TRADE AND EMPIRE:
REMEMBERING SLAVERY

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The University of Manchester
The Whitworth
Art Gallery

TRADE AND EMPIRE:
REMEMBERING SLAVERY

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The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M15 6ER
Tel: 0161 275 7450 Fax: 0161 275 7451 www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth

Events: There will be a programme of events to accompany the exhibition. Please check the Whitworth Art Gallery website and the Revealing Histories website for further details. (**www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth** & **www.revealinghistories.org.uk**)

Acknowledgements: 'Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery' is the Whitworth's main contribution in 2007 towards 'Revealing Histories', an ambitious long-term project involving many museums and galleries in Greater Manchester. It aims to collaborate with communities to explore the impact of empire and the legacy of the slave trade in the collections and histories of the region's cultural institutions and communities.

The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester would like to thank SuAndi, Kevin Dalton-Johnson, Emma Poulter and Dr. Alan Rice for their enthusiasm and commitment in putting together this exhibition and the forthcoming publication (due out in October 2007). Thanks also to everyone at the Whitworth who contributed to the exhibition and to Colin Piggott for his support with the show.

Special thanks must go to the staff of all the lending institutions to the exhibition and to the private owners who also generously lent works.

Whitworth Art Gallery liaison: David Morris, Andrew Vaughan and Esmé Ward
Design: Epigram Print: New Leaf

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Front cover: Althea McNish, 'Golden Harvest', 1959, Screen-printed cotton satin
The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester

HISTORY OF THE BENIN BRONZES

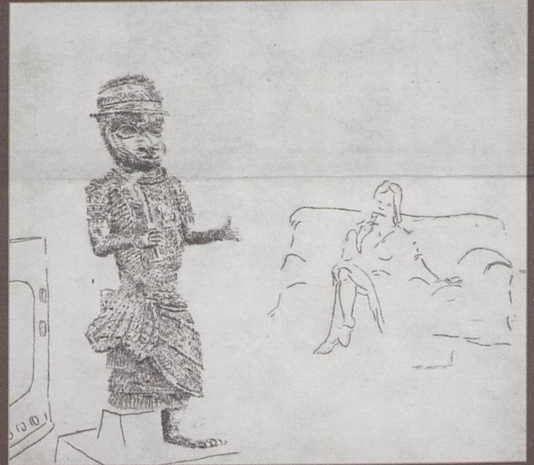
Since the advent of slavery, the African Holocaust, the Benin Bronzes have symbolised the intrinsic beauty and strength of African art and aesthetics. They also represent the pillage and rape of African people and cultures by European countries – a dehumanising attack for which there has been no reciprocity, compensation, or apology.

The Bronzes represent a culture rich in knowledge, technology and democracy; now dislocated in Europe they have become ornaments of pleasure, sitting in glass cases in the drawing rooms of English private collectors, or being viewed and interpreted by gallery and museum visitors as examples of primitive art from the Dark Continent.

Tony Phillips has captured the sense of dislocation caused by the legacy of trade and empire in his series of etchings called "History of the Benin Bronzes", a commentary on the British Punitive Expedition into Benin in 1897 and its aftermath.

Within this exhibition, the Bronzes work as a metaphor to represent the displacement and dislocation of Africans in the Diaspora who continue to struggle to maintain identity and culture on foreign shores. I am not suggesting the mass repatriation of my people, but I am arguing that locality and aesthetics are cousins who sit better together in their place of origin, and that the authorities must let the Benin Bronzes go home.

Kevin Dalton-Johnson



Tony Phillips, *'History of the Benin Bronzes'*, 1984, Plate 11, *'The Lounge'*
Etching. The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester

WEST AFRICA: FROM 'SLAVE COAST' TO 'OIL RIVERS'

Photographs in this exhibition belonged to Tom Singleton Gardner, who was based in New Calabar, southern Nigeria, from around 1890 to 1917. Gardner was an agent for the British trading company, The Africa Association Ltd and was one of a web of traders stationed in West Africa.

Many West African ports had grown up around settlements originally established as slave markets. In the later nineteenth century the British worked to replace the monopoly they had held in the slave trade with what became known as the 'legitimate trade' in palm oil. The mechanisation of the textile industry in Manchester and the spread of railways, increased demand for palm oil as a lubricant and it was also used in soap. The area of West African referred to as the 'Slave Coast' thereby became known as the 'Oil Rivers'.

Tom Singleton Gardner died in 1917 from TB, which he contracted in West Africa. We know little about what sort of man he was or about his time in West Africa; his diaries are lost. However, these photographs, which are on loan from his family, provide us with a glimpse of what life was like in West Africa at this time. Although it is possible that Gardner himself took some of these photographs, most are attributed to the Black African photographer J. A. Green, whose studio was in Bonny.

Emma Poulter

WILLIAM HOGARTH (1697–1764) & GODFRIED DONKOR (b. 1964)

William Hogarth often made strategic use of black characters in his work to satirise and comment on the morals of mid-eighteenth century British society, using the black characters to laugh at the upper classes, thus reversing conventional roles and perceptions. The black figures are shown as natural in juxtaposition to the artificiality of the whites satirised. Hogarth's use of black characters reflects a growing black population during his lifetime, especially in London, and as servants to the aristocracy throughout the country, so that by the end of the century there were around 20,000 blacks in Britain. This black presence has often been omitted in popular British historical accounts, which have traditionally dated the arrival of a significant black population to the Windrush generation that settled after the Second World War.

The Ghanaian born, Brixton-based artist, Godfried Donkor is fascinated by this earlier presence and uses collage techniques to insert an African presence where it has been elided and foreground it where it has been sidelined. Here, our juxtaposition of Donkor's work with his hero Hogarth, shows how Donkor also strategically inserts black figures which pose questions regarding national identity and multicultural lifestyles of relevance to both Hogarth's time and his own.

Godfried Donkor, *'London Mob'*, 2001
Collage. On loan from Kelly O'Reilly

Alan Rice

THE SABLE VENUS 1793 TO THE BIRTH OF VENUS 2005

Pro-slavery images such as Thomas Stothard's 'The Sable Venus' were as much part of the propaganda war as Abolitionist images. Twenty-first century viewers of Stothard's image should not be too shocked by its wilful distortion, however, as 'The Sable Venus' is more representative of the consequences of the slave trade than of its reality. Its portrayal of luxurious ease is a projection of the surplus value attendant on this black body. This will create a more easeful life in Europe and American because of a supply of labour that has no wage costs and will eventually reproduce itself at no extra cost.

The price of the phenomenal expansion of human possibilities in the Atlantic world was paid by captive Africans and their descendants with their blood and sweat. There is, of course, none of the blood and sweat in this image but much of the enhanced possibilities that slavery opened up for Europeans. The preponderance of white cherubs cosseting 'The Sable Venus' betray the importance of her labour (and procreative) power to the development of Western capitalism; a system within which she is a disposable commodity as surely as the products her labour power will produce. Donkor's 'Triptych' speaks back to this image, surrounding the Venus with pornographic images from the eighteenth century, making the point that sexual and economic exploitation feed off each other in the culture of slavery.

Alan Rice

PRINTED TEXTILES DESIGNED BY ALTHEA MCNISH

A painter from early in her Trinidad childhood, Althea McNish came to London as a student and made a career in textile and wallpaper design in the late 1950s. Bringing tropical colour to Britain, she became the country's only black textile designer of international repute. As a member of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) she took part in its seminars and exhibitions, and organised CAM work for the BBC magazine programme 'Full House' in February 1973, which proclaimed to the British public the presence of the Caribbean arts.

McNish's career as a rare black and female presence helped develop recognition of multicultural issues in the hitherto conservative design world. Her work as artist and designer was recognised by the honorary award of Doctor of Fine Art of the University of Trinidad and Tobago in 2006.

McNish's ancestry and life reflect the triangulation of the African diaspora. Her paternal ancestor came from Senegambia in the eighteenth century, before being enslaved in Georgia, fighting for the British in the war of 1812 and then settling in Trinidad in 1816. In recognition of this her textiles are displayed in a triangular form speaking to Africa, the Americas and Europe.

Alan Rice

Left: 'Ovonramwen, Oba of Benin, with guards on board ship, on his way to exile in Calabar in 1897',

Photograph by Ibani Ijo photographer J. A. Green

Photograph courtesy of The Tom S. Gardner Photographic Collection

Remember... we were People before we were slaves

TRADE AND EMPIRE:
REMEMBERING SLAVERY

This exhibition explores the themes of trade and empire, commerce and collecting, and the impact and resonance of the experience of slavery and its legacy, within the context of the bicentenary of the parliamentary abolition of the British slave trade in 2007. The exhibition has been co-produced with four guest curators: SuAndi, Kevin Dalton-Johnson, Emma Poulter and Dr. Alan Rice, who are community engaged artists and/or academic researchers working on the history of slavery, trade, empire and its legacy in Manchester and the North West. In their selection of works, debates on the meanings of objects, and views on how the works should be displayed, the guest curators have brought a stimulating array of new voices into the Whitworth and have helped to unearth many previously hidden stories about the objects in our care. The show comprises selections from the Whitworth's collections, integrated with other contemporary works by black artists and objects borrowed from The Manchester Museum, The John Rylands University Library Manchester, Bolton Museums and Archives Service and private collections around the North West.

David Morris,
Head of Collections,
The Whitworth Art Gallery,
The University of Manchester

Andrew Vaughan,
Learning and Interpretation Manager,
The Whitworth Art Gallery,
The University of Manchester

Guest Curators

I am a performance poet and Cultural Director of Black Arts Alliance. The word slave makes my stomach turn. The word history puts me on medication – an intentional fabrication of fact by men of so-called standing over each one of us. Now, as for the word art, it used to make me giggle, but back then no one had graced me with art as part of my culture. It is now a very important part of my life as it knocks against falsehoods, exposes the unknown and celebrates the achievements of ordinary people. I love the fact that we are, each and every one of us, extraordinary people who have survived.

SuAndi

I am a professional artist, teacher and researcher into black masculinities as represented in popular and visual cultures, and presently I am working on a PhD in Art History and Visual Cultures at The University of Manchester. Involvement in this exhibition is unique and exciting, as it provides opportunities for looking at how displaced African artists overcome difficulties of dislocation to represent ourselves, our identities, culture and history within our work and also within the gallery space.

Kevin R. I. Dalton-Johnson

I was the principal researcher for the 'Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery' research project and am currently completing a PhD in Museology at the University of Manchester. I am delighted to be a guest curator for this exhibition. My work examines the biographies of objects in museum and gallery collections, unravelling their connections to institutions and individuals as well as links to histories of trade, industry and colonialism.

Emma Poulter

I am an academic at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, researching in the field of African Atlantic studies. The opportunity to use research related to my 2003 book "Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic" to frame, with other experts, an exhibition that would tell of the deep impact of slavery on `British, American and Global cultures was very welcome.

Dr. Alan Rice

'Le Traite des Nègres', c.1800-1817, Rouen, Normandy, France
Roller-printed cotton handquilted in running stitch. The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester

***"If you know your history
Then you will know where you're coming from"***

So wrote the late great reggae maestro Robert Nesta Marley. However, Bob (as we all know him) wasn't simply referring to the slavery that placed Africans in the Caribbean, but the history of Africans across her continent. It was the same thinking that inspired Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) to say, "The truth will set you free." (See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El-Hajj http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malik http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shabazz)

The truth that Malcolm was referring to embraced the history of slavery as well as the resulting segregation policies in the USA. Moreover, seeing as the USA is a former British colony, Malcolm was speaking directly to the English nation, exhorting her people to embrace the bad as well as the good of the history of colonialism, because if they did not, (if you do not) a life of denial would be a life only half lived.

Europe and Great Britain value culture most highly. Culture has always been considered as a sophistication that can only be achieved and maintained by a civilised society, which is able to utilise hard labour and relax from its toil in the pleasure of the arts; and that ability to appreciate culture was considered to be the result of good grooming and education. Qualities that, during the period between 1700-1930, the upper classes of England refused to acknowledge existed within African societies. In truth, for many a long year the English working class poor were brainwashed to believe that Africans were not even part of the human race, but an abnormality of nature, placing them (us) just slightly above monkeys, apes and gorillas, and therefore worthy of no compassion – worthy only to be considered as chattels to be traded, abused, tortured and raped; then bred much like cattle.

Meanwhile, in the drawing rooms of high society, on the walls of galleries and in the glass cases of museums, African culture had been stolen from its creators and displayed as a backdrop to the bloodiest of holocausts in the history of civilisation.

SuAndi

TRADE AND EMPIRE

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Americas provided a means to riches for many Britons through direct and indirect investment in slave economies. This section of the exhibition reflects the workings of this international trade, which fed the growth of the British Empire until the Abolition of slavery in 1833 and beyond. In particular, sugar and cotton plantations provided fantastically lucrative investment opportunities in the Caribbean, Latin America and the American South. British people's notorious sweet teeth meant there was a tremendous demand for sugar, meaning that by the 1770s sugar imports were far higher in monetary value than any other single commodity brought into the country. This demand for tropical goods came at the expense of large numbers of African slaves, transported in appalling conditions from that continent and who endured a middle passage that claimed the lives of around 15% of the human "cargo". Once working on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, around a third of slaves did not survive to see their fourth year because of the harshness of the conditions there.

Alan Rice and Emma Poulter

"Every slave in a southern state is an operative for Great Britain. We cannot work rich southern soil by white free labour, and if you have cotton manufacturers, you must have them based on slave labour"

Thomas Cooper, South Carolina 1830

COMMERCE AND COLLECTING

Slave-grown cotton is crucial to the story of the Industrial Revolution and to the accumulation of wealth that built Manchester during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Every ounce of cotton had to be imported into Britain from overseas plantations, many of which used slave labour.

During the eighteenth century the slave plantations of the West Indies provided Manchester with raw cotton alongside the traditional sources of the Middle East and India. From 1790 this shifted to a dependence on the slave plantations of the American south and by 1802 America had become the largest supplier of cotton to the British market.

Slavery continued in North America after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 and Manchester remained dependent on slave grown cotton. As late as 1860 America supplied 88% of the cotton imported into Britain. Slavery enabled cotton to be grown cheaply and was a major reason why the price of cotton textiles fell steadily from the 1790s to 1840.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries new generations of rich industrialists and other businessmen emerged whose wealth derived from businesses associated with cotton. These families used some of this wealth to make collections of fine and decorative art to demonstrate their prestige, refinement and taste.

Cotton was crucial to the rise of industrial Manchester but at what cost?

An estimated 12 million Africans were forcefully transported across the Atlantic into slavery. Enslaved people were denied basic human rights and the inhumane treatment experienced on slave ships and plantations cost many their lives.

In Manchester, the rise of the cotton industry meant that the population of the city spiralled; multiplying from 17,000 to 180,000 people between 1760 and 1830. Living and working conditions were crowded, dirty and dangerous. Whilst some grew very rich through cotton, it caused great deprivation and hardship for many more.

Emma Poulter

Left: Cotton Pickers in the American South
Photograph courtesy of Bolton Museums and Archives Service

Inset left: *'The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia, who escaped from Richmond, Va., in a box 3ft. long, 2½ ft. deep and 2 ft. wide'*, c.1850-60
Photograph courtesy of Bristol Record Office