

Portrait of a Man, Portrait of a Woman?

Race, Gender, and Misapprehensions in the Peruvian Photographs
Collection at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen

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The *Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen*'s collection includes a small assortment of nineteenth-century photographs from Peru, each featuring a similarly generic catalogue description such as “*Portret van een Peruviaanse man in traditioneel kostuum*” (“Portrait of a Peruvian Man in Traditional Costume”), or “*Portret van een Peruviaanse vrouw*” (“Portrait of a Peruvian Woman”). The descriptions impose an anthropological function on the images, as though their value rests in their visual representativeness of local male and female human types. And yet there are differences in the circumstances of the images’ creation that have bearing on their significance. While some were produced by foreign visitors to the region who were interested in cataloguing its human landscape, others were produced by local photographers for local patrons wanting to pose for posterity. Keeping present Peru’s own deeply-entrenched history of African slavery, a fact which makes the “South American” label a subtle – and strange – act of erasure that severed many of the descriptions’ connection between those portrayed in the photos and the place of birth of their ancestors, this article probes the implications of removing the images from their local socio-historical contexts and placing them within a new, display-oriented one with its own set of racial and gendered codes.

Each of the trio of nineteenth-century photographs is organized in the online catalogue of the Dutch *Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen* (hereafter, NMVW) under similar descriptions: "Portret van een Peruviaanse vrouw," ("Portrait of a Peruvian Woman," Figure 1), "Portret van een Zuid-Amerikaanse vrouw" ("Portrait of a South-American Woman," Figure 2), and "Portret van een Peruviaanse man in traditioneel kostuum" ("Portrait of a Peruvian Man in Traditional Costume," Figure 3). Their catalogue descriptions serve as directives for how to understand them and their contribution to the knowledge produced by the museum, not only about the regions the photographed subjects each represent but the demographic landscapes in those regions as well. Under this classificatory system, the photographed subjects are to function as generic, illustrative human types, male and female.



Figure 1 Eugenio Courret, Portrait of a Peruvian woman, 1874-1875.



Figure 2 Courret Hermanos [Eugenio and Aquiles Courret], Portrait of a South American woman, 1895-1905.



Figure 3 Courret Hermanos [Eugenio and Aquiles Courret], Portrait of a Peruvian man in a traditional costume, 1874-1875.

But because the photographs were produced in a prestigious Lima studio that was run by Eugenio and Achilles Courret, a famous pair of French-born brothers whose patrons included families, notable cultural and political figures, as well as some of the wealthiest members of Peruvian society, they take on a meaning that pushes back against the one imposed by the museum. They now assume the appearance of puzzle pieces removed from one box and placed in another. What was the reason for their removal, for their being carted out of Peru and across the ocean, and for their being placed in a Dutch museum?

One possible reason can be found in another photograph in the museum's collection. This one is labeled "*Portret van een zwarte Peruaanse man met mand op het hoofd*" ("Portrait of a black Peruvian man with a basket on his head," Figure 4) and is part of a larger series of photographs titled "*Verslag wereldreis*" ("Travel Souvenirs") from 1888. Although the photographer in this case appears to be anonymous, the original inscription on the front, "*Type: Inboorling van Peru*" ("Native of Peru"), is written in Afrikaans, suggesting that the image was the work of a South African visitor to Peru (it is also worth noting here that while the catalogue description refers to the subject's gender, the original caption does not; I will say more about this added detail below). Seen in the light of this additional piece of knowledge, the Courret photos are meant to fit together with this new puzzle piece from an entirely different box, to provide a pastiche of human types in Peru.



Figure 4 Portrait of a black Peruvian man with a basket on his head, 1888. Photographer unknown.

These do not appear to be images that were extracted under violent circumstances, such as when the British raided and burned down Benin's Royal Court and looted objects – including the famed Benin Bronzes – that are now housed in more than 161 museums and galleries throughout Europe and North America, including the Netherlands' own NMVW.¹ Nor do they appear to count among the forty-percent of objects that made their way into the NMVW through colonial appropriation, given that the images were produced in the decades after Peru gained its independence from Spain.² But their inclusion among the museum's collection nonetheless helps them fit within a particular kind of discursive framework.

Deborah Poole has attributed “the scientific and voyeuristic fascination” with nineteenth-century photographs and engravings from Peru (and elsewhere outside of Europe) to “the ways in which their material nature as image objects lent support to an emerging idea of race as a material, historical, and biological fact.”³ Indeed, as Dan Hicks has recently noted in *The British Museums*, citing late-nineteenth anthropologist Everard im Thurn, photography had the potential to be used “for the accurate record not of the mere bodies of primitive folk – which might indeed be more accurately measured and photographed for such purpose dead than alive, could they be conveniently obtained in that state – but of these folk as living beings.”⁴ Hicks argues that a consequence of this form of visual knowledge has been the emergence of a kind of racial thinking that could be used “to measure out the distance of ‘non-Western’ cultures from the West, one object at a time.”⁵

Through their acquisition by and classification within the museum, the Peruvian photographs emerge as proof of the depicted subjects' racial otherness. They function, both on their own and

1 Dan Hicks, *The British Museums*

2 <https://en.unesco.org/courier/2020-4/netherlands-museums-confront-countrys-colonial-past>

3 Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, p. 15.

4 Dan Hicks, *The British Museums*, p. 183

5 Dan Hicks, *The British Museums*, p. 184

together, as anthropological sources rather than socio-historical ones. This, despite the distinct circumstances behind their creation and attendant divergent meanings. Indeed, the images produced by Eugenio and Aquiles Courret, the French-born brothers who founded their popular photo studio, "Fotografía Central" ("Central Photography") in Lima, Peru, in 1863 (just a few years after the 1854 abolition decree outlawing slavery), were typical of their style. The brothers specialized in the production of albumen silver prints mounted on small, portable pieces of cardboard known as *cartes de visite*, or visiting cards that could be traded among friends and social intimates. The photographs featured men, women, and children of all colors and classes who appeared alone, in pairs, and as part of groups while wearing work clothing, uniforms, and formal attire. For many of the people who sat for the Courret brothers, the photo sessions provided a chance to preserve their and their families' likenesses, marking special occasions, and even providing distant relatives with reminders of the loved ones from whom they were separated.

This context adds depth and dimension to each of the photographs in the NMVW collection. "*Portret van een Peruviaanse vrouw*" ("Portrait of a Peruvian Woman," Figure 1), for example, features a woman wearing what appears to be a two-piece outfit known as a *saya y manto*. The outfit dated back to the colonial era, when it was heavily favored by elite Spanish women when they made their way out in public over the course of daily life. The *saya* was a long, full skirt (generally worn with a petticoat underneath), while the *manto* was a kind of veil that covered the whole of the upper body, leaving only the face (and often only a single eye) uncovered. The wearers of this costume were known as *tapadas*, or covered women, thanks to their successful obstruction of all but the basic outlines of their bodies. In addition to being worn with mantos, sayas generally comprised the main component of elite women's dress, with capes and cloaks going into rotation on the upper halves of their bodies to offer protection from both the elements and accusations of impropriety. There was thus little differentiation in the cut and construction of their wardrobes.

However modest and lacking in structural variety, their outfits were by no means simple. They incorporated a range of fashionable colors, lavish fabrics, and elegant finishes into both their sayas and their upper-body coverings, creating multiple outfit combinations that were suitable for any number of occasions.⁶

The costume still had some adherents in the nineteenth century, including the woman in the photo.⁷ She appears to be of Spanish, or European ancestry, which suggests that her wearing of the costume was a gesture of fealty, to tradition, and to the preferences and customs of her mother, grandmother, and female ancestors. It also suggested a desire to commemorate that fealty in a lasting way, one that could be easily disseminated to friends and loved ones. She could not have expected that this image, which would have held tremendous personal meaning to her, would have circulated outside of her own city, much less to a museum a world away in the Netherlands. She also could not have known that she would come to serve as part of an attempt to typify – and therefore flatten – the demographic landscape of a region she knew to contain multitudes.

But what demographic, exactly, did she typify? Historically, the figure of the tapada evoked in visitors to Peru the figure of the veiled Arab woman, whose face and physical form were hidden beneath the folds of her costume. To the mostly male, mostly European observers who wrote about the tapada, her covered-up nature was unsettling, as she could see without being seen.⁸ For her part, the tapada became less Western and European, and more Eastern and non-white, through the process of being visually consumed. This transformation was completed upon the photograph's arrival in the NMVW, if not before then, at the

6 For more, see: Tamara J. Walker, *Exquisite Slaves: Race, Clothing, and Status in Colonial Lima, Peru*.

7 See, for example: Alicia del Aguila, *Los velos y los pieles: cuerpo, género y reordenamiento social en el Perú republicano (Lima, 1822-1872)* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2003); and Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity*, pp. 87-88.

8 Tamara J. Walker, *Exquisite Slaves*; see also: Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity*, pp. 87-95

moment of purchase or acquisition, cementing the woman's status as an exotic representative of a faraway land that had nothing in common with her likeness's new home.

That Peru was a former colony of Spain added an additional layer to this kind of exotic framing. The Iberian Peninsula's unique history, with its legacy of Moorish occupation and the enduring influence of Arab and Jewish populations on the region's culture, meant that it occupied a subordinated racial status in relation to the rest of Western Europe.⁹ American-born Spaniards were even further subordinated, as the very fact of their being born into a context that was so profoundly shaped by race mixing, called their racial purity into question.

In this way the woman in the photograph is visually and conceptually linked to the woman in "*Portret van een Zuid-Amerikaanse vrouw*" ("Portrait of a South-American Woman," Figure 2), despite the differences in this one's catalogue label, which describes the woman as South American rather than Peruvian. The woman appears to be of African ancestry, and possibly of mixed indigenous or European heritage, and to a casual observer might be taken as Brazilian. This would have been understandable considering the country's significant population of African descent owing to the primacy of slavery in the region (where abolition did not take place until 1888, making it the longest-lasting slaveholding society in the Americas), and the degree of race-mixing there. But Peru had its own deeply-entrenched history of African slavery, a fact which makes the "South American" label a subtle – and strange – act of erasure that severed the African-descent woman's connection to the place of her and her ancestors' birth.

More than a point of information, the woman's African ancestry and connections to the history of slavery in Peru are also useful to understanding why she would have wanted to sit for a photograph in the Courret brothers' studio. To help explain why, it is first worth discussing a popular motif within the Courret

9 See, for example, María DeGuzmán, *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

brothers' body of work, which featured the young, nursing-age children of wealthy being held in place by their (mostly black) wet nurses. By definition, wet nurses were recently post-partum, so that their lactating breasts could feed their charges (a practice which traced its origins to the period of slavery and always posed a threat to the women's own children's access to their mother's milk and the nutrients it contained). One typical example of the genre, from 1881 (not pictured), featured a baby named Melanie Cocle, who is posed on a pedestal in front of her unnamed wetnurse. In the photograph, Melanie is swaddled in a voluminous white, lace-trimmed fabric. Holding her from behind is the unnamed wet nurse, who wears a heavy, dark shawl that covers her entire face. This was not the fashionable manto worn by the tapadas, and hardly a fashion at all as its heavy folds rendered the wearer both unseen and unseeing, and made it impossible for to do anything but hold still, in service to her young charge and the image that is, most importantly, about her (and, by extension, her family). And yet the presence of the wetnurse is essential, in terms of how she both literally and figuratively props up the child.

In contrast, the woman in the NMVW photograph appears alone. She also wears her hair uncovered, its long coils reaching down past the crisp white collar of her dress, which has a cinched waist and petticoat under the skirt that adds to her shapely form. She poses with her hands – soft, with clean nails – crossed at the wrist and delicately placed over the back of an ornately-carved wooden chair. There is nothing about the image that suggests a life lived in service to other people, a life toiling in manual labor, or one that bore any obvious connection to the history of slavery. She appears instead to be a woman of comfort and means, who would have been proud to pose for posterity.

This is not to romanticize the world of images produced by the Courret brothers. Indeed, the inclusion of wet nurses and their charges is just one hint that not every subject of their photographs was an entirely-willing participant in the image-creation process, or posing for photographs in service to their own visual narratives.

The third Courret image "*Portret van een Peruviaanse man in traditioneel kostuum*" ("Portrait of a Peruvian Man in Traditional Costume," Figure 3) offers another possible hint. The photographed man is of apparent indigenous ancestry and, like the aforementioned tapada, gestures towards tradition in his manner of dress. In this instance he wears a coarse wool poncho and wide-brimmed hat combination that was favored among highland populations and holds a walking stick that would have been useful for navigating rough mountain terrain. Both the outfit and the walking stick would have been out of place in the urban context of late-nineteenth Lima where the Courret brothers did their work. While it is possible that he, like the tapada, was outfitted in this way to honor his highland relatives and ancestors, a more likely explanation is that he was a model, equipped with props and enlisted to pose in this way by the photographers in order to typify the human types in the highland region of Peru. Deborah Poole has noted, in addition to producing photographs for local consumers, the Courret brothers also marketed their photographs to Parisian audiences, particularly those of "Indian types."¹⁰

The Courret brothers were not the only purveyors of these types of cartes de visite. It held appeal to other local photographers as well as to foreign visitors who were arriving in Lima (and elsewhere in the Andes) in the late 19th century with the express purpose of compiling cartes de visite to represent native populations wearing typical costumes of their socioeconomic station and line of work.¹¹ This seems to be the context in which the image bearing the NMVW catalogue label "Portrait of a black Peruvian man with a basket on his head" (and the original, Afrikaans label "*Inboorling van Peru*," or "Native of Peru") was produced.

While the label might hold up to a quick visual appraisal of the image, upon closer inspection there appears to be a misapprehension at work. For, beneath the billowing fabric of the long cape covering most of the subject's body, there emerge the folds of a dress or

10 Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity*, p. 195

11 Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity*, p. 118

a skirt. The institutional rush to categorize, to sort, therefore, at some point seems to have overtaken the important work of careful inspection and analysis. This is not simply a correction for the sake of one, but rather an observation about the racialized attitudes and assumptions about gender that were at work in the creation of the catalogue description. What was it that made it so easy to label the subject as male? Perhaps it was the absence of long hair (or, put another way, the presence of a headscarf to cover up the hair), in conjunction with the physical labor of carrying the basket that marked the subject as male.

There was always some degree of labor involved in posing for a photograph in the nineteenth century, since, at minimum and whether sitting down or standing up, a subject's erect posture needed to be maintained for the duration of the session. But the labor involved in posing with props, especially those held aloft in the subject's hand(s) or otherwise supported in some way by his or her body, was even more taxing. Thus, the "Portrait of a black Peruvian man with a basket on his head" is a portrait of a subject involved in a potentially grueling kind of physical exertion. The positioning of her arm, bent and with a hand placed on his right cheek, not only adds another layer of physicality to his pose, but hints at the strain of maintaining such as pose as well.

As with any attempt to assemble puzzle pieces taken from different boxes, even if the boxes they each come from promise similar final pictures – whether of landscapes, vistas, individuals, or collectives – they rarely, if ever, fit together perfectly. The pieces were carved out by different hands, with subtle gradations of design on each. In this case, the difference between the Courret brothers' images and that of the South African photographer is subtle but instructive. In the Courret images, the subjects all face the camera. Their eye contact is meaningful. In contrast, the South African photograph, with its subject posed in profile, possesses a different sort of quality. It seems to adhere to the prevailing conventions of nineteenth-century colonial ethnography.

The photographs attributed to the Courret brothers that form part of the NMVW collection are also significant for what they

are not. Setting aside the handful of photographs of Lima church buildings and cityscapes that also form part of the collection, they represent a distinct sample of the Courret brothers' larger body of work. Although we do not know, exactly, how many photographs the pair took in their studio (or in the homes of patrons, in public venues, or on the city streets where they occasionally staged sessions), or how many of those photographs have been preserved, extant examples range from photographs of families seated around elders, sibling groups posed on toys, young children surrounded by dolls, toddlers being held in position by nursemaids. The Courret brothers also took photographs of group scenes, at parties, in parks, and on the street. They speak to the social ties they forged, the social lives they led, the power dynamics they formed part of, and the things they held dear. Yet none of that larger story and context is visible in the decontextualized assortment of images in the NMVW museum.

In this way, the Courret photographs share key features in common with the South African-authored photograph. Because all four subjects appear in these images by themselves, outside of any recognizable social or familial context, they are nobody's daughters or sons, nobody's wives or husbands, and certainly nobody's mothers or fathers. They thus appear on the verge of extinction, the last of a dying breed. It is only in naming that vision and contrasting it with the documented record detailing the lives these women lived, women and men who had names like Juliana and Maria and Juan and Miguel, families of their own, and children whose futures they were so hopeful and intentional about securing, does it become possible to restore the humanity and material concerns -outside of their labor - that they worked so hard to make us see.

Recent conversations around the subject of museum responsibilities tend to focus on the question of whether, how, and when to return objects, particularly those appropriated in the context of colonial rule, to their original sites and cultures (as well as the attendant logistical complexities). Indeed, the NMVW itself has been an active participant in these conversations as they

pertain to its own collections. The museum's "Return of Cultural Objects: Principles and Process" document outlines an agenda and procedural approach for addressing "the long, complex and entangled histories that have resulted in the collections the museum holds."¹² However, the Peruvian photographs, taken after the country secured its independence from Spain, do not easily correspond to, or require, the kind of redress scenario that is imagined by these conversations. Should they? In a certain sense, they are no different than contemporary photographs taken by journalists or travel photographers whose work circulates far beyond the contexts in which they were produced.

Still even that genre of photograph has been recently subjected to reappraisal. For example, *National Geographic*, the monthly magazine that has earned global renown for its photojournalism, adopted an ethical statement governing the work that appears in its pages as part of its "Enduring Voices Project," which focuses on documenting endangered languages and the people who speak them. It states, in part, that:

"All photographs and video taken of cultural and tribal people, as well as images of the land—including sacred lands—have been taken with strict permission from those individuals, and from the traditional owners of the land that we have been invited onto. For any images that are deemed suitable for media use, permission has been given for specific usage. In addition the names of individuals, their tribal affiliation, and their land names have been carefully documented and included in captions where appropriate. We understand the photographing of people and their land is an act of trust and is completed with respect and understanding to the laws and traditions of the people involved. The Enduring Voices Project film and photography archive has been designed to be an archive of culture for future generations."¹³

12 <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/about-tropenmuseum/return-cultural-objects-principles-and-process>

13 <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/archive/projects/enduring-voices/ethics-statement/>

The statement is compelling for its emphasis on the need for explicit consent for the taking and specific usage of photographs, and on the need to include individuals' names in any captions that get appended to the photographs. It is also instructive as a model for how Holland's NMVW might attempt to address the future place of the Peruvian photographs within the museum. It is obviously impossible at this point to obtain permission from the photographed subjects, who are no longer alive to be contacted even if their names were somehow un-erased from the records produced by the museum in relation to the images. That does not necessarily mean, however, that their names are lost to history. Future research into the Courret brothers' studio and patrons, which can be found in records scattered throughout libraries and archives in Peru (and, possibly, elsewhere), could possibly uncover more identifying details about the photographed subjects, including their names and potential heirs living in the present-day. To be sure, the work will be difficult if not impossible. But the effort itself, along with the challenges inherent to it, may prove instructive in ways that might be narrativized to replace existing methods of labeling the photographs in the NMVW. Such a narrative, alongside a contextualization of the world the Courret brothers lived and worked in, could more fully acknowledge the very human stories they created their photo studio to tell in the first place.

All contributors called into the Un/Engendering research project were asked to think outside their respective specializations. Without their courage, openness, humility, and without the peer reviewers' generous attention, such an interdisciplinary project could have never taken place.

Images

Figure 1: Eugenio Courret, Portrait of a Peruvian woman, 1874-1875. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll.nr. RV-A111-1-33.

Figure 2: Courret Hermanos [Eugenio and Aquiles Courret], Portrait of a South American woman, 1895-1905. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll.nr. RV-A389-3.

Figure 3: Courret Hermanos [Eugenio and Aquiles Courret], Portrait of a Peruvian man in a traditional costume, 1874-1875. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll.nr. RV-A111-1-37.

Figure 4: Portrait of a black Peruvian man with a basket on his head, 1988. Photographer unknown. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll.nr. RV-A122-1-33.

We publish these articles as the museums consolidate into one nominal entity, het Wereldmuseum: since the articles were written between 2020 and 2023, they do not yet reflect the March 2023 name change.