

*La Bouche du Roi* is made up of many different elements, each with its own significance. Every petrol can mask represents a living person with a name, a voice and beliefs. The objects attached to the masks symbolise personal connections to particular gods of Benin. African religions, as well as music, language and other forms of cultural life, were important means of resistance by enslaved people.

- ① The smaller masks represent women and children.
- ② The broken masks are people who have died during the voyage, which could last eight weeks.



Blue and white beads are worn by followers of the water goddess *Mammy Wata*. Red feathers show allegiance to *Xevioso*, the maker of thunderstorms. Small wooden figures, *ibeji*, are made when one of a pair of twins dies.

# LA BOUCHE DU ROI

an artwork by Romuald Hazoumé

A meditation on human greed and exploitation: the Atlantic Slave Trade of the past, and the different forms of oppression that continue today.



© 1997–2005 Romuald Hazoumé. Photo: Benedict Johnson

- ③ The narrower masks show how close together the enslaved people had to lie.
- ④ Gin bottles are included because spirits brewed in Liverpool were taken to Africa to barter for slaves.
- ⑤ Bottles are used to represent the masts of the ship and to indicate that the slave traders spent time drinking on deck while people suffered below.
- ⑥ The gun symbolises domination and was an item that was traded.

- ⑦ The yellow mask symbolises the white ruler who was imposed on Benin, West Africa, by the French in the 1700s.
- ⑧ The black mask symbolises the king of Benin.
- ⑨ The scales relate to the balance of blame between European traders and some African rulers for the slave trade and its legacy.
- ⑩ Tobacco, beads, cowrie shells, spices, mirrors and cloth were some of the goods taken to African countries by Europeans to trade for slaves.

'They didn't know where they were going, but they knew where they had come from. Today they still don't know where they are going, and they have forgotten where they come from.'

Romuald Hazoumé



The acquisition of *La Bouche du Roi* for the British Museum was supported by the British Museum Friends and The Art Fund



THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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## Introducing *La Bouche du Roi*

*La Bouche du Roi* was created by Romuald Hazoumé of the Republic of Benin, West Africa, between 1997 and 2005. It is named after a place on the coast of Benin from where slaves were transported for hundreds of years. The artwork comprises 304 plastic petrol can 'masks' arranged in the shape of a slave ship. Every mask represents a person. You can hear them calling out in the languages of Benin.

The aroma of tobacco and spices, as well as the terrible smells of a slave ship, including urine and faeces, are also represented. Other elements of the artwork include gin bottles, tobacco, beads, shells and mirrors. These were some of the trade goods taken to African countries by Europeans to barter for slaves.



Photos: Romuald Hazoumé

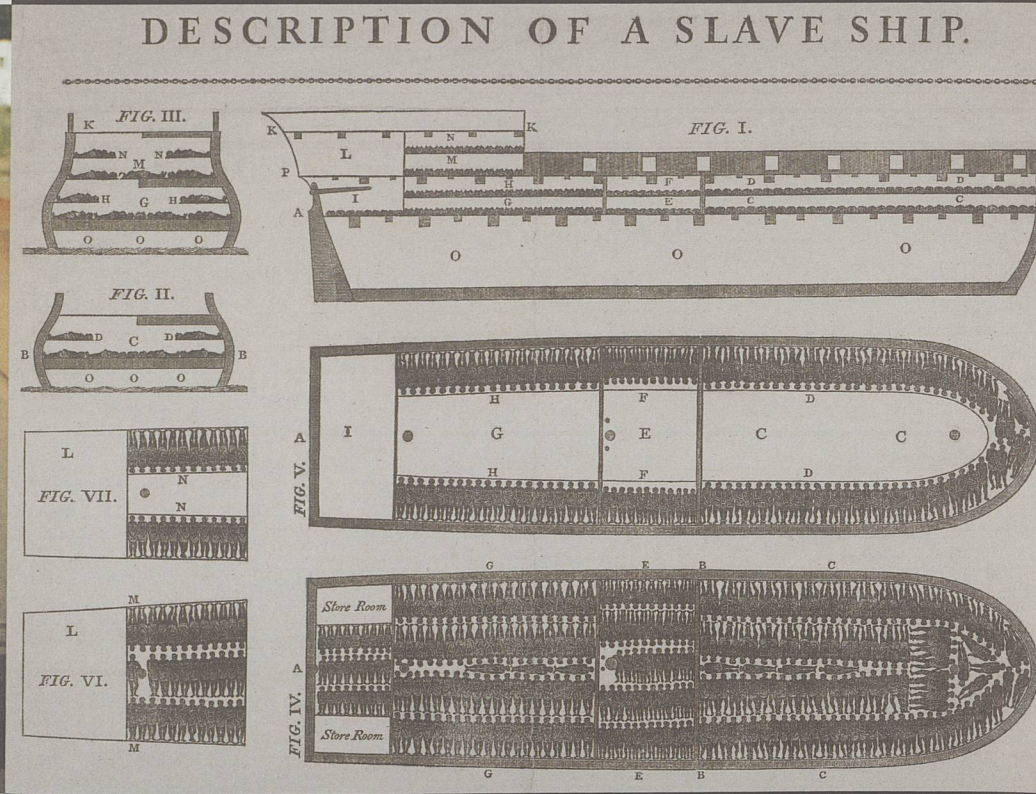
*La Bouche du Roi* also includes a film showing the motorcyclists who transport petrol illegally between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. They carry plastic petrol cans of the type Hazoumé has turned into masks. These containers are expanded over a flame to make them as large as possible, a process that weakens them and leads to fatal explosions. Like slaves, the plastic cans are worked to breaking point, and then discarded.

If the petrol cans signify enslavement, then the motorcyclists – though powerless to escape the economic necessities that drive them – still represent resistance to that oppression. They claw back some of Africa's natural resources which make fortunes for a few, leaving the majority in desperate poverty.

## *La Bouche du Roi* and the Atlantic Slave Trade

The Atlantic Slave Trade started during the 1500s and lasted over 300 years. During this time ten to twelve million people, many from western Africa, were transported to the Americas on European slave ships. Romuald Hazoumé has based the arrangement of *La Bouche du Roi* on a woodcut of the Liverpool slave ship *Brookes* (below).

The woodcut was produced in 1789 for the British anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson. It demonstrated the appallingly inhumane conditions on board ship and played a major part in the movement to abolish the Atlantic Slave Trade. But the schematic nature of the composition deprives the figures of all individuality and culture.



*La Bouche du Roi* challenges any consequent perception of African people as passive victims, aiming to restore the identities of the enslaved.

On 25 March 1807 the British Parliament passed an act abolishing the Atlantic Slave Trade. Abolition was ultimately achieved by the continual resistance of enslaved people such as Toussaint L'Ouverture who led the 1791 slave revolution in Haiti. It would be over thirty years before slavery itself was finally abolished throughout the British Empire although it still exists in many parts of the world.

Romuald Hazoumé was born in 1962 in Porto Novo, Republic of Benin, where he continues to live and work. He is one of the Yoruba people who live mainly in Nigeria and Benin, West Africa; he was raised in a Catholic family.

Hazoumé became a full-time artist in the early 1980s. He assisted in the creation of the recently opened Fondation Zinsou in Cotonou, Benin. This gallery and cultural centre promotes contemporary African and world art.

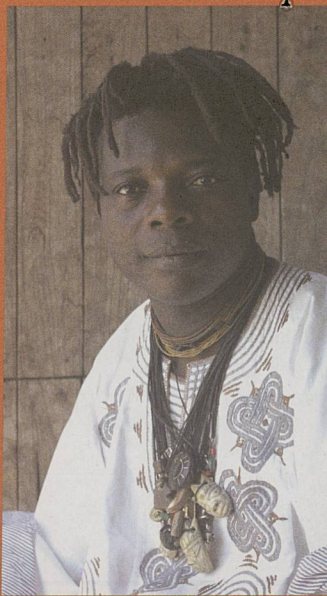


Photo: Erick-Christian Ahounou

'In many ways, slavery has never ended – many people live in the same kind of conditions, bound to work their whole lives for rich bosses, who use them without regard for their humanity, and who then throw them away, like refuse.' Romuald Hazoumé

## On tour

*La Bouche du Roi*: an artwork by Romuald Hazoumé will be on tour during 2007–9 and can be seen at the following venues:

22 March – 13 May 2007

British Museum, London

[www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/tradeandidentity](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/tradeandidentity)

2 June – 15 July 2007

Ferens Art Gallery, Hull

[www.hullcc.gov.uk](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk)

4 August – 2 September 2007

Merseyside Maritime Museum, National Museums Liverpool

[www.merseysidemaritimemuseum.org.uk/hazoume](http://www.merseysidemaritimemuseum.org.uk/hazoume)

15 September – 28 October 2007

Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery

[www.bristol.gov.uk/museums](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/museums)

10 November 2007 – 3 February 2008

Laing Art Gallery, Tyne & Wear Museums, Newcastle

[www.twmuseums.org.uk/laing](http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/laing)

5 December 2008 – 1 March 2009

Horniman Museum, London

[www.horniman.ac.uk](http://www.horniman.ac.uk)

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