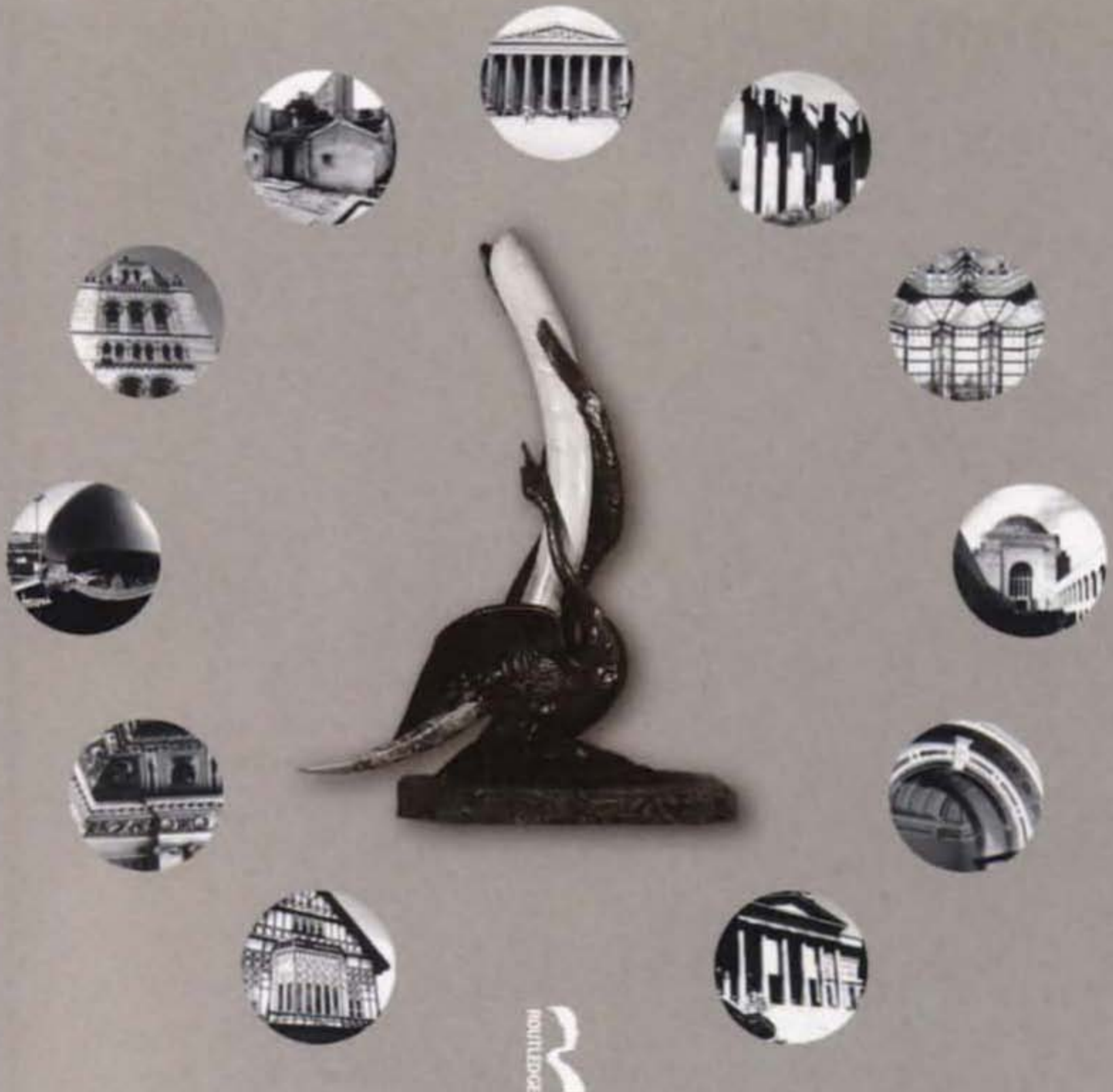




# Colonialism and the Object

Empire, Material Culture and the Museum



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The silversmith Peter Bentzon was part of the community of free coloured by birth and situation, although his occupation and education in the elite trade of silversmithing, his international travel, and no doubt his light skin complexion placed him in the upper class of that group. The unique circumstances which shaped Bentzon's future must have been the result of connections and financial support provided by an outside source, such as his European father or the European relations of his mulatto mother. As noted above, Bentzon was a 'mustice' born in about 1783 to a free mulatto mother and a white father. At the age of eight he was sent from the West Indies to Philadelphia for his education. He was probably at school prior to serving his apprenticeship to a currently unidentified silversmith in Philadelphia from 1799 to 1806. For the next four decades Bentzon lived and worked in Philadelphia and St. Croix, travelling frequently between the two places. His movements to and from Philadelphia and the West Indies can be tracked from records in the Danish National Archives in Copenhagen and the National Archives in America.<sup>5</sup>

After completing his apprenticeship in 1806 at the age of twenty-three, Bentzon returned to Christiansted, St Croix to start up his business as a silversmith. Upon arrival, port officials recorded Bentzon's plans to stay with John Daly, the only free coloured plantation owner and one of three attorneys in St Croix. Daly may have managed the funds which enabled Bentzon to obtain his education and apprenticeship, and which subsidised his peripatetic silversmithing career. Bentzon practiced his trade in St Croix for ten years and during this period he made several trips to St Thomas. One visit to the neighbouring island in 1816 was with his wife Rachel (de la Motta) Bentzon, who was also identified as a mustice – they had married in about 1813 when she was approximately fourteen. In 1816, Bentzon also began a series of journeys back and forth to Philadelphia to organise the relocation of his business and family to America.

Until their departure, Bentzon and his growing family and the three slaves who worked for them lived in Christiansted at 53A Company Street, one of the main thoroughfares of the port town. The two-storey, four-room building which was probably both Bentzon's shop and residence, survives today in the historic district of Christiansted. Although Bentzon was a freedman of African descent, his property was outside the 'Free Gut'. Bentzon offered 53A Company Street for sale in the *St Croix Gazette* in August and September of 1815, and by the time of his departure from St Croix the property had been sold and listed in the tax register as 'F.N. [fri-neger/frinegerinde] Peter Bentzon's, now Rigallon's house where he and his family live.'

In 1816, the year of Peter Bentzon's departure to Philadelphia, the Danes repossessed the islands of St Croix, St Thomas and St John from the British who had occupied them during the Napoleonic Wars in 1801 and again from 1807 to 1816. During the British occupations, there was fairer and more equal treatment of the free coloured population (Hall, N. 1992: 167). Not surprisingly, Peter Bentzon chose to relocate to Philadelphia in 1816 upon the return of the Danes. In 1817, Bentzon makes his first appearance in the Philadelphia

directories though he continued to travel to and from the West Indies. The family lived in a racially diverse commercial district north-east of Market Street where Bentzon rented property from Robert Dawson, with whom he may have had Cruzan connections. On one return trip from St Croix to Philadelphia, he carried, 'A quantity of Old plate, American manufactured, for repairs' as well as an old looking glass, a box of sweetmeats and one dozen coconuts.<sup>6</sup> Bentzon probably called his silver 'American manufactured' to avoid taxes on silver made outside of the United States. When Bentzon visited St. Croix a year later, he described himself as a 'practising goldsmith and jeweller.'<sup>7</sup>

After more than a decade in Philadelphia, during which period he moved four times within the commercial district, Peter Bentzon returned to St Croix. In November 1829, Bentzon arrived in Christiansted stating that he 'wanted to stay on St. Croix.'<sup>8</sup> He continued to trade and to move goods across the ocean but ran into trouble in 1831 when he was accused of illegally trading silver spoons. Having recently returned to the West Indies, Peter Bentzon pleaded ignorance of the tariff regulations. By 1832, Bentzon had returned to Company Street, near his first dwelling and place of business. Exactly why Bentzon returned to St Croix after more than ten years in Philadelphia, where he had learned his trade and had established his initial business contacts, is unclear. His movements may reflect an unstable business climate or racial politics.

A growing unrest amongst the slave population, and the tension between slaves, free coloureds and Europeans in St Croix which reached its violent climax in the 1848 slave revolt, most likely prompted Bentzon's second relocation of family and business to Philadelphia. He may have also left the island because of his involvement in a lengthy court case in which a young female slave named Rosa stole and pawned some of her mistress's jewellery to Bentzon. Incidentally, Rosa's owner was Madame Cappel, the mulatto mother of Anna Heegaard, the free coloured mistress of Governor General von Scholten. Unknowingly, Bentzon accepted Madame Cappel's jewellery and was therefore implicated in the crime. Bentzon was charged with receiving stolen goods and the case progressed in turn from the police in Christiansted, St Croix, to the West Indian upper court, to the High Court of Copenhagen. The transaction between Bentzon and the slave girl gave the authorities immediate cause for suspicion. Bentzon acknowledged the Chief Constable's previous admonitions 'not to indulge in buying or receiving such things from suspicious persons', but when he remarked that so many young people were pawning their gold that it was impossible to decide who was legitimate, the Constable reminded him that all the unfree were suspicious (Garde 1993: 68–74). Although the court found Bentzon not guilty of a crime, ignominiously his free coloured status was made public and he was required to pay an allowance for court fees. With this incident resolved, although hardly satisfactorily, Bentzon left St Croix for the last time.

Once back in Philadelphia, he and his family joined his daughter and newlywed husband, and they lived together in the Spring Garden ward. Almira Louise Bentzon and Albert Crantz Stabell, of St Croix, were married in 1848 in the

Catholic Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul by Bishop F. P. Kendrick. Witnesses at the wedding were a Cruzan couple, possibly free coloured, which indicated that Peter Bentzon and his family may have been part of a Cruzan, if not African-American community in Philadelphia. The marriage ceremony by a bishop is also intriguing, perhaps pointing to the family's status in the church.

Peter Bentzon pronounced himself Danish Lutheran and Anglican at different times, perhaps a pragmatic reflection of the successive presence of the Danish and the British in St Croix, although his wife Rachel was Catholic. The Bentzons had six daughters and one son. The five eldest children were Catholic and the youngest two Lutheran. The sixty-seven-year-old Peter Bentzon, his wife, six daughters, one son and their son-in-law were listed in the 1850 Philadelphia census. After that date there is no trace of the family in historical records in either Philadelphia or St Croix.

Of the nine known objects marked by Peter Bentzon, only two are hollow-ware containers, the rest flatware.<sup>9</sup> Their existence reflects the narrow scope of Bentzon's silversmithing business which was probably limited to smallwork and repairs rather than a consistent stream of commissions for tea and coffee services. Bentzon most likely made the diminutive silver teapot when he first started working in Philadelphia (Fig. 7.2). The object reflects his Philadelphia



**Figure 7.2** Teapot by Peter Bentzon. Philadelphia, c. 1817. Marked 'P. BENTZON' twice on the bottom (see Figure 7.1) and inscribed 'Rebecca Dawson' on the edge of the base. The cipher 'MC' on the side is a later addition. Silver and wood: height 7 in, length 12 in. (Private collection: photograph by Wayne Gibson.)

training, as opposed to his exposure in the West Indies to imported Danish and English silver. The teapot's shape, and especially the incised oval plate on the end of the spout, are characteristic of Philadelphia silver. The heaviness of the teapot is unusual for the second decade of the nineteenth century when many silversmiths used rolling mills to make lightweight sheet silver. The characteristics and quality of Bentzon's teapot indicate that it was made by a silversmith whose business was not well organised for prolific hollow-ware production. The engraved 'Rebecca Dawson' on the foot probably refers to a relative of Robert Dawson, from whom Bentzon rented his house and workshop in Philadelphia. The cipher engraved on the side of the teapot was a later addition for a different owner. The teapot is the only known object which Bentzon made in America. Based on the scarcity of silver marked by Bentzon and because of the change in his occupational title from goldsmith to jeweller in 1817, just one year after his arrival in Philadelphia, he probably concentrated on 'smallwork' (jewellery and repairs) rather than the production of hollow-ware. Bentzon was probably ill-equipped to compete with the changing face of silversmithing in Philadelphia as industrialisation encroached on the workshop.

The second hollow-ware object is the 1841 footed cup presented to Reverend Benjamin Lucock by the superintendent and teachers of St John's Episcopal Church Sunday School in St Croix (Fig. 7.3). St John's was a racially mixed congregation of Europeans and free coloured people. English by birth, Lucock went to the West Indian island of Montserrat in 1822, received an honorary degree from Columbia University in New York City, and in 1832 moved to Fredericksted, St Croix, to run the Episcopal parish. Lucock received the cup before returning to England, weakened after a carriage accident. As a gift to their minister, the superintendent and teachers of the Sunday School chose to patronise a silversmith in St Croix rather than purchase an imported object from England or Denmark (Fig. 7.4). The choice of Bentzon for the commission of the cup may have been because he was a member of the congregation, for apart from Peter Bentzon there were at least two other silversmiths in St Croix. In any event, the patronage of a free coloured individual was not uncommon; in the diverse community of St Croix, there were many free coloured people who offered services and goods that were readily purchased by Europeans. Whites and free coloureds alike, for example, patronised the successful restaurateur Apollo Miller who was born a slave and became free by self purchase (Hall, N. 1989).

Peter Bentzon was a member of a free coloured community in St Croix although his occupation and education as a silversmith, his international travel, and probably his light skin complexion, placed him in the upper class of that group. Even though he was moderately successful in St Croix, owning property and able to travel frequently, his free coloured position prevented him from achieving equality with the resident Europeans. In Philadelphia, where he ran a small silver, jewellery and repair business, his African ancestry does not appear to have been a political or social impediment, making his experience as an African American in Philadelphia very separate from his life in St Croix.



Figure 7.3 Footed cup made by Peter Bentzon for presentation to Benjamin Lucock (1792–1846), St Croix; 1841. Marked 'P. BENTZON' three times on the inside rim of the base (see Figure 7.4) and 'PB' four times under the foot. Inscribed 'Presented/ To/REV. B. LUCOCK/By The/Superintendent and Teachers/of/St. John's Church Sunday School/Christiansted St. Croix/As a token of their/Estem & Respect April th 1841 (sic)'. Silver: height 6¼ in, width 5½ in. (Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund and partial gift of Wynyard Wilkinson, photograph by R. C. Cooper, Ltd.)

Peter Bentzon's is only one story in an uninvestigated group of African American silversmiths. Henry Bray and Anthony Sowerwalt were both listed as silversmiths and 'Persons of Colour' in the 1813 and 1818 Philadelphia directories, and Joseph Head, 'Black Man Silversmith', had business transactions with the better-known early nineteenth-century silversmith Samuel Williamson.<sup>10</sup> And as cited by James Porter in *Modern Negro Art*, John Frances was a runaway silversmith of colour employed by John Letelier in Philadelphia (Porter 1992: 16). To date, little is known about the careers of Bray, Sowerwalt, Head or Frances, and no objects bearing their marks are known. In a business that we currently perceive as European American, there was a diverse African American or African European presence.<sup>11</sup>

The preoccupation with physical appearance and the concern to correlate skin



**Figure 7.4** One of Bentzon's three identical marks on the inside rim of the base of the footed cup.

complexion with legal status shaped the experiences of the free coloured in St Croix and the other Danish West Indian islands. The surviving documentary evidence shows Bentzon consistently responding and reacting in ways most convenient for the prevailing moment – transporting goods into America under the auspices that they were ‘American manufactured’, or relaying to the Philadelphia census-taker that he and his family were all US citizens, or that he had taken out citizenship papers when really they were his charter of freedom as a free coloured Cruzan, or his fluctuating religious affiliations which were dependent on the coloniser at hand. When asked about his Burgher Briefs, Bentzon claimed that his had been ‘lost by fire in America’. The court researched Bentzon’s claim only to find that there was no proof that he had ever applied for citizenship papers. But these reactions and adaptations may be because Bentzon was an individual residing on a boundary or seam between cultures: European and African (free and slave); Danish West Indian and American; African American and European. Furthermore, such snippets and scraps of paper and information were all conspiring to reduce Bentzon to an identity that other people had invented. Bentzon responded with distance and denial, and half-denials and cunning half-truths. Over the years he became a virtuoso of ambiguity and equivocation.

Even though Bentzon experienced economic mobility in St Croix, his free coloured position prevented him from achieving an equality of status. In



Philadelphia, however, he and his family, as mentioned earlier, may have passed for white. In 1850, the instructions to the census marshals, under the heading 'Colour', read: 'in all cases where the person appears white leave the space blank; in all cases where the person appears black, insert the letter B; if mulatto, insert M. It is very desirable that these particulars be carefully regarded'. Although the instructions are vague, they indicate that skin shading, not ancestry, was the census marshal's sole determinant of 'race'.

In St Croix, Bentzon and his family were regarded as 'coloured' because of their publicly known African ancestry, but in America they were not considered to be of African descent because their skin complexion suggested otherwise. Although Bentzon was of African descent and worked in America, he neither experienced Philadelphia as an African American nor produced work there that remotely suggested an African affinity. Instead, Bentzon appears to have taken advantage of his multiple social identities, picking and choosing as he moved through different places and communities at different times.

Just as the racial hybridity of individuals such as Peter Bentzon complicates the sociologist's attempt to pigeonhole by community, so too the objects produced by those without clear allegiance to one social grouping or another must



Figure 7.5 Teapot by Peter Bentzon (see Figure 7.2), as exhibited in 'Old World and New', part of the Sarah Mellon Scaife permanent collection galleries at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Photograph by Richard Stoner, courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art.)

necessarily challenge traditional cultural classification systems conventionally used by the museum curator. How then do museums present and interpret objects born of colonialism – implicitly the product of a forced marriage of cultures? The National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark displays in its West Indian gallery an American sideboard with silver drawer pulls by Bentzon, so emphasising the importance of Denmark's colonial history in the Caribbean. In contrast, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art the footed cup by Bentzon is presented within the specific context of that city's silversmithing tradition. A third object, a silver tablespoon marked by Bentzon, has taken on a different cultural value by virtue of its acquisition by the Center for African-American Decorative Arts. The 1994 reinstallation of the permanent collection in the Sarah Mellon Scaife galleries at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Fig. 7.5) afforded an opportunity to look anew at the relationship between objects without the constraint of commonly employed museum classifications such as nationality, school or medium. American, European and non-Western decorative arts, paintings and sculpture were here combined to produce thematic rather than national, typological or chronological groupings. Bentzon's c.1817 teapot is exhibited at the entrance to these galleries in a section entitled 'Old World and New' which examines the transference of style from the former to the latter in early Anglo-American culture. In the case of the teapot, evidence of any techniques or stylistic traits imported from continental Africa, however, are non-existent. Residual African characteristics in early African-American decorative arts were attractive to groundbreaking historians such as James Porter and Alain Locke because they confirmed suspicions of an alternative transference of style. In Bentzon's case, any evidence of his African ancestry was erased by his colonial experience, which in turn was the cause of his hybrid identity. In the absence of telling visual information which reveals the colonial origin of an object such as Bentzon's teapot, the museum visitor can acquire a full understanding of its cultural significance only by means of its association with and juxtaposition to other carefully selected exhibits and with the benefit of enlightened, cross-related labelling.

## Notes

- 1 As cited in Gates 1996: 68.
- 2 Broyard took the expression 'avenues of flight' and some of the concepts in his own essay from Jean-Paul Sartre's 1948 'Portrait of the Inauthentic Jew' (*Commentary* 1950).
- 3 Genealogical material on Bentzon and his family was derived from the following: H. F. Garde, 'Peter Bentzon – en vestindisk guldsmed', *Personalthistorisk Tidsskrift*, 1 (1993): 68–77; Hugo Ryberg, comp., and Mrs. Rigmor de Vicq, ed., 'A List of Names of Inhabitants of the Danish West Indies from 1650–c.1825', (photocopy, Danish National Archives, 1945); *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, October 10, 1848; Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center, St Augustine's microfilmed baptismal register, November 6, 1828; Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center, Cathedral of SS Peter and Paul, marriage register, 1847–1868, October 11, 1848; Philadelphia Census, 1850.
- 4 I am indebted to Elizabeth Rezende of St Croix for sharing with me her research on the Guts.

- 5 Rigsarkivet (Danish National Archives), Vestindiske lokalarkiver, Christiansted byfoged 1734–1900, Politimester, Protokoller over ankomne og bortrejste personer, 1817; incoming passenger lists. National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.
- 6 Entry for 1 October 1816, Incoming Passenger Lists for Philadelphia (National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Region).
- 7 Vestindiske lokalarkiver, Christiansted byfoged 1734–1900, Politimester, Protokoller over ankomne og bortrejste personer, 1817, p. 36.
- 8 Ibid., 1829, p. 138.
- 9 Objects bearing Bentzon's mark are as follows: teapot (private collection, currently on loan to the Carnegie Museum of Art), presentation cup (Philadelphia Museum of Art), tablespoon (The Center for African American Decorative Arts), tablespoon (St Croix Historical Society), four silver drawer pulls on an American sideboard (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen). Additionally, two pastry, or 'klejner', tools, a fish slice, and a gold buckle are in private collections in Denmark.
- 10 The Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum and Library, Downes Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Samuel Williamson account books, daybook, 105.
- 11 Other sources which note the African American presence in the early American silver trade are Driskell (1976); Lewis, S. (1976); Locke (1940); Porter (1992).