

A body for memory: the construction of chintz in visual culture (Rio de Janeiro, 1808-1850 c.)

Um corpo para a memória: a construção das chitas na cultura visual (Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1850 c.)

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ABSTRACT

During the first half of the 19th century, in Rio de Janeiro, calico fabrics, which had long been known to residents of other parts of Brazil, became popular among different social groups. The growing success of these prints informed a constant requalification of textiles. As these classifications became more frequent, painters, engravers and publishers strove to reproduce these fabrics through images. The transfer of the Royal Family to Brazil and the opening of ports to friendly nations caused conflicts, interests and experiences surrounding textiles and the circulation of printed matter to gain new momentum. Starting from the context of the expansion (of qualities and varieties) of the same product in international markets, this article problematizes the mechanisms that ensured the “differentiation” between fabrics through iconographic resources. Our investigative path examines a calico manufacturing manual (1804) alongside engravings by Henry de Chamberlain and Joaquim Guillobel. The argument here is that the archetypes constructed around black bodies were fundamental to inform elements present in the images — and, paradoxically, also to represent what could not be visualized, such as the warp and weft of fabrics. Finally, I highlight the permanence and power of these iconographic constructions over time.

Keywords: Iconographic memory. Fabric. Rio de Janeiro. 19th century.

RESUMO

Durante a primeira metade do século XIX, no Rio de Janeiro, os tecidos estampados, que já eram antigos conhecidos dos residentes das partes do Brasil, caíram no gosto de diferentes grupos sociais. Esse sucesso crescente informava uma constante requalificação dos têxteis. Ao passo que essas classificações se tornavam mais frequentes, pintores, gravadores e editores esforçavam-se para reproduzir, por meio de imagens, os padrões têxteis. A transferência da Família Real para o Brasil e a abertura dos portos às nações amigas fizeram com que conflitos, interesses e experiências em torno dos têxteis e da circulação dos impressos ganhassem nova velocidade. Partindo do contexto de ampliação (das qualidades e das variedades) de um produto nos mercados internacionais, este artigo problematiza os mecanismos que garantiram as “diferenciações” entre os tecidos, por meio de recursos iconográficos. Nosso caminho investigativo examina um manual de fabricação de chitas (1804), ao lado de gravuras de Henry de Chamberlain e Joaquim Guillobel. O argumento aqui defendido é que os arquétipos construídos em torno dos corpos negros foram fundamentais para corroborar os elementos presentes nas imagens e, paradoxalmente, representar o que não podia ser visualizado, como a urdidura e a trama. Por fim, destaco a permanência e o poder dessas construções iconográficas ao longo do século XIX.

Palavras-chave: Memória iconográfica. Tecidos. Rio de Janeiro. século XIX.

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INTRODUCTION: IMAGE AND MEMORY

What is the relationship between memory and image? This broad question has been explored by phenomenology of memory, which emphasizes the connection between remembrance and erasure. Paul Ricoeur (2007), drawing on the writings of Henri Bergson, defined the transition from pure remembrance to “image memory” as a moment of crystallization (Ricoeur, 2007, pp. 66-67). But it is not enough to recognize that memories crystallize into images; it is necessary to examine how they repeat and, through these repetitions, foster desires or longings with other images, or become credible testimonies.

Alongside pure remembrance, Bergson recognized that our perception of others is shaped through the play of the “remembering-image” (Dosse, 2000, p. 279). The revitalized past, through the image-material, is therefore a muddy terrain where both the traces for constructing historical knowledge and deliberate silences, as well as the matrices for the extermination of individuals considered different, are found.

Materialized images in colors, drawings, and fabrics present themselves as inescapable artifacts of material culture and form social memories that evoke spaces, times, and people. Social memory is rooted in specific communities and particular periods, marking gatherings, convivialities, and sometimes conflicts, reordering, and violences.

Based on the context of the Portuguese Royal Court’s arrival in Brazil and the opening of the ports to friendly nations, this article analyzes how textiles were classified at the port of Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 19th century. As these classifications¹ became more frequent, painters, engravers, and publishers endeavored to reproduce textile patterns through images. International conflicts, which resulted in the Napoleonic Wars, changed interests and experiences related to textiles and also modified editorial circuits. Faced with this multitude of transformations and interests, this article examines the mechanisms that ensured the “differentiations” between textiles through iconographic resources². To address this question, we will examine a 1804 chintz manufacturing manual alongside engravings by Henry de Chamberlain and Joaquim Guillobel. The argument here is that the archetypes built around Black bodies were crucial in corroborating the elements present in the images and, paradoxically, in representing what could not be visualized, such as the warp and the weft.

1 Most of the products arrived in pipes, barrels, lots, casks, bales, and boxes. These large volumes bore the label of the company, merchant, or firm, or simply the initials SAR (His Royal Highness). Upon disembarkation, the products could follow three paths: re-exportation for coasting trade and the Rio de la Plata; distribution within different parts of Brazil via mule transportation; or sale through auctions in Rio de Janeiro. In many cases, large lots were subdivided, renamed, and advertised in local newspapers. The term “classification system” encompasses this entire process of constructing the taxonomy for products within global commercial circuits.

2 Iconographic resources used to represent a fabric are different from the prints on the fabric; the latter have been referred to as surface design. Surface design is recognized within the framework of visual culture and, more recently, understood as “visual texts” (Lemire, 2018; Skeehan, 2020).

By visual culture, we understand “a set of devices, institutions, technologies, figurations, materialities, powers, desires, languages, and processes of shared collective meanings” (Schiavinato; Costa, 2016, p. 6). Based on this broad framework, it becomes important to isolate some “social markers and their operated deviations” (Certeau, 1994). This broad starting point distances us from explanations that analyze goods as manipulated solely as signs. It is true that laws and the purposes of states operated in accordance with the cognitive processes of individuals. Appropriations of behaviors and representations occurred within specific historical conditions, and studying these relationships, together with competing economic practices, helps us understand how certain political cultures took root and became resistant.

INTERESTS TO DISCIPLINE

Charles Ribeyrolles (1941, p. 19), who was in Rio de Janeiro in 1858, declared that Brazil was a country with so many issues to debate and so many “interests to discipline,” where everything was still to be done.

Since the beginning of the 18th century, manuals aimed to “discipline interests” and educate tastes (Neira, 2014, p. 200). Maxine Berg suggested that the changes in the aspirations of the middle classes in the 18th century were driven by international trade. There was a fascination with oriental designs arriving through maritime expansion. On the other hand, French influence persisted, dominating bourgeois taste. These ideas were well received in London, whose urban growth had been nurtured by the initial signs of the Industrial Revolution. Fashion, represented by printed cotton fabrics and Chinese decoration, created demand for the cotton industry (Berg, 1995, p. 29). Thus, new markets for these items emerged, stimulated by industrial progress, changes in domestic spaces, and the newly opened trade borders, as was the case with the Port of Rio de Janeiro since 1808.

Domestic economy or consumers of new markets, the fact is that exchanges of information during long-distance travel constructed values, social systems, technologies, and artistic sensibilities. Conversely, it is important to highlight the role of the circulation of people, artifacts, and printed materials, creating a fertile ground for what some historians have called intertwined cultural flows (entangled history).

Since 1808, Rio de Janeiro has been characterized as an “intertwined space” (Bhabha, 1998). It was a space that housed many people (coerced, chained, or free) amidst the migration of the Portuguese Royal Family. The move of the Braganza Court aimed to establish a seat for the European monarchy in the American soil, in response to the continental blockade occurring in Europe. This initiative did not happen without conflicts, and as the Court projected its power into the world, it also had to negotiate through divergent projects concerning Brazil itself.

The displacements of objects and the marking of differences occurred alongside the transitions of the colonial system, Portugal’s position in the European concert, and the insurgent parts of Brazil. From a commercial perspective, Rio de Janeiro functioned as an important site for classifying and qualifying goods, because it was a city that was growing and hosting the Court, in addition to serving as a “transfer

hub” for supplying the “*sertões*” and “all the numerous small ports along the Brazilian coast” and in South America (Spix; Martius, 1938, p. 71). The reinterpretations of material culture artifacts and the construction of images (through manuals, watercolors, and drawings) took place within the context of these transformations.

Recovering, even briefly, the fabric related to the classification of textiles helps us understand how memory played a role in the weaving of a visual culture in Brazil at the beginning of the 19th century³.

The overarching question guiding my research is: how, since the transfer of the Portuguese Court to Brazil, have the systems for classifying objects in the Rio de Janeiro commercial market been refined? Within the scope of this dossier on visual memory, I would like to specifically address the uses (and abuses) surrounding the iconographic memory of chintz⁴.

In 1804, Antonio Veloso Xavier translated, by order of the Portuguese Court, the book “*Arte de fazer chita*” by Lormois. Originally, written in French in 1780. The treatise described how to prepare dyes, produce the design, and apply the material onto the fabric. During this period, the plates for application were made of blocks of wood, iron, or copper.

In addition to explaining the methods for producing dyes and their application, the manual, translated by Veloso Xavier, also provided instructions on creating designs that would appeal to the “general taste”:

One can use all [...] such as natural flowers, flowers, and fruits of India, and from fantasy [...] some landscapes are also introduced, as well as animals, mainly butterflies, insects, and birds: but it has been experimented that the designs which most resemble nature are more sought after; when the natural flowers, which have been introduced, are well drawn and well painted, and when the fabric and handling match the correction of the design, they sell very well. An artist should therefore focus on making natural drawings, and should not place on the same branch flowers of many species; likewise, he should avoid using many colors on the same flower; I mean, for example, that in a branch, it should only have red, in a jasmine, blue; in a jonquil, orange; in violas, purple, etc. There are also certain flowers, which are susceptible to many colors, such as anemones, multi-hued tulips, and perfumed roses (Lormois, 1804, p. 5-6).

Both the reference to distant countries and the emphasis on the outline of the flora deserve highlighting.

And going far beyond describing nature through textile liturgy, the dissemination of the manual — in its translation into Portuguese — also allowed for the revelation of techniques for the restoration of artifacts:

3 The most recent work discussing this intersection between text, textiles, and graphic design is that of Danielle Skeehean (2020), but this debate is not new. Gilda de Mello e Souza, in 1953, defended a thesis in which she sought to understand fashion in 19th-century Brazil both as a marker of social distinction and as a material support for class, gender, and race struggles. This interpretation — predating the works of Pierre Bourdieu — was based on the studies of Florestan Fernandes, Roger Bastide, and Gilberto Freyre.

4 This choice overlooks a valuable debate about national interests, the textile industry, and the relationship between slavery and the textile factory. For this discussion, see the recent works of Dourado (2023) and Santos (2023).

They are also very suitable for renewing the colors of old tapestry, or those with a high gloss, or silks, wool, or cotton, making them look like new, by passing the same color with a brush on areas where the color has faded. You will be pleased to see that these colors will be more beautiful and will fade less than the original ones used in the making of the tapestries (Lormois, 1804, p. 7).

The entire focus is on the themes of the design and the application techniques. At no point is the weaving process evaluated. And, although it is known that chintz printing mainly took place on cotton fabric, muslin, silks, wool, and tapestries could also be printed, as highlighted by Lormois (1804).

William Reddy (1987), who studied textiles in the context of the French Revolution, reported a methodological problem that his own research encountered. By using a commercial catalog as a source, Reddy (1987) found that his documentary corpus exhibited a stable situation that hindered access to human relationships and the terms of agreements and conflicts that shaped their forms. Reddy's (1987) warning is unequivocal: if we want to understand the agreements that gave rise to a dimension of the object under certain conditions, we must rely on documentary sources of various kinds. The image is the result of these agreements and conflicts, not the starting point.

Paying attention to Reddy's (1987) warnings, we will start from the description of chintz fabrics reported at the end of the 18th century and proceed towards the pictorial understandings in Rio de Janeiro, already at the beginning of the following century.

As we traverse this path, we can find the earliest evidence of the connection between the creation of drawings and watercolors, the dissemination of printed materials, and the circulation of artifacts of material culture.

Let's look at the case of Guillobel and Chamberlain:

The significance of Joaquim Cândido Guillobel's work for Brazilian visual memory at the beginning of the 19th century remains relatively underexplored. The Portuguese military officer was responsible for producing isolated drawings. His goal was to create sketches that would serve as the basis for representing the "characters" of that Brazil (*Olhar Viajante in Casa Fiat de Cultura*, 2008, p. 56).

In Figure 1, the Black person is a theatrical figure. An archetype featuring a pipe, a staff, and an unsteady gait, with a basket on the back and striped clothing and plain dyed fabric. This representation created a character that was quite popular:

The watercolor on paper is attributed to Henry de Chamberlain. It is likely that Guillobel sold his drawings to Chamberlain⁵, who composed the scene of "Largo da Glória" and handed it over to engraver Thomas Alken. Once the engraving was

5 Joaquim Cândido Guillobel was a Portuguese painter and military officer, while Henry de Chamberlain was an English painter and military officer. Both collaborated in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 19th century. Portugal and Great Britain, during the João VI period, usually studied from the perspective of the imposition of English consumption patterns or Portuguese "disadvantages," but they can also be analyzed through the perspective that recognizes the practices of trade, the diffusion of arts, and printed materials within intertwined circuits. It is important to emphasize that copying of drawings, in that context, was not an obstacle.



Source: Guillobel (1819–1822).

Figure 1. Brazilian asking for money for the church festival and enslaved Brazilian.

completed, the plates were edited by one of the most renowned London publishers of the mid-19th century, Thomas McLean. Based on McLean's edition, the catalogs acquired printed materiality and circulation speed. The collective work involving a draftsman, watercolorist, engraver, and publisher was completed. At the end of this process, about a dozen more traders, booksellers, and auctioneers could be involved.

The original drawings, the creation of watercolors, the work of engravers, and the actions of publishers created circuits for the prints and for the textiles depicted through these prints (Leite, 2023, p. 403). And thus, the archetypal Black figure with a staff and pipe traveled the world.

This network of collaboration between artists and merchants built a "credible testimony," a "factor of security for the entire set of social relations," fostering the trust necessary for transforming testimony into an institution (Ricoeur, 2007, p. 174). It is under this perspective that we should revisit the character created to represent the Black person.

In Figure 1, the garments of the lower part of the Black figure with a pipe were painted dark blue. In Figure 2, Chamberlain lightened the same piece and reduced the contrast of the shirt. All the enslaved women are depicted with a slight drape of the fabric around their shoulders. These signs of sensuality contrast with the white man, who is overly dressed for the scorching temperature of Rio de Janeiro. The only figure not carrying weight on his head is the white man; he is also the only character whose clothing features red tones. These images were also given the title (at the time) of "Brazilian types".

Beverly Lemire (2018) recognized that intercultural exchange through artifacts was successful in Early Modern Europe as it evoked the imagination, beliefs, and



Source: Chamberlain (2025).
Figure 2. *Largo da Glória*.

values transmitted over time. Botanical knowledge was thus intertwined with perspectives on the world that embraced new designs, colors, and textures. This movement led to a revision of material culture within the global system, enabling men and women to acquire cosmopolitan sensitivities through a long process of adoption, adaptation, and modification of content that was already familiar to them (Lemire, 2018, p. 11).

From another perspective, it is important to understand the force of violence that shaped "*Largo da Glória*" by Chamberlain. The characters were already sketched out and received more or fewer colors depending on their (arbitrary) placements within the city's spaces.

The difference is striking when Chamberlain depicts his Black characters in moments of conviviality:

In Chamberlain's Figure 3, the women's breasts burst out of their dresses, the stripes appear clearly, and the work is accompanied by the sound of a *berimbau* played in the background.

It is worth emphasizing once again — following the testimonies of Lormois (1804) — that printed fabrics were highly valued in the global market, and the use of colors did not represent an attribute of any people or exclusivity of a particular geographic region.

However, the main reference for the painter in Figure 3 is *Guinea cloth*, that is, striped fabrics with bold tones, invented by English manufacturers for trade in



Source: Chamberlain (2025).
Figure 3. A market stall.

Africa and later characterized as having an “African taste”⁶. According to Danielle Skeehan (2020), when Manchester manufacturers began producing *Guinea cloth*, they were compelled to study and imitate African patterns, prints, and aesthetics, as well as incorporate printed Indian cottons that sold well in the prosperous West African market. The striped and checkered patterns that characterized these types of fabrics would become one of the main prints or styles that English cloth producers in Guinea attempted to imitate. *Guinea cloth* has the ability to illustrate how Europe visually plundered Africa. Embedded within the fabric itself is a history of economic relationships, aesthetic practices, and unequal distributions of power that characterized the slave routes across the Atlantic (Skeehan, 2020, p. 74).

At this point in our analysis, we need to highlight the difference between printed fabrics in general, chintz, and *Guinea cloth*. In eighteenth-century England, chintz was the name given to fabrics featuring traditional Indian colors: red, pink, brown, blue, and yellow. In France and Portugal, as indicated by Lormois’s document, besides the primary colors, chintz was also considered a form of high-quality painting, employing sophisticated techniques of the time.

Calico was a designation for fabrics that were generally painted. Cotton, with different weaves, could be painted using mechanical or manual techniques, but

⁶ The use of striped fabrics to identify enslaved people is not unique to Chamberlain’s work. Jean Baptiste Debret (1981) employed the same techniques in plates such as “Transport of Carriages at the Port of Rio de Janeiro” (Debret, 1981, p. 287). What this article aims to demonstrate is precisely this circulation and collaboration between the artists.

muslin, linen, and fustian were also subjected to the same process (Sykas, 2007). The term “chintz” as a designation for a fabric⁷, pattern, and weave would be a contentious concept throughout the 19th century.

Still following Skeehan (2020), it is important to highlight that textiles themselves were highly circulated material texts that infiltrated various cultural circuits. In this way, these fabrics created memories that guided artworks and enhanced the growing publishing market.

The collection of drawings and watercolors forms a grammar for the eye, portraying enslaved people alternately as staggering, sensual, or drum players. The clothing framed this image, defining colors for the Black individuals, without small flowers or heavy garments such as velvet and wool.

When we compare these images with the shipments of chintz that arrived at the port of Rio de Janeiro (still in the early 19th century), we find evidence indicating the prestige of fabrics from France, the USA, and England. Meanwhile, the iconography of these same textiles begins to differentiate small flowers for ladies and large stripes and bands of fabric for the clothing of those depicted as enslaved.

Over the years, this distinction became more pronounced. But if the composition could only be verified by touch and drape, how did iconography develop a code to translate the thickness and fiber composition?

The recovery of Chamberlain and Guillobel’s works, along with the trajectory of these prints, allows us to infer that the marker indicating the “quality” of the fabric was located in the depicted bodies, not in the textile itself.

The further we progressed through the 19th century, without the presence of Chamberlain or Guillobel, the more the iconographic memory evoked a specific body to describe an ordinary product:

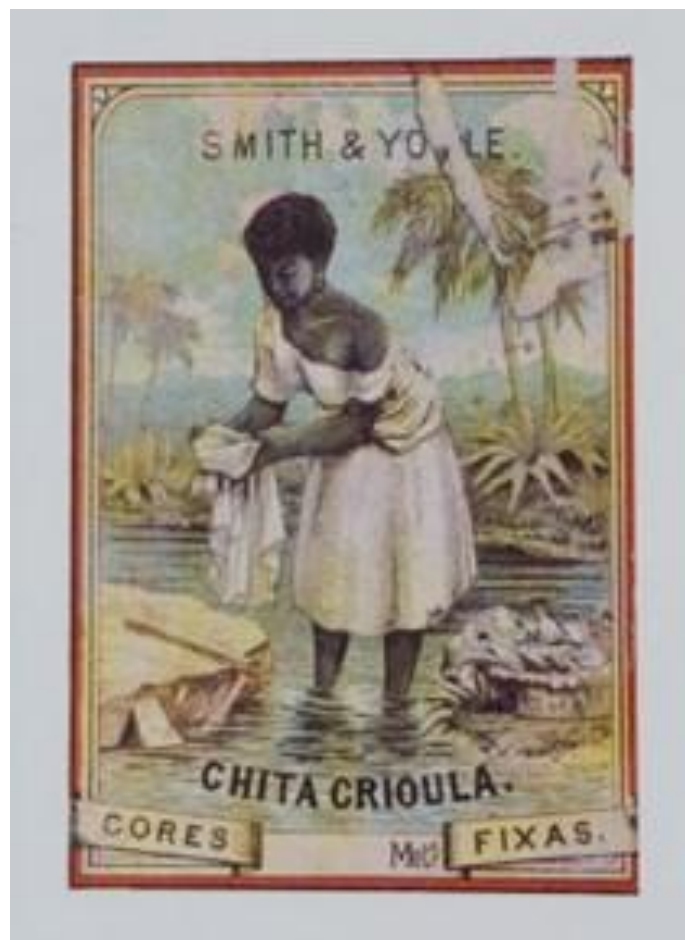
Figure 4 is a temporary print from the second half of the 19th century, and as such, it has a broader circulation potential than the engravings and manuals from the early 1800s⁸.

In this new context, “chintz” became a specific type of fabric and no longer referred to the 18th-century chintz with its floral motifs. In the lists of almanacs, the descriptions of fabrics became more important than the drawings, and so “linen pillowcases, chintz bedspreads, white cotton socks” appeared (Almanak Administrativo, Mercantil e Industrial do Rio de Janeiro, 1858, p. 215).

The writings below Figure 4 emphasize that the “colors” were “fixed”, although the contrast highlights the difference between black (skin) and white

7 From a technical perspective, the variation in cotton is characterized by the fiber (length and quality), and the fabric by the fiber content, warp, and weft.

8 We will not delve into the debate over the consumption and dissemination of these ephemeral prints. For now, if we assume that the socio-economic figure of the consumer was shaped through a long process of bargaining, usurpations, and agreements, and that what we commonly recognize as the “public space” at the end of the 19th century was the result of these struggles, on one hand, and state decisions and global circuits of trade, industry, iconographic production, printing, and distribution, on the other, then it becomes increasingly important to study consumption based on the mediations between body, culture, and economic circuits, from a historical perspective.



Source: Heinemann, Rainho e Cardoso (2009, p. 114).
Figure 4. Creole chintz.

(fabric). All the violent attributes, elaborated by painters, draftsmen, engravers, and publishers during the earlier period, were consolidated by the second half of the 19th century, without the need for explanation or retouching. The “interests to discipline”, as indicated by Ribeyrolles (1941), were embedded through crystallized memories, whose repeated sharing fostered a sense of commonality (Ricoeur, 2007, p. 175)

In the second half of the 19th century, it was no longer necessary to alter the colors of clothing, create stripes to define *Guinea cloth*, or draw a *berimbau* to evoke someone’s African origin. Skin color remained prominent. All other attributes were constructed through a long process of erasures and violence⁹.

CONCLUSION: BODY AND MEMORY

Within a broad perspective of visual culture, I have sought to demonstrate throughout this text how fabrics were classified in the city of Rio de Janeiro between 1808 and 1850 (c.), starting from the analysis that examined engravings, paintings,

⁹ “Curiously, the field of research on the histories of clothing in Brazil has been slow to undertake the collective effort to reveal the plurality of its attire” (Andrade et al., 2024, p. 2).

and drawings by two artists and compared these images with a treatise titled "*Arte de fazer chita*", translated into Portuguese in 1804.

It is true that what I refer to as a "new system of classification" of goods encompasses transformations in the body of laws, state regulations, and the cognitive processes of individuals that are much more complex and interconnected than those presented in this text. Within the scope of this dossier on visual memory, I have aimed to select and describe how the construction of a memory specifically regarding chintz took place.

The documentary collection is not exhaustive. Neither do the sources used include less explored works. It was precisely this ordinary character of the images that led me to conduct initial examinations regarding the persistence of a visual memory. By analyzing the work of these artists, I was able to verify the interconnection between drawing, painting, publication, and distribution, which reflects the dynamism of editorial circuits on a global scale, as well as the repetition of iconographic patterns that depicted the people in Rio de Janeiro.

Henry de Chamberlain and Joaquim Cândido Guillobel developed efficient codes for their representations of textiles. Over time, these codes evolved into mnemonic understandings of the fabrics. In South America, the editorial circuit, the production of watercolors, and the textile trade cannot be understood as isolated businesses.

The way textiles were represented allowed for a classification system that translated designs and colors, penetrating the complex terrain of qualifying the weaves and threads. It was an intermediation between material culture artifacts and images that reflected a long and violent process of enslaving people from Africa. It was a system of description of Black bodies.

The materiality of the artifact was revealed through pictorial apprehension. But how was it possible to describe texture, weave, and volume of textiles through images? The draftsmen, painters, engravers, publishers, and merchants worked collaboratively, not only to spread the fabrics but also to ensure that the characters, imagined and constructed solely through the gaze of white men, traveled across different engravings and catalogs. As we progress into the 19th century, print runs and editions became more numerous and circulated increasingly widely. Thus, a body was created based on reiterated visual memories, reproduced and sold within global circuits. A body was fashioned for the graphic memory.

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