

## **On Rocks and Threads / Bar Yerushalmi**

### **Reflections on scientific illustrations in the works of Tal Yerushalmi**

Potsherds, flower petals, fish scales, feathers of a rare bird, or the muscles of a severed human hand. The nineteenth century cataloging obsession filled thick volumes with thousands of illustrations by researchers who set out to classify the world and organize it, giving it a name and a place in the cosmos.

As the main means of visual documentation before the invention of the camera, scientific illustration is an inseparable part of the classification process of the known world by modern science. Thomas Garnet Henry James, the curator and Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum in the 1950s, once wrote: "If you are really interested in discovering how our knowledge of ancient Egypt has been built up over the past two centuries, you will soon find that the greatest contribution has been made not by excavators but by the host of little-known workers, amateur and professional, who have laboured, devotedly and unsung, on the recording of monuments and the copying of inscriptions."<sup>1</sup>

James touches on an interesting point – the almost consistent anonymity of the artists and illustrators in the Western endeavor of knowledge production. For centuries of scientific research, illustrators and artists have documented the discovery of the world and its cataloging by researchers and scientists. It seems impossible to separate the geographic, zoological, botanical, or archeological discoveries in recent centuries from the drawing hand toiling in the background on their translation into paint on paper.

Tal Yerushalmi's paintings stand as hybrids in this cumulative historical process of visual organization and cataloging. In them, we identify the movement of a deliberate, research-oriented hand, directed by scientific findings and research data, alongside the work of an "unknowing" hand, which advances diligently toward the unfamiliar. Like an eternal tango, the paintings engage in a perpetual dialogue with the history of modern scientific research. Fragments of rocks, pieces of ropes, and shreds of cloth are collected into compositions that have a logic of their own, as part of a scientific classification process whose underlying

---

James is quoted by Barbara Fash, "Beyond the Naked Eye," in *Past Presented: Archaeological Illustration and the Ancient Americas*, Joanne Pillsbury (Ed.), (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2012).

principle is hidden from us and whose outcomes will never be revealed. For Yerushalmi, the painting does not end with the conclusion of the scientific research, but rather pushes through and exists in its own sphere, as a byproduct of the process of translation into painting. Yerushalmi follows and uses the visual language of documentary painting, while formulating her own interpretation to this scientific language. The interpretation she offers transgresses into a mixed reality, one in which the history of science (or, to be precise, the history of scientific drawing) is entwined with the domain of paintings: an area of illusions and diffused boundaries, where scientific methodologies unravel in the face of the painted image that answers its own set of rules, which does not have to comply with the burden of proof that binds science.

### **On Rocks**

Archeology is the study of what is not there: faced with the unwritten past, it draws its conclusion from empirical observation of the inanimate objects that survived, and the world from which they came.<sup>2</sup> Removed from its local history, the archeological finding, be it pottery fragments or an ancient necklace, remains detached, drifting without any roots that connect it to the time and place in which it was made.

Until the nineteenth century, archeological artifacts were mostly collected for their aesthetic or historical value: rare manuscripts, ancient seals or gold coins were kept in the famous "curiosity cabinets," along with anything else perceived as exotic or mysterious. All this has changed with Augustus Pitt Rivers, a pioneer of scientific archeology and inventor of typological cataloguing method. In contrast with his predecessors, Rivers maintained that any object found at an excavation site has value, and attributed importance to artefacts that are not beautiful or interesting formally. With that, he in fact paved the way to a methodology that sees the archeological finding as part of accumulative history as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

As she turns to the archeological, Yerushalmi extricates the artefact from its local history, wishing to re-examine it by translating it into a single painted object. At the same time, she deviates from Rivers' typological tradition in order to produce a new order, one where the

---

*Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. Retrieved from the dictionary website on 28.11.2017.<sup>2</sup>  
Dan Hicks, "Characterizing the World Archaeology Collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum" in Dan Hicks and Alice Stevenson<sup>3</sup> (Eds.), *World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum: a Characterization* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013), pp. 1-15.

archeological object is not examined as a part of a series, but as a singular embodiment of history, whose secrets should be deciphered from within itself.

One of the recurring images in Yerushalmi's works in the last couple of years is flint rocks. Half formed or broken, the depicted rocks range from the functional to the inscrutable. At times they crystalize and form a practical image: an arrowhead, hand axe, or a surface for lighting fire. Other times they remain nondescript, random rocks collected along the way. She painstakingly carves in the paint, shaping the volume of the flint rock. The act of carving replicates the act of chiseling the prehistoric flint, and exposes its three-dimensionality on the surface of the painting, as if it had carved itself.

Yerushalmi plays a double game, striving to be at the same time both researcher and maker. Her painting technique allows her to follow the trail of the artefact's unknown history. In experimental archeology, the analysis of the artefact is carried out by simulating its manufacturing or usages (using ancient paints and painting techniques to recreate cave paintings is one such example). In a similar vein, the act of painting in Yerushalmi's works serves as a physical means of exploration, through which she understands the structure of the object and wishes to accomplish what scientific research struggles to do: experience the past and the present concurrently. Through her manner of painting, the past of the prehistoric rock materializes and meets its re-invention as a painted rock. The viewer who looks at the painting of the flint rock is not looking at a copy of the flint, nor at its translation into painting, but rather at the creation of a new flint rock, executed by carving in the paint texture of the painting's surface.

### **Weave into the Fabric of Time**

The Navajo people in North America tell the story of the Spider Woman, a primal figure that exists beyond time and space, her thousand hands spinning in the giant loom of creation, her fingers moving and fluttering between the infinite possibilities of life's reality, creating new stories and unraveling obsolete ones. With her dozens of eyes, she sees what has been and what will be. She is the great narrator who maintains the incessant movement of the universe as it emerges into existence. The Spider Woman taught humans how to weave, and in acknowledgement of this debt they leave a spider-sized hole in the center of each cloth. When European merchants first arrived in the continent and refused to buy the blankets

because of the hole in their center, the Navajo weavers replaced it with a "spirit outlet" – a thin line that ran from the center of the cloth to its borders, delineating the spider's path.<sup>4</sup>

Weaving is one of the earliest crafts in human history. Like many other myths and tales surrounding it, the figure of the Spider Woman wishes to tell us a bigger story – one that speaks the language of the people who created it. Yerushalmi takes on these mythologies in the series of paintings of cloths. She composes them little by little, insisting on the portrayal of every change, hue, and detail in the textile. The complexity of weaving, the moments of unraveling and tying, the design of the pattern, all receive the most meticulous treatment. She looks at the cloth as a kind of an intricate road map, which she attempts to decipher through painting, and like the Spider Woman, makes her way through the design patterns, searching for the hole through which she can get in and out.

Textile is among the first to succumb to the ravages of time, second only to the decay of body tissues. Unraveled or partly torn, full of holes and eaten by rodents, the painted textiles preserve all that is left of the dozens of hands that toiled and weaved for days and months. In her devoted care, the artist connects to the threadbare items, scouring them in search of veins of meaning. The textile is a testament of life, she claims; it recounts a tale that was lost in the recesses of history yet survived as a weaving pattern, a grid, or color lexicon. In her long conversation with this ancient craft, she salvages the fragments of culture that persistently embedded themselves in the threads. She cannot understand what they are saying – the language they speak is not her own, and so she awkwardly recreates the fragments of formal sentences on the surviving textile, a moment before they final unraveling by the toiling hands of the Spider Woman.

### **Painting the New**

How did Sydney Parkinson, official artist and illustrator of James Cook's voyage, feel when the views of the virginal shores of Terra Australis, never before seen by any European, first appeared before him? Or Howard Carter – the archaeologist who became famous after discovering the tomb of Tutankhamun – in his first visit to Egypt at the age of 17 as an artist and illustrator of an excavation of the Egypt Exploration Fund? And what about Condard Martens, painter of the expedition of his friend Charles Darwin, as they sailed along the

---

Raymond Friday Locke, *The Book of the Navajo* (Los Angeles, CA: Mankind, 1976).<sup>4</sup>

coast of South America? What is common to all these people is not necessarily their knowledge of biology or archeology, but rather the fact that they served as the eye that witnessed the new world that they visited, and as the hand that translated and captured these singular views.

The history of scientific illustration is intimately linked with a series of historical changes and shifts that affected the visibility and disappearance of the life that it wished to record. The eighteenth and nineteenth century expeditions to new lands in the name of the advancement of science, exposed Western man to "terra incognita", which was unknown to him thus far, but by its very discovery completely transformed it. Species of flora and fauna, as well as the human communities that were documented in those expeditions, had to adapt to the demographic, climate and cultural changes that white man brought about, which sometimes even led to their demise. Documentary drawing is more than anything a residue of this fateful encounter between different cultures and forms of existence, and the artist or illustrator as the first witness to that collision, who tries to understand it with the set of tools at his disposal.

It is fascinating to observe these remainders of an initial exploration. More than they attest to the item they portray, they attest to the person who painted it and to the culture from which he came. Yerushalmi's paintings turn to the remains of an ephemeral existence and arrange them together into a new composition. Rocks, pieces of textile, or wood, the organic material accumulates knowledge inscribed in its physical characterizations and shape. Painting, in turn, assumes the role of observing this reservoir of knowledge and reexamining it. In this respect, there is no need to embark on far away expeditions to the edges of the world. The new is not found in an imaginary "there" but rather in a daily encounter with the continuous present, the world of rocks and pieces of civilization found in the backyard of human history.