This introduction has two aims: It provides an overview of this special issue's explorations of art produced in and emerging from colonial contexts, and it offers a case study in miniature on the issue's theme. I locate these articles within an expanding field of African art historical scholarship on colonial structures and their appendages (military, academic, commercial, or otherwise) as sources of pressures that impose, coerce, restrict, or provide opportunities for innovations by African artists. Africa's colonial histories span millennia and the breadth of the continent, from ancient Carthage in the continent's northern reaches and Omani imperialism in East Africa, to regional empires whose memories are preserved through the names of nations (Mali, Ghana, Zimbabwe), as well as empires now contained by nation-states (Benin, Ashanti, Bamum). The continent's imperial history also encompasses the apartheid system's colonization and resistance from within in South Africa; one of this issue's articles addresses artistry both circumscribed and fueled by this setting. Yet references to Africa's colonial history usually evoke a single subset of these myriad political histories: those imposed by European states between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries.

This period also saw the development and institutionalization of the field of African art history. Indeed, colonial empire is ubiquitous but only glancingly addressed in foundational African art historical literature and exhibitions¹—ubiquitous because the field itself and many of its most important collections were born in and of colonial settings. As the many museum labels and accession records dating objects to the “early–mid 20th century” attest, the majority of the works of art that constitute the canon of classical African art history—the elegant figurative sculpture, masks, and power objects that populate permanent galleries in museums and the pages of auction catalogues—were collected in African communities that were subject to European rule.² In 1994, Christopher Steiner's brief depiction of this historical setting was, for its time, unusually direct in its linking of African art history with the modern colonial era: “While interest in African art was slowly emerging in Europe—spreading further and further outside the inner circle of modern primitivists—European presence in Africa was growing at a furious pace, as the scramble for the continent unfolded” (1994: 5).³ As I will describe, these concurrent and closely related developments are increasingly being illuminated by art historical research, manifested in exhibitions as well as publications.

The intersection of the colonial and the canonical is also coming to the fore in popular discourse with the recent explosion of public debate on the repatriation of collections; as Allen Roberts noted in his recent First Word, “Is Repatriation Inevitable?,” “There seems a sudden acceleration of such conversations with regard to sub-Saharan holdings” (Roberts 2019: 1). The recent reopening of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, now renamed the Africa Museum, throws this historical context into stark relief as the institution struggles to address, if not to reconcile, its legacy in the Congo Free State's rapacious extractive colonialism, which was focused on ivory and rubber but also encompassed artworks of great cultural and aesthetic power.⁴ Until relatively recently, however, explicit acknowledgment of this colonial context as an element of the field as a whole was rare.⁵ Much of the key scholarship on African art published in the last decades of the twentieth century incorporated the colonial era into histories of specific artistic genres, as part of stories of adaptations, introductions of new forms and media, or the destruction of long-standing practices. Colonial Africa is a fact, part of the setting for research on past and present art making, not a focus. The colonial context was necessarily addressed more comprehensively in scholarship on some artistic genres: Benin bronzes and ivories are inseparable from the British sacking of the kingdom's capital in 1897,
and Dogon art is forever associated with the colonial official/ethnographer Marcel Griaule, who appointed himself the culture’s chief interlocutor.6

Still, in a field that was burgeoning through the 1980s and 90s, producing important work on a wide array of artistic traditions whose histories encompassed the modern colonial era, little scholarship foregrounded the colonial setting. Exceptions include Christraud Geary’s publications on King Njoya’s innovative responses to the European presence in Bamum (1988, 1996), and Enid Schildkrout and Curtis Keim on Mangbetu precolonial and colonial-era artistry (1990). Writing of Baule figurative blolo bla and blolo bian (or, “Other World Lovers”), Philip Ravenhill was strikingly forceful in his description of the impact of French colonization on this genre:

This new, layered society was in turn linked to an international network centered in metropolitan France—a network that irrevocably changed Baule society … This new order was controlled by armed power. Innovation was the result of imperialism, and change came about by the imposition of a new class system (1996: 14).

In 2005, Susan Vogel drew attention to the dearth of systematic attention to the colonial in African art historical scholarship—and to a second, equally troubled aspect of the field’s roots—in an editorial in this journal: “Perhaps it is time to say out loud what everyone already knows: that scholarship in African art has always been conducted under the shadow of the politics of race in America and the legacy of colonialism in Africa” (Vogel 2005: 16).

Nearly a decade later, Sidney Kasfir, whose African Art and the Colonial Encounter (2007) exemplifies a new turn to the colonial as an African art historical subject, wrote a First Word on the imperative to study modern empires as well as other pasts: “The inevitable question is, therefore, what will happen to the study of precolonial, eve-of-contact and early colonial African art, produced before World War II?” (2013: 4).

African art history was not alone among academic disciplines in its sidelong of the colonial as subject. West Africanist historian Fred Cooper called for a “rehistoricizing of the colonial situation,” as he noted the near-absence of modern colonial empires as subjects of academic study in a range of disciplines, including history and anthropology, until the 1980s. Attention to African histories of European imperialism, he declares, is important in a double sense: an application of anthropological analysis to a different sort of society, that defined by a mission community or a colonial regime, and an extension of the fieldwork method to archival sources, which would be examined with the same kind of quest for the relationship of different parts of the story to each other (2005: 47–48).

Recent art historical scholarship, including that of the contributors to this special issue, attests to Cooper’s assertion: Focusing our analytical gaze on this era and its structures in African lives yields rich insights.

The recent blossoming of scholarship in this vein includes Kasfir’s African Art and the Colonial Encounter, which offers a close analysis of British imperialism and African material cultures, constructed around a comparison of warrior aesthetics in British Nigeria and British East Africa. A nonexhaustive enumeration of other recent books on colonial empires and African art must include Roberts’s A Dance of Assassins (2013), Z.S. Strother’s Humor and Violence (2016), Susan Gagliardi’s Senufo Unbound (2014), Steven Nelson’s Cameroon to Paris (2007), Nii Quarcoopome’s Through African Eyes (2009), and Prita Meier’s Swahili Port Cities (2016). These works address the collection and reception of African objects outside Africa, of non-African objects in Africa, as well as the innovations of African artists and others in response to colonial structures of power. This colonial line of inquiry has also explored the European construction of an imagined Africa—and of the category “African art”—as one element of these structures of power.

The articles presented in this volume all address imperial settings through the visual expressions produced at the intersections of cultures, approaching these junctures through a wide variety of media: architecture and photography, ceramics and signatures, headrests and mass media, textiles and technology. The authors also address an array of colonial geographies: France in West Africa, North Africa in France, Belgium in Congo, and the apartheid system’s colonization of South Africa from within. In order
to account for the reach of imperial structures, this special issue expands the field of Africa’s colonial visual culture beyond objects produced in Africa and beyond the conventional temporal limits of modern colonial empires.

THE PITH OF IMPERIAL POWER

I turn now to a series of encounters with an emblematically colonial object whose authority as a symbol might appear to be unassailable. The pith helmet (Fig. 1) is so deeply embedded in colonial structures of power that today its association with this past remains undimmed. A rather recent event involving the First Lady of the United States demonstrates the intensity of this power. In 2018, Melania Trump traveled to several African countries including Kenya, where she was photographed in full Out of Africa attire (Fig. 2): tan jodhpurs and knee-high boots, a white dress shirt, and a classic pith helmet, white with small ventilation holes, a black band or strap across its brim, covered with the white fabric that created a reflective surface over the over the body of the helmet, which would have originally been made of wood pith. As memes flooded the Internet (too many to cite here), calling the pith helmet in particular an insensitive symbol of colonial oppression, Mrs. Trump tweeted her response: “I wish people would focus on what I do, not what I wear.”

The trouble is what the pith helmet can do on its own, aided by but not dependent upon the head that wears it (as Figure 1 demonstrates, even a disembodied pith helmet speaks its message clearly). Its associations with specific histories of European hegemony in Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere make this hat no mere accessory; the pith helmet can forge its own path, evoking the steep barriers of racial hierarchies and political divides, adapted to an array of settings while retaining the core of its signification. The helmet is a measure of imperial power, a key element of what Andrew Apter has labeled “the sartorial insignia of imperial standing” (Apter 2002: 576). For this compressed exploration, I focus on one colonial setting—interwar French West Africa—to trace the transformations of the pith helmet, rendered more explicitly in French as the casque colonial.

The connotative flexibility of the helmet begins at its inception, for it was born of European vulnerability to the ostensibly unhealthy climates of their colonies, specifically as a means of protection from the intensity of the Asian or African sun. But this sign of susceptibility to the tropical climes they sought to govern became an iconic element of the uniform of dominance worn by these sun-sensitive Europeans. The helmet was worn by official and unofficial agents of colonial power, from administrators to military officers and commercial representatives, from missionaries to teachers and tourists, men and women alike. Their use of this headwear was much more than practical (see Cover, for example); it was a symbol of affiliation with the colonial system. As one former British missionary in India vividly described, using the Anglo-Indian term for the pith helmet, the headwear was a signal of one’s most basic loyalties: “The topi was a fetish; it was a tribal symbol. If you did not wear a topi you were not merely silly, you were a cad. You were a traitor … You had gone native” (de Caro and Jordan 1984: 237). Going deeper, Dane Kennedy’s analysis of the pith helmet’s profound significance in British colonial Kenya and Rhodesia reads the garment as a porthole into an existential state of unease that permeated the culture of the colonial state:

Encouraging settlers to perceive the host environment as a hostile land and themselves as unwelcome sojourners in it, climatic theories gave impetus to a uniquely defensive form of socialization which profoundly influenced the character of the colonial culture (Kennedy 1981: 51).

The helmet was a potent symbol, whether of power or of its tenuousness.

In the French empire, too, the pith helmet embodied national self-image enhanced by imperial reach, and it also manifested the unease that accompanied the extension of the nation into territories long marked as “exotic.” The audiences for this projection of national identity were both internal—the residents of the “hexagon,” as continental France was known—as well as the “natives” subject to French rule overseas. One element of that assertion of power was the diffusion of this symbol from French into West African visual cultures, where its associations with European power fueled it but did not delineate its significance. Through a series of images—visual as well as verbal—I trace this supremely colonial form across both sides of an imperial divide during a period of shifting metropolitan discourse on the colonies.
Elizabeth Ezra characterized the tenor of interwar French imperialism as “projecting into the present a past that was quickly becoming obsolete, as the colonial empire began to dissolve” (2000: 10). The pith helmet’s continued presence and its separation from its roots as an ostensibly practical garment provide exemplary fodder for analysis of the visual culture of this colonial nexus of Europe and West Africa, focusing on France and the federation of colonies that constituted Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF).

To capture this aspect of the headwear’s “work,” we move to France, to an event that aimed to quite literally bring the colonies to the metropole: the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale. This interwar event was the largest in a series of massive public celebrations that promoted national achievements in industrial, political, scientific, and artistic realms, and it was also the most focused on the colonies. While all of the expositions, which reached from the late nineteenth century to 1937, presented the colonial empire as an element of national achievement, in 1931 the imperial message was honed and accentuated, as described in one of the many articles in the popular and colonial press covering the event and its achievements: “The lesson that emerges from this colonial exhibition in Vincennes [eastern Paris] is profoundly different from its predecessors, not only in its scope and its variety, but above all in its entirely distinct aims” (Lebrun 1931: 109). The author, president of the Senate, enumerates these aims, primary among them the creation of a consciousness among the French public of their nation as an empire, whose colonial possessions were both dependent upon and beneficial to the “mère patrie.”

Among the thousands of press images produced by the Agence économique de la France d’outre-mer now catalogued and digitized in the Bibliothèque National de France’s collections, one photograph from the margins of the fairgrounds, apparently taken on a Parisian street, expresses the helmet’s significance more eloquently than all the photographs of pith helmeted officials and dignitaries (Fig. 3). The image, labeled “Exposition Coloniale: la vente du casque colonial,” is focused on a table piled high with the distinctive white domes of pith helmets. A woman appears to be a the vendor, who stands with her three apparently interested customers, all presumably French. In a testament to the broad appeal of empire, these customers include a man, a woman, and a child, all of whom wish to take up this emblem of their nation’s overseas possessions for its colonial flair. In Paris, where heads needed no protecting from the sun, a vendor of casques coloniaux finds a ready market.

One can readily imagine the desire of French civilians to partake in the power of this emblematic accessory, for its wearers garnered great respect—and in the faraway lands of France’s empire perhaps great apprehension. In his 1973 novel/memoire of a West African interpreter to the employ of the French administration, L’Étrange Destin de Wangrin, renowned Malian writer and researcher Amadou Hampâté Bâ provided a stark description of the reactions of ordinary people to the mere sight of a pith helmet: “As soon as one saw a white man wearing a pith helmet, even if the helmet was dirty and discolored, one thought of one thing: run and fetch chickens, eggs, butter, and milk to offer them to ‘Mr. Helmet-wearer,’ like a mystical offering” (Bâ 2000: 25).

Images of other pith-helmeted Europeans in AOF illustrate the diffusion of the garment’s associations, from imposing colonial officials to a generalized adventure-chic (à la Mrs. Trump’s recent debacle). Also in 1931, Vogue magazine published a one-page feature on a French artist/socialite’s travels in Senegal (“Au Coeur d’Afrique,” 1931: 34). The photograph captures the traveler, identified as Madame Edouard Carniglion, standing knee-deep in a river while behind her floats a raft on which her car is being transported. She wears a bright white shirt, neatly tucked into the skirt she holds gathered at her knees (just beyond the water’s reach). Her smiling face is framed by the white oval brim of her pith helmet, which she touches with her non-skirt-holding hand, a tip of the hat to the viewer. Behind her stands her apparent travel companion, a second European woman whose crossed arms and hunched shoulders give her an air of resistance, whether to the camera or to the entire experience. Yet even this least gung-ho of travelers adopted the attire of her station: the pith helmet.

The headwear’s absorption into West Africa’s sartorial vocabulary vividly illustrates the precariousness of the colonial government’s deployment of visual symbols to both associate their subjects with the colonial state and to police that association. Popular
press and other forms of colonial propaganda presented an ideal colonial subject, whose admiration for and aspiration to serve the administration was manifested in the bestowal of the pith helmet. To the consternation of French observers, however, the casque colonial did not remain tied to the administration's aims, but instead floated freely into West African fashion systems.

The ideal migration of the headwear may be observed in several scenes from a film produced as colonial propaganda, one of many created in the early decades of the twentieth century (Lemaire 2003: 138). The film, Karamoko (1937), was further distributed through print media as the subject of a two-page spread in the monthly magazine Le Monde Colonial Illustré, illustrated with a dozen film stills. The article announced that the filmmaker, Georges Manue, had presented three new films, all made in AOF, to a selected audience in Paris that included the Minister of Colonies (Fraysse 1937: 18–19). Karamoko tells the story of Arafan, a young man from rural Soudan Français who comes to Dakar to study at an elite school for colonial subjects, the École William Ponty, in order to become a teacher. As key visual signifiers of French influence, clothing and textiles—notably including the pith helmet—were one element of the film’s persuasiveness as propaganda.

The film begins with Arafan and his father arriving in Dakar, presumably coming from their home in rural Soudan Français. Next, the young student boards the boat to Gorée Island, location of the prestigious École William Ponty. On his arrival, when he officially joins the student body, he changes his clothes. A still image of a young man wearing a plain, white jacket, buttoned to the neck, with a black cap is captioned: “Arafan changes the uniform of student teachers” (Fraysse 1937: 18). In another still, the students receive a history lesson from their teachers. Dress plays a key role in the scene: The students wear their black caps while the teachers are distinguished by the white pith helmets that are the sartorial emblem of their status. On completing his studies, Arafan is qualified to teach and receives his first posting: He will return to a school in his home village of Sansanding. In another still from the film, we see him seated at the bow of a large canoe of the type that typically plies the Niger River, presumably coming from their home in rural Soudan Français. In another still, we see him seated at the bow of a large canoe of the type that typically plies the Niger River, now wearing a pith helmet as the insignia of his new status.16 But, as the film makes clear, he still preserves the distinction between administrators and their subjects: We follow Arafan as he stops in Bamako, capital of the Soudan Français (and today capital of Mali), where he “orders a boubou for himself, the national dress.” His new standing as a product of French colonial education entitles Arafan to the pith helmet, but his African identity is equally prominent with his freshly commissioned boubou. The newly minted teacher’s headwear projects the status of the French administration as much as it projects his own. Figure 9 on page 75 of this issue depicts a similar, though nonfictional, instance of “appropriate” pith helmet adoption. In this photograph, a West African man—likely a cotton farmer—wears a pith helmet along with his elegant white boubou.

First gaining access to the pith helmet as a marker of affiliation with colonial administrations, West Africans reshaped the garment, freeing it from the bounds of the imperial structure, just as French civilians in the non-sunny streets of Paris freed it from its original purpose. In the colonies, however, the headwear’s movements might bring it into conflict with French interests. A French visitor’s 1928 description of the streets of Dakar drew attention to several of the city’s dress “peculiarities,” all examples of the “improper” use of Western garments:

The shirt is usually worn over the pants, the shirt tails billowing. Pith helmets are never lost, and always wind up on the head of a native, who often feels the need to paint it. One of them had a periwinkle hue, another gave his a coat of black paint (Perez 1928: 238).

This last must have seemed the height of sartorial ignorance, for the black surface would absorb rather than repel the heat of the sun, thus countering the helmet’s raison d’être.

Paradoxically, the desire among West Africans to own this headwear, ostensibly an emblem of aspiration to the French ideal, was also a source of French officials’ opprobrium. A 1931 article entitled “The Native Consumer,” which appeared in a magazine that served French interests in Togo and Cameroon, used the pith helmet to express dismay at African shopping habits, which were deemed to be indicative of a broader immaturity:

Because the native customer doesn’t always know what he is going to buy; in other words, what is, not so much his need but his desire or his whim? If he enters a store with the intention of buying a cooking pan, he will come out with a pith helmet even if he has hardly any clothing. But he buys the helmet because its form, color, and style please him and because he felt an immediate desire to become the owner of this object (J.M. 1931: 452).

Whether or not these writers actually observed the blackened pith helmet or the customer who disregards the cooking pot he needs for the helmet that catches his fancy, these anecdotes express their disapproval for changing, creative dress styles in AOF. The pith helmet, then, could signify the futility of progress in the colonies. The headwear of the efficient administrator and the intrepid explorer here marked the vast chasm that separated France from her colonial subjects and, by implication, the failure of past policies that had sought to assimilate these subjects.

Finally, beyond the interwar period but remaining in French West Africa, the pith helmet appears in contexts wholly detached from the administration that introduced them (Fig. 1). As Christine Kreamer describes, the casque colonial left behind even its hat-ness to become sculpture in wood:

Full-sized wooden hats inspired by French colonial headwear were carved by the Baule of Côte d’Ivoire prior to independence in the 1960s. Their appeal to the Baule lies not in their imitation of exotic foreign dress, but in the appropriation of dress that, linked to colonial authority in the Baule’s history, carried with it associations of power, authority, and prestige (Kreamer 1995: 109).

The white, dome-shaped, cloth-covered headwear’s projection of imperial might was so potent that it could be adopted to serve an array of contexts, where its appearance might reinforce, disseminate, as well as subvert, the structures of colonial power. And in all of these manifestations, the helmet is a product of colonial encounters, not solely French or West African but produced at the crossroads of the two.
Many thanks to the authors whose work comprises this issue, all of whom have been a pleasure to work with. Thanks to Florence Babb for her close reading of both of my contributions to this issue, and to Cartee Forbes for her comments on this introduction. I am grateful to the Department of Art and Art History at UNC Chapel Hill for exceptional research support. Many thanks as well to the Clark Fellowship at the Clark Art Institute, where I wrote the first draft of "A Wider Loom."

1 My focus is on the field as practiced in the United States, where African art history has the largest institutional presence, both in academic and museum settings. Although published by US presses, the scholarship that drives the discipline is produced by researchers of many nationalities, reflective of the African art history’s international character.

2 In their overview of the history of African art collections in US museums, Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke trace the development of many collections between the late 1800s and the 1920s (2011: 4–7). Yet such assessments came largely from outside the field of African art history.

3 This critical reaction to the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition and publication Primitivism in 20th Century Art (1984) provided an occasion for some scholarship on the entangled histories of African art history and European imperialism, largely calling out MOMA’s curators for failing to even grudgingly allude to the perspectives of African and other non-European cultures whose art was collected, admired, and appropriated by Modernist artists. Hal Foster called this "political genealogy of primitivism," which would trace the affiliations between primitivist art and colonial practice (1985: 62). This approach came largely from outside the field of African art.

4 In her discussion of the Royal Museum for Central Africa’s history as a site that both reflects and creates Belgians national memory of empire, Deborah Silverman vividly characterizes the institutions’ collections as “by-products of the frenzy for rubber that had cut a swath of fire and blood through the villages of the Congo Free State” (2014: 6 19). The museum was not designed to tell the story of the Congolese, but rather the story of the empire.

5 Such acknowledgment might address diverse aspects of the impact of colonial governance on African art history, encompassing both the making and use of art in Africa, and the reception of African material culture in Western academe and museums.

6 Foundational art historical work on Benin’s pre-colonial and colonial histories have been addressed in numerous publications by Paula Girschick Ben-Amos (1999), Barbara Blackmun (1991, for example), and Kathleen Curnow (1997). Marcel Griaule’s research on Dogon art and cosmology has been reassessed through its colonial/military methods by Clifford (1988), W.E.A. van Beek (1991), and de l’Etoile (2007).

7 This discussion of the pith helmet’s history in France and Africa Occidentale Française is adapted from one portion of my book-in-progress, Cloth Colonialism: Cotton of France in West and West Africa. Although the pith helmet has origins that are obscure, it was developed in the early nineteenth century by British planters in South Asia (Kennedy: 1981: 51, de Caro and Jordan 1984: 235). The helmet is called a "Màa" helmet in the Wolof language, and was worn by Senegalese soldiers during the French colonial period.

8 While the pith helmet’s origins are obscure, it was developed in the early nineteenth century by British planters in South Asia (Kennedy: 1981: 51, de Caro and Jordan 1984: 235).

9 Elizabeth Ezra reproduces a similar image—perhaps from the same series of press photographs—taken by the photographer during the 1931 Exposition coloniale (Ezra 2000: 22).

10 Sansanding is a town in the Segou region of Mali.

References cited


