

On Miniatures: a dialogue

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In a new series of postings, we draw two research projects on miniatures together in dialogue:

Miniatures Matter

[Jonathan Walz](#)

Jonathan Walz is an anthropologist who practices archaeology in eastern Africa and the western Indian Ocean. This contribution arises from his long-term interest in representations of archaeology and Africa and previous explorations of miniatures, often overlooked by archaeologists more typically drawn to monuments. The tendency to miniaturize impacts the form and substance of practices, materials, and the eventual effects of things on humans in the endless entanglement of material, agency, subjectivity, memory, and affect. Postage stamps collapse of multiple symbols into proximity motivates metonymy and the exchanges and contests among bundled ideas rooted in the negotiated political landscape of the public and nation-state.

From doll houses to pocket portraits, miniatures serve to manipulate and authenticate human experience. The post office distributes archaeological miniatures in the form of postage stamps, cancellations, and other postal paraphernalia. In effect, state-sanctioned postal images about archaeological topics reflect state and societal ideals and induce social entanglement.

Among other purposes, states commission and distribute postal products with archaeological themes in order to influence historical imaginations. Miniatures are best suited to the task: “The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulate-able, version of experience...which is domesticated and protected from contamination” (Stewart 1984:69). Stamp images serve as mnemonics for past and present events and social conditions; however, through mimesis, even removed consumers (beyond the state) can find relevance in postal imagery. Consumers mediate visual expressions to (re)produce memories. That stamps are miniatures compresses their meanings and intensifies their memory making capacities.

Miniaturization results from the application of technology. Gell (1999:167) explains that a miniature, “achieves its effect via the enchantment cast by its technical means, the manner of its coming into being, or, rather, the idea which one forms of its coming into being...” By miniaturizing, the state wields technology—imagined as the collective creativity of its citizenry—to promote idealized pasts and futures. Thus shrouded in enchantment, a stamp’s art focuses and channels an audience’s reflexivity onto the heritage represented. At once, a stamp’s content is validated by the state (technology of enchantment) while simultaneously validating the state (enchantment of technology) in a pictorial fabrication of an ideal social world. The image as produced and read—a mimic—intensifies the memories and meaningfulness it spurs. Moreover, due to the emphasis

placed on the object *and* its representation, the miniature depiction opens up the possibility to discover metonymies.

In the most complex cases, metonymies appear across collections of postage stamps issued by a single state (also see Child 2008). For instance, years ago Egypt began to employ images of antiquities to promote “modern” issues, such as information technology, to glorify its past and to demarcate itself as progressive. In one case, the Egyptian government printed stamps that endorsed a UNESCO project to “Save the Monuments of Nubia” endangered by the erection of the Aswan High Dam within a month of stamps promoting the dam’s electrical generation capacities and, therefore, development capabilities. Egypt clearly locates its legitimacy in both the past, represented by its monuments, and its future, represented as development. The interlacing of these two themes produces a metonymy that transposes each onto the other resulting in an imagination that Egypt’s modernity is ancient and that continued and heightened development is inevitable (Walz 2008:234).

By making sites and objects in postal miniature, states—colonial and postcolonial—fabricate historical representations, enhancing national glory while cleansing political machineries of responsibility for past tragedies (for example, slaving and slavery, colonization, and post-colonial failures). Sometimes states, such as Ethiopia and South Africa, enchant heavily through the post office. In other cases, such as postcolonial Eritrea, governments choose postal silence, purposefully restricting the deployment of topical imagery. In the United States, no stamp sets exist for Cahokia or Colonial Williamsburg. Communities and archaeologists working at the African Burial Ground in New York City lobbied to create a stamp in celebration of that meaningful locality, but were unsuccessful. When postal images do appear, regardless of context, they always collapse time and space in a microcosm and send it traveling; spreading, as it were, enchantment.



The Mulready cover image shows Britannia flanked by those from colonized lands within the British dominion, including Africans packing sugar casks (upper right). These early postal images

juxtapose European “civilization” to its alters



Mussolini attempted to justify his fascist political ambitions by associating himself and the Italian state with a glorious Roman past. This stamp of the excavation of a Roman road at a vicinity in North Africa promotes Italy’s return to Rome’s once occupied lands while silencing African pasts.



The parenthetical message – “Built by Arabs who hated slave trade [sic]” – overlying this image of Tongoni Ruins, a Swahili urban site on Tanzania’s coast, belies knowledge about the origins of these settlements, which are indigenous, as well as the robust Arab slave trade in East Africa.

Stamps with historical themes tied to sub-Saharan Africa have origins in the nineteenth century (for other forms of miniature representation in Europe's African colonies, see Ciarlo 2011). As early as 1840 a stamped envelope designed by William Mulready portrayed Britannia flanked by unflattering representations of peoples falling within the British dominion, including "Negroes packing casks of sugar" (Robinson 1948:314-316) (Figure 1). By denigrating Africans, Mulready's imagery set a trend intensified later. For instance, Benito Mussolini employed stamps as fascist propaganda in his colonization of the northern Sahara. One stamp issue from 1932 depicts a Roman road being unearthed in Libya, a claim by the Italy to ownership by antiquity of association (Figure 2). In 1931, at the *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* in Paris the French government acted similarly, issuing commemorative stamps legitimizing the French 'civilizing' mission in Africa while creating "an illusion of control over the colonies" for its home citizens (Adedze 2004:58). In each of these cases, representations silenced or submerged African agency and historicity.

A fascinating case from the western Indian Ocean appears in the form of a stamp series titled "Old Buildings and Architecture of Tanzania." In the series, a single stamp portrays Tongoni Ruins, a Swahili urban settlement dating to the early second millennium A.D. (Figure 3). The state sanctioned caption overlying the image reads "Built by Arabs who hated Slave Trade [sic]." Through such statements, the endorsing state—Tanzania—seeks to subvert a troubling past (slaving), perhaps to unify members of its diverse citizenry and contentious geography (Zanzibar, primarily Islamic, and the mainland) in the present (Walz 2005:88). In postcolonies, like Tanzania, the relabeling of historical traumas in stamps is symptomatic of states' use of a "specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes" (Mbembe 2001:102). As postcolonial states distance themselves from pre-independence legacies of violence, they tread on and peripheralize the formative experiences of their citizens, who lived or distinctly sense such pasts.

Other influences affect or derive from miniatures. Citizens and tourists collect stamps, like other souvenirs, as mementos: proof of experience. What, then, are the ramifications of state sanctioned postal images of, for example, the Lost City resort in Sun City, South Africa? "[T]he Legend of the Lost City" Martin Hall explains, "is a master narrative that structures the cultural politics of Africa" (Hall 1995:181). For stamp collectors, exposure to the mythical pasts of the Lost City, rooted in foreign agency and 'civilizing' narratives, reinforces imagery in wider postal representations (such as game parks and beaches) that erase or downplay the historicity of African communities. Attempts at authenticating experience through souvenirs coalesce in stamp albums of fabricated pasts that meet foreign tourists' expectations of Africa, thereby distancing Africans and contributing to their alienation.

Do archaeologists' miniatures (re)produce similar alienating effects? Are miniatures of sites and artifacts (drawings, photographs, and so forth) disenchanting in that they inevitably fabricate authenticity, conceal anomaly, and submerge the conflicts inherent to all communities and pasts? As specialists of the material world, we would be wise to ponder how practice, representation, and meaningfulness often suffer from miniaturization.

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Miniatures matter because we make them matter

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My research studies historic and contemporary miniaturisation as a material culture practice among

the indigenous people of the Northwest Coast of North America, including fieldwork with the Haida, Makah, Tulalip and Kwakwaka'wakw. It has focused on miniaturisation as a form of non-verbal communication which can preserve, defend and develop cultural practice, particularly in the face sudden cultural shocks.

In Walz's insightful essay, he has considered the ideological effect which stamps, as a form of miniature, can have on an audience. He has done so primarily by noting most specifically the ways in which governments, as the ultimate creator of stamps, have used sanitised historical imagery as nationalistic devices to promote ideological messages to a wide audience. This happens, as W. J. T. Mitchell has noted, because of the "system of codes that interposes an ideological veil between us and the real world" (2002:91) deployed in the stamp.

Such a system is only possible however when a government has accurately assessed how its citizens will interpret such a message. Firstly they must be able to draw on the iconic qualities of the stamp, such as recognising the images as mimetic reproductions of antiquities in the Egyptian stamps Walz cites. They must then form the requisite indexical links to reach the intended conclusion linking the power and glory of Ancient Egypt with the modern Egyptian state while conveniently ignoring the many temporal and political divisions which separate the two.

Miniaturisation is certainly therefore, as he suggests, a technology; primarily, although not exclusively, a technology of communication. That is it such requires that it be "an action which is effective and traditional" (Mauss, 1979 [1950]:104). Its efficacy is directly tied to the ability of its creator to accurately assess the ability of the intended audience to form the desired indexical links. That it is traditional in nature is also indisputable; miniaturisation as a magical device is common in the archaeology of Ancient Egypt (Jones, 1990) and, temporal political shifts notwithstanding, can therefore be potentially understood as a direct forebear of the miniaturised philatelic propaganda efforts of modern Egyptian governments.

Efforts to construct methodologies through which we can assess miniature objects as communication technology are on-going (Evans, 2012; Knappett, 2012; Foxhall, 2014). My own contribution to this field requires an assessment of the ideological messages of a miniature by analysing the ways in which a practitioner has constructed the miniature: what mimetic devices are deployed; what scale has been used and how has the image been simplified, a tripartite system I have labelled the "elements" of miniaturisation (Davy, 2015).

The stamps cited in Walz's essay all depict very large examples of ancient political infrastructure. Physical, immovable remains which in the images form indexical mimetic links between the glory of the past and the current political regime. They do so at a scale which enhances the grandeur of the monuments depicted while eliminating such extraneous environmental, political and physical details irrelevant to the creator's message. Together these elements are intended to generate a subtle yet powerful indexical effect in the mind of the audience; the 1932 Italian propaganda stamp is a particularly striking example, in which an Italian boot literally removes the "dirt" of centuries of

Islamic rule, returning Libya to its “rightful” Roman (i.e. Italian) heritage.

In his concluding paragraphs Walz notes that miniatures, by their diminutive tactility, exert magnetic powers of fascination on the collector’s mindset. This allows people, often far divorced from the original intended audience, to assemble, dissolve and reassemble collections of miniatures to form their own constructions of reality. Walz expresses justified concern at the potential for this practice to cause colonialist alienation. Although the reason is different, he is not the first to express concerns over this practice; as a Danish archaeologist one noted, the inherent fascination of the miniature has meant that many miniatures inevitably “find their way to museums, just where they ought not to be, as generally, with a few exceptions, they are devoid of all scientific value” (Porsild, 1915:233)

However, it is legitimate to wonder whether it is correct that “practice, representation, and meaningfulness often suffer from miniaturization” as Walz suggests they might. Inevitably of course an unreflexive or consciously prejudiced assemblage of miniatures can be misleading; such is potentially true of any assemblage of objects intended to interact with an audience (Jacknis, 1985; Jonaitis, 1991; Errington, 1998). However, if we can learn how to interpret miniatures as objects of communication technology, we can start to unpick the original ideological messages they contain and thus gain insight into the veiled intentions of both the original creators and those of the collectors who followed them.



Northern Northwest Coast canoe miniature, c.1870 © Trustees of the British Museum



Alex McCarty of the Makah demonstrating carving techniques on a miniature canoe, Author's Photo. Evergreen State College, 2015

Properly applied, these methodologies permit the dismantling of the propagandised ideologies of miniature assemblages and images, such as those of Sun City or Mussolini, and to potentially enable groups disenfranchised by the proliferation of misleading miniatures to have their agency restored. Miniatures only “submerge the conflicts inherent to all communities and pasts” when we, as an audience, allow them to do so, and they only cause suffering to “practice, representation, and meaningfulness” when we fail to question their obscured ideologies.

Miniaturisation exists as a fundamental tool of human communication through material culture. These mimetic objects skeumorphically bend reality through their diminutive and simplistic affordances and permit the creation of new, imaginative realms through their fascinating tactility; the liminality inherent in licking a stamp, for one example. They can only exist however in the relationship which is created between object, creator and audience. It is the subtlety of this relationship which grants them their powers of enchantment, and recognition of this relationship which can allow us to take them back.

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