

Portrait of an African film transcript

Nahem Shoa

A portrait comes from the idea of the icon. That's the image of God.

Louisa Adjoa Parker

His birth is a dark song he carries inside him, an almost-memory: a young woman's screams, as she lies in the black belly of a ship surrounded by cold bodies, her skin slicked with salt, and the cold air holds the stench of human waste, and the air is filled with fear, and waves rock the ship like displeased Gods, and his mother a songbird who longs to fly home, and the labour a storm raging inside her, and life: bright as a new coin, loud as an elephant's roar, vast as the sea they're crossing.

Samenua Sesher

When I see that painting, I actually just think it's beautiful. Seeing an African man in a different era, in different clothes in a different way, allows me to see different things. And not that those things aren't there. But I look at that man and I see something gentle and I see a softness and I see a femininity and I see an intelligence and a composure and something beautiful.

Julien Parsons

The painting, a portrait, is unquestionably the most important artwork in the collection. And it's gained importance through

the decades in a way, it's become more and more iconic. We don't actually know very much about the past history of the painting, which is one of the great issues that we need to challenge or we question. We know that it came from an art collector, an art dealer, Percy Moore Turner, and he gave the painting to RAMM in 1943. One of the challenges though, is that we don't know anything about the painting before it was in Turner's possession.

Nahem Shoa

It's one of the most powerful portraits in the 18th century, regardless of his colour. It's also an image of a black man who has become the subject of the painting. He's no longer in the shadows. As a painter we've always looked at this painting as a kind of a challenge to try and paint the black image today. And I've been privileged enough in the last few years to put my own work next to this.

Peter Braithwaite

During the COVID pandemic, lockdown number one, I started a project called rediscovering black portraiture, to recreate portraits featuring black subjects. I used a pillowcase or cushion cover to create a ponytail and I created a centre-parting in my own hair and used various hair products to try and recreate the shape of his hair. The shirt and the necktie were created with various sheets and again, a pillowcase I think for that. And then this is a red bomber jacket. The gaze is not as penetrating as his, I was trying to think about what it might have been like to sit for that portrait.

My initial reaction was curiosity and wanting to find out more about who this person was, and actually surprise to see such a well-dressed solo portrait from this period because up until that point, I'd been looking at images where the black figure had been pushed to the margins and not the central character, but this is completely different he's the sole voice, the sole sitter in this portrait and that's what's really intriguing about it, I think,

Joy Gregory

It's very rare to see a person of African descent actually presented within this context from that period. That's why, for me, it becomes like an exceptional image rather than one that is of the every day. And also at that period, to have a likeness of yourself wasn't something that was an everyday thing, so only certain people were able to be imaged in that way. So unlike today, where everyone and their cat can have a picture of themselves it was like a much rarer occurrence in that time.

Chukumeka Maxwell

So I went to a school which wore the same uniform since 1553, and people say the same thing about me, it was at the time when at my school there was only four black people. It gives me a sense of pride because you know, it's another black person, which you don't often see in paintings, but it also makes me laugh because I was saying in the 70s we all used to straighten our hair with relaxer. And it's the same again, this sort of straightened hair to sort of acclimatise, acculturise yourself to the times. So for me there's been a journey of

wanting to be very much part of British society, but at the same time understanding my cultural heritage and the pain and suffering that's got me to where I'm standing now.

Joanna Traynor

I feel anger when I look at this picture – for what it doesn't say, tell us, for what it doesn't explain. I see a man's spirit dressed up as belonging but I feel his alienation keenly. Is Exeter a fitting home for a picture like this? I think so. For here is a man, cast forward, a breadcrumb of history – just one of many clues connecting this city to the men, women and children stolen, sold, used and abused and cast out as inferior beings till forever, till now, till the white man gets it. We cannot see this man's past beyond that jacket he wears. We cannot see the lash on his back or the loved ones who cared for him, about him, who missed him. We ask who was he? But who asked back then?

Melissa Percival

Well, as you can see, it's a beautiful portrait. The man is very calm and serene. But I think what it conceals is a much darker history about black Britain, and particularly during the era of slavery. And I think this portrait that happens to be in our gallery here is an opportunity to perhaps look at some areas of history that we haven't looked at before. And particularly at a time like this, with a lot of Black Lives Matter protests, with a lot of thinking about Britishness, post Brexit and coming to terms I think with some of the more difficult aspects of our past in terms of colonisation and slavery.

Laura Sandy

The actual painting itself, when you look at it, when I look at it, I think there's a kind of gaze, a challenge there. But also, it's like someone's about to speak to you and tell you a story. And that story is one that in some ways confronts our national history of identity with colonialism and slavery. I think it's also challenging in many ways, because the subject of the picture is dressed in European or English fashion. The same with their hairstyle, but yet at the same time is clearly of African descent and an African. I think some people find the notion to be tied to one's roots and to be part of the slave trade, one maybe should reject that European imprint. And I think the flip side of that, is that it means that we can tell a really, really interesting story about the dualness that is imprinted on those who are involved in the slave trade and those who have a history of African descent.

Sue Giles

In Bristol since the 1990s, we've been organizing exhibitions and working with the community. Looking at Bristol's role in the transatlantic slave trade. Exeter wasn't as heavily involved as Bristol was, but there were probably people in Exeter who were investing via other routes because we know people in Bath were investing through Bristol ships. The money got spent in and around the area as people moved out. People with compensation money, for example, or profits from slavery; they might have moved into a big house in the country. So people would be moving out of Bristol into the Southwest. There were certainly black servants, enslaved people, servants

in Exeter with the big families. There's at least one ship that actually left Exeter and did a triangular voyage, it wasn't I think as profitable as the Exeter owners hoped. So they never repeated the experiment. But we do know from all the shipping information that there was at least one voyage financed out of Exeter.

Laura Sandy

I think that the portrait being here in Devon is really, really brilliant. I think it gives people around the country the opportunity to visit Devon as a place and remember that there is a heritage that's related to slavery, the slave trade but also a multicultural history here, a diverse history. I also think that having portraits outside of the main cities that we associate with the slave trade like London, Bristol, Liverpool, of course, is really, really important for educational purposes, for people understanding their local history and their part in the development of British history which is of course, black history itself, is British history.

Samenua Seshier

So is it Sancho? Is it Equiano? Do I have an opinion on the fact that they can only think of two men when there were hundreds here, possibly thousands.

Nahem Shoa

It's been given attributions to Equiano and Sancho. But both attributions are completely false. I would love them to be one of those guys because they're so important, Sancho was the

first British black man to vote in this country. It's part of British history that we don't know about. In London at this period, there were 20,000 black people living there. Wouldn't it be interesting to know how this portrait was painted of him. He's one of these people.

Julien Parsons

It was pretty early on decided that the painting wasn't actually painted by Reynolds at all. And then in the 1960s, a curator from the British Museum, William fag, identified the sitter as Equiano. And from that date, really, the painting has been used on countless books, used in exhibitions as a representation of this great figure, Equiano. People looked at this painting, and they've wanted it to be Equiano and then later on in its history, the curator John Madin, wrote an article about this painting and he was arguing that it was actually Ignatius Sancho, who was another leading figure in Britain in the 18th century,

Laura Sandy

Not knowing presents us with the constant opportunity to discuss, to debate, to argue, to look further and to reach deeper into the different histories around people who could potentially have sat for that picture. I think it opens up a really, really interesting discussion that anyone can have standing here in the museum in the exhibit.

Julien Parsons

When I started at the museum in 2004, I didn't see it very often, for years, because it was almost continually on loan.

Its fame is well beyond Exeter and well beyond the Southwest. It's an international fame that this painting has.

Lucy MacKeith

People do have great attachment to this portrait. I invite you all to have your own relationship with this portrait because that's what's important in a museum, is the relationship between the visitor and the thing we're looking at, in this case, the portrait of what's known as the Unknown African.

Joy Gregory

I actually quite like the term Portrait of an African. It talks of an African presence here, in England, in the UK, in Europe. And it talks about a presence from a time which is not now, not since the 1950s but actually from the 1700s.

Samenua Seshier

I think the painting should be called 'You' because we are all Africans.

Chukumeka Maxwell

One of the biggest illusions on this planet is that we're a minority. We're not a minority. We're a majority in the world, but in reality, we are just part of one glorious humanity. So I want people to see that there are many manifestations of being black just like there are for every other culture.

Joy Gregory

I mean, I think it's important that people have an understanding that African people did, they did, and still do, live and work around the whole country and not just within those metropolitan centres.

Peter Braithwaite

It's a way of seeing a black life when it's incredibly hard to find representations, especially from that period of black people in Britain and Europe. So, having that is like a nugget, a glimpse into another world. It places me and my story more firmly into the grand scheme of things.

Nahem Shoa

In a way, this is like the Mona Lisa of black portraiture in Britain. We don't know who the Mona Lisa exactly is. There's many interpretations - she's this person's wife or she's not. This is like one of those mysteries and it has that same mysterious presence this painting.

Joanna Traynor

Who is this man who travels the world looking out of his frame, a man with fame and no name. The African from that slab of land like a giant tongue, holding millions of tongues, a great tongue of promise cut-off, split from, your uncivilized civilization. Even without a name, we will remember them. We must, we must remember them.

Film by Michael Jenkins, 8th Sense Media

Credits:

- Louisa Adjoa Parker - Writer and poet
- Peter Brathwaite - Opera singer and BBC Broadcaster
- Sue Giles - Former Senior Curator of World Cultures, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery
- Joy Gregory - Artist
- Lucy MacKeith - Former RAMM Education Officer, Researcher and Presenter on Black History in Devon
- Chukumeka Maxwell BSc - Founder of Action to Prevent Suicide CIC and Founder of Goodwill in Action to Prevent Suicide CIO
- Dr Julien Parsons - Senior Collections Officer and Content Lead, RAMM
- Professor Melissa Percival - Associate Dean of Global Humanities and Professor of French, Art History and Visual Culture, University of Exeter
- Dr Laura Sandy - Senior Lecturer in the History of Slavery, Department of History, University of Liverpool and Director of the Centre for the Study of International Slavery (CSIS)
- Samenua Seshier - Founder and Director of Museum of Colour; Trainer, coach and consultant
- Nahem Shoa – Artist
- Joanna Traynor – Writer