

## Art Review

### “Yale Center for British Art: Images of Eighteenth-Century British Slavery”

Dr. Hwa Young Caruso & Dr. John Caruso Jr.  
Art Review Editors

From October 2 to December 14, 2014, the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, CT, displayed more than 60 paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, and decorative objects, some on loan from other collections, in an exhibition entitled *Figures of Empire: Slavery and Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Britain*. The educational exhibition focused on the impact of slavery, Britain's expanded involvement in the slave trade, and depictions of enslaved Africans and Black servants in 18<sup>th</sup> century British family portraits.



The three-month exhibition was organized by the Yale Center for British Art and curated by Esther Chadwick and Meredith Gamer, Ph.D. candidates in the Department of the History of Art at Yale, and Cyra Levenson, Associate Curator of Education at the Yale Center. Extensive research, much of it based on original documents, was integrated into the exhibition and linked to the Center's website. The supplemental materials included a 45-page monographic guide, 14 audio interviews with art critics about individual works, an annotated historical time line from 1555-1833, and 38 high-definition digital photos of the art works and other materials.



The historical provenance of the artworks is critical to understanding the nuances of a leveraged social scale that placed unknown Blacks as sitters representing enslaved Africans who, regarded as possessions, were ranked materially above domesticated animals and household pets. These works reflect an acceptance of a genteel racial hierarchy.

The Blacks depicted in the works are primarily young males between the ages of 12 and 18 years. They composed the largest segment of the estimated 15,000 slaves in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England. They are attired in expensive, stylish, tailored finery confirming the wealth of their masters who could possess and outfit a household slave or an indentured servant. Their orientalized appearances with turbans are so resplendent that the paintings reinforce the myth of the joyful and materially comfortable life of a slave comparable to a person



of standing in English society. The slaves' smiling faces beaming with childlike adoration of their White superiors confirm that they are well treated and regarded as fortunate to be enslaved servants of benevolent owners. These enslaved servants were spared from the harsh short lives of most slaves who labored from dawn to dusk as beasts of burden in the tobacco, cotton, rice, and sugar cane fields of the Caribbean. Confirmation of their status as enslaved servants versus employed servants is difficult to ascertain. The exceptions are those images in which servants are wearing slave's collars made of iron or silver or documentation identifies their status, not their individual

identities or owners.

Great Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century expanded a colonial empire to rival the acquisitions accumulated by Spain, Portugal, and Holland for the previous 200 years. The commercial benefit of establishing secular corporations in the Age of Reason, when



be a costly venture to the Empire, however, as the Crown had to fight extended wars with the French, Spanish, indigenous tribal nations, and finally America in a massive revolutionary war between 1776 and 1783.

The British, as the result of the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, were given a monopoly over the slave trade to Spanish colonies. This concession produced immense wealth and resulted in the British having direct contact with enslaved Africans who, in small numbers, were sold as prized possessions in London, Liverpool, and Bristol, the slave trade centers of an emerging global Empire. Slaves were sold from ships, warehouses, and coffee houses to English masters. With wealth came the rise of the merchant middle class who had to display their achievements and possessions in baroque elegance to offset the social hierarchy dominated by ruling nobility. The Georgian Era (1714-1830) was a time of colonial expansion under the rule of four German kings from Hannover that was part of the Duchy of Brunswick-Lüneburg. The emerging British middle class and landed gentry wanted to self-affirm their successes by emulating the trappings of nobility. One tactic was to enshrine and embellish their status in art works, namely individual and family portraits called conversation pieces. The major Georgian portraitists were centered in London and served the growing affluent middle class.



all social institutions had religious affiliations, was a monumental achievement. Visitors may recall that the first English entry into the new world, the Jamestown Settlement, was funded by a rudimentary investment corporation (Virginia Company 1606) under the protection of a royal charter. Exploration was intended to systematically exploit another region and return the material spoils and profits to the motherland. The 13 American Colonies proved to

After King George III established the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768, many of these portraits were shared with the public. These displays enhanced their social standing and justified the expense of having a family portrait painted by Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney, William Hogarth, John Hopper, Thomas Lawrence, or others. The aspiring middle class could not pose in front of family

castles on huge feudal estates. They engaged the painters of the times, initially trained in Holland but later native Britons, to depict them in the interiors of their manor homes or on modest estates. The Yale exhibition focuses on explaining these self-adulations, specifically how, when, where and why enslaved Africans or indentured Blacks servants were depicted.

The exhibition contained diverse materials that illustrate how African slaves or servants were portrayed fulfilling their subservient tasks. The artworks ranged from colored drawings and prints, to books, personal items, mementos, sculptures, and large scale paintings. The portrait that set the tone of the exhibition and served as the cover of the monographic guide is one of Charles Stanhope, Third Earl of Harrington, and a Black servant. It was painted by Joshua Reynolds in 1782, while he was serving as the first President of the Royal Academy of Arts. Reynolds commanded a large fee for his portraits and relied on his students to paint sitters during the initial stages of his many works. The large scale painting is out of historical sequence as a full-suit of medieval armor was rarely worn into battle at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The setting glorifies Lord Stanhope, who stands fearlessly prepared for battle in a stoic, almost saintly, pose. His young Black servant, holding his plumed helmet, looks upward with reverence albeit a tinge of apprehension should his Lord fall in battle. Who



Who would be his new master if the Earl was killed? No one knows who the sitter was in this painting and even if the Earl owned an enslaved servant. Some art historians speculate that the servant was an assistant of Reynolds who filled in the role of a sitter. The identities of Africans in the exhibition's artworks are unknown because most were stripped of family roots and birth names. Most lived with assigned names affirming them as valuable ornaments and possessions of nobles and the aspiring middle class.

Black servants were regarded as necessary functional possessions who in turn served and protected their employers and owners. Their position in most of the artworks is on the periphery in an obsequious pose expected of a servant or enslaved person of any race.

There are two powerful sculptures in the exhibition, both ornamental but one also functional. The ornamental work is the bust of an African male ca. 1758, by Francis Harwood, composed of Black limestone on a yellow marble socle. Harwood spent most of his adult life in Rome and Florence. He worked in Giovanni Battista Piamontini's studio in Florence, which he directed after Piamontini's death in 1762.

Harwood sold copies of classical sculptures to wealthy English patrons making the grand tour of Italy. This formidable bust sends a mixed message because it is so detailed, including facial scars. No one knows if the scars were from brutal treatment because sitter is unknown. It was executed in a classical style but isn't the work of a copyist because the subject emits so many original emotions. If the subject was enslaved, as his torso suggests his hands are bound behind his back, he never surrendered his dignity while confronting his oppressors.



The second sculpture by an unknown artist ca. 1708 belonged to Elihu Yale, the Welsh merchant whose generous donation was recognized by naming Yale College after him in 1718. The sculpture was on his estate near Wrexham, Wales, until it was donated to Yale in 1922. The sundial was placed in the courtyard of Jonathan Edwards College in 1933 and remained there until the 1970s. Two English sculptors, John Nost and John Cheere, produced similar cast bronze functional garden ornaments in the 18<sup>th</sup> century often referred to as Blackamoor, African, or Slave. The pose is a painful posture if one imagines balancing the heavy marble sundial on one's head. It is necessary labor, for telling time was important before watches and clocks became portable. It is the type of labor suited to African slaves, physically demanding but requiring little reflection, while exposing the slave to the raw

elements.

Did Elihu Yale (1649-1721) own slaves during or after his life in India? The answer would help the viewer discern if the enslaved servant who filled the glasses with Madeira from a flask and is wearing a slave's silver collar and padlock around his neck belongs to Yale in the center or to either of the two seated noblemen or the lawyer who is standing. Yale is in the company of William Cavendish, second Duke of Devonshire, on the right, his younger brother James Cavendish on the left, and a lawyer named Mr. Tunstal. The portrait, set on the Duke's Chatsworth estate,



confirms that wealth can buy access to royalty and status. Yale was worth the equivalent of billions of dollars earned from an immensely profitable posting to India. He served as Governor in the East Indian Company's settlement at Madras and managed the slave trade while dealing in precious stones. Upon his return to Britain, he negotiated the marriage of Anne Yale, his daughter, to James Cavendish by providing a large dowry which allowed Yale to unite his family with nobility. The question arises, "Who owned the young slave and why was he in the painting because portrait artists charged a higher fee for each person in the portrait?" Since the betrothal had commercial implications, it was important for Yale or the Duke to demonstrate to viewers that both were wealthy enough to own an enslaved servant. The expression on the slave's face shows curiosity but little understanding of the matters being discussed and negotiated. Blacks were considered as having low intelligence and best suited to demanding physical work as field hands or household servants.



William Hogarth's, *Portrait of a Family*, ca. 1735, expresses the full extent of the inherent contradiction of wanting to show the world that the family was wealthy enough to own an enslaved servant but that person was on the lowest social strata, in some cases just above a household pet. The viewer has to scour the painting to locate the Black servant. On the far left side there is a Black child's figure holding a

silver tray with an overturned teacup. Research indicates the painting was trimmed, removing most of the Black servant.

At the time, family portraits were considered conversation pieces. Servants were often shown providing an expensive food or beverage imported into England. Portraits captured a scene of daily life that was supposed to represent everything good about their status in society. It was important to display the range of their valuable possessions including clothing, veneered or inlaid furniture, imported Chinaware, healthy children, pets, horses, servants, and, if possible, an impressive manor home or castle on a spacious estate. Hogarth's painting contains multiple activities and interactions, especially the playful pets. The room is filled with items of conspicuous consumption generated by Britain's expanding and profitable Empire. One can only speculate why the Black servant was cut out of the original painting.



The usual setting of a materialist conversation piece was to present the enslaved servant in a subservient role but enough of a presence to confirm that they fulfilled functions below the social level of their owners or employers. The 1755 painting entitled *John Orde, His Wife Anne, His Eldest Son William, and a Servant* by Arthur Devis shows three adults and a young Black servant who is carrying a letter addressed to Orde, the seated landowner leaning on a veneered table. Two actions are frozen in time. Orde's wife accepts the pheasant her stepson has just shot, and the well attired servant wearing a turban assumes a pose that is part of required bowing before nobility.

It was important to show that, in addition to the expensive imported Chinaware on the mantel, the silver basket on the table, the embroidered furniture, the family portraits, a landscape over the fireplace, and a fine meal of roast pheasant, the family owned and had the wealth to maintain an expensively attired servant or slave.

Occasionally the enslaved servant was able to express emotions beyond adoration, simplicity, wonderment, and loyal obedience to his or her master in a painting. An unknown artist, or Johann Zoffany (1733-1810) as some speculate, painted a gentleman hunting with his dogs and servant ca. 1765. A range of emotions are displayed in this painting. The servant is handing his master a game bird that he had shot and that was retrieved by a Spaniel hunting dog. Simultaneously the smiling servant looks directly at his master, who looks away, while patting him on the shoulder for making a difficult shot. This scene momentarily elevates the servant to the level of a free person who has the right to express his own thoughts and emotions without fear of retribution. It is a bold but calculated gesture of affirmation. The pat on the shoulder is counterbalanced by the servant's body language of deference. His right foot and leg are in the position of a curtsy or bow to a person of standing in case the shooter considered the affirmation of his hunting prowess impudent.



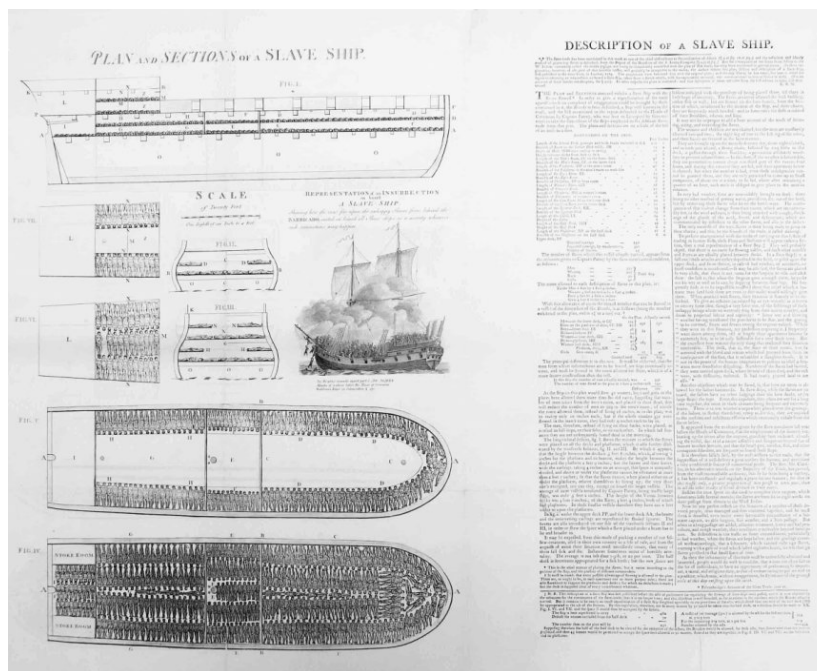
Bartholomew Dandridge painted *A Young Girl with a Dog and a Page* ca. 1725



that provided another view of hierarchical emotions. A young girl, perhaps the 12-year-old daughter of the master of the enslaved servant, stands in a garden, staring directly at the viewer. The enslaved servant, perhaps 15 years old, wearing a slave's silver collar with a lock, is gesturing and imploring her to respond to his adoring appreciation of her beauty. The slave offers her grapes and peaches, fruits that have sexual connotations in classical paintings. The large urn behind her has a sexualized theme of Pan the Greek god of flocks, music, and fertility who took the form of a humanized goat. The girl is secure in her role protected by a loyal English mastiff or pit bull. Strict class lines based on race and gender are

reinforced in this painting. A White girl who could not own property takes priority over a Black enslaved male and a household pet because inherently any White person by nature is superior.

Other smaller pieces in the exhibition confirm the harsh realities of slavery. The first is a diagram and detailed explanation of the horrors experienced by captured African slaves on their two-month torturous ocean journey on the Middle Passage from West Africa to the West Indies. Unspeakable conditions were inflicted on slaves packed like canned sardines, chained into cramped, filthy, disease-ridden stowage below deck sometimes in a space only 18 inches high. The mortality rate was calculated at 20% of those who began their hellish journey into perpetual slavery for themselves and their children. An unknown artist created this 1795 line engraving of the plan of a slave ship adapted from a work entitled *Description of a Slave Ship*, published in 1789 by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The engraving was a central document in the 18<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist





movement to expose the horrific excesses and brutalities inflicted on kidnapped African men, women, and children. The accompanying text describes the bestial conditions and implores the reader to put an end to the evil practices of slavery.

Due to the shortage of coins of the realm, merchants privately minted coinage accepted locally as legal tender. A half penny token was struck at the Soho mint in Birmingham in 1796.



The coin carries the seal of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade with the cogent message, “Am I not a man and a brother,” advocating ending slavery and oppression. The signet ring from 1787 has a similar message that would be impressed on wax to seal an official document. There was a spate of privately minted coins, tokens, signet rings, medallions, cameo brooches, hair pins, snuff boxes, dishes and other objects that provided convenient opportunities for anti-slavery groups to advocate abolition of slave trading in Great Britain.

Other groups and individuals who benefitted from the slave trade funded efforts to continue the practice albeit reforming some of its harsher aspects. English academic and religious institutions propagated the myth that Blacks or Africans were biologically,



intellectually, spiritually, and morally inferior to Whites. In print, folk culture, and popular forms of entertainment, Blacks were demeaned, diminished, and dismissed as persons of low morals and limited intelligence. In the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century these stereotypes were allegedly proven scientifically by those who embraced the racial hierarchy of Social Darwinism.

In 1759 a two-act social farce, *High Life Below Stairs*, by Reverend James Townley was performed in a London theatre and other performances were held across Great Britain and eventually the United

States. The play was intended to lampoon the master’s family and those who served them. Roles for Black servants, employed and enslaved, were played by Whites in

blackface. The exhibition displayed a dry-point hand-colored etching by printmaker James Bretherton of a scene in Townley's farce where the White coachman, the White female cook, and the Black butler, all drunk and drowsy from the master's wine, are slumped in the kitchen. When the master knocks on the locked door, each one orders the other to go and answer the door. There appears to be social equality as they work and drink together, but the coachman and cook use racist terms of Sambo and Blackee when ordering the Black servant to open the door.

## Conclusion

In the 18th century, thousands of African slaves were bought to work in London, Liverpool, and Bristol after the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht granted a slave trade monopoly to Great Britain. Young male slaves were trained to work as house servants, coachmen, watchmen, kitchen help, and servants doing other jobs related to city life. The slave trade was a great economic stimulus for England and helped to finance the growth of the British Empire. With the rising economy, the emerging middle class became obsessed with climbing the social ladder in a class-dominated society. Purchasing and displaying expensive material goods and services was a method to advance social status. Manor homes were built and filled with expensive furniture, imported Chinaware, silver utensils, crystal chandeliers, jewelry, silk clothing, and other symbols of wealth including servants, enslaved and employed. One necessary indicator of wealth and status was the family portrait painted by a prominent artist, which served as a conversation piece.

The educational exhibition presented a historical explanation and illustration of how, when, where, and why anonymous enslaved servants and other Africans appeared in family portraits. The portrait was a social tool that assigned permanent subservient roles to Africans. Black sitters posed for the real or imaginary enslaved servants who were depicted as expensive accessories and smartly attired servants but always placed on the periphery or faded into the background. The polite poses and body language reflect the stereotypes of enslaved servants. Their facial expressions were filled with adoration and admiration for their master and his family. The enslaved servants appeared as solitary individuals in the paintings indicating that they required the constant supervision of Whites to complete their daily tasks. This diverse exhibition educates viewers about the harsh realities of slavery by using emotion-laden artworks that condoned 18<sup>th</sup>-century genteel slavery in an expanding British Empire.

## Artworks, Resources, Acknowledgement

Materials in the exhibition are from the collections of the Yale Center for British Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Lewis Walpole Library, and Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The artwork images were reproduced courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art.

## Artworks

1. Exhibition installation view at the Yale Center for British Art.
2. Exhibition installation view at the Yale Center for British Art.
3. Exhibition installation view at the Yale Center for British Art.
4. *Portrait of a Young Man*, undated by Bernard Lens III, watercolor and gouache on vellum sheet, 4 x 3 in.
5. *Die Schlacht von Bunker-Hill (The Battle of Bunker's Hill)*, undated by Johann Georg Nordheim after John Trumbull, hand-colored engraving, 20 x 30 in.
6. *The Slave Trade*, 1791, print by John Raphael Smith, after George Morland, mezzotint, printed in color, published state on medium, cream laid paper, 22 x 29 in.
7. *Charles Stanhope, third Earl of Harrington, and a Servant*, 1782, by Sir Joshua Reynolds, oil on canvas, 93 x 56 in.
8. *Bust of a Man*, ca. 1758, by Francis Harwood, black limestone on a yellow marble socle, overall 27 x 20 in.
9. *Elihu Yale Sundial*, ca. 1708, unknown artist, bronze, cast lead, and cement base, overall 63 x 33 x 27 in.
10. *Elihu Yale, the second Duke of Devonshire, Lord James Cavendish, Mr. Tunstal, and a Page*, ca. 1708, by unknown artist, oil on canvas, 79 x 93 in.
11. *Portrait of a Family*, ca. 1735, by William Hogarth, oil on canvas, 21 x 29 in.
12. *John Orde, His Wife Anne, and His Eldest Son William*, ca 1755, by Arthur Devis, oil on canvas, 37 x 38 in.
13. *An Unknown Man, perhaps Charles Goring of Wiston, out Shooting with his Servant*, ca. 1765, by unknown artist (possibly Johann Zoffany), oil on canvas, 46 x 54 in.
14. *A Young Girl with an Enslaved Servant and a Dog*, ca. 1725, by Bartholomew Dandridge, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.
15. *Plan and Sections of a Slave Ship, from Carl Bernhard Wadström's An Essay on Colonization Particularly Applied to the Western Coast of Africa*, London: Harvey and Darton, 1794-95, by unknown artist, line engraving with aquatint, engraved inscriptions, and letterpress on wove paper, 22 x 27 in.
16. *"Am I Not A Man And A Brother"* obverse and reverse, Anti-Slavery Conder token, ca. 1796, manufacturer: William Lutwyche: Soho Mint, Birmingham, artist: Roger Dixon, copper, 1.1 in.
17. *Signet ring for wax seal*, ca. 1787, by unknown artist, gold with red stone, possibly jasper face, 1.1 x 1 in.
18. *High Life Below Stairs*, 1774, by James Bretherton, after Thomas Orde, etching and drypoint, hand-colored, on laid paper, 10 x 12 in.

## Resources

*Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (1995). By Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. Published by Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ  
[http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/digital/publishing/books/gerzina1995/pdf/Gerzina\\_Black-London.pdf?mswitch-redir=classic](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/digital/publishing/books/gerzina1995/pdf/Gerzina_Black-London.pdf?mswitch-redir=classic)

English Figurative Painting: Portrait Art, Genre-Paintings in 18th/19th Century England.  
<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/english-figurative-painting.htm>

*London, Metropolis of the Slave Trade* (2003). By James A. Rawley. Published by University of Missouri, Columbia, MO.

Multiple Perspectives on Slavery: An Eighteenth Century English Colloquium  
[http://www.umich.edu/~ece/student\\_projects/slavery2/index.html](http://www.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/slavery2/index.html)

Records Relating to The Slave Trade at The Liverpool Record Office  
<http://www.britishonlinearchives.co.uk/9781851171477.php>

The British Online Archives  
<http://www.britishonlinearchives.co.uk/>

The Slave Trade and Plantation Wealth  
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/discover/people-and-places/the-slave-trade-and-abolition/sites-of-memory/the-slave-trade-and-plantation-wealth/>

## Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of the curators, Esther Chadwick and Meredith Gamer, Ph.D. candidates in the Yale Department of the History of Art; Cyra Levenson, Associate Curator of Education; and Betsy Kim, Head of Communications and Marketing at the Yale Center for British Art.