

Ignored No More: Re-intepretations for the 200th Anniversary of the British Slave Trade

by Barbara Cohen-Stratner

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2007 is the 200th anniversary of the Parliamentary act that ended British participation in the Atlantic Slave trade. It was a major victory for the British Abolitionist movement. Museums, cultural and municipal institutions, and Parliament itself chose 2007 to develop exhibitions, trails, and public programs that remind their public that 1807 did not end slavery or racism in Great Britain or its former colonies. In London last spring, I took the walks, attended the programs, and visited the artifact and virtual exhibitions of **Abolition200**.

These projects were of special interest to me as a student of American Abolitionism and as a resident in England during the worst of its racist past in the 1970s. They also serve as windows into the impact of new museology on British museums. They present examples of ways that different museums can develop exhibitions and re-interpret permanent collections to accommodate ignored or repressed history, each within its mission and institutional style. Exhibitions in Parliament and municipal archives focused on William Wilberforce and the Abolitionist movement itself, which used powerful artifacts and imagery to influence public opinion. History museums worked with their permanent collections of artifacts from the sugar, rum, tobacco, and cotton trade, emphasizing the role of slavery in producing those goods. These examples indicate that different museums can develop exhibitions and re-interpret permanent collections to accommodate ignored or repressed history, each within its mission and institutional style.

Please check out the web sites in the Sidebar to see the full scope of the project. I will focus on three major exhibitions—one that

commissioned a new art work, one that re-labeled elements of its permanent display, and one that combined these methods.

New Installation

The British Museum, which was also celebrating a season dedicated to Atlantic Trade and Identity, commissioned an installation, **La Bouche du Roi**, by Benin sculptor Romuald Hazoumé. It was on display from 22 March to 13 May, 2007, and is now on tour. No curator was credited. A promotional card for the museum stated:

This contemporary response to the 18th century print of the British slave ship the *Brookes* is primarily a warning against all kinds of human greed, exploitation and enslavement, both historical and contemporary. Made from a combination of materials, including petrol cans, spices and audio and video elements, this work is truly profound.

The basic message is that abolition is an on-going struggle, as the opening text panel reminds the visitor:

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 30 years before slavery itself was finally abolished throughout the British Empire, although it still exists in many parts of the world.

The installation's context is Africanist, and not focused on slavery's impact on the Western Hemisphere. It is named for a West African port, used in the 18th century for slavery. It

helps to know that Nigeria was a colony in the British empire that was a major source of slaves, and has, in recent decades, had its internal splits fueled by oil extraction and trade.

The basic method here is powerful art, with secondary texts. The central image is based on the diagram of the HMS Brookes out of Liverpool, a plan for fitting 304 slaves into a ship in middle (i.e. Atlantic) passage. Of the many such diagrams from that era, the Brookes plan is notable since it was displayed in Parliament during the debates. Hazoumé reproduced the packed slaves on the floor with 304 plastic “jerry cans” (petrol [gasoline] container lids), which can be seen as faces (with the open spout as a mouth) or curled up bodies. Some tops have been individualized with items tied around the handles, such as feathers, cowrie shells, strings of wood and trade (glass) beads, leather thongs, wrapped string or twine, and small icons. The store rooms were indicated with piles of cotton, tobacco, spices, glass bottles with gin labels, and other trade items. At the rear are two petrol container tops overtly decorated as masks, black and yellow, with Caucasian hair and moustache.

A video in the gallery shows a continuous loop of contemporary motorcycle petrol smugglers in Nigeria, jerry cans strapped to their motorcycles. The audio is a collage of names in Yoruba, Wémé, and other West African languages.

At the back of the gallery, there are two loft spaces with windows over the installation. The first has texts and photographs exploring links from the slave trade to the Nigerian oil trade. The second makes visual and text connections from specific individualization items and colors

to Benin traditions, such as blue denoting Shango (a Yoruba deity) and the tradition of trade beads as decoration for icons, as well as people.

Web presence:

There is a single page description of the installation on the touring exhibitions and loans page (www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/what's_on/touring_exhibitions_and_loans/l_bouche_du_roi.aspx). It includes a striking photograph taken from floor level that clarifies the resemblance of the can lids to face masks.

New Captioning

The National Portrait Gallery re-captioning project, *Portraits, People & Abolition: 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade*, was available in the galleries from 17 March to 22 July, 2007. The trail was researched and written by Dr. Caroline Bressey, University College, London.

Its basic message, as stated in the exhibition brochure, was that the Atlantic slave trade affected all in Britain:

2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Act of Parliament that legally ended British involvement in the trading of African people to serve as slave labour (sic) in the Americas, the West Indies and Europe. This Act did not end slavery in the British Empire, nor did it end the involvement of British companies in the slave trade. 1807 did, however, mark the moment when men and women—privileged and poor, enslaved and free—celebrated their initial success against a barbaric trade.

The basic method was added re-interpretation through additional captioning of portraits

If you can't get to England this year, you can still participate in the project by accessing the many related web sites.

The best starting point is the Abolition200 project site (www.abolition200.org.uk). “/venues” brings you to the complete list of participating sites. Another general access point is on the Ministry of Culture's site (http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/Museums_galleries/bicentenary_abolition_slave_trade.htm).

The artifact exhibition in the house of Parliament is documented on its web site (<http://slavetrade.parliament.uk>). The catalogue by Melanie Unwin can be found in the full text data base Project MUSE at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/parliamentary_history/v026/26.4Sunwin.pdf.

The Westminster trail, On the Road to Abolition: Ending the British Slave Trade, can be read and downloaded at www.westminster.gov.uk/abolition. Devised by historian Steve Martin, it comprises the National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, Parliament, Tate Britain, Westminster City Archives, and Westminster City Council.

Primary document collections on Abolition and the Atlantic slave trade targeted for school use can be found at British and Scottish gateway sites: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/slavery> and <http://www.ltsotland.org.uk/abolition>.

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specified on a map, for example:

To commemorate this anniversary, the National Portrait Gallery has created a new gallery trail that highlights some of the individuals in the Collection who have been associated with the history of the slave trade in many different ways. It ends with a series of contemporary portraits of individuals who have an interest or involvement in preventing the existence of slavery today... Use the maps and key overleaf to find the relevant portraits in the Gallery and look out for the labels with the special logo to find out more about them.

Since the chronology of the National Portrait Gallery works down from highest floors to ground floor, the Abolitionist trail begins on the 2nd floor with those involved with exploration of the Western Hemisphere, then moves into the inclusion of slaves and servants in formal portraiture of the 17th and early 18th century; portraits of African Americans or Afro-Caribbeans in England; and paintings of active Abolitionists. In the final ground floor gallery, the contemporary black, African, or Afro-Caribbean subjects are given opportunity to speak for themselves.

The impact of re-labeling had varying impacts. For the 16th and 17th century figures, such as Queen Elizabeth I, the new captions remind us that exploration of the Western Hemisphere inevitably involved both colonialism and slavery. The labels for Samuel Pepys, and other major 18th literary figures tell us about their investments in those explorations. The revisionist power of re-labeling is best seen in the 19th century literary figures, where it is less expected. The permanent label for the Romney portrait of William Cowper describes him as a “poet [who] suffered from severe depression and attempted suicide. For many years, he

lived at Olney, where he wrote the Olney hymns and poems of country life, including *The Task*, 1783.” The Abolitionist label says that he “...was asked by supporters of the abolition campaign to write some verses that could be used to capture the attention of the British public. In response, Cowper produced *The Negro’s Complaint*. It was a great success and, when set to music, became an effective political song, sung as a ballad on the nation’s streets” and points out that *The Task* condemned slavery. Similarly, the new label for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, rather than focusing on her romance and elopement with Robert Browning, explains that although “her comfortable upbringing had relied on wealth from Jamaican estates that used slave labor, she was an ardent Abolitionist [who] believed that her family was cursed by profiteering from slavery.”

Web presence:

The new content is not integrated into the digital gallery. The captions from the Abolition Trail can be found in the e-Learning section of the NPG web site (NPG/Education/e-Learning/Abolition). The permanent installations with captions can be found through the normal search procedure, via either Search or Education.

New installations and captioning

At the Victoria & Albert Museum, *Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design*, was on display from 20 February to 17 June, 2007. The project was curated by Zoë Whitley, with Ligaya Salazar as project manager. This project combined new commissioned works placed within the permanent collections with a Discovery Trail, a concurrent re-interpretation of existing decorative arts exhibits, which continues to 31 December. The basic messages are that any and all art can express personal

political beliefs and that political realities, such as the slave trade, are inextricable from artifacts of decorative art.

The contemporary art installations were distributed around the museum. Other than Julien Sinzigan's large painting, *The Gates of Return*, which greeted visitors in the main entrance, they were placed in galleries and permanent exhibitions where, in the words of artist Keith Piper, they could "almost... disappear within the permanent collection, taking on the appearance of period objects and revealing their true identity only upon close inspection." (Pool, 2007). Lubaina Himid's life-sized painted wood figures hover near furniture in the British decorative arts rooms, as if well-trained servants. Anissa-Jane's video, photography and sculpture installation, *The Spirit of Lucy-Negro*, was placed in the chronological array of the fashion gallery. A visitor could easily have considered the denim ankle shackles and distressed cutaway jacket only in the context of wearable art.

Uncomfortable Truths: Traces of the Trade comprises five trails in the British decorative arts galleries, highlighted in a booklet. Four trails are, as the web site states "endorsed" by a non-curator, identified in the gallery text as a "high-profile black Briton." There is a short introduction by each, which serves as narration for the alternate eye. Two of the themes focus on items produced by slaves, such as sugar bowls and snuff (tobacco) boxes. The second depicts "Black servants in British homes" in decorated china, embroideries, and prints. Trail 4, introduced by rap artist Ty, shows items "representing slavery and Abolitionism," including a Wedgwood medallion illustrated with the chained slave symbol of SEAST, the principle Abolitionist organization, which was also the illustration on *The Negro's*

Complaint. The final trail, which leads through the African sculptured weight collections, invites visitors' views.

Web presence:

There is a continuing presence in the past exhibitions section of the web site (www.vam.ac.uk/uncomfortable_truths/index.html). It includes very few illustrations and only incomplete texts, but does lead to a discussion board on the "vastatic" microsite.

Conclusion:

When a museums, or group of institutions, decide to "ignore no more," to focus attention on a forgotten theme, historical event, or artist, they generally agree on a coherent, consistent approach. But, there is little consistency in this fervent consortium of exhibitions. Some look back at a historical movement and its heroes. Some look forward to promises not kept and opportunities missed. Others look angrily out at the audience, accusing it of slipping back into willful ignorance. Half-way through the bicentenary year, the diffused themes of abolition are reflected in the different missions and exhibition practices of the participating museums. ✨

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