

The Red that Colored the World.* Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. May 17, 2015—September 13, 2015.

Reviewed by Jason Baird Jackson

Like the tiny bug at its center, *The Red that Colored the World* is extraordinary. Bringing vernacular and elite arts borrowed from a large number of institutions and lenders and representing many world traditions together with the latest conservation science, an interconnected global history, the explication of a wide diversity of local arts, and superb design, *The Red that Colored the World* is a tour de force. Visually compelling, intellectually clear and coherent, thematically broad, and interpretively innovative, the exhibition will appeal to diverse audiences, including scholarly ones. In an era in which interdisciplinarity is preached constantly but successfully practiced much more rarely, *The Red that Colored the World* is a model museum project. Organized by the Museum of International Folk Art (MoIFA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, curated by a team led by its Curator of Latino, Hispano, and Spanish Colonial Collections, Nicolasa Chavez, and presented in its Hispanic Heritage Wing and its Cotsen Galleries, *The Red that Colored the World* is a unique and powerful exhibition.

Spanning the 6th to the 21st century, *The Red that Colored the World* tells the worldwide story of American cochineal (*Dactylopius coccus*), the insect used as a vivid red dye by indigenous peoples in Mexico, Peru, and elsewhere in the Americas and globalized first by the Spanish after the colonial encounter. Organized chronologically, but exploring key themes (colonization, cultural exchange, art, commerce, social status, ecology) iteratively across time and space—the exhibition begins in Pre-Columbian Mexico and Peru and follows cochineal's spread along ever more complex and encompassing global trade routes. Along the way, this remarkable product of both nature and sophisticated indigenous cultural practice becomes woven into an expanding range of arts, cultures, histories, and economic systems. Without feeling overstuffed with objects, interpretive materials, or themes, the exhibition also presents state-of-the-art materials science, drawing upon extensive technical investigations that were made with nearly all of the objects on display. The stars of the exhibition are these remarkable objects gathered from diverse times, places, traditions, and collections, but they are supported with well-written and sophisticated labels, evocative media, and a kid-focused dress up nook that my own son and daughter both loved.¹ (A sample of the objects presented are shown here as figures 1-5).

In *The Red that Colored the World*, the story of cochineal becomes a global story of both interconnection and local diversity. Like sugar as studied so famously by Sidney Mintz (1985) in *Sweetness and Power*, cochineal proves to be an excellent means by which to understand global social, political, and economic history. Whereas the study of sugar also provides a platform through which to study changing global foodways, close consideration of cochineal also opens an instructive door on world art and material culture. The exhibition presents breathtaking works that help visitors grasp global art history while simultaneously appreciating worldwide connections and local traditions.

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In dialogue with curators and other stakeholders, every museum director hopes to find and pursue the right project at the right place at the right time. *The Red that Colors the World* is that kind of project. With outstanding global collections of relevance, the MoIFA is the perfect organizer and venue for this show. With the recent development of sophisticated materials science techniques (used here to test for the presence of cochineal in the incredible objects on display), as well as a period of worldwide excitement about textiles, organic materials, and cultural hybridization, the timing for this exhibition is perfect. The ways in which an obscure insect can help tell the story of world art and world history is a captivating and well-chosen hook. It helps bring the mission of a global museum such as MoIFA to life.

Working globally at the border between art and ethnography, MoIFA has long been an important institution with an impressive track record of collecting, exhibition, research, and programming. *The Red that Colored the World*—together with other recent initiatives such as the museum's innovative Gallery of Conscience and the Global Folk Arts Network, positions the museum as an innovator among world museums. These initiatives are signature projects of the museum under the leadership of its director Marsha Bol. *The Red that Colored the World* invites close scholarly study. Not a specialist in its many topics, I hope that the exhibition—and its companion catalogue—will be widely reviewed by those with specific expertise on the many themes and topics that the exhibition introduces.

This exhibit was planned over a seven-year period and produced with the support of many funders, including the National Endowment for the Humanities and a large companion edited volume, not reviewed here, accompanies the exhibition. It is titled *A Red Like No Other: How Cochineal Colored the World* and was edited by Carmella Padilla and Barbara Anderson (New York: Rizzoli, 2015).

After *The Red that Colored the World* closes in Santa Fe, it will travel in its full form to the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California, USA, where it will be presented from October 31, 2015 to March 20, 2016. A version of the exhibition, somewhat reduced in size through the return of the exhibition's most fragile loan objects, will begin touring in 2017.

Notes

I visited the exhibition on two occasions. On Sunday July 12, 2015, I visited in the company of my family. I returned alone for a slow, systematic visit on July 19, 2015. During the Sunday visit (which occurred during the International Folk Art Market—an event that brings 20,000 people to Museum Hill where MoIFA and the Museum of Indian Arts and Cultures are located) the gallery was extremely crowded. My second visit occurred on a more typical museum day, during which the exhibition welcomed very steady traffic but was never so crowded as to preclude full engagement with the exhibition.

In assessing the preceding review, readers may wish to know the following background facts. The author is also the editor of the journal in which it appears—*Museum Anthropology Review*. That journal is published by the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, for which the author serves as Director. At the time that it was written, the Mathers Museum of World Cultures was an

active partner of the Museum of International Folk Art on two long-term initiatives—the China-U.S. Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project and the Folklore and Museum Policy and Practice Working Group, both initiatives of the American Folklore Society. While the author is not acquainted with the curator or curatorial team associated with *The Red that Colored the World*, he is acquainted with, and sympathetic to, the broader work being pursued at MoIFA. It is hoped that more independent reviewers will pursue reviews of *The Red that Colored the World*. It is notoriously difficult for editors to secure scholarly exhibition reviews for reasons widely known and discussed in the field. It is hoped that this review, where the risks of bias are acknowledged, will retain some value for readers and the field.

1. The label copy in *The Red that Colored the World* is sophisticated and well written. It is both accessible and scholarly. Suggesting that the label writing task is not as hopeless as many of us sometimes fear, I witnessed several different pre-teens getting a great deal out of the labels, in more than one case explaining them and other gallery content to accompanying parents and grandparents. The children's station mentioned here features rich red clothing in a range of historically and culturally famous styles—British military coats, luxurious capes, kimono, etc.

Reference Cited

Sidney Mintz

1985 Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History. New York: Viking-Penguin.

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Figure 1. Navajo sarape with small poncho neck slit, Navajo Nation, Arizona or New Mexico, mid-Classic period, ca. 1865. Red raveled wool weft yarn (one–two S-spun strands) dyed with 100 percent cochineal, 72 x 48 in.; slit length 4½ in. Courtesy of The Owings Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico. From the exhibition: *The Red That Colored The World*, Museum of International Folk Art.



Figure 2. Jacob Frères, armchair (*fauteuil*) from the Council Room (Salle du Conseil), Malmaison, France, 1800. Painted and gilded beech; original under-upholstery and red wool show cover (silk, velvet, and gilded silver trim), 38 x 26. x 28 in. New York Historical Society, gift of Louis Borg, 1867.438. © New York Historical Society. From the exhibition: *The Red That Colored The World*, Museum of International Folk Art.



Figure 3. Sewing box and cover with cochineal dyed wool yarn (detail). Box, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, México, late eighteenth century. Wood, paint, metal, gold leaf, 4 3/4 x 17 5/16 x 5 in. Museum of International Folk Art, IFAF Collection. From the exhibition: *The Red That Colored The World*, Museum of International Folk Art.



Figure 4. Iran Trade Cloth. South Persia, mid-19th century. Wool embroidery and applique. 75 3/16" x 45 11/16" Museum of International Folk Art, Gift of Cyrus Leroy Baldridge. (A.1965.31.40 SW) Photo by Blair Clark. From the exhibition: *The Red That Colored The World*, Museum of International Folk Art.



Figure 5. Orlando Dugi, evening gown (from the Red Collection), Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2014. Hand-dyed silk duchesse satin, silk organza, and silk thread; cut glass and sterling silver beads, French coil, Swarovski crystals, vintage beads and crystals; lining of duchesse satin and tulle, 63 x 52 in. Collection of the artist. Photo by Blair Clark. From the exhibition: *The Red That Colored The World*, Museum of International Folk Art.

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