By the end of the 1930s, the French Antiquities Service in Syria had expelled natives from Tadmor’s ancient locale, demolished their dwellings, and converted their ancient mosque back to a Roman temple [Fig. 1]. Less than a century later, claiming to eradicate the symbols of idolatry, the Islamic State pulverized the same vestiges for which the French had cleared the site in order to ‘preserve.’ While Stephennie Mulder offers a sound comparison between these mutually destructive acts, her extensive postcolonial analysis of the weaponization of Palmyra’s ruins lacks nuance in its treatment of archaeology as a purely physical process, overlooking the site’s early dismantlement through European visual culture. Published in 1753 to document his ‘discovery’ of Palmyra, Robert Wood’s Ruins of Palmyra represents an epoch in the modern tradition of image-making and image-breaking at site. Much like the Islamic State’s destruction of its monuments, Wood enacted his tour of Palmyra with a macabre sense of the theatrical, exploiting the site as a territory of self-fashioning. The selective framing of his recueil’s plates project aspirations of the Grand Tour onto the ruins, while calculated aesthetics give them the legitimizing veneer of scientific objectivity. By transforming commemorative monuments into art objects, Wood’s folios subject their syncretic styles, imbued with centuries of cultural meaning, to the standards of classical templates. This adherence to tradition facilitated the proliferation of the recueil’s plates through print mediums, as well as their adoption by other areas of Rococo visual
In its conflated composition and dislocation from ritual space, the tower tomb on plate LVI [Fig. 2] provides a valuable unit of analysis for the transformation of Tadmor’s locale into a series of dissociated ornaments.

While the Roman empire was generally conceived of as its metropole alone, 18th-century travelers who toured its provinces set out with similar expectations for the ruins, and classical literature remained primary in their interpretation. The concentration of grand tourism in Italy established European heritage values centered on classical architecture, which regarded it as an inviolable artistic canon to which all ancient societies aspired. Disposed to reject the variable styles they deemed uncanonical, Europeans altered their representations of sites to make ruins appear more classical, facilitating their claim to former Roman provinces through ‘discovery’ of their lost empires. Through a selective framing of the site, Wood’s folios construct, shatter, and alter images of Tadmor fundamentally to fit the aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual ideals of the Grand Tour. The recueil’s tower tomb demonstrates this precisely; a distinctly Palmyrene monument not found anywhere else in the Roman world, its illustration illuminates how Europeans grappled with representing, defining, and appropriating archaeological remains that did not fit into their absolute categories of ancient architecture. By transforming the tower into an architectural specimen for aesthetic evaluation, Wood’s plate overemphasizes form at the expense of meaning, eliding the tower’s significance to contemporary actors. Though these monuments’ connections with the settlement strengthened and imbued them with meaning, the tower in plate LVI represents the monument in a dislocated syntax, its isolation typifying the transformation of ritual spaces into objects of exhibition in Rococo prints. The only towers illustrated in Wood’s contemporary vedute [Fig. 3] are distant, minute, and atmospherically obscured; denoting the
tower’s position only relative to the ancient city divorces the monument from its culturally significant locale, fairly isolated in the arid hills on the settlement’s periphery.\textsuperscript{9}

While difficulties provenancing Wood’s structure may be explained by consecutive decay, that his contemporaries struggled to measure the site against his gaze [Fig. 4] may suggest the plate’s conflation of multiple towers.\textsuperscript{10} While the extant body of the Iamkliku tower [Fig. 5], for instance, closely resembles that of plate LVI, the extended proportions of the doorway above the stepped plinth are only found on one contemporary engraving [Fig. 6]. In addition, the ostensible displacement of various relief elements to compose an entirely new decorative program reflects a scientific (and aesthetic) interest in presenting objects in an orderly arrangement.\textsuperscript{11} For instance, the supine body of the tomb founder below the niche helps create a more symmetric composition than typical relief niches, which feature the tomb founder reclining upright within the niche and a cluster of family members behind him in the recess [Fig. 7].\textsuperscript{12} The plate also omits the standard vine tendrils decorating the niche’s border and substitutes doric capitals for corinthians, possibly inspired by Iamkliku’s facade [Fig.8] or a tomb interior [Fig. 9].\textsuperscript{13} In addition, though it does not represent the figure on the standard \textit{kline}, the plate makes reference to its upholstering through the patterning on the pillow beneath the figure’s head.\textsuperscript{14}

Plate LVI’s reconstructive rendering shows a departure from the more theatric styles of ruin etchings, especially \textit{vedute} and \textit{capricci}, that were fashionable among grand tourists. Instead, the plate bears witness to emergent trends in small finds illustrations, which were closely connected to the development of scientific illustration as a major graphic genre in the 17th and 18th centuries.\textsuperscript{15} Serving to delimit and transmit information, these engraving suggest a reconsideration of archaeological materials as data rather than curiosities.\textsuperscript{16} Stripping down artifacts to
their core characteristics served to omit imperfections and idiosyncrasies not considered useful in their classification. The scientific gaze of plate LVI naturalizes the elisions and embellishments that promote Wood’s underlying messages about the ruin. Despite this illusion of scientific justification, the tower’s simplification to core features of classical art and architecture reflects the inclination of grand tourists to seek refuge in more palatable portrayals of the sites they found uncanonical. In addition, the departure from the tower’s more local, syncretic features represents an antiquarian tendency to press materials into pre-determined ‘systems’ rather than permitting the data itself to construct new categories. Wood’s background as a classicist, compounded by his exclusive study of Palmyra through Latin texts, also limited his authority on non-classical vestiges and mechanized a selective framing of Palmyra through its Roman ruins alone.

The tower’s ahistorical, decontextualized, and otherwise manipulated form in plate LVI invites a reconsideration of the recueil’s engravings as subjects of Rococo visual culture. While itself not widely accessible, the Ruins of Palmyra’s illustrations made their way into European society through other avenues, including newspaper illustrations [Fig. 10] and colorized prints created after the recueil’s plates [Fig. 11]. Similar to the demise of other ritual spaces in the 18th century, reproduction through print alienated these monuments from their original usefulness by placing them into a network of exchange. By separating monuments from their contexts, prints offered up these spaces as autonomous objects in their own right, promoting an adaptability of their models that could fit any purpose. Dissemination of these images, in turn, facilitated the appropriation of Palmyrene spaces as ornaments. A contemporary porcelain spoon tray [Fig. 12] from the Worcester Porcelain manufactory, for instance, illustrates Palmyra’s arch monument
after plate XXVI in Wood’s *recueil* [Fig. 13]. The transmission of this arch onto fine ware suggests its emergence as a token of the site. As these images endured and Palmyra became a popular symbol of the eastern Roman empire, European engagement with these provinces in the subsequent centuries indicate a lasting influence of the heritage values these images evoked. On the French regime’s selective conservation of a former Roman province in Algeria, for instance, a French apologists argued: “the symbolic monument of the country is not the mosque, it is the triumphal arch.” As with this particular site, the arch monument took on considerable force in the image-making of Palmyra, enduring into the 21st century when replicas of the monument were erected around the world [Fig. 14] as a response to its destruction by the Islamic State.

The appropriation of designs from Wood’s plates also extended to the architectural realm, where British architects and their patrons used them as templates for architectural self-fashioning, replicating both intricate details as well as entire façades. For instance, the drawing room at Osterley Park (1761) [Fig. 15], a world heritage site in London, features a ceiling with a distinctly Palmyrene variation of coffering, made available to the European public as a result of Wood’s expedition. Consistent with the Temple of the Bel’s representation in plate XIX [Fig. 16], this ceiling's octagonal coffers meet only at their angles, forming residual spaces resembling four-lobed stars, which are embedded with the shapes of cubes. Multiple parallels emerged on ceilings of Rococo spaces in the years following Wood’s return to England. By adopting the ‘versatile’ designs of Wood’s plates, the Rococo helped alienate this architecture from its original and inherited meanings by adopting the aesthetics of the *recueil’s* vestiges. Like the tower tomb on plate LVI, the Temple of the Bel was also a ritual space in the 18th century, functioning as the Mosque of Tadmor. Despite the messages Wood’s *recueil* conveys about the monument, the
structure likely served as a Roman temple for no more than two centuries of its 2000-year history, and in Wood’s time, its mosque was integrated into the ancient fabric of the living city. By venerating and caring for the structure, locals of Tadmor strengthened it both literally and physically, including stabilizing its entrance portal with reinforced concrete, which helped preserve the structure long enough for Wood to be able to re-invent it as a locale of antiquity.

By illustrating the site through a selective framing, Wood’s Ruins of Palmyra undermines these monuments’ relationships to modern actors while facilitating their aesthetic coalescence with European Rococo designs. Though the French regime physically uprooted Palmyra's non-ancient vestiges in the 20th century, Wood’s rejection of these ‘uncanoncial’ spaces constructed the very aesthetic ideals of the site that the French sought to materialize, namely vacant ruins, which lack modern inhabitants and non-ancient spaces. In addition to omitting Islamic and Turkish constructions from the recueil’s plates, Wood's reception of ancient commemorative monuments as art objects further divorced these monuments from their importance to natives of Tadmor, denying them of their ancestral connections to ancient spaces. In her analysis of the “French creation of Palmyra as a heritage locale,” Mulder bypasses the influence of Wood’s narratives of the site on these aesthetic value systems. By overemphasizing European interlopers who physically dismember ancient sites (through ‘preservation’ or excavation), postcolonial critics construct false origins of archaeology’s implicit forms of imperialism. This deficit, compounded by the current politicization of Palmyra’s ancient monuments on account of their destruction, necessitates a renewed inquiry into Wood's recueil. Without it, engravings such as plate LVI, whose best preserved counterparts on site have been demolished, risk becoming authoritative holotypes for the Palmyra’s lost heritage.
Two notes: (1) I am using ‘Tadmor’ (the local name) to refer to the area in and around the site, and ‘Palmyra’ (the Roman name) to refer to the ancient city. (2) It is not entirely clear to me which artist we should attribute these engravings to. They were ultimately engraved in London ‘after’ Borra’s sketches on-site, but those who have accessed Borra’s initial drawings have noted their significant difference from the published engravings. Because I would like to avoid continuously listing everyone who was involved in the production of these plates, I will sometimes just refer to them as ‘Wood’s’ since they were created under his influence and published in his volume.


Ibid, 237.


Riegl, “Modern Cult of Monuments,” 22.


De Jong, “Staging Ruins,” 43 and 44.

Of all the Palmyrene tower tombs engraved by Louis-François Cassas in the late 18th century, none fit Wood’s representation quite right. Fig. 4 demonstrates Cassas’ attempt to compare a tower he observed on-site to plate LVI in Wood’s *receuil*, placing a watermark at either side with details from Wood. Moreover, my following interpretation of the composition of Wood’s tower is speculation based on my review of tons of engravings and photographs of Palmyrene towers from the 18th-21st centuries, but there is no way to know for sure. Even if I’m wrong about where Wood got these details, the significance of how he chose to represent the site’s distinct burial tradition as a whole through this plate remains the same.


*Klinai* were a form of Greco-Roman furniture, similar to a bench, which usually had twisted legs and upholstered seats on Palmyrene tower tombs.


Ibid, 60 and 91.

Ibid, 62.

Ibid, 79.


23 Ibid, 249.

24 Ibid.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.


32 Mulder, “Imagining Localities,” 231.

33 Ibid.
Works Cited


Figure 8. Louis François Cassas, “Tombeau d'Iamblichus, a Palmyre,” engraving, ca. 1785-1800, (Originally published in *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phoenicie, de la Palaestine et de la Basse Aegypte*, 1800, plate IV, no. 113), Katalog für die Bibliotheken der Universität Heidelberg, accessed October 13, 2020, https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cassas1800bd1/0002/thumbs.