



The Art of Slavery



Throughout the whole period of the Transatlantic Slave Trade – and despite the horrors of the conditions endured – enslaved Africans continued the artistic traditions exemplified by cave paintings in South Africa and Tanzania (4000-1200 BC), Benin bronze carvings, Ife stone sculptures and Ashanti brass weights that date back to around AD 1500.



Clearly, for slaves there was little opportunity for overt displays of creativity and, therefore, many African artistic traditions were destroyed in the West. However, because of the lack of skilled craftsmen in the colonies, there was, ironically, a demand for creative Africans working in the media of wood, metal, pottery and cloth. Indeed, some slave owners made money by hiring out their artisan slaves. Some of their work has disappeared with time, but recent archaeological excavations in the United States have revealed, for example, clay pipes engraved with traditional African designs. Much, though, was deliberately covert and subversive. It's well known that many gospel songs derived from traditional African melodies and rhythms were used to convey secret messages to escaping slaves.



Similarly, African women used their skills to create patchwork quilts, some with coded messages showing the route to freedom embroidered into their complex patterns.

The subject of slavery proved inspirational for many Western artists both contemporaneously and subsequently and, since there were none of today's high-tech cameras, many of our internal images of slavery are informed by works produced by those artists, images that remain subliminally and indelibly engraved on memory. Thomas Wedgwood, abolitionist and member of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery, suggested that an emblem on the title page of a pamphlet entitled 'An address to the People of Great Britain on the propriety of abstaining from West India

sugar and rum' would heighten its impact. He commissioned a woodcut that became the famous Slave Medallion. Thousands were distributed in the UK and the USA and they became a contemporary fashion statement, worn as hair ornaments, bracelets and to decorate snuff boxes. Thomas Clarkson, fellow anti-slavery campaigner wrote: 'It is evident that through the success of the medallion, Wedgwood had achieved, at least in part, the desire to make known the suffering of the slaves...' Although achieving its laudable aims, it is perhaps unfortunate that the abiding image of the African in slavery is that of a black man in chains, kneeling, pleading to have his humanity recognised: 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother.'



English landscape artist J.M. Turner's darkly dramatic *Slave Ship* (full title *Slavers Overthrowing the Dead and Dying - Typh[o]n Coming On*), based on a real incident, shows slaves thrown overboard in order to claim insurance. In Turner's view, the ship itself is seen to be heading for impending – and deserved – disaster.

Equally indelible in their impact are the English poet, painter and engraver, William Blake's graphic and horrifying engravings, *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave* and *A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows*. Blake was totally



opposed to slavery, both mental and physical, writing in 'Songs of Innocence and Experience',

*In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.*

That last line contains that title of an exhibition of Blake's works touring the country to coincide with the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.



Another common image of the African of the period is that of a servant. At the time, it was deemed fashionable to have a black servant. In paintings such as Flemish artist Anthony Van Dyck's *Portrait of Elena Grimaldi, Marchesa Cattaneo*, the French painter Edouard Manet's *Olympia*

and the German artist Johann Zoffany's *The Family of Sir William Younger* the black servant serves to enhance the subject's social status.



The English satirist,



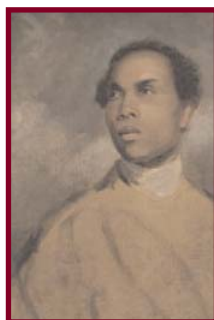
William Hogarth, used the figures of the black servant in two of his series of works, *The Harlot's Progress* and *Marriage à la Mode* to pass comment on both the moral status of his protagonists

and slavery itself.

A fascinating example, though, of how fashion and attitudes change is the portrait of the Glassford family painted by Archibald McLauchland around 1767. It seems that the painting once contained the figure of a young black page, later painted over, possibly because of anti-slavery feelings. Glasgow Museum's conservators have undertaken a project to put the figure back into the picture.

Less commonplace were the images of African men and women portrayed as more than dehumanised, soul-less objects. Many of those that do exist arise from interesting stories. The painting of *Dido Elizabeth Belle*, attributed to Zoffany, is evidence of the unusual tale of the illegitimate great-niece of the Lord Chief Justice, the Earl of Mansfield. The painting depicts Dido, who was brought up by Lord Mansfield and worked at Kenwood helping the Earl with his correspondence, together with her cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray.

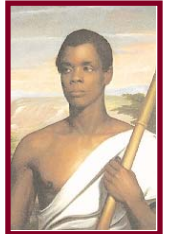
There are several versions of the English painter Joshua Reynolds' portrait of *A Young Black*. It is thought to be Francis Barber, servant to Dr Johnson. Clearly, Barber would have had to be reasonably well regarded by Johnson to be allowed to sit for such a portrait.



The Irish painter Daniel Maclise's painting, *The Death of Nelson* shows a black sailor and a black cook. Since contemporary documents show that there were two people on board HMS Victory who were born in Africa, it is likely that the portrayal is an accurate one.



In contrast to the Wedgwood medallion and Blake images, the portrait of Joseph Cinque, leader of the revolt on board the Amistad slave ship by the American abolitionist artist Nathaniel Jocelyn, shows the subject standing proud, unbowed and defiant, dressed in a Roman toga and with an almost regal bearing.



There are numerous images of the revolutionary, Toussaint Louverture, ranging from caricature to stately portrait, presumably depending on the political viewpoint of the artist.

Today, descendants of Africans – both enslaved and free – are continuing the artistic tradition and reclaiming and reinterpreting the legacies of the slave trade. For the Victoria & Albert Museum's touring exhibition, *Uncomfortable Truths: the shadow of slave trading on contemporary art and design* 11 international artists present new and specially-commissioned works to explore a number of thought-provoking issues arising from the legacy of slavery. The artists include Ghana's El Anatsui, America's Michael Paul Britto and Fred Wilson and Yinka Shonibare, Lubaina Himid, and Keith Piper from the UK.

It is perhaps appropriate – and coming almost full circle – that the Beninese artist, Romuald Hazoumé has created the installation *La Bouche du Roi* for the British Museum. The work is made up of 304 'masks' made from black plastic petrol cans, a CD of sounds and voices, a film depicting the lives of motorcycling petrol traffickers, and the scents of tobacco and petrol. The shape of the installation is based on a famous print of the British slave ship, the Brooks, a model of which Wilberforce used in the campaign for abolition. The title signifies the name of a place in Benin from which slaves were traded, but the installation brings us up to date with Hazoumé's depiction of

modern-day slavery. As Hazoumé describes his work:

Contrary to what might appear, La Bouche du Roi ('The King's Mouth'), does not speak of past slavery, but rather of that which exists today, for it is the mouths of our present-day 'kings' that kill us. In times gone by, the slaves who set sail to Ouidah or Porto-Novo knew from whence they came, but knew nothing of where they were heading. Today, they still do not know where they are heading, but they have forgotten, and no longer know where they came from. I denounce

an Africa and a world ruled over by corrupt kinglets who steal, pillage, hijack, appropriate, and enrich themselves at their peoples' expense. I am not afraid of denouncing them. Today, many families are still forced to sell their children in order to survive. This is unacceptable.

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Resources

J.M. Turner's *Slave Ship* can be viewed online at www.victorianweb.org/art/crisis/crisis4e.html and Zoffany's *The Family of Sir William Young* at www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/collections/18c/zoffany.asp. The Glassford family portrait is at www.glasgowmuseums.com/showEvent.cfm?venueid=0&itemid=859&Showid=152&slideid=11 and *Dido Elizabeth Belle* at www.oxforddnb.com/public/dnb/73352.html. Several images of Toussaint Louverture can be viewed at www.haitiusa.org/special_features/toussaint_louverture/louverture_slides.php?cs=1.

Western Art

Mind-forg'd Manacles: William Blake and Slavery can be seen at The Burrell Collection, Glasgow from 3 November 2007 to 6 January 2008 and at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester from 26 January to 6 April 2008.

The Image of Black website (www.theimageofblack.co.uk/) highlights the various representations of black people in European art, thus helping to reshape black heritage, culture and identity. The site also has a special section on the Black Presence in the National Gallery that examines the black presence in three paintings by Edgar Degas, William Hogarth and Johann Liss.

The National Gallery in London has an exhibition, *Scratch the Surface* (www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/scratchthesurface/default.htm) running from 20 July to 4 November 2007 that looks at the role that the trade in slaves played in the lives of two people seen in portraits belonging to the gallery: Zoffany's portrait of *Mrs Oswald* and Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Colonel Tarleton*. As part of the exhibition, the artist Yinka Shonibare has created a new installation in response to the two portraits.

The online *Abolition trail* (www3.westminster.gov.uk/abolition/) features an audio guide that illustrates a walk around Westminster and takes in visits to the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery.

The English Heritage exhibition, *Slavery and Justice: the legacies of Lord Mansfield and Dido Belle* runs at Kenwood House in London until 2 September 2007.

The Glassford Family Portrait – A hidden legacy runs from 17 August 2007 to 2 March 2008 at the People's Palace and Winter Gardens in Glasgow. Through the portrait, the exhibition explores the legacy of tobacco and slavery on Glasgow and you'll be able to watch the conservators working on the painting in the Looking at Art gallery in Kelvingrove until August.

In a small exhibition at Norwich Castle, *Thomas Fowell Buxton and the Anti-Slavery Movement*, from May to 18 November, rare decorative art items from the Castle demonstrate how slavery had become a part of life in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House has an online exhibition (www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/projects/abolition/#exhibition) bringing together pamphlets from both sides of the anti-slavery argument as well as a number of related artefacts.

Contemporary artists

The V&A's *Uncomfortable Truths* exhibition travels to Salford Museum and Art Gallery (30 June 30-2 September) and then to Ferens Art Gallery, Hull (15 September 15-6 January).

Romuald Hazoum 's *Bouche du Roi* can be seen at: Ferens Art Gallery, Hull (2 June-5 July 2007); International Slavery Museum, Liverpool (4 August–2 September 2007); Bristol's City Museum (15 September–28 October 2007); Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle (10 November–3 February 2008); Horniman Museum, London (5 December 2008–1 March 2009). You can also listen to an interview with the artist on the BBC World Service website, (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/focusonafrika/news/story/2007/03/070320_abolition200.shtml).

Online, The Brunei Gallery has details of its *Transitions* exhibition (www.soas.ac.uk/gallery/transitions/home.html) held in 2005. It features the works of 61 artists who live and work in Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Mozambique. There are also worksheets for primary and secondary schools. The Triangle Arts Trust was set up as an artists' workshop bringing together local and international artists and now incorporates regular workshops in over 20 countries. On the website (www.gasworks.org.uk/triangle/) you can view workshops in Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia, Uganda, Tanzania, Senegal, Botswana and Namibia.

The October Gallery (www.octobergallery.co.uk/exhibitions/2007cou/index.shtml) commissioned three leading visual artists from West Africa to create works to mark the bicentenary of the UK's parliamentary abolition of the Transatlantic slave trade. The artists, in three very different ways, map personal and universal relationships between past and future. Although the exhibition is over, the artworks can be viewed online. The Gallery's new project, entitled *Bitter Aftertaste: Sugar, the Slave Trade and the Arts of the Atlantic World* also includes a range of schools' workshops and a web resource exploring the material culture and legacies of the Atlantic trade in art and society today.

African traditions

The British Museum has an online tour, *Views from Africa* (www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/explore/online_tours/afrika/views_from_africa/views_from_africa.aspx) that features objects made by artists from south of the Sahara between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. The Horniman Museum has the first permanent exhibition in Britain dedicated to African art and culture, *African Worlds* (www.horniman.ac.uk/exhibitions/current_exhibition.php?exhib_id=16), bringing together a rich mixture of sculpture and decorative arts from across Africa, from Egypt to Zimbabwe and from African-related cultures including Brazil and Trinidad. Highlights include masterpieces of the bronze casters art from Benin as well as Dogon and Bwa masks from Mali and Burkina Faso. Online, you can find a learning pack giving support and inspiration for teachers of students from nursery age to early teens as well as parents, carers and community group leaders.

Greater Manchester's museum collections hold the physical evidence of the impact of the slave trade across the region. In its ethnographic, industrial, social history and fine arts collections, the story of the slave trade is woven. You can see examples of some of the objects on the *Revealing Histories, Remembering Slavery* website (www.revealinghistories.org.uk/stories/).

The Victoria and Albert Museum has an exhibition of Asante gold weights from Ghana running until the end of the year and on 21 July, there is *Celebrating Africa Day with The Big Draw*, a family day of African-inspired drawing techniques, live music, dance, African art, discussions and African portraiture.

On 26 July, Liverpool's International Slavery Museum hosts an afternoon of African-themed arts and crafts and on 27 August, there is a special handling session that lets visitors see objects from the Customs and Excise Museum's collections up close. It focuses on smuggled goods from Africa and takes place at the Customs and Excise National Museum.

In the classroom

There is a teachers' guide to African art online (www.thinker.org/fam/education/publications/guide-african/part-1-3.html) and many teachers might be interested in the Fairmead SEN School's art project to help students to investigate the issues of slavery and to think more deeply about Africa and, thus, break down stereotypical views. Details of the project can be found on the Global Dimension website (www.globaldimension.org.uk/default.aspx?id=320).



The Real Histories Directory

The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) has been created as a resource tool for teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community to support them in their teaching and learning about cultural diversity in the UK. The website helps you to locate **resources** in your and other LEAs, such as storytellers, dual language books, culturally diverse toys and relevant **events** taking place in the UK. There are also items of **news** that may be of particular interest to schools and teachers.

You can also submit resources that you would like to include in the directory free of charge by visiting the site, clicking on 'Submit an entry' and following the on-screen instructions.

As well as the varied resources available, each month a new **Topic of the Month** is added with suggestions for using the Directory in the classroom and at home.

We are interested in hearing your views on our Topics and the Real Histories website. You can email comments and suggestions to: realhistories@runnymedetrust.org.