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# *Border objects: dissolution or exacerbation of identity*

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From the very beginning of the Early modern period, objects were designed that embedded various layers of contact between Europe and extra-European worlds. At the methodological crossroads of objects biography, material culture and transculturality, this paper will investigate so-called *border objects*, artifacts made in Europe with natural or artificial objects coming from the antipodes like mounted shells or Chinese porcelain.

The value of context or visual horizon in the making of the meaning of objects and their ambivalent identity are key issues of this survey. In order to discuss the dissolution or exacerbation of identity that such objects embedded in themselves, this paper will address borderline cases of *border objects*, at times, kitsch, like a Venetian binding and a cabinet. Borderline because self and otherness are probably much more entangled in such Venetian objects than in the other European cases of *border objects*. The *border objects* are entangled objects, therefore, the identity they bear is an entangled identity, global and local at the same time. The Venetian borderline cases of *border objects* provide a particularly interesting light on this essential point for the definition of such objects and therefore for the question of identity because there is the problem of whether the *border objects* still exist in border areas as Venice where everything is mixed or hybrid or if people are so accustomed to hybridity as they are able to perceive more subtle differences.

The vibration or the fluidity of meaning seems to be the more appropriate answer at the question about identity of *border objects* and much more in these borderline cases. These Venetian objects are exponentially ambivalent objects whose spatial ambiguity is essential. In this sense and in this context, they are special and performative cases of *border objects*, evidence of an unstable and ambivalent world.

Ambivalence  
Border objects  
Borderline  
Fluidity  
Kitsch

From the very beginning of the Early modern period, objects were designed that embedded various layers of contact between Europe and extra-European worlds. At the methodological crossroads of objects biography, material culture and transculturality, this paper will investigate so-called *border objects*, artifacts made in Europe with natural or artificial objects coming from the antipodes like mounted shells or Chinese porcelain, according to the new meaning of the concept proposed by the *Exogenesis* Program supported by the Agence nationale de la recherche I launched in 2013 and ending in 2016<sup>1</sup>.

The nautilus of the South Pacific Seas mounted by German, Dutch, Italian silversmiths in the late sixteenth century can be considered as paradigmatic *border objects* because they tell the story of Europe's encounters with remote worlds and, therefore, the story of the European identity construction. Manufactured in Europe, these objects can be understood in the evolutive European context and allow to understand the relationship of Europe with the far East, the Africa and the Americas, often a mix of appropriation and fascination, attraction and repulsion. Indeed, the *border object* itself made visible the relationship between the two parts that build it- the European one and the non-European one. The perception of antagonism in the contiguity of self and the other is a key to understanding *border objects*. If the focus on the history or biography of objects is commonplace in the historiography of art, the approach using the most recent anthropological methods relative to objects, conceived as concentrators of meaning, and applying those methods to the study of Europe understood as a meeting ground, is relatively new. The value of context or visual horizon in the making of the meaning of objects and their ambivalent identity are key issues of this survey.

In order to discuss the dissolution or exacerbation of identity that such objects embedded in themselves, this paper will address borderline cases of *border objects*, at times, kitsch, like Venetian binding and cabinet. Borderline because self and otherness are probably much more entangled in such Venetian objects than in the other European cases of *border objects*. Based on case studies of Early modern things that "talk"<sup>iii</sup>, this paper deals with novelty, migration, knowledge, cross cultural dialogue and presents the *border objects* as enlightening for the understanding of the European impact of the "first" globalization of art.

## *Border objects*

Therefore, this survey intends to provide an opportunity to better understand the complexity of *border objects* : the ways in which they articulate the relationship between what was perceived as "here" and "elsewhere" not in terms of separation, but of visible difference; the ways in which they created novelty in local artistic production by using exogenous items ; the relationship they established between container and contents both within the object itself and in their spatial settings ; their "agency"<sup>iii</sup>. The *border objects* do not just carry miscegenation<sup>iv</sup>, nor belong only to the «exotic». That tip the *border object*, is the time and place or better the space-time where exogenetics occurs: it's a metabolic story, according to the anthropologists. For work, the *border object*, it is necessary that the two part, the European one and the Non European one remain visible and continue to vibrate in symbiosis or syntonie or agreement. The two parts, the two identities, talking to each other, interact, without one dominating the other or, more accurately, without the viewer being able to watch the one without watching the other.

The *border objects* are entangled objects, therefore, the identity they bear is an entangled identity. So we are - and we were- in front of objects with more or less identity than the other kind of objects. In other words, we could talk of objects with a lost identity or with maybe a new identity. So if such objects are different it's because they are very complex, glocal objects, global and local at the same time. As *border objects* are capacitors of meanings and senses, hubs of magnetic fields, contrary intensifiers, creating another time space, the definition of their identity might seem problematic, even explosive. In the case of such objects, is the border exacerbation or dissolution of identity? The two ways can coexist in them. We can consider first that *border objects* could be founded by exacerbation of the difference between their two parts, so by highlighting their two identities and their strangeness. But we could also consider that the border object is the result or the consequence of the disappearance of two different objects that make up another, a neutral one in which all identity is dissolved. A more narrow way, a third one, however is emerging in this concept of *border object*, that of balancing two identities which magnetize, attract but not become undifferentiated nor remain or produce a constant struggle. The question can also be asked differently since a strong identity does not preclude the universal and vice versa. Based on a magnetization process like waves that attract and repel in a given field, *border objects* can be defined as waves whose crossing is offered to us if we know that we face our eyes, our understanding, our perception.

«J'ai constamment insisté jusqu'ici sur le fait que l'identité est faite de multiples appartenances ; mais il est indispensable d'insister sur le fait qu'elle est une, et que nous la vivons comme un tout»<sup>v</sup>. Amin Maalouf, here not described, of course, *border objects* but attempted to clarify what he meant by identity in his book on *Les Identités meurtrières* published in 1998. Just replace in the sentence following the word "person" with the word "object" and we would be very close to the *border objects* : «L'identité d'une personne n'est pas une juxtaposition d'appartenances autonomes, ce n'est pas un patchwork, c'est un dessin sur une peau tendue : qu'une seule appartenance soit touchée et c'est toute la personne qui vibre»<sup>vi</sup>. Of course, all this might seem a little easier: human beings are not objects -and the aim is not to objectify people- nor the objects are people, and while the biography of objects is "fashionable", it solves nothing since it is the being who gives meaning to the subject. However, if we take this definition to apply to the case of *border objects*, it becomes very enlightening. The question is about spatial, local and material ambiguity or ambivalence. First, in other words, what is the quantum of otherness in the *border objects* ? Is the quantum of otherness more or less in the *border objects* than in the fusion existing in other type of hybrid objects? Secondly, how to measure the dose of otherness, or more precisely? Is the amount of non-European objects in an object or the type of mixture? Is it even possible to identify markers of otherness? Should not we address differently the two entangled questions of otherness and of identity and is the latter still appropriate in front of such objects?

## *Venetian borderline border objects*

The Venetian borderline cases of *border objects* provide a particular interesting light on this essential point for the definition of such objects and therefore for the question of identity. Two Venetian objects -a cabinet and a binding- allow us to a better understanding of the way the self and the other are embedded.

The binding of the Museo Correr (Inv. Ms Cl. III. 1103) presents a coffered covered with carving inserts of mother of pearl (probably from elsewhere) decorated for a ducal commission destined to a member of the Giustinian family. At the center of the back plate shows the emblem of the Giustinian family place inside an oval. In the cabinet of the Berlin Kunstgewerbe Museum, the decorative repertoire of Islamic origin and the Turkish-Ottoman materials (chalcedony, alabaster and lapislazuli thanks to the trade with the eastern Mediterranean) are part of an architectural structure reminiscent of contemporary Venetian buildings

(Sansovino's Cà Corner)<sup>vii</sup>. In both objects, the entanglement is very strong and powerful. Indeed, these two objects don't/didn't deal with a new identity nor with a lost identity but with a new form of identity and could be considered like «typical Venice» objects.

The Venetian cases of *border objects* are relevant because there is the problem of whether the *border objects* still exist in border areas as Venice where everything is mixed or hybrid or if people are so accustomed to hybridity as they are able to perceive more subtle differences. A survey about Venetian identity of premodern objects is the subject of the conference organized by the research group on «Premodern objects» and the Deutsches Studienzentrum in Venedig to be held in Venice on March 3, 4 and 5 2016. The title is *Typical Venice ?* And it deals with Venetian commodities<sup>viii</sup>. Indeed, it's often difficult to be sure whether the objects were made in Venice or in Byzantine, Islamic or other European contexts but there were a Venetian identity exported. And this Venetian identity is/was built upon complex materials, provenances, sources, forms, ...

The process of identity is much more complex in the Venetian case of borderline Early modern *border objects* than in the «Chinoiserie», .... In the latter, there is generally less doubt about the area of production of the object and a will to make an object «à la manière de». In the former, we are in front of avant-garde objects, in other words, at the forefront of fashion objects. These objects talk about a formal and aesthetic novelty. In those objects is born a new beauty unless they are stalked by kitsch. The unusual mixture of elements from different sources and materials can lead to surprise and to qualify kitsch such objects. It's a tightrope! The result depends on the possibility of the viewer appreciation, on the the ability to perceive such new objects and incorporate them in a visual horizon. In the Venetian case, which may explain the number and particular quality of such Early modern objects is precisely the visual horizon, itself rich and multiple for a long time, as it's documented by the *Typical Venice ?* conference.

The vibration or the fluidity of meaning seems to be the more appropriate answer at the question about identity of *border objects*. These Venetian objects are exponentially ambivalent objects whose spatial ambiguity is essential. In this sense and in this context, they are special and performative cases of *border objects*. These ambivalent objects are the evidence of an unstable and ambivalent world.

The question of identity involves redefining the history of taste, the history of the perception of objects, social history, history of beauty and therefore fundamental questions in art history. And ultimately, we can better define a more open Early modern world than we generally perceive, a world more able to renew itself regularly through its artistic productions where identity issues maybe do not arise in our today terms. Art historians are thus committed definitively to producing a global art history.

According to the French philosopher and sinologist, François Jullien,

«Mais il conviendra également d'interroger les autres cultures : la quête de l'universel n'est-elle pas la préoccupation singulière de la seule Europe ? Il est temps, en effet, de sortir à la fois de l'universalisme facile et du relativisme paresseux : notamment, de requalifier, mais par leur versant négatif, un absolu des droits de l'homme ; de repenser le dialogue des cultures en termes non d'identité et de différence, mais d'écart et de fécondité en même temps que sur le plan commun de l'intelligible ; d'envisager ainsi ces cultures comme autant de ressources à explorer, mais que l'uniformisation du monde aujourd'hui menace. Car seul ce pluriel des cultures permettra de substituer au mythe arrêté de l'Homme le déploiement infini de l'humain, tel qu'il se promeut et se réfléchit entre elles»<sup>ix</sup>.

Bio-note :

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<sup>i</sup> *Exogenèses* : la production d’objets frontière dans l’art en Europe depuis 1500 is a national research program founded by the Agence nationale de la Recherche and coordinated by Sabine du Crest (2013-2016). The partners are Monique Jeudy-Ballini et Brigitte Derlon, Collège de France, Laboratoire d’anthropologie sociale, EHESS, CNRS and Rémi Labrusse, Université Paris Ouest-La Défense. Cf. The blog <http://exogeneses.hypotheses.org/>

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Findlen Paola ed., *Early modern things. Objects and their histories, 1500-1800*, New York, Routledge, 2013 ; Gerritsen Anne and Giorgio Riello eds., *Writing material culture history*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2015.

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Gell Alfred, *Art and agency. An anthropological theory*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Gruzinski Serge, *Les Quatre parties du monde. Histoire d’une mondialisation*, Paris, La Martinière, 2004 ;

<sup>v</sup> Cf. Maalouf Amin, *Les Identités meurtrières*, Paris, 1998 ; *Le Livre de Poche*, 2001, p. 34.

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> Venetian manufacture, Cabinet, 1565-1580, softwood (spruce perhaps), poplar, alder, of fruit tree wood painted and lacquered, amethyst, alabaster, lapis lazuli, and other semi-precious stones, mother of pearl partially painted and gilded, iron ; 81cm/112, 2cm/48, 8cm ; Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kunstgewerbemuseum, inv. N. 1933.26 ; cf. Sframeli Maria, Valentina Conticelli, Riccardo Gennaioli and Gian Carlo Parodi, *Lapislazzuli. Magia del blu*, Catalogue of the exhibition (Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Museo degli Argenti, Museo di Storia Naturale, June 9-October 11 2015), Livorno, Sillabe, 2015, cat. 57, pp. 330-331 ; Koepe Wolfgang, in *Venice and the Islamic World 828-1797*, Catalogue of the exhibition (Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe, October 2 2006-February 18 2007 ; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 27- July 8 2007), S. Carboni ed., New York, 2007.

<sup>viii</sup> Cf. *Typical Venice? Venetian Commodities, 13th-16th Centuries Tipico di Venezia? Le merci veneziane, XIII-XVI secolo*. International conference organized by Philippe Cordez (Research Group "Premodern Objects", Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München/Elitenetzwerk Bayern) and Romedio Schmitz-Esser (Deutsches Studienzentrum in Venedig). Venice, Deutsches Studienzentrum in Venedig, Palazzo Barbarigo della Terrazza / Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, March 3 - 05, 2016

<sup>ix</sup> Cf. Jullien François, *De l’universel, de l’uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures*, Paris, 2008.