordier’s works, and contribute to an incomplete understanding of the development of works of art alongside anthropology. The exhibitions fail to examine the myth that artists have privileged access to, and understanding of, physiognomic and color difference, and the way contemporary and past audiences understand and stereotype other cultures through decontextualized art objects.
Chapter 1: Orientalism

Cordier exhibited his ethnographic sculptures in a number of venues, each of which inflected the works with different meanings. In the context of the Paris Salons, the busts functioned as decorative images ostensibly divorced from the context of their creation. They were received as examples of artistic truth based on an understanding of the artist as a privileged interpreter of the world. Cordier’s works fall under the rubric of Orientalism defined by Edward Said in relation to colonial literature. Said describes European information about the Islamic world as a reflection of its own construction of the Orient. Orientalism, Said explains, is a discourse, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”

In visual art, Orientalism can be emblematized by Eugène Delacroix’s 1834 painting *Femmes d’Alger* (Figure 5) or Eugène Fromentin’s 1846 drawing *Café à Blidah* (Figure 6). Both these artists use the contrasting tones of their subjects’ skin against the light and dark segments of the background to emphasize color difference and garments. Delacroix sets the one dark-skinned woman in his composition against a bright cloth, and the lighter-skinned, seated women against the room’s shadows. Fromentin, depicting groups of men on a mid-tone ground, uses bright whites to highlight their garments and architectural elements, and black to delineate the shadows on their skin. Significantly, both these paintings include particular architecture in the backgrounds along with titles that name places in Algeria, cues that situate the works in an Islamic context. Because his

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work is sculptural, Cordier employs only his models’ garments, along with titles, to situate them geographically. Painters now considered Orientalist used environmental cues and naturalism to record their experiences of the Orient as though they were historical and ethnographic evidence. The interpretation of these works as unquestioned records of the cultures of their subjects disconnected these works from the practical aspects of their creation, and distanced the works from artists’ subjectivities and biases.

The situation of Cordier’s busts in contexts that posited them as art objects and scientific documents reinforced their status as accurate depictions of other races, equating their naturalistic rendering with scientific observation. The movement of these busts from a Salon context to a natural history museum extends their apolitical status as works of art to the scientific space, so that fine art and anthropology both endorse the conditions and politics of these representations. Cordier’s busts, like much of Orientalist cultural production, proclaim the superiority and prejudices of colonizing peoples while seeming to investigate and celebrate the nature of subject peoples.

The deployment of artists as envoys of France to the colonies served a number of practical purposes, including the simple movement of French bodies to and through newly colonized spaces. Nineteenth-century artists from the metropole gained privileged access to images of other lands, and brought both intellectual and physical resources from the colonies back to France in the service of the government. The influx of images of colonial landscapes and daily life helped to further French interests by creating and reinforcing the superiority and civilization of the French.

Both Edward Said and Linda Nochlin explain that European culturally-embedded stereotypes about North Africa were reproduced in artistic and cultural production,
regardless of what artists encountered in North Africa.10 Said describes Orientalism as dealing “not with a correspondence between Orientalism and the Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient.”11 Central to French perceptions of the Orient was a belief that art and its production existed outside the political realm, and were influenced only by transcendent inspiration. In fact, artists manifested human prejudices and explicitly served political interests in genre painting and Orientalist art. Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures participated in the larger process of justifying colonial rule by reflecting a particular version of both French and Oriental identities to his European audience.

*Locating Orientalism in Cordier’s Ethnographic Sculptures*

Though many of Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures served French colonial interests, they portray a range of otherness beyond people of French colonies, including Greek, Italian, Egyptian and Chinese peoples. Cordier’s transformation of these subjects into types reflects a colonizing impulse to collect and display otherness in order to position France at the center of power. Historian of art and science Barbara Larson convincingly argues that Cordier’s chosen subjects are treated in an Orientalist manner. Those that are not explicitly Mediterranean subjects were commissioned, meaning their subjects were not chosen by Cordier. Cordier’s non-commissioned works take North Africans and Mediterranean Europeans as their primary subjects, people who, she argues, “could equally fall under the designation Orientalist.”12 To a nineteenth-century French

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audience, the Orient consisted of North Africa and the Middle East. Said maintained that Orientalism “derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only India and the Bible lands.”\(^\text{13}\) He goes on to define Orientalism in opposition to “a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans,” unifying western European cultural identity against the rest of the world\(^\text{14}\)

The subjects of Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures cannot all be classified as non-European, since works like *Femme Hydriote, Jeune Grecque, Jeune Fille des environs de Rome* (Figures 2, 7, and 8), and others depict subjects from Greece and Italy. Rather, Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures represent a reconfiguration of Said’s categories that limits ‘us’ to French Caucasians. Cordier’s Mediterranean European subjects, like his North African subjects, represent a range of ethnicity, skin coloration and ornamentation. Yet all these busts are treated with the same level of naturalism, attention to sartorial detail, interest in particularized facial features and use of polychromy that characterize Orientalist artworks.\(^\text{15}\)

Cordier’s Orientalism thus includes parts of Europe considered by the French to be culturally or sartorially other. These busts may represent migrating Mediterranean populations Cordier encountered in Algeria, where a large number of Italian, Greek and Alsatian immigrants lived in the nineteenth century. Though he also traveled to Egypt

\(^{13}\)Said, *Orientalism*, 4.

\(^{14}\)Ibid, 7.

\(^{15}\)In this paper, polychromy refers to the use of different media in a single sculpture, such as the combination of bronze and marble, or the use of white marble and onyx marble for their colors to create effects of light and dark or for their patterns to emphasize aspects of ornamentation on the works. It includes the techniques enameling and of plating bronze to increase the range of available patinas.
and Greece, Cordier spent an important period of his career attempting to create works of
different Algerian “types,” and returned to Algeria a number of times, moving there
permanently late in his life.\textsuperscript{16} Algeria’s history and colonization is therefore an important
context that frames the creation of Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures.

*French Perceptions of Algeria*

The diversity present in Algeria in the nineteenth century was the product of a
long history of migration and Empire-building that dates at least to the first-century
Roman outpost at Icosium, and continues with vast and multicultural dynasties from the
whole circumference of the Mediterranean coast. The political and historical identities
embodied in the presence of Kabyle, Arab, Maltese, Greek, and Sudanese peoples in
Algeria form a complex history of the Ottoman Empire in the region beginning in the
sixteenth century. French colonization of Algeria began with the 1830 defeat of the
Ottomans, only a generation before Cordier arrived. The early French occupation was
marked by the looting of goods, architecture, and artifacts and the violence of conquest
and insurgency. It was in the field in Algeria that the French occupying government
determined its colonial policies, through the suggestion and implementation of policies of
“mildness, push-back and extermination” toward non-French inhabitants, depending on
the circumstances.\textsuperscript{17} The violence of the early occupation influenced the reception of all
future attempts at reform, and the subjugation of people indigenous to Algeria continued
to characterize their relationship to the French.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
Cordier’s position in Algeria was explicitly colonial; he was sent as an emissary of the French government, charged with recording the empire for the benefit of people in France. His mission as a sculptor, to capture and categorize the physiognomy of types of subject peoples, underscores his role as part of the French colonial project. To make manifest these types, Cordier relied on his skill as a portraitist, which allowed him to reproduce the features of individuals convincingly, and evoked the contemporary ethnographic practice of craniometry and facial mapping. That the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle employed Cordier’s works, and later commissioned two, in a scientific capacity reflects their presupposition that a portrait can stand in for a whole ethnic group. This use of his extant works invested Cordier with the power to choose the best representative of a group, according to his own predilections and preconceptions, and reinforced the early anthropological practice of typing, which assumes a group can be adequately represented by an individual or by a set of data collected and compared among a group of individuals.

Cordier defined Algerian types by religion as well as ethnicity, evident in the titles Juive d’Alger and Mulâtresse, prêtresse à la fête des fèves (Figures 3 and 9). Jews had been present in Algeria for centuries, both as traders and as refugees from Egypt and later Spain. These early Jewish communities helped to found the major Algerian cities, including Algiers and Oran, and created and oversaw a separate legal code under the Ottoman Empire. In contrast to the large Islamic population in Algeria, the Jewish minority interacted and traded with French colonizers, providing an opportunity for

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alliance between French officials and important members of the Algerian community.\textsuperscript{20} Christianity, the dominant religion in France at the time, was mobilized as a site of unity among colonists in Algeria who were otherwise politically and economically disparate. Islam thus became an important sign of difference between colonizers and colonized who occupied the same space.

After 1840 Muslim religious leaders allied themselves to organized anticolonial violence by naming Abd al-Kader commander of the faithful and governor-general. His army, then 60,000 soldiers, had nearly doubled by the time he was defeated by the French military in 1847, having waged constant war on the coastal cities and mountain regions inhabited by colonists and military outposts.\textsuperscript{21} The French cast this conflict as an Islamic uprising rather than a war for independence, using religion to distance Algerian Muslims from French citizens, and eventually to deprive them of rights. Cordier does not explicitly identify any of his Algerian types as Muslim, though periodicals from the time reflect a French awareness of Abd al-Kader and the Islamic movement for independence from French rule.\textsuperscript{22}

Information about North Africa came to France in a number of ways in the second half of the nineteenth century. Imports and imagery of North Africa focused on craft production like textiles and rugs, and architecture instead of figurative art. This in part

\textsuperscript{20}Stora, \textit{Algeria 1830-2000}, 9-10. This opportunity was codified in 1870 through the Crémieux decrees, which naturalized Algerian Jews as French citizens.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid, 4. After years of violent confrontation between French and Algerian military forces, the colonial government instituted the Code Indiginit, which outlined legal restrictions placed on non-French Algerians, based on the belief that French laws were not harsh enough to control Islamic peoples. These measures were systematized after the transfer of power from military to colonist rule in 1871.

\textsuperscript{22}\textit{L'Illustration, Journal Universel}, \textquotedblleft Abd-el-Kader au fort Lamaigue,	extquotedblright No. 270, Vol. 11 (Samedi 29 Avril 1848) 155-8.
responded to stereotypes that Islam forbade figurative imagery, and in part denied North Africans the type of artistic achievement that Europe believed characterized civilization. Images and articles in newspapers and magazines joined fine art in portraying particular stereotypes of North Africa. In the 1840s the journal *L’Illustration* extensively covered the Salon of 1848, including reproductions of a number of Orientalist paintings displayed there. It further included illustrated articles like “De la magie et du magnétisme en Orient,” a travel journal of a man’s experiences in Oran, and one full-page illustration of “Types Orientaux” (Figure 10).23 A travel guide to Algeria in 1895 describes its “population and races,” differentiating among Christians, Jews and “Islamists” as well as subdividing the last group into Berbers and Arabs.24 Sources like these elaborate the specific stereotypes present in France, illustrating “Oriental” men wearing robes and smoking long pipes and women in isolated groups. Articles about magic and slavery in the Orient reinforced beliefs that North Africans were less evolved than Europeans: degenerate, lazy, and violent. Descriptions of Algeria continued to focus on the diversity of ethnicities and religions using limiting Orientalist representations, as Cordier did in his ethnographic works.

*Orientalist Art*

The visual vocabulary available to Cordier was necessarily restricted by precedent and colonial expectation. The mobilization of artists on colonial projects has a long history in France, as explained by Todd Porterfield. His discussion of Algeria focuses on

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Delacroix, who visited Algiers in the earliest days of French occupation and later created the painting *Femmes d’Alger*. Porterfield argues that the naturalistic treatment of this work implies that Delacroix was painting from experience, thus was present in the harem, transgressing Islamic cultural codes. The painting embodies a narrative of access to forbidden colonial space and a power relationship of the artist over his models. Based on this narrative the image reinforces the ideological superiority of the French over the Algerians, who kept their women restricted to lavish interiors in a state of perpetual sexual availability, according to this canvas.

This early example of a French depiction of Algeria would have influenced Cordier’s interpretation and French expectations of imagery of Algerians. Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures participate in the tradition of, and are tied to expectations established by works like, the *Femmes d’Alger*. The naturalism of the ethnographic sculptures, like Delacroix’s painting, belies the complex decisions these artists made in the course of producing them. In spite of his scientific approach and clear facility with naturalistic portraiture, Cordier’s works are not exact reproductions of their sitters. Regardless of his mimetic accuracy, Cordier filtered his choices of models, subjects and materials to emphasize particular racial qualities in the works. He described his process of choosing a model for the works saying “I search among the individuals that I have studied and compared for the one that presents to the highest degree the reunion of the

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special beauties of an entire population.”

As a part of the French colonial apparatus, he bases the subject of a people’s “special beauties” on a European index both of beauty and of the traits that are representative of race, with a focus on difference. Further, he represents this interpretation to a colonizing audience, reinforcing their preconceptions of the Orient. Said’s *Orientalism* emphasized precisely this point, that there are no de-politicized Orientalist works. Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures, based on their naturalism and subject matter, are politicized in this sense, tied to theories of both racial hierarchy and colonialism.

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Chapter 2: Racial Theories and Anthropology

The concept of race in mid-nineteenth-century France was largely formed by the developing field of anthropology. Race itself was a fluid and contested word, a concept also called species or variety, depending on the author’s theoretical affiliation. Monogenists like the scientists at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle believed that all races descended from the same two people, Adam and Eve, and that differences in skin color could be accounted for by the degenerative effects of non-European climates.29 Polygenists, including the founders of the Society of Anthropology, conceived of races as different species of humans created separately. Though this theory does not explicitly center on theories of degeneration, “the egalitarian possibilities of polygenism were left undeveloped,” and its supporters “stressed a separate and inferior destiny for the black race.”30 Polygenists found evidence of European superiority in their perception of Europe as more civilized than other races. Both groups found proof of African inferiority in physical characteristics like the slant of the forehead in profile or the weight of the brain, explaining either that this resulted from degeneration or from separate creation.31

Physical anthropology, the comparative study of the physiognomic characteristics of different peoples, predominated as the basis for theories of racial difference. The

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30Ibid, 86.

31Ibid, 221-232.
definition of racial types intersected with theories of climate and focused on global regions. Scientists considered climate a defining factor of perceived racial differences like skin color and temperament. Before the development of fieldwork, anthropologists relied on the free and forced movement of foreign people to Europe as examples of racial types. Anthropology in nineteenth-century France was associated early on with the display of non-Europeans in the Jardin d’Acclimatation, where scientists would go to take measurements of performers, who were not always participating voluntarily. These scientists focused their attention on the measurements of skulls and the cataloging of human features through written and photographic records, reflecting the way difference was considered calculable and visualizable. Anthropologists hotly debated the hierarchies and equalities of racial types, partly in the context of abolition. Significantly, arguments for the rights of African slaves in France and its colonies did not displace French theories of racial difference, but reinforced the existing social construction of hierarchies of differentiation. It was in this anthropological context that Cordier produced and circulated his ethnographic sculptures as examples of typological difference. These discourses are therefore critical to understanding his works.


Sculpture and Difference

The Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, as an early patron of Cordier’s ethnographic works, played an integral part in the definition of his market, as did the anthropological belief in the possibility of categorizing and quantifying racial difference through collecting records of comparative physiognomies. After receiving one order from the Muséum for copies of the existing sculptures Venus Africaine and Saïd Abdallah as well as the commission for Chinois and Chinoise, Cordier applied in 1853 for a mission to Algeria to study its people and travelled there in 1856. Cordier exhibited copies of the four works held at the Muséum as “types nègres” and “types mongols” at the Universal Exposition of 1855, and by 1860 had developed an “ethnographic gallery” including dozens of busts which he exhibited as parts of expositions in Le Havre, London, and Paris. This last was part of a display of Algerian products at the Palais de l’Industrie.35 Cordier continued to create portraits of French noble people, decorative sculptures and monuments along with his ethnographic busts, but he found success by identifying himself as an ethnographic sculptor specializing in racial types.

Cordier participated in two ways in the different schools of anthropology that were establishing themselves in nineteenth-century Paris. He displayed works in the ethnographic context of the Muséum beginning in 1851, and was a member of the Society of Anthropology from 1860. Cordier framed his process of choosing a model as a search for “a face that reflects with harmony and balance the essential moral and intellectual character of the…race,” which he claimed to find by going to another country.

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and observing a number of people until he found “the one who presents the most pronounced characteristics associated with his race.”

Cordier here introduces ideas of “harmony and balance” into his version of racial typing. The physical demonstration of non-physical characteristics like “morality” would have been central to the project of anthropological comparison at this time. Cordier’s methods departed from standard anthropological data collection, however, which relied on instruments of ostensibly increasing accuracy, believed to be more reliable than the senses. Anthropologists historically mistrusted artistic processes, seeing a tension between their own search for scientific evidence and the motivations of artists, who claimed a privileged faculty of the sense of sight. Describing this conflict, Nélia Dias writes,

Opposition between the observable, measurable and numerical anthropological features and the descriptive physical characteristics depicted in images was seen as part of a broader dichotomy between facts and value-judgments, or objectivity and subjectivity.

Dias establishes the perceived polarity of anthropological research and artistic interpretation. Paul Broca, founder of the Society of Anthropology, responded to this opposition between art and anthropology. In 1868 he wrote, “the history of the arts… forms part of the programme of anthropology,” which “demands from [the sciences grouped around it] particulars rather than didactic developments; and in this way anthropology can exclude no branch of human knowledge.” Broca explicitly describes art as one of these branches of human knowledge, suggesting that works of visual art can


provide raw data that anthropologists then interpret. As a member of the Society of Anthropology in Paris beginning in 1860, Cordier would have been familiar with arguments for the relevance of art to anthropological research, as well as anthropological standards of head and face measurements. This context would have allowed him to argue for the scientific validity of his own sculptural process, which he saw as both artistic and anthropological.

In a presentation to the Society of Anthropology in 1862, Cordier used anatomical terms to describe his method of mapping a face from a central point in preparation for a sculpture:

To set up my measurements, I start from some central point – for example, the center of the ear – to determine the slant of the medial line from the chin to the occipital bone; then I trace the arc of a circle, beneath which I determine the position of each feature, each depression, every landmark, and so on for all the lines, for all the contours, down to the most delicate crevice and protrusion.39

Cordier uses the vocabulary of anatomy and anthropology in this description, explaining the accuracy of his measurements and perhaps implying his use of tools to touch the faces of his subjects.

Cordier describes his process for choosing a model in explicit terms of racial typing, “I reconstruct an ensemble in which I reunite all the special beauty of a given race.” He goes on to say that the representative individual is always “of a superior class,” to whom, therefore, his sculpted portraiture is a more appropriate recourse than life casting.40 Sculpture was a highly respected art form, and people who sat for portraits


were privileged, whereas life casting and ethnographic photography were uncomfortable and humiliating. These were systems of typing and measurement for science rather than for posterity. In order to compare multiple types anthropologists employed life casts, which required the model to have plaster smeared on his or her face, and photographs, usually taken frontally and in profile, requiring long posing. Life casts would have been preferable to photographs because they would have allowed anthropologists to compare three-dimensional measurements.

Cordier’s sculptures provided the solution for one wealthy Chinese family’s disinclination to subject themselves to life casting. Sitting for sculptures allowed the couple to maintain their dignity, at least through the distinction of the sculptural product, and provided the typological example for Chinese people that the anthropologists wanted. The early half-length portraits of this Chinese family, called Chinois and Chinoise (Figures 11 and 12) both have a high sheen on their faces and hands. Their garments are elaborately decorated with carvings that represent embroidery and are cut into a rougher texture that highlights the reflective bronze of their skin by absorbing the light around it. The long fingernails of Chinois signify leisure and his class status as a merchant. Cordier focused on the differentiation of his subjects’ garments, as well as their skin and hair, and provided a three-dimensional representation of Chinese people that satisfied both the Museum’s desire for representations of racial types and the models’ desire to maintain the dignity that was their due in their own culture.

Facing the Other includes two contradictory scenarios about the creation of these works. Margerie describes Cordier generating the subject of Chinois and Chinoise, whereas Barthe claims the commission was designed by the museum, and the subjects were chosen by its anthropologists in advance.

A later version of these two sculptures became Cordier’s first polychrome works, made of bronze with blue and red enamel details in the clothing.

Cordier’s and others’ sculptures were purchased for the anthropology room at the Jardin des Plantes, where the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle was located. This anthropology room was a new project in 1852, headed by Etienne-René-Augustin Serres, director of the natural history museum’s laboratory of human anatomy and natural history. Paris-Guide of 1867 includes a description of Cordier’s works in these anthropological rooms, describing their situation among physiognomic specimens, including skulls and preserved heads. In the first hall a visitor saw “a row of Arab and Kabylian heads, most of them decapitated by a Yataghan saber and dried in the African sun. Their white teeth protrude from shiveled lips that are contorted in the horrible grimace of violent death.” In the second hall, Cordier’s sculptures “were surrounded by molds made from the faces of living Tibetans.”

The placement of commissioned sculptures among objects like life casts and skulls relates them to anthropological objects. Their status as sculptures with a high level of detail and finish distinguishes them visually from other classes of objects in the galleries, reinforcing their privileged status as fine art. The sculptures provided a tangible

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46 Ibid, 104.


48 Ibid.
and complete focus for the viewer, against the mass of fragmentary evidence that included bones and organs preserved in ethanol, as well as wax models of body parts.\textsuperscript{49} Though both are fragmentary, the conventions of sculptural representation provoke a familiar response from viewers, compared to the unsettling presentation of preserved body parts and other replicas. Alice Conklin, writing about a similar display sixty years later, describes interspersed fine art busts at the Musée de l’Homme as

instantiations of generalized racial archetypes whose difference could be read – according to experts – in their very bones. This tendency by anthropologists to embody race difference in a particular selection of measurable features was especially evident in France.\textsuperscript{50}

The sculptures in these scenes provide a three-dimensional, measurable “archetype” of the culture described by specimens and artifacts in the room. Nélia Dias, writing about the earlier display, explains that while fine art and anthropology were understood as separate disciplines, art could be used as a form of anthropology: “in this order of ideas the busts and sculptures, while retaining their artistic quality, were valued for their informational content.”\textsuperscript{51} By this definition, the sculptures manifested scientific concepts that were measurably embodied elsewhere, both in the scientific objects surrounding them and in the actual bodies of Chinese and African peoples elsewhere in the world.

\textit{Multiplicity}

Cordier explicitly collected types of otherness and circumscribed his models with markers of their relationship to Europe. In the galleries of the Muséum, Cordier’s works of fine art were presented as ethnographic evidence. This complicates their status in the


\textsuperscript{50} Alice Conklin, “Skulls on Display” 253. Emphasis hers.

\textsuperscript{51} Nélia Dias, “Cultural Objects/Natural Objects,” 44.
Art-Culture System devised by James Clifford in an effort to explain the distinction between aesthetic and cultural authenticity. Clifford discusses the movement of both European and non-European objects between zones of “masterpiece” and “artifact.” The criteria for their authenticity as cultural or art objects changed based on their position in or between these zones. Cordier’s works complicate this dynamic. Like ethnographic photographs and plaster casts, they cannot be artifacts because they represent non-Europeans rather than being non-European themselves. Yet, the sculptures are positioned liminally between physiognomic artifacts and masterpieces. By juxtaposition, they represent the failure of non-European cultural artifacts to qualify as works of art. Because they are surrounded by skulls they represent the evolution and refinement of European technology. They further represent the missing context of the fine art museum or Salon, not simply because they are art objects, but because copies of these same works could be seen in those contexts elsewhere in Paris. Finally, the sculptures combine with photographs and plaster casts as European objects that control the representation of non-Europeans.

Nineteenth-century European cast sculpture maintained a complex relationship to authenticity because its process rendered its product reproducible. The only true original sculpture is the artist’s clay model, which is destroyed in the process of creating the plaster mold that led to a bronze or plaster copy of the clay and subsequent wax versions. A sculpture’s authenticity results from its place in a series of “originals,” since the process of creating wax copies for casting slowly degrades the first plaster mold, causing slight degradation to the products. Sculpture is “a hybrid, fugitive medium that has

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poached on a number of different fields and been an interloper in different institutions and spaces.” The three-dimensionality of sculpture associates it with a series of ethnographic objects that includes fetishes, dolls and funerary objects. In the nineteenth century, debates raged about the commercialization and miniaturization of fine art sculpture, revealing the precariousness of sculpture as a category. Yet multiplicity of originals allows sculpture to inhabit many spaces simultaneously. Cordier was able to take advantage of this, selling multiple copies of many of his works and trading on the reputation he gained through the display of his works as ethnographic types at the Muséum.

The use of solid three-dimensional figures to represent difference, whether chronological, racial, or religious, mobilizes Mark Sandberg’s theorization of the effigy as a corporeal index in wax figures. Naturalistic representations of people, he explains, are presumed to be portraits taken from a live sitter, “[relying] on a combination of iconicity (its powers of resemblance) and indexicality (its physical connection to a source) for its realistic effect.” The use of mannequins allows viewers to separate themselves from the body placed in context yet visualize themselves in contact with the distanced people represented. In this way Cordier’s sculptures visually demonstrate difference and allow viewers to experience themselves in the same space as people ethnically and sartorially distinct from themselves. In the case of Cordier’s sculptures, this association maintained the distance between France and Algeria while allowing

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audiences to express enthusiasm for the subjects of the ethnographic sculptures. In contrast to news of contemporary colonial warfare, these fragments of bodies provided a nonthreatening experience of racialized violence and reinforced the superiority of the viewer as an animate, particular entity.

Sculptural originals and racial types share a complex relationship to authenticity. The Greek word for type, *tupos*, has a dual definition of both an impression and a figure, that is, both the “physical contact between” and the “image of objects,” a particularly useful duality in the context of typological sculptures. The multiple meanings of *tupos* reflect the tension of racial typing, where members of a group are created from or refer back to a supposed original, in the same way that sculptures are cast from a single mold. Linda Kim considers the effect of the sculptural process of creating series of molds from series of originals on the twentieth-century sculptor Malvina Hoffman’s sense of human types. In choosing this focus, Kim rejects Hoffman’s own claim that artists inherently notice morphological groups and differences because of their artistic training and their affinity for noticing the visual. Hoffman’s interpretation of her skill reflects the persistence of the belief in the privileged status of artists to manifest difference, and the particular efficacy of replicable sculptures for portraying racial types.

Cordier’s practice of creating multiple copies and versions of works through the addition of polychromy and multimedia helped him avoid potentially contradictory meanings of simultaneous display in natural history and fine art contexts. In fact, he believed sculpture and anthropology could be used together, since both were concerned with observing and cataloging particular human features they believed measurably

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55Kim, “Malvina Hofmann’s Races of Mankind,” 27.
distinguished one racial type from another. Since racial typing relied heavily on three-dimensional measurements taken from the face and head, ethnographic photography provided an inferior record of race, though it was displayed in the Muséum as well. The repetition of images of the same subjects from different angles shows anthropologists’ efforts to achieve three-dimensionality using photographs. Yet as Nancy Stepan points out, photographs include all present information, so unless the photographic studio is consciously staged, the effect of garments and environment could reveal aspects of hybridity, modernity or colonial mixing that undermine the project of producing discreet ahiistorical racial types.\(^{56}\)

Life casting provided a three-dimensional version of a subject which could be measured and compared visually, but reflected so much particular detail of each subject that their broad use as a type would have been impossible. The success of ethnographic photographs and life casts would have hinged on their comparison across a large collection of specimens, so that a more generalized conglomerate type would be embodied in the viewer’s mind. By contrast to ethnographic photographs and life casts, sculpture emphasized the three-dimensional facial measurements needed by anthropologists, but without excessive specificity. Sculpture moved beyond the broad index and concretized types previously only imagined by anthropologists. Further, through its multiplicity of originals and relationship to types, sculpture provided a privileged, three-dimensional product uniquely positioned to present racial types.

Chapter 3: Colonialism

French displays of otherness from Algeria played a pivotal role in forming French images and ideologies about the colonies and the rest of the world. The colonization of Algeria was brought home through Orientalist depictions of North Africa and justified by anthropological racial theories, as discussed in the last two sections. Christine Peltre, in her survey of Orientalism, categorizes Cordier as an Orientalist artist because of his North African subject matter and the naturalism of its treatment.57 His position as an Orientalist was sustained by his participation in government missions that formed part of the colonial apparatus, particularly his mission to Algeria in 1856.

Travel to North Africa and the Middle East was an integral part of many Orientalist artists’ processes. Travel to increasingly distant countries was supported by the Salon-sponsored bourse de voyage beginning in 1881.58 These types of official scholarships were pioneered by artists like Charles Cordier and Eugène Fromentin, who traveled to Algeria in the early days of French colonization. While these artists were not themselves colonists, since they did not settle in Algeria, they were active participants in the colonial project.59 Cordier mediated the colonies visually for France by activating the scientific language of anthropology and racial typing, and by representing the new colony

57Christine Peltre, Orientalism (Paris: Terrail, 2004), 119-120.

58Roger Benjamin, Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa 1880-1930 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003), 130. The bourse de voyage was intended to augment the prix de Rome by sending artists to non-European countries to study and develop subject matter.

59Cordier did resettle to Algiers at the end of his life, but during the period under discussion his permanent home was in Paris.
of Algeria at a more manageable scale, using familiar vocabulary. He brought Algeria back to France in the form of mute and inanimate sculptures that stood in for the vast, unwieldy Algerian population.

Algeria was marked in news reports by violence and insurrection, particularly the rebellion of Abd al-Kader in 1847. Visualizing Algerians as racial types rather than as a spectrum of peoples with varied political and religious loyalties and beliefs simplified news of Algeria for the French. By reducing the particularity of individual Algerians to male and female types, Cordier also evokes French beliefs about the inferiority of African and Arab men and the mysterious sexuality of North African women. These racialized and gendered sculptural interpretations of types could be collected and arranged in orderly fashion, giving works of art the power to disguise the reality of French oppression of people and exploitation of resources, effectively distracting the French from the news that many Algerians were actively and violently protesting colonial rule.

In 1851, Cordier began to solicit support for a trip to French North Africa. In 1854 he requested a mission “to spend six months in Algeria to reproduce the different types that right now are merging into one and the same people.”60 The urgency of this request reflects the anxiety of colonizers that subject races were disappearing. Anxiety about the disappearance of racial types can refer either to the extinction of a people or to a loss of tradition and purity through cultural and sexual intermixture. While the former results from colonial invasion, the latter is a result of the colonial perception of pure cultural and racial types, which are a European construction, situated in a static pre-

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60 Charles Cordier, quoted in Margerie, “Chronology,” 131.
colonial history in which an imagined pure French race encounters an imagined pure other.61

Intercultural exchange, invasion and occupation had taken place for centuries in Algeria before the French invasion in 1830. In spite of this long history, French commentators generally perceived Algerians to be largely racially homogenous; at most, they recognized their division into Kabyle and Arab peoples.62 The French hierarchy that justified colonization of North Africa was based on gendered stereotypes of a homogenous, inferior North Africa without any nuanced sense of a cultural or racial spectrum.63 In Orientalist painting, men are portrayed as unjustly violent and oppressive, which “leaves the woman free for the abduction of the viewer’s gaze since she is not attached within the painting, being mismatched with a male who is her obvious inferior. Thus, she must desire to be saved from her fate in some way.”64 The notion that French colonists were liberating sexualized Algerian women from inferior men informs Cordier’s concern over the disappearance of racial purity. Based on his Orientalist understanding, the pure races he expected to mix may have been French and Algerian, since virile French men would, according to the Orientalist colonial imagination, have been liberating sexually available Algerian women. Many of Cordier’s busts of Mediterranean women are sexualized through their clothes. Their breasts, with clearly


63Young, Colonial Desire, 94.

defined nipples, are often framed by their garments, which reveal a lot of “skin” in many of the ethnographic sculptures. This portrayal makes these types available for the sexual titillation of Cordier’s French metropolitan audience and by extension suggests the availability of real Algerian women. These Orientalist representations of the sexual availability of colonized women embody both their moral inferiority and their powerlessness in the eyes of colonizers.

The urgency Cordier expresses about the mixture of races and the disappearance of purity in Algeria is a common, though complex, colonial trope. It both contains and masks the perception that the disappearance of actual subject peoples and of their traditions and cultural objects in part results from colonial violence. It also projects the Eurocentric view that these peoples have static and unchanging races and cultures, by contrast to the dynamic urban French. Conceiving of colonized individuals as types and re-casting their disappearance in terms of unattributed decline fits in the framework of anthropological theories of hierarchical civilizations discussed in the previous section. By framing colonization in terms of disappearing cultures, Europeans justified their own destruction of colonized populations and occupation of colonized landscapes as salvation.

Many French artists and anthropologists expressed the belief that it was the responsibility of colonizers to preserve a record of subject cultures and races for posterity. Cordier, for example, wrote in a letter in 1856, “The sum of 13,000 francs will enable the state to acquire thirteen durable objects belonging to both the worlds of art and science.” He positions himself in this letter as a bridge between France and Algeria.

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Inherent in his proposal to capture the typological physiognomy of Algerians is a belief in tangible and recognizable racial difference and his own privileged ability, as a sculptor, to perceive and reproduce it. Because of its materials sculpture provided a more permanent record of its subjects than other art forms. The association of its “durable” quality privileges sculpture as the best means for the preservation of vanishing races. This typing of colonial subjects, moreover, helped the French government to understand the Algerian population as a whole. The French government relied on anthropological information to determine extant social power structures in order to attempt to intervene in the colonies.

*Ordering Algeria*

In light of this perceived need to preserve the purity of other cultures, Europeans collected objects, animals, and people from their colonies and displayed them in museums, world’s fairs, universal expositions and human exhibitions. The act of collecting and displaying non-European people and objects reinforced the colonial power structure that positioned white Europeans as the most knowledgeable and civilized, justifying colonial missions. It gave colonizers the power to mediate the way non-Europeans were seen in Europe, to justify both the violence and the expense of French colonization. These displays were mechanisms by which Europeans both developed and bolstered anthropological theories of race and civilization discussed in the previous section. Cordier’s representation of cultural others in vivid colors and exquisite detail

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68 Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities*, 134.
celebrates his own ability to see, perceive, and mediate Algeria, Greece, and Egypt for the French. In this way, Cordier positions himself as the anthropological eyes of France, identifying types of Algerians and others in order to render them up to French scientific and aesthetic scrutiny in an established system of “world-as-exhibition.”

Cordier’s mission in Algeria combined ethnographic data collection with the inventorying of geological resources. Cordier spent part of his trips to Algeria and Greece investigating marble and alabaster quarries. Algerian quarries are the source for much of the onyx marble he used in his later work, and constituted an important colonial resource. Onyx marble was presented in 1860, along with a number of Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures, in the Exhibition of Algerian Products at the Palais de l’Industrie. Cordier’s mission constituted a commercial expedition for artistic and architectural material goods, as well as a mission to record the typologies of the subject peoples from whom the resources were taken. Cordier’s use of materials from the same regions as his Algerian models, including Arabe d’El Aghouat (1856), Capresse des Colonies (1861), and Juive d’Alger (1862) (Figures 13, 14 and 3), reinforces their colonial location and collapses the distinction between geological and human goods. Onyx marble was seen as a traditional material used by the Roman Empire and inherited

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70 Edouard Papet, “The Polychromy Techniques of Charles Cordier,” in Facing The Other: Charles Cordier (1827-1905), Ethnographic Sculptor, eds. Laure de Margerie and Edouard Papet (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004), 83. Papet clarifies the term onyx marble, “sometimes erroneously referred to as “onyx.” In proper usage, onyx is a variety of agate, a hard stone often used for intaglios and cameos. Onyx-marble is a compact, translucent variety of calcite that can appear in hues of white, yellowish, grayish or dark brownish, and red. It is a type of alabaster, a pure limestone with traces of magnesia and iron carbonates that result from the formation of subterranean stalagmites.”

71 Ibid.

Cordier examined these ancient quarries, said to have been abandoned until the French occupation, which the French subsequently excavated and exported to Europe. This lineage from ancient Rome to nineteenth-century France draws a parallel between ancient Roman sculpture and Cordier’s, and between the Roman Empire and the French colonization of Algeria. It further accuses those in power in Algeria since the Romans, from the Umayyads to the Ottomans, of failing to recognize the use and value of this resource, a failure that reinforces the racial hierarchy that positions Europe above Islamic North Africa.

Cordier’s contextualization of the Orient is displayed in and on the bodies of his ethnographic sculptures through Algerian stone, which Cordier often used to carve garments and sometimes flesh. The version of *Arabe d’El Aghouat* (Figure 13) clothed in a burnous exemplifies Cordier’s practices of sculpting an Algerian subject from onyx marble and combining different materials to emphasize racial difference. A particularly dark patina on the bronze of the subject’s face accentuates the paleness of the onyx marble of the burnous. Cordier completely surrounds the face of the sculpture with marble, creating a dark focus in an expanse of yellow-white. The subject’s burnous is pulled back over his right shoulder, revealing an area of intricate patterning on the shirt below. This creates a mild shadow, which both balances the face, and emphasizes its comparative darkness. The detailed, naturalistic bronze face, a material associated with Europe, is swathed in delicately carved onyx marble, a product perceived as inherited from ancient Rome. Both the subject and the marble display the superiority of the French gaze, which has salvaged the beauty of the Algerian people and their natural resources, both of which were undervalued and ineffectual without French intervention, according to Lorcin,

Cordier’s busts capture their subjects, focusing on their racial difference, and arrange them according to artistic conventions. This reinvention of his subjects establishes his power to order Algerian types, an action that mirrored the anthropological ordering of Algerian populations in the service of the colonial government.
Chapter 4: The Neutrality of Fine Art

Cordier’s works, so clearly conforming to conventions of fine art sculpture, evoke the privileged space of the fine art museum, but gain new meanings in their surroundings at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle. Natural history and fine art both fall under the rubric of “the exhibitionary complex,” spaces which “[exhibit] artefacts and/or persons in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meanings and values.”

Tony Bennett explains that the development of art and natural history museums was closely tied to educational and cultural initiatives seeking to delimit appropriate public behavior and to define nations and individuals according to particular versions of history. Bennett demonstrates the politicization of museum spaces by laying out the ways their formation intersects with discourses of gender, class and national identities through the development of conventions of display. He explains that both natural history and art museums inherit this history of colonization and control. Yet contemporary museum spaces appear disconnected from their discursive and political contexts.

According to Carol Duncan, “isolation and illumination of objects induces visitors to fix their attention onto things that exist seemingly in some other realm.” This situation causes visitors to feel they are encountering works of art in a ritual space divorced from the mundane worlds of history and economies, so that the contemplation

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74 Ibid.
of beauty elides the particular circumstances surrounding the creation and acquisition of works. This phenomenon dates to the mid-nineteenth century in France, when decontextualized presentation of works of art and the formalization of museum spaces were in the process of being codified.\textsuperscript{75} Art museums were coming to represent both the apparatus of cultural education and the space for its demonstration. The construction of a master history and regulation of public behavior combine with the decontextualization of artworks in the ordering of museum space. Both natural history and art museums were concerned with educating their perceived publics about what cultural and scientific authorities considered valuable. Whereas art museums claimed political neutrality in the name of promoting cultural transcendence, they nonetheless, in displaying Orientalist paintings and sculpture, played a supporting role in the discourse of colonial expansion, one that helped cement the authority of Cordier's works in other venues. The ideologies present in the formation of these institutions, persist in museum spaces in the twenty-first century, allowing for the decontextualization and de-politicization of Cordier’s works in contemporary displays.

The cultural authority of museums and of works of art is bound to their perceived neutral status, which is cultivated through display as well as terminology. The word polychromy used by twenty-first century scholars defuses Cordier’s use of varied materials to depict racial types. This term reduces Cordier’s use of multimedia to a visual technique rather than a materialization of the subjects’ color difference and ties to their

particular geographical, and thus their comparative evolutionary and racial, locations. In the ethnographic bust *Juive d’Alger*, Cordier used a variety of polychromy and multimedia, employing patinated bronze for the subject’s face, enameled bronze for her head covering and portions of her blouse, gilt bronze in the decorative braiding on her sleeves, and an onyx marble shawl. Stone or glass was set into the face to represent eyes. The effect of highly polished stone and shining gold interspersed with the numerous colors of marble and enamel in fact render the material of the subject’s face dull by contrast. The woman’s face and hair absorb light because they are not as polished as the surfaces surrounding them, which draws attention to the artifice of the sculptures ornamentation. *Juive d’Alger*, in particular, was criticized for its over-use of color.

Debates about the relative merits of color and design raged in the nineteenth century after the discovery that ancient sculptures had been tinted. The whiteness of the marble of classical and neoclassical sculpture signaled the white skin of Europeans as well as symbolic purity. By contrast, color represented not only the skin of non-Europeans but also sin, carnality, and criminality, given an understanding of white as the unmarked normative category meaning European, pure, virginal, and innocent. White European skin, along with white marble, represented non-color, against which both skin color and polychromy were measured. Color, according to Charles Blanc, was explicitly

76 Papet uses “polychromy” in the catalog for *Facing the Other*, as does the entry for the *Juive d’Alger* and *Capresse des Colonies* in the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, “Europe 1700-1900.” New Series, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Fall, 2006) 49. For more on Cordier’s use of multimedia, see Jérôme Coignard, “Quand la sculpture prend des couleurs,” *Connaissance des Arts* no. 613 (February 2004).

77 Papet, “To Have the Courage of His Polychromy,” *Facing the Other*, 63.

gendered female and subordinated to design, which was gendered male. He asserts that “design must maintain its preponderance over colour. Otherwise painting speeds to its ruin: it will fall through colour just as mankind fell through Eve.”

Cordier’s use of color to portray non-French and non-Christian subjects follows the logic of this nineteenth-century art theory, which reflects popular anthropological and colonial hierarchies of racial difference. This complex hierarchy of color and whiteness is reduced in contemporary scholarship and museum display to “polychromy,” a term that inadequately expresses the discourses of color and race.

*Museum Display in the Twenty-First Century*

Displays of Cordier’s works in fine art contexts have consistently under-represented their reliance on colonialism and the visualization of race. In 2004, the Musée d’Orsay addressed the theme of colonization in a limited way, framing these central forces as generally but not directly related to the motivations and processes of Cordier’s ethnographic works. In her article in the exhibition catalog, Laure de Margerie describes the context in which Cordier worked, including human display, slavery and anthropology. Yet she states, “It is clear that the artist Cordier did not entertain any belief in the hierarchy of race.”

The glossing of Cordier’s works as apolitical extends to the installation of his work in many art museums in America, where they are displayed alongside other Orientalist works. This organization fails to portray the full contexts in

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which the works were made, notwithstanding a general scholarly association of Orientalism with colonialism.

Cordier’s sculptures are constituted in Facing the Other as objects inspired by the curiosity of an individual who boldly flouted sculptural convention and racial prejudice. The exhibition and catalog included selected, circumscribed historicizing information while at the same time limiting the acknowledgment of Cordier’s involvement with anthropology and colonialism. This limited the audience’s ability to respond critically to the sculptures. The Musée d’Orsay’s presentation preempted an unspoken accusation of racism directed toward the artist. The failure of curators to address this politico-discursive issue took the form of anachronistic concepts of cultural diversity. This tone of celebration of diversity was interspersed with a version of Cordier’s career that framed him as transcending the conventions of monochrome European sculpture as well as the nineteenth-century hierarchy of races.

The painter Jacques Leman represented Cordier juxtaposed to his sculpture Venus Africaine in a large portrait in 1863. This work hung in the first room of the temporary exhibition Facing the Other, suggesting a continuation from the nineteenth century of the celebration of Cordier for his mastery of the feminine ethnographic subject. Titled Charles Cordier Sculpting African Venus (Figure 15), this painting shows Cordier seated, in a white shirt and tan jacket, with his sleeves rolled up to indicate he is working. In his right hand he holds a modeling tool pointed at the bust of Venus Africaine, which he clutches with his left hand. The image shows Cordier in possession of the sculpture, which is placed on a low bench. His tensed grasp directs the sculpture so it is positioned in profile to the viewer. Although Venus Africaine, pictured in the foreground, is the
focus of the artist’s labors, Cordier looks above her, gazing out of the frame. His body
takes up the central space of the painting, pushing *Venus Africaine* to the bottom right
corner, where the work is cut off. Positioned below Cordier, in the margins of the
composition, the sculpture’s darkness blends in with the tone of the background, adding
to the sense that the presence of *Venus Africaine* acts as a foil to Cordier, who is
Caucasian, animate, active, male, superior. This painting appropriately represents the
power dynamic between Cordier and his work, and perhaps between Cordier and his
models generally.

Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures were introduced by a version of *Love One
Another* (Figure 16) positioned at the threshold of a room filled with eighteen
ethnographic works arranged in barely-accessible rows. This bronze sculpture of an
African and a European child embracing set a tone of multiculturalism that pervaded the
exhibition. The curators’ unflagging insistence on Cordier’s search for “beauty,” and
diversity and their repetitive return to scientific curiosity denied Cordier’s identities as an
ethnographer and an agent of the colonial government in Algeria. While the term
“beauty” is never explicitly defined in the catalog, Margerie uses the Cordier quote “The
most beautiful negro is not the one who looks most like us,” as her title, implying an
association between beauty and difference that positions Cordier as celebrating diverse
beauties. Nineteenth-century sculpture was based on a single canon of the human body,
with specific proportions that defined beauty. By measuring non-European and non-
classical bodies, using anthropological methods, for the purpose of creating works of art,
Cordier was creating new canonical types, which would inevitably refer back to the
original, European, classical canon. The very fact of their difference marked these
sculptures’ “beauties” as distinct from European beauty. In the introductory essay to the exhibition catalog, Laure de Margerie sets up a series of racially charged issues including universal expositions, human exhibition, anthropological racism, and slavery. Her conclusion in each section creates a quixotic image of Cordier as a heroic champion of beauty who is fascinated by difference in a way apparently unsullied by racial prejudice. Though the exhibition was temporary, the catalog for *Facing the Other* represents the scholarly construction of Cordier for posterity.

*Works by Cordier at the Musée de l’Homme*

By contrast, the inclusion of Cordier’s sculptures in the exhibition *L’Homme exposé* (2007) at the Musée de l’Homme visually acknowledges the role of colonization and anthropology in its remaining collection of anatomical and early anthropological works. The transfer of large portions of the museum’s non-European collection to the new Musée du Quai Branly caused its staff to reevaluate its role as a museum of the study of man.81 Left with objects as diverse as fossils, prehistoric skeletons, skulls, wax anatomical models and life casts from early anthropology, curators saw an opportunity to showcase the problematic history of the study of man. This exhibition worked to recontextualize objects in their collection that correspond to the early study of humanity, including thirteen of Cordier’s ethnographic busts inherited from the nineteenth-century incarnation of the museum as the gallery of comparative anatomy at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle. The Musée de l’Homme, unlike fine art venues, situated these

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81 Sally Price, *Paris Primitive : Jacques Chirac’s Museum on the Quai Branly* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27-8. The creation of the Musée du Quai Branly led to the transfer to the new museum of virtually the entire ethnographic collection from non-European countries previously held at the Musée de l’Homme.
works as an explicit part of the French anthropological project to record global human types.

Curators for *L’Homme exposé* used the repetition of packing crates as display cases and pedestals to invoke the colonizing movement of objects and people. In addition, explanatory texts acknowledged some of the violence and degradation inflicted by early anthropologists on their subjects. Twelve of the thirteen Cordier sculptures owned by the Musée de l’Homme were placed on packing crates in cascading rows (Figure 17). The packing crates were painted white, in contrast to the crates in other displays, which were left raw wood, and each sculpture was spot lit brightly and faced the same direction. Further, they were arranged against a wall, so that the audience could not walk around them and thereby fully experience their detail in three dimensions.

The lights and the white crates invoked a fine art space, yet the height of the display and the placement of empty crates in front of the sculptures distanced visitors physically, and fell outside the conventions of museum display, where works are shown individually, at eye level. The creation of a tableau cordoned off from visitors recalls ethnographic displays in which a scene is made visible but not accessible to an audience. This exhibition included elements of fine art display within an ethnographic context, perhaps in order to examine it. By presenting the works in an unexpected way, the Musée de l’Homme curators used Cordier’s works in the context of the exhibition’s theme; the works have the ambivalent sense of being in transit, removed from their crates for assessment as a group, inaccessible for solely visual consumption.

Yet the reduction by the Musée de l’Homme of colonization to the migration of objects and people fails to historicize the works in terms of economic and power
relationships among nations and races. Missing from both museums are the complex
Second Republic and Second Empire aesthetic and political environments in which these
works were created. Missing also is the mobilization of Orientalist imagery and Algerian
resources in a colonizing agenda. The exhibitions elide the explicit relationship between
these works and the dissemination of information about the Mediterranean world.
Further, *L’Homme exposé* leaves out the role of Cordier’s sculptures in the history of the
gallery of anatomy and the laboratory of anthropologists who formulated and debated
French ethnic and racial theories at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle. The embodiment of
this reduction from colonization, orientalization and racial definition to travel in the form
of packing crates situates the works’ movement in an aesthetic of nineteenth-century
commerce. Yet the causes and justifications for colonialism went beyond commerce,
tapping into discourses of human science and fine art, all of which are manifested by
Cordier’s sculptures, yet inadequately presented in their twenty-first century display.
Conclusion

Cordier’s ethnographic works are well-crafted, with a compelling high polish and impressive use of naturalism and three-dimensional composition. Though his use of multimedia pushed the boundaries of classical sculpture, the use of different media and patinas fits into a Second Empire trend toward lavish multi-colored interior decoration. This relationship to French design history and Cordier’s place in the Orientalist canon establish his sculptures as created for a French audience, though their subjects are Mediterranean. The ethnographic works were not displayed in these regions, but in France, frequently in contexts that were intended to describe these regions to the French. Cordier exoticized the subjects of his works through the portrayal of their clothing and physiognomic features. The sculptures of women were eroticized, and both genders were objectified. Cordier’s ethnographic busts appear to be static, typological representations, but serve as artifacts of nineteenth-century colonial and anthropological France.

In a contemporary setting, the conformity of these works to conventions of fine art contradicts and calls attention to their complex histories. Displays of these works were segregated from other nineteenth-century artworks, both in Facing the Other and in museums like the Art Institute of Chicago. This separation highlights the particularity of the works’ production without historicizing it, with the result that these museum curators and art historians push images of otherness to the margins of the history of nineteenth-century European art. Cordier and Orientalists like him displayed their works in the Paris
Salon, which at the time was the central authority defining the parameters of acceptable art. Cordier and others conceived of their scientific projects as inseparable from their privileged status as artists. The ethnographic sculptures took up spaces of art and science simultaneously. Many Orientalist works emblematize the harmonious overlapping and integration of science and art that was systematized at this time in the form of travel scholarships and collaborative scientific missions where artists recorded images of plants, animals and people in many parts of the world. To remove the scientific aspect of the works is to remove an integral part of the artist’s intention in making them: to show visual difference.

The twenty-first century exhibitions at both the Musée d’Orsay and the Musée de l’Homme made an attempt to reinvigorate interest in Cordier’s life and works by re-presenting them along with anthropological and colonial aspects of the nineteenth century. The use of white paint and spot lighting in combination with packing crates constituted the most successful aspect of *L’Homme exposé*, since it alluded to other types of exhibition of the works. However, it left the direct relationships of Cordier’s works to colonial movement and commerce ambiguous. An even more successful display might have explicitly addressed the numerous pasts of these works by taking advantage of the large number of extant copies. An exhibition that shows a set of sculptures, such as *Saïd Abdallah* and *Venus Africaine*, in a variety of recreated historical settings would engage with the multiple contextual and discursive meanings any contemporary display of these works inherits.

The continuing display of Cordier’s works in contexts of uninterrogated Orientalism naturalizes the collapse of their scientific and colonial valences into their
status as fine art. This phenomenon is not unique to Cordier’s works. The separation of Orientalist works like Cordier’s from contiguous art-historical movements creates an echo chamber of the construction and display of otherness that does not encourage critical interpretation or comparison to other subjects of representation. The disturbing quality of Cordier’s ethnographic works is the result of their nineteenth-century creation and display in worlds of both art and science. They must be situated in the context of their creation in the midst of scientific racism and colonization. In spite of their beauty and craftsmanship, they cannot be displayed solely as art objects, but should be presented as artifacts from this period when visual difference was used to dehumanize non-French populations.
Figure 14. Charles Cordier, *Capresse des Colonies*. 1861, oxidized silvered bronze, gilt bronze, and onyx marble, 38 x 21 1/4 x 11, Musée d’Orsay. From *Facing The Other* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2004) 56.
Figure 17. Cordier Sculptures on display in the exhibition l’Homme exposé. 2007. Available from Memoir Vive: Réflexions en course
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