

Black People in British Art

18th – 20th century collections in
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Information for teachers

Black People in British Art

There are several paintings in the permanent collection in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery which either feature black people or were produced by black artists.

They span the period from the 19th century to late 20th century.

The following notes give teachers more detailed information on these works.

Please note: paintings in the permanent collection are not always on display! Please ring before your visit to check.

Schools Liaison 0121 303 3890

The Piazza of St Mark's, Venice 1883

William Logsdail



The painting captures the bustle and colour of St Mark's square in the late 19th Century. Fashionable Venetians relax at a pavement café, a band plays and gondoliers in their striped shirts mingle with strolling tourists and locals.

Logsdail portrays a vibrant city in all its social and ethnic diversity. Many Arab, African, Asian and Oriental traders visited the great trading port of Venice throughout the centuries, including Black and Asian seamen or lascars who worked on the ships travelling between Venice and Egypt.

In the centre, with a pet monkey are two entertainers who might have formerly been sailors.



King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid c1883
Edward Burne-Jones



The subject comes from an Elizabethan ballad used by Tennyson for a poem "The Beggar Maid" in 1842. In the ballad, Cophetua is called African, giving Burne-Jones the opportunity to contrast his dark skin with the beggar Penelophou's white limbs. Burne-Jones drew the king from a live nude model and this superb large life study is also in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery collection. Unfortunately, the model remains anonymous. According to the ballad, the king was an unlikely suitor: *"He cared not for womankind but did them all disdain"* - but fell in love at first sight with a beautiful young beggar *"all in gray/The which did cause his pain"*.

Burne-Jones described his difficulty whilst painting the girl's dress about whether *"to put on the Beggar Maid a sufficiently beggarly coat, that will not look unappetizing to King Cophetua, - that I hope has been achieved, so that she shall look as if she deserved to have it made of cloth of gold and set with pearls. I hope the king kept the old one and looked at it now and then"*

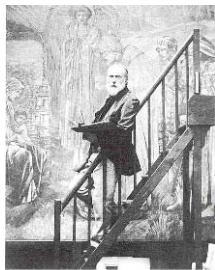
The Star of Bethlehem 1887-90

Edward Burne-Jones



In 1886, William Morris was asked by Exeter College, Oxford, to produce a tapestry for the college chapel. Edward Burne-Jones agreed to design the subject, 'Adoration of the Magi'. The specific treatment of the bible story of the three wise men derives from a medieval legend, Kings of Cologne, in which Gaspar, King of Godolie, with Melchior, King of Tarsus, and Balthazar, King of Nubia, journey to Bethlehem, and afterwards establish a church at Seville in which all three are buried after their deaths. Their bodies are later removed to Cologne, and there, a cathedral is built in their honour.

The corporation of Birmingham approached Edward Burne-Jones in 1887 to paint a major work for the new Museum and Art Gallery. In taking up the commission of £2000, he was able to propose the same Adoration subject, entitled 'The Star of Bethlehem' to be painted in watercolour.



The picture - on large sheets of paper mounted on canvas - was painted using a ladder to reach the topmost area: *"And a tiring thing it is, physically, to do,"* he wrote, *"up my steps and down, and from right to left. I have journeyed as many miles already as ever the kings travelled."*

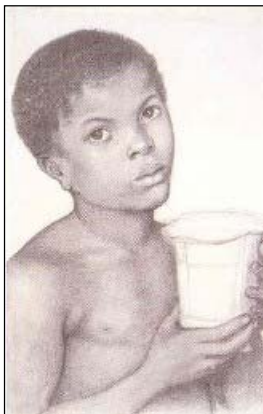
Study of Girl for The Beloved, 1865

Dante Gabriel Rossetti



'The Beloved' represents a procession in which the Bride from the Song of Solomon is advancing to meet her groom, attended by maidens. Intended as a celebration of female beauty, it is firmly Anglocentric: the Bride represents 'unsurpassed loveliness' while her attendants have darker hair and skin. In the foreground, an African child holds a golden cup of roses, signifying the Bride's fair complexion.

To the artist the work was an exercise in colour harmonies. Explaining the inclusion of the child, Rossetti wrote: *'I mean the colour of my picture to be like jewels, and the jet would be invaluable.'*



Rossetti's first model was a mixed race girl.

Her portrait was drawn in February 1865.

Shortly afterwards, the artist discovered a darker-skinned model in the form of the young boy, who was seen

at a London hotel, travelling with his 'master', and posed in Rossetti's studio in Chelsea.

He was an active lad, who preferred running and jumping and wept when made to sit still. The tears ran down his cheeks, reported Rossetti: *'the skin, as if it absorbed them as blotting paper, would look darker'*. To the artist's aunt, this suggested the boy was crying for 'his mammy', and therefore enslaved.



The work was painted during the US Civil War, when Abolitionist campaigners from America enlisted support from 'leading men' in Britain. Submerged references to slavery inform the portrayal of the child; in later memories, the artist's friend F G Stephens indeed believed that she was shown wearing a 'jewelled collar'.

Black King from tapestry cartoon for **Adoration of the Magi**
Walter Taylor



The Adoration of the Magi was designed in 1887 by Edward Burne-Jones as both a tapestry woven by William Morris for Exeter College, Oxford, and as a very large watercolour, entitled *Star of Bethlehem*, for Birmingham Corporation. Burne-Jones produced studies for the figures, including the black king Balthazar, and cartoons for the tapestry, which were photographically enlarged and followed by the weavers. Eleven copies of the *Adoration* were commissioned, the last being ordered in 1906 for a new church at Roker, near Sunderland. By this date Walter Taylor was responsible for weaving the heads in Morris & Co tapestries; he drew *The Black King*, with the other heads, by tracing from Burne-Jones' original design, colouring the study to contrast Balthazar's dark skin with his pale linen hood.

The Pipe Bearer 1856
John Frederick Lewis



Lewis spent a decade from 1841 living in Egypt in Ottoman style and gaining extensive knowledge of architecture, costumes and social customs, which he used on return to Britain for a long career as an orientalist painter. His most celebrated works depict women within the harem.

The young Nubian man is carrying a 'hookah' pipe for his employer. The setting is based on Lewis's house in Cairo, and the older man's features are probably taken from those of the artist. The younger man may be drawn from a servant in Lewis's household; his features appear in several other works by the artist.

Portrait of Joseph Sturge, c.1850-59
Unknown Artist, British School (19th century)



With its strong manufacturing base, Birmingham was well equipped to provide goods for sale in West Africa and the Caribbean. Many local businesses profited from this 'triangular' trade route; but it was just as inevitable that a city famous for non-conformity and dissent should also become a centre for the campaigns of the abolitionists.

One of the leading activists was Joseph Sturge (1793-1859). Born in 1793 in Gloucestershire, Sturge moved to Birmingham in 1822 where he soon became involved with the local Anti-Slavery Society, becoming its secretary in 1826. He quickly lost patience with the more cautious character of the Society's

London leadership, arguing instead for more public meetings and agitation of a wider kind. 'The people must emancipate the slaves,' was Sturge's argument, 'for the Government never will.'

The campaigns by the Anti-Slavery Society and other groups resulted in the 1833 Emancipation Act, which abolished slavery and replaced it with a system of apprenticeship. Visiting the Caribbean in 1836, Sturge saw first hand that little had changed, and that working conditions were as harsh as ever. On his return to England, Sturge continued to campaign against indentured labour and was instrumental in gaining its abolition in 1838.

However, this did not stop his efforts, and he continued to work on behalf of slaves in other parts of the world; in 1857 he purchased the Elberton Sugar Estate on the Caribbean island of Montserrat. The land was purchased primarily to turn the estate's production to growing limes, but also provided Sturge with the opportunity to prove that free labour was productive.

In the bottom right hand corner of this painting lies a scroll with the word 'emancipation' written clearly on it. This, coupled with the presence of a black girl on the left is a clear reference to his leading role as a campaigner against slavery.

The Ghosts of Christendom, 1990-91

Keith Piper



Birmingham-born Black artist, Keith Piper, made this artwork in 1990 as part of a bigger installation named *A Ship Called Jesus*.

On one level the work explores the relationship between the slave trade and Christianity. This relationship is full of contradictions as Christianity supported the start of the slave trade, but it was also a force for good in that it inspired slaves to eventually resist their oppressed situation.

Many slaves converted to Christianity, inspired by its idea of heaven that promised them reward for their suffering in the physical world. Tragically, many white plantation owners felt their power was threatened by the conversion of their slaves, and many Christian slaves were consequently flogged or hung.

The artwork is a computer montage (measuring 270 x 152cm) of various photographic sources including the artist's own feet and the famous illustration of a slave boat of 1808.

Printed and framed in the shape of a crucifix, the artist's feet are shown with crosses in them, like nails, giving further reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. The artwork draws parallels between this and the ill-treatment and torture of slaves as a result of their converted Christian beliefs. The depiction of chains and fire adds to the work's disturbing, unsettled atmosphere. The cheap sectioned frame intersecting the work is suggestive of a cage or cell, referring to the oppressed lives of the enslaved Africans.

Keith Piper was born in Birmingham in 1960. Having trained as an artist, Piper played a key role in the promotion of Black artists in Britain during the early 1980s. At this time there was a growing awareness of work by minority ethnic art groups and Piper curated exhibitions, organised conferences, and exhibited in a range of exhibitions that helped promote 'Black Art'. Labelled 'the angry young man of the 80s' much of Piper's artwork refers directly to Black history and culture, with social and political undertones.

Negro in Mourning, 1957

Francis Newton Souza (born 1924)



Souza was born in Goa (1924) and studied at Bombay School of Art until expelled in 1945 for his left-wing views and support of the Quit India Movement. He emigrated to England in 1949 where he became a significant but under-valued and under-represented Asian artist working in Britain during the 1950s-60s. *Negro in Mourning* is an image of isolation and alienation prompted by the artist's own experiences of living in London in 1957 when the race riots were taking place.

Souza has not stated whether this portrait is of anyone in particular. The man could be mourning the death of a friend and fellow black man during the riots. Souza has depicted a worn, vulnerable figure rather than one standing strong and defiant. The painting could be interpreted as portraying the artist's own sense of despair towards the whole issue of prejudice and discrimination in 1950s London. The following text is taken from a letter written about the painting by the artist in 1997:

NEGRO IN MOURNING

In the 1950s race riots suddenly flared up at Notting Hill Gate in London. I lived close by.... Although I wasn't involved in any unpleasantness over skin colour and have never been, prejudice is a fact of life. Being born in India I know better: the caste system, called varna in vernacular, means "colour" - the 'colour bar', in fact; and is practised in India on a vast scale, worse than apartheid was in South Africa! Moreover, the Hindu-Muslim problem - carried further even in Pakistan - will never be solved any more than there can be a solution to the Jewish - Muslim conflict! Religious prejudice, that's what it is. But the black man, the negro, has had the worst of it. In fact, it was in London that I became aware of this black-white discrimination. Much of it had to do with sex. It was dangerous for a black man, a negro, to be seen with a white woman!

The Bible speaks of God having made of one blood all nations of men, Acts. 17:26. Abraham Lincoln, in a speech, July 17, 1858, said: "All I ask for the Negro is that if you do not like him, let him alone. If God gave him but little, that little let him enjoy." But I think the most democratic pronouncement was made by Lord Acton: "The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities." The Prime Minister of India and Indian bureaucrats must place Lord Acton's statement prominently in their offices.

Apartheid in South Africa has ended. In England, foreigners are much more accepted, possibly because of the 'European Community', and coloured people have opened shops and work in stores and hospitals etc.

I painted Negro in Mourning in London when the race riots flared. My dealer, Victor Musgrave, who opened the first avant-garde art gallery in London in 1954, bought the painting...my present dealer in London has acquired the painting. I personally think Negro in Mourning is one of my best works - socialist realism maybe; Expressionism certainly! I am an expressionist painter. All great art, in my criterion, is expressionist. Moreover, Negro in Mourning is close to the bone of man because it's about the colour of skin.

Francis Newton Souza, New York October 1997

My Parents, Their Children

Lubaina Himid (born 1954)



This is a double portrait of Himid's paternal grandfather, a Lancashire publican, and her maternal grandmother in Zanzibar.

They never met in life, but are united here above their respective emblems of sawdust and sand.

Separated by geography and culture, their histories converged in the birth of their granddaughter.

Mau, Mau 1953

William Gear (1915 – 1997)

This painting was Gear's response to the Kenyan independence movement of the 1950s when the native Kikuyu fighters (Mau, Mau) were in bloody conflict with the British army and colonial settlers.

In the artist's own words, the painting '*emerged as figures in a kind of jungle, with trees, hint of axes and machetes*'.

