

# Parallel Perspectives

*Transnational curation in London 2015-16*



This collection of essays, launched on 3rd July 2017, was commissioned by the *Cultural Institute at King's College London* to capture a particular moment in London's curatorial history at the start of the 21st century. It considers the challenges and opportunities inherent in national cultural organisations undertaking exhibitions which seek to address multiple histories and identities in today's global London, and celebrates the successes and fascinating new insights gained through the process. The project was led by **Dr Gus Casely-Hayford** (*Curator, Cultural Historian and Cultural Fellow at King's*) with support from **Dr Ruth Craggs** (*Lecturer, Department of Geography*). The collection was edited by **Professor Mark W Turner** (*Professor of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature at King's*) and **Katherine Bond** (*Director, Cultural Institute at King's*).

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# Foreword

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London is an extraordinary place. Inventive, cosmopolitan, connected, defiant, wry, dynamic, enterprising, complex and infuriating – a playground with limitless potential. But London is only as good as its people and their ideas. We certainly have the people – there are over 300 languages spoken here every day – a rich and unrivalled pool of talent. Our diversity and openness is central to our success as a global city. London is a powerful common ground. Wherever we come from we are all ‘Londoners’. London’s museums and galleries reflect this journey, they are filled to the brim with treasures and artefacts documenting our story, but what can we learn from this? What new conversations and perspectives can museums stimulate? How can collections best interpret the past, remain relevant, point to a better future?

This group of essays from leading academics and commentators reveals how different exhibitions are grappling with these questions and presenting London’s complex histories in fresh ways. The British Library, Tate Britain and the V&A are cultural powerhouses, and as such have an important role to play in this city. They can set new paradigms, reframe narratives and create the space for difficult conversations.

For centuries London has welcomed artists, performers, writers, musicians, poets and designers from all corners of the globe. They have shaped the authentic story of this city, with their ideas, their curiosity and even their rebellion. So London must remain open to people and ideas. This also means protecting and celebrating the creative process itself as a vital force in this city. The creative process is the thing that propels us forward, it brings new thinking and innovation, it transforms places and helps us all to get closer to realising our potential. And I’d argue, we need it now more than ever.



# Introduction

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After spending some time with Jean-Michel Basquiat, the art dealer Fred Hoffman mused that artists are a very special breed, that at their best they have a particular ‘innate capacity to function as something like an oracle distilling perceptions of the outside world down to their essence and, in turn, projecting them outward through creative acts.’<sup>1</sup> Some twenty years earlier, Jacques Lacan had made similar observations, but he went even further, suggesting that artists did not simply distill and reflect what they see around them, but that they possess a particular kind of foresight. In his 1964 seminar lectures, Lacan argued that much of the most interesting artistic output is not only reflective of the cultural context into which it is born, but is also an effective bellwether of incipient trends and thinking. He felt that *great art* can operate as a kind of societal subconscious that might be read and mined, offering glimpses of our collective motivations, giving access to subliminal cultural mechanics and hinting at possible futures. What is true of *great art* might also be true of the very best curation. Truly insightful curatorial practice does more than just observe and capture patterns. Thoughtful curation can tell us something meaningful and useful about ourselves; perhaps even help us negotiate societal anxieties and capture the present in powerful ways. One of the many attractive things about this collection’s assessment of the outcomes of artistic and curatorial practice is that it gives culture a useful framework through which we might measure its impacts. Even before we read Lacan, we can suppose that this view is intuited by many art lovers to be correct: the notion that between the classic intrinsic and extrinsic values accredited to culture there is a third

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1 Fred Hoffman, ‘The Defining Years: Notes on Five Key Works’, in Basquiat, ed. Marc Mayer (New York: Merrell, 2005), pp. 129-139.

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way of making sense of the worth of great cultural practice – as a kind of multi-dimensional lens, a mechanism for understanding who we are, and who we might be.

The unusual coinciding of three major curatorial initiatives at three national institutions in 2015-16 – the Victoria & Albert Museum’s

*India Festival*, Tate Britain’s *Artist and Empire* exhibition and the British Library’s *West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song* exhibition – together offered an insight into identity and Britain’s imperial past that seemed more than chance. It appeared that something interesting and worthy of investigation might be happening, and that these initiatives might be indicative of wider cultural shifts beyond these particular cultural institutions.

The UK has a deep, rich history of museum specialists working diligently to ensure issues of culture, empire and identity remain on the agenda. Whilst this is not the first time that national museums have taken on the challenge of dealing with this subject, there seemed to be an ambient acknowledgement that 2015-16 represented something different institutionally, culturally and politically. Although these projects were primarily focused on Britain’s imperial past, there seemed to be a latent aspiration that they might each tell us something new and important about our contemporary selves.

Over its two-hundred-and-fifty-year history, the development of the British state-sponsored arts sector has seemed to shadow the demands of Britain’s foreign policy. The British Museum and the Royal Academy came into being at the height of the Enlightenment with the burgeoning of British imperial ambition. With the expansion and consolidation of the nation’s empire in the mid-nineteenth century, the suite of national museums expanded across South Kensington and Trafalgar Square. These new institutions did not just reflect Britain’s empire and place within it, they contextualised and rationalised the programme of expansion for a domestic audience. In the post-war period of decolonisation, the ICA, the Arnolfini, Ikon and the Hayward Gallery were not only key in helping the British population consider the country’s new place in the world, but also how the world might now find a place in a renewed Britain. Each wave of museological development was reflective of the ambient mood

and, very occasionally, part of a concert of trusted triggers that galvanised and catalysed public opinion. To some extent the legacy of empire has continued to dominate these institutions and the sector. Whilst the cultural sector has usually reflected wider societal interests and anxieties, there continue to be times when the arts do not simply follow or reflect; there are moments instead when museums truly catalyse, lead and dynamically interrogate wider society.

As the essays in this collection make clear, the problem/issue/question of empire remains very present in twenty-first century Britain. Its legacies continue to pervade so much of the country's cultural activity. And yet, unlike other nations that are similarly burdened by a colonial history, Britain has not really consciously or constructively confronted this chapter of its history. It has never formally sought to offer an official apology for its imperial projects, or instigated a state-sponsored investigation of its actions. It has not facilitated a process of reconciliation or offered compensation for colonialism or its imperial wars. Nor has it sought to return war plunder, to posthumously expunge the records of those who were criminalised for their participation in struggles for freedom, to truly acknowledge the contribution of peoples from its former colonies to its present prosperity and security, to offer reparations for slavery or examine the ongoing legacies of colonialism for its ex-colonies and their neighbours. And those legacies have unquestionably left a mark, an uncomfortable and complex sphere of unresolved issues that hamstring curatorial approaches of state-sponsored museums and frequently compel them to engage in a complex intellectual choreography to avoid addressing these difficult and unresolved issues directly. This is a strange area of dissonance for a broadly liberal sector that on the whole has aspired to be perceived as living up to its responsibilities to deliver to diverse audiences. British museums have often sought to unite us. They have been the excavators of a collective narrative – collators, curators, custodians of shared dreams; they have often told stories that have made sense of changing communities and have offered up narratives that have helped broker cohesion and built pride; at times they have helped us digest difficult stories and deliver communal catharsis and even,

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very occasionally, national absolution. But for the most part, they have continued to speak to and for a privileged minority, with the result that difficult questions around race and diversity pervade.

Today Britain's museums and galleries attract more than 120 million visitors a year and this figure has grown exponentially over the last 20 years. Since the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) was instituted in the early 1990s, the British state-sponsored cultural sector has been utterly transformed. It is now the most successful national cultural sector in Europe. The British Museum, the country's most visited single-site museum, has seen visitor numbers grow from 4.8 million a year in 2009 to more than 6.7 million today. It is a resounding success story. And to further contextualise this success, the sector has achieved this growth as the proportion of government grant has declined, as audience expectation has heightened, and as museum redevelopment has placed unprecedented pressure upon revenue. These pressures have forced a sector-wide re-allocation of resources: development and partnerships have, understandably, been widely prioritised, whilst some of the more exploratory work in curation, research and audience development has received less institutional support. The sector has, by necessity, become more risk averse, more business-minded, more focused on communications and more oriented towards 'blockbuster' exhibitions. The aggregated impact of these changes has been significant. Museums have felt forced to prioritise retail and commercial opportunities and to focus upon physical infrastructure and the user experience as every area of public-facing delivery has been upgraded. Some of the hidden costs of this approach are challenging. Whilst resource intensive areas, such as internationally-focused curation and diversity, receive more attention now than two

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decades ago, they have not received sufficient funding to deliver at the level that corporate plans advocate. This is a strange and very obvious area of ongoing under-delivery for a broadly effective and sensitive sector. In mitigation, it should be understood that as quickly as museums have changed, beyond the sector, the surrounding context has changed even more profoundly.



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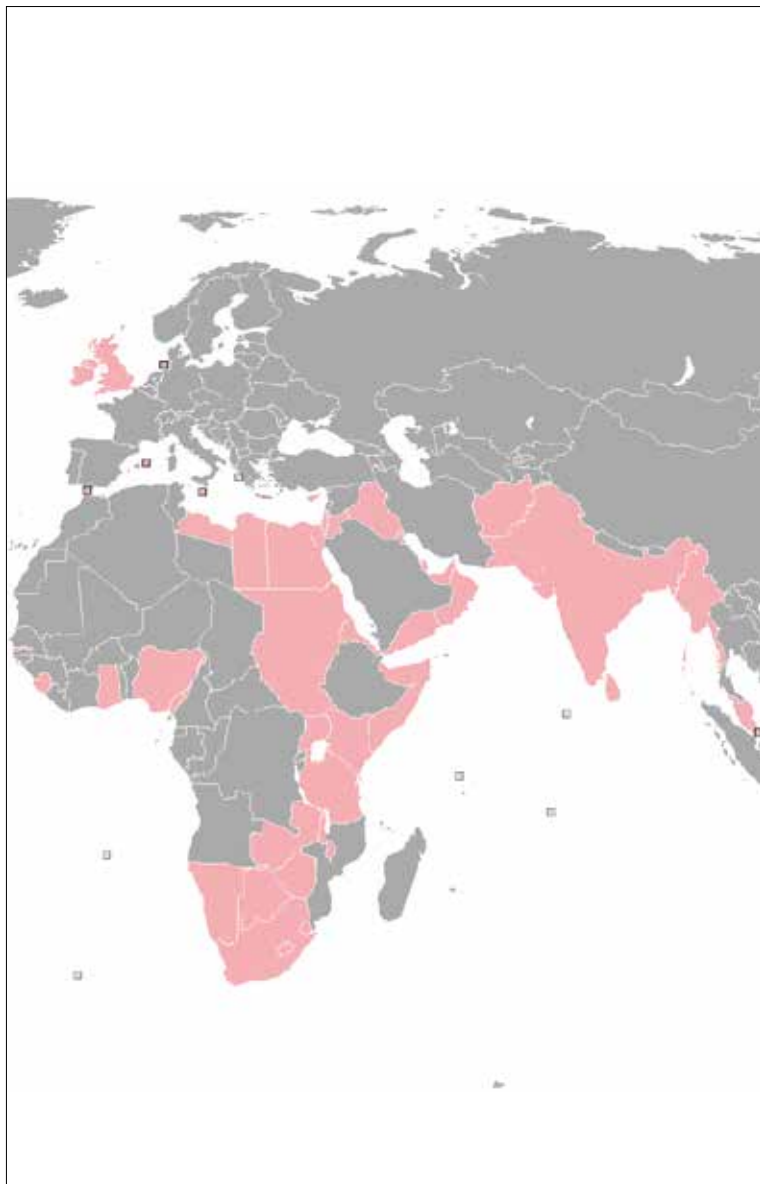
Demographically, technologically, in the cultural fluidity of audiences and the demands of partners, the shifts in audience profile and consumption patterns have been profound. Britain has changed – demographically and culturally. The profile of the populations in many of its cities has transformed, with immigrants and ethnic minority communities now constituting

the majority in a number of major conurbations. So, the gallery-visitor is changing. The presumptions once made about the perspective of the visitor have had to be reconsidered – and curators now feel that they have permission to deal more robustly with challenging issues connected to ethnic diversity, migration and colonialism.

The cultural sector has fought to respond, but the examples of sustained successful delivery in this area remain rare. Beacon-projects that have worked are so exceptional that learning has been difficult to institutionalise. For both government and commercial sponsors, evaluation has become an obsession. The art sector struggles with how it measures what it does, how it quantifies its worth, how it evaluates progress and against what matrices it gauges its success. It has had a recurrent debate about the relative merits of extrinsic quantifications and intrinsic qualitative measures of success – about empirically quantifiable assessments and the inherent aesthetic valuations of art. Most institutions have tried not to favour one or the other, but to deliver programming that is qualitatively appropriate as well as being popular. Such an approach has encouraged great 'Blue Riband' programming that attracts audiences, secures funding and speaks to the arts' heartland. Yet although it has so often given core audiences what they want, it has usually done so at the cost of risk, diversity and innovation.

So whilst there has been an increasing need to address diversity, international practice and issues that surround the legacies of empire, there have usually been easier, more profitable programming choices to make. It is therefore all the more important to celebrate the bravery of curators in pushing institutions and vital to acknowledge the foresight of museums in working against traditional foci and immediate

commercial interests to deliver complex, demanding programmes that focus on questions of empire, race and migration. Often the challenging responses to these exhibitions from partners, press and the public may not feel like commensurate reward for the hard work, particular risks and the exceptional resource provision needed for their delivery. Most museums do not have the facilities to accommodate or capture public anxiety, anger or unhappiness, which can be natural outcomes of this type of work. And in the absence of an institutional conduit through which to absorb ambient distress, curators have had to shoulder some of that angst, whether directed from within or beyond the museum. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the substantive difficulties of delivering this kind of practice, we should also make sure that we focus upon the benefits. Beyond the opportunities to build new relationships with neglected audiences and communities, beyond the creation of platforms for the development of new business and sponsorship relationships, and in addition to the telling of truths that need to be told, there is the huge curatorial benefit of beginning to address the neglect of the creative practices of vast areas of the world. There is also audience-focused benefit of hopefully setting up programming patterns that will define the future, as well as the formidable benefit of the organisational catharsis that comes from doing the right thing.



**A crop of a world map showing the extent of the British Empire in 1886. British territories coloured in pink (2016)**



# West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song



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**The British Library | 16 October 2015 – 16 February 2016**

*Curated by Dr Marion Wallace (Curator of African Collections, British Library)  
& Dr Janet Topp Fargion (Curator of World and Traditional Music, British Library)*

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## CONTEXTS

London, 15 October 2015, and something unusual is happening at the British Library. The reading rooms have closed early and bright flags inscribed with Adinkra symbols drape down from the first floor mezzanine towards the foyer. To the right is a stage where highlife music will be performed towards the end of the evening; to the left is a bar where alongside the traditional drinks and finger food of a British buffet are bottles of palm wine imported from Ghana. The crowd – let's be refreshingly honest – is not the typical British Library crowd. Why all the fuss? It is the official opening of the British Library's *West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song* exhibition and one of Britain's most significant cultural institutions has been given over to West Africa for the evening.

This is not something that happens every day. It's a measure of the gap that exists between realities and representations that it feels like a major breakthrough to have a London exhibition dedicated not to 'Africa' but to West Africa instead. Previous major exhibitions in the capital have tended to look at 'African art' or 'African history', as if the continent is some generic place where there is no social or cultural differentiation.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the British Library's exhibition and its recognition of the

<sup>2</sup> Eg the Royal Academy, *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (1995); the Victoria & Albert Museum, *Africa: Exploring Hidden Histories* (2012-13).

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cultural cohesiveness of this major world region and the facets that make it distinctive, seem as if it might offer a step forward in the way in which public discourse and British institutions represent ‘Africa’.

There is certainly a dire need for this kind of step in the right direction. When it comes to public

exhibitions, the question of discourse and perception is especially acute. On one hand, the history of art relates to the history of any product or activity made in visual form for aesthetic or communicative purposes, ordinarily expressing worldviews, ideas and/or the emotions of an era. And yet on the other, with ‘art’ heavily intertwined with expressing global views and philosophies concerning societal issues, the curating of exhibitions has always proved to be a contentious place for diversity, where, moreover, ideas of ‘universality’ and ‘the canon’ have privileged a Western aesthetic and history of artistic production.

These tendencies have meant that over time ‘art’ has been catalogued in various ways, from the older distinction between liberal arts and mechanical arts, to the modern understanding of fine arts and applied arts. These recent changes have also altered the ways in which curating ‘art’ and/or ‘culture’ is viewed, as a result of the ways in which society conceptualises the relationship between artist and audience, ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’. The transfer of concepts derived from capitalist consumption and production to every aspect of the cultural endeavour means that the ways in which diverse histories are represented encompass an ever wider body of visual media, from the traditional museum spaces such as the British Library to more innovative forms. But how do those spaces encompass the growing diversity of society, with different experiences and approaches to culture and history? How do different voices get heard, and what are the processes of institutional power which both enable and stifle these voices? These are the key questions at the heart of how curators can develop major new exhibitions representing the cultures of the world in a transnational, multi-cultural city such as London is today.



**Treasure box, *forowa* in Asante, of sheet brass with repoussé decoration, mounted on a four-wheeled stand resembling a carriage, made around 1900; in the collections of the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum (1935.56.12)**

Already, the way in which this society views art is changing. In the twenty-first century film, television and advertising lead the way in regard to reach and industry in public aesthetic perception. However, the question of artistic representation of history and culture has been especially acute here, and these media have been targeted by regulators and distinguished personalities for not reflecting British diversity. Sir Lenny Henry again challenged major broadcasters at the 2015 BAFTA awards, demanding more radical change, dismissing the idea of quotas and making the case for Ofcom to take responsibility for an industry-wide definition of what diversity means.<sup>3</sup> The UK TV industry has been legally forced into employing talent from a diverse background, with the

<sup>3</sup> The lecture can be heard here: <https://soundcloud.com/bafta/diversity-in-television-lenny-henry-18-months-on>. See also the Guardian report on this lecture: <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2015/nov/18/lenny-henry-reiterates-his-call-for-a-sea-change-on-diversity>.



hope that in the following 18 months more shows reflect the UK's diverse communities.<sup>4</sup> The question of representation has also filtered into the political domain with then Prime Minister David Cameron demanding more diverse MPs from his whitewashed party, with little as yet being achieved.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of all these crucial dynamics, it is important to reflect on the circumstances that brought the *West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song* exhibition into being, and also on how the curating of the exhibition helps us to think about the violence of empire and its legacies in London in the early twenty-first century. The exhibition is defiantly not about imperialism – in spite of one complaint received by the curators, there is certainly no coverage of explorers such as Mungo Park and his ilk – yet at the same time the conditions that allow an institution such as the British Library to host this sort of exhibition emerge from imperialism. *West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song* challenged public and mass media stereotypes by focusing on the historical depths and intricacies of the region's cultural frameworks; in also laying bare and giving voice to many of the problems around ongoing performances of institutional power, it thereby provides a welcome opportunity to consider the legacy of imperial inequalities and their representation.

### PREPARING THE EXHIBITION

The willingness of the British Library to enter into this debate is to be applauded. In spite of the heavy rhetoric, the sense is often given that the importance of a reflective diversity within major public institutions is only revisited by said institutions when their equality charters are under scrutiny. The impression is of an immediate surface level change in the first instance but the reinforcing of the status quo in the rapidly following-up second instance. Questions of legacy and processes of institutional change are parked decidedly on the kerbside. And thus, over time, these deep-rooted diversity issues have remained unresolved. Questions of inequalities in power of representation – which an exhibition such as *West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song* is bound to provoke – are thus welcome challenges to embedded modes of thinking that are decades old and offer

4 <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/commission-announces-new-project-increase-diversity-television-sector>.

5 <http://www.itv.com/news/update/2015-10-07/david-cameron-makes-a-point-about-diversity/>.



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few ways for British society to come to terms with the ways in which it is changing.

All the same, when the announcement of this exhibition was made, an initial response among some in the indigenous African and Diasporian communities was anxiety. Would

this be yet another project about Africans that would be eroticised, misunderstood or dumbed down? With the Barbican's ghastly *Exhibit B*, the 'human zoo' of 2014 leaving a grotesque aftertaste, the British Library team really had little room for error and had to ensure that their attempts were well researched and carefully managed.<sup>6</sup> One of the things that was most disturbing about the Barbican fiasco was the apparent failure of the curators and artist to understand the sense of anger and distress that the exhibition had caused; this alone revealed the chasm that can so often exist between the external desire to produce an objectified narrative of a historical wrong and the need for such narrative to be reflective also of the multiple complexities for those wronged by the past experience. The relationship between the curatorial team, the public consultation and the exhibition itself would therefore be fundamental to the success or failure of *West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song*. The curatorial level of expertise and understanding of these diverse worlds would be the hinge of the whole event.

The curatorial team that was chosen was 'in-house', and consisted of Marion Wallace, Head of the Africa Collections, and Janet Topp-Fargion, Curator of World and Traditional Music. An advisory board was appointed whose chair was the well-known historian and curator Dr Gus Casely-Hayford. This was important, since where black narratives are undertaken by white professionals, they often result in misrepresentation and exploitation, as in *Exhibit B*, the 'human zoo'. Alternatively, opposing artefacts are bunched together with no real connection between them other than having been produced in the same continent. The subtext of such a show would be that there was no acknowledgement of the expert craftsmanship involved, the significant

<sup>6</sup> See the New York Times report: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/28/opinion/t-o-molefe-racism-and-the-barbicans-exhibit-b.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/28/opinion/t-o-molefe-racism-and-the-barbicans-exhibit-b.html?_r=0).



**Ghanaian Methodist Church skirt and blouse, from a set comprising skirt, blouse and baby-carrier (1961). Held by The British Museum**

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societal and cultural importance the pieces represent or the pivotal position that these pieces held in shaping modern European art – through, for instance, the influence of the Benin bronzes on the emergence of Cubism in the early twentieth century. Thus by appointing an advisory board very well represented by scholars,

community groups and thinkers from the representative communities, the curatorial team hoped to avoid such a mistake.

In putting the exhibition together, the British Library wanted to go beyond this paradigm and to showcase how sophisticated and varied the cultures of West Africa truly are. A slew of roundtable discussions with the advisory board meant that the quality and information of the exhibition was prudently planned and agreed before the loans and build began. The Royal African Association undertook evaluations and market research with selected groups on behalf of the British Library concerning West African artists and their work. These results helped to determine which pieces were selected and the sections they would appear in. When the results came in, evaluations showed that a large majority of the visitors thought an exhibition of this ilk was relevant to them.

By the time the exhibition was in the final stages of preparation, in the summer of 2015, it had a lot to live up to. Preceding it in the Library's exhibition space was the hugely anticipated and successful exhibition on the Magna Carta. With a much lower anticipated visitor count, *West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song* received a lower marketing spend. It targeted the educated communities and those of West African heritage. The focus of the exhibition was to be the development of a narrative that discussed historical complexities and cultural strength, which would be achieved through five sections. i) Building, using words, symbols and music to build society. ii) Spirit, uncovering the various religions in West Africa. iii) Crossings, a small section on the transatlantic slave trade, cultural transfer and material on the Notting Hill Carnival. iv) Speaking Out, late nineteenth century post-colonial posters, speeches and textiles advocating state independence. v) Story Now, post-colonial literature and poetry showing the rise of West African consciousness. This was a hugely

ambitious enterprise. There were some concerns that an excessive focus on Nigerian artefacts might create divisions, even though one in five Africans is Nigerian; however, the curators addressed this by ensuring that there were exhibits relating to every single country in the region.

## THE EXHIBITION

Spanning two thousand years, one thousand languages and every West African country from The Gambia to Cameroon, the exhibition was emboldening and bursting with wordplay, innovation and unique materials. Through the expert use of novels, music, masks and pamphlets, a real sense of complexity and invention destroyed the primitive, childlike and simplistic myths of the region. The result challenged western preconceptions regarding the ‘developing world’ and served as an enlightening experience for all involved. The indigenous marvel in the fact that their culture helped to inspire some of the great artists that would follow: Picasso, Van Gogh, Henri Matisse and the like. For those that do not have heritage from West Africa, the feeling of shared human achievement and discovery is huge. This is a region that for 16-30-year-olds residing in the UK has become synonymous with starving, fly-infested and bloated-bellied babies; to show it instead as a pioneering region in the history of the world helps to muzzle that unhelpful narrative and leads to vital questions.

One of the prime ways in which the exhibition challenged the stereotypes is in the historicising of the complexity of West African cultures. The first section, on ‘Empires’, introduced the visitor to the diversity of West African empires, with coverage of Asante, Ife, Mali and Oyo among others. There were some striking objects on display, including Adinkra scripts, gold weights from Asante and reproductions of the 1375 Catalan Atlas (produced in Majorca) depicting Mansa Musa, the emperor of Mali, holding a gold nugget. A welcome sense of the diversity of West African scripts was provided by reproductions of Arabic, Banum and Vai scripts, and also of the diversity of languages, by Sigismund Koelle’s nineteenth-century *Polyglotta Africana*.

As the exhibition showed, there is therefore a very deep and diverse oral and written historical culture in West Africa. The early engraving of Timbuktu was sublime and paid tribute to the revolutionary city located in the wealthy Malian Empire. From the eleventh century, Timbuktu developed into a centre of education and business, especially under the

reign of Mansa Musa (ruled 1312-37). In 1324, Musa pilgrimaged to Mecca, trailing vast convoys of gold behind him. He returned to Mali and distributed his wealth, bringing back Muslim scholars and architects. By the twelfth century, Timbuktu became a distinguished hub of Islamic study and housed a university with three established branches and more than a hundred and fifty Quranic schools. The exhibition had some fascinating products of this culture, with a 'saddlebag Qu'ran' and many Arabic texts that testify to the longevity and diversity of the cultures in Sahelian West Africa.

This historicisation of West African orature and writing continued throughout. The section on 'Speaking Out' looked at the texts of important early twentieth-century novelists such as J E Casely-Hayford, the musical-political fire of Fela Kuti and the speeches of key anticolonial figures such as Amílcar Cabral and Kwame Nkrumah. It offered a riveting and fearless celebration of the creative opposition towards the colonial era. Newspaper cuttings, posters, pamphlets and audio Presidential declarations captured the urgency of postcolonial independence battles. Politics never looked so vibrant, with colourful cloths used as a tool of political mobilisation and printed with Senegal's President Senghor's face draped in the exhibit cases. Fela Kuti (1935-97), one of West Africa's most renowned musical activists, was featured heavily. Kuti invented a new musical style, Afrobeats – a musical style that has been used by popular international artists in record-breaking, chart-topping singles, and has appeared on the UK's hit show The X Factor.

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Most politically challenging for the curators was the preceding section on 'Crossings', which looked at the writings of West Africans protesting against the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century, and also some of the cultural representations of that protest and its legacy. Here the texts of Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho sat alongside the ekonting, the Senegambian musical instrument brought by enslaved Africans in their 'middle

passage', and revived by them and their descendants in the New World. The ekonting is a stringed instrument made by the Jola people of Senegambia, which, with its long neck and broad base, bears striking resemblance to the American banjo in construction and playing style, with its movable bridge and four strings. However, where the banjo dates to the nineteenth century, according to the Jola ethnomusicologist Daniel Laeomahuma Jatta, the ekonting dates back to the seventeenth century at least, with the English gold trader Richard Jobson making reference to it whilst journeying through the Gambian River in the 1620s. Thus with exhibits like this, the curators of the exhibition move the traditional discussion of slavery into several different directions, emphasising agency, resistance, and cultural strength as an important legacy in trans-Atlantic crossings.

### ISSUES, PAST & PRESENT

This historicisation of the complexity of West African political and cultural histories is to be welcomed. It rides the wave, too, of a growing sense that appears to be present in British institutions: that cultural and educational discourses surrounding 'Africa' are failing Britons. The new OCR A Level option, 'African Kingdoms' – developed by one of the authors of this essay – is a part of this changing ground, as was the recent Radio 4 programme *In Our Time*, which was devoted to the Mali Empire.<sup>7</sup> These are small beginnings, but it is noteworthy that they have coalesced at a similar moment; all point to the need to recognise the diverse audiences to which historical narratives and syllabi should be addressed: they reflect a changing country and a realisation that the story of what 'History' is needs to change with it.

At the same time, the need for such a rebalancing, and the way in which the British Library exhibition pointed towards this, reflects how the shadow of empire can hang over discourses that seem to have nothing to do with it. The Library's exhibition was about West Africa, not empire; and yet the need to challenge stereotypes has emerged precisely because of the cultural hubris of imperial values and the ways in which these values stifled alternative narratives for many decades, both during the life of the British Empire itself and since. In some ways, therefore, these different ventures in unpicking popular stereotypes about

7 <http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/180152-african-kingdoms-opinion-piece.pdf> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06kgggv>.

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'Africa' also reflect the unpicking of the imperial worldview – and it is therefore significant that they should coalesce together and each address the importance of revalorising West African histories. This is a reflection of London as it becomes the centre of a transnational financial empire that is no longer tied to political imperialism. But at the same time, the need to challenge stereotypes that were created by 'Empire' in the first place explains why some visitors might have wanted the

exhibition to address this question of imperial legacies more directly, even though it appears to have nothing to do with them.

Most reflective of these tensions was the section on 'Crossings'. The fact that it would be impossible to curate a major exhibition on West Africa in London without some focus on slavery is redolent of the way in which, since the Abolition movement in the UK began in the 1780s, West African history and slavery have been seen to be symbiotic. At that time, pro-slavery activists argued that the slave trade was 'saving' West Africans from the slaving wars of their continent, while abolitionists showed how the slave trade had brought untold strife and disorder to West Africa: for both, slavery was at the heart of questions of West African history and their debate related to the new directions that British imperialism would take in the nineteenth century, leading eventually to formal colonialism. And yet, West African histories are much richer than this narrow focus on slavery would suggest, something which also must be reflected in new approaches to communicating this history to a broad audience.

This focus in 'Crossings' thus spoke to the power of the British empire, its role in slavery and its abolition, and the way in which that role has been debated and conceptualised ever since. Institutional and historical inequalities grounded in empire shaped the way in which the British Library exhibition needed to address this issue in the exhibition, and also the way in which that focus was on trans-Atlantic slavery rather than,

for instance, the trade across the Sahara to North Africa. Nevertheless, what was striking was the creative way in which the curators went beyond traditional paradigms for discussing the trans-Atlantic slave trade from West Africa and its abolition. There was no focus on the traditional ‘heavies’ of the abolitionist movement, Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce; and alongside the West African writers whose works were exhibited sat more under-represented symbols of resistance and cultural strength, such as the Jola ekonting. This approach in the exhibition was in keeping with other new approaches to the historicisation of the West African past, where the OCR A Level option on ‘African Kingdoms’ also avoids a heavy focus on slavery, recognising the importance of broadening the historical understanding of the West African past.

Because of such careful retouchings of focus and emphasis, this hugely important exhibition had a strong impact on those that witnessed it. Whether it is ignored by the leading broadsheets or championed online by smaller entities, the point remains that it was a landmark showcase hosted by a quintessential British institution, which sought to offer some much needed perspective on a region that is usually bastardised; indeed the fact that some broadsheets ignored the exhibition is probably a compliment to it. Young people with heritage from Africa left with a sense of pride, similar to the Sankofa bird which was represented in the exhibition in the decorations on a Ghanaian sheet-brass box, perched majestically behind its glass casing and offering a rectangular brass version of a container. The Sankofa bird references the Akan belief ‘that the past serves as a guide for planning the future’, and similarly young people of African heritage who attended will know that they can achieve great feats in the future; that this is so unusual in a British institution speaks volumes for the need which the exhibition met.

## **ISSUES, PRESENT & FUTURE**

In conclusion, it is worth asking why all these reflections are so forcefully evoked by the exhibition. Again, why all the fuss? These questions of West African histories, slavery, and their representations are particularly significant in London today because of the ongoing need to challenge the institutional inequalities that are the legacy of the British Empire. These inequalities are raw and they are persistent, and they cut to the heart of the different ways in which the exhibition was conceived and received.





**Bele carnival costume. Designed by Ray Mahabir of Sunshine International Arts (2015)**

A good example is the issue of partnerships. One of the difficulties faced by the curators of the British Library exhibition was in developing institutional connections to a West African partner institution. Visiting a preview talk on the exhibition in June 2016, the Senegalese historian Boubakar Barry said to the curators, 'Congratulations: but I have one question, when is it coming to Dakar?' Yet owing to institutional logistics, and no doubt to questions of finance, insurance and the risk assessments that have become the go-to tool for those who want to say 'no' to something, it was not possible for the curators to co-stage the exhibition with a West African partner.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the staging of the exhibition also offers a useful chance to reflect on the ongoing institutional inequalities between the Global North and the Global South, and the way in which they can be reflected in an exhibition such as this.

The impossibility that the curators faced in developing a West African partnership for such an important endeavour is reflective of two

<sup>8</sup> Although, the night following the private view, a 'Felabration' was streamed live from Fela Kuti's home in Lagos to the British Library, which was closed to the public to host this event.

**'The imperial narratives of racial and cultural superiority give way to a sort of financial apartheid to match the era of transnational finance, where those who have capital can come and go at will, but everyone else must be kept in their place.'**

competing and contradictory impulses at the heart of modern globalisation in London. On the one hand is the desire for London to be the 'Global City' of the twenty-first century, and therefore to reflect the diversity of peoples, cultures and histories that are found here; and this is in essence designed to appeal principally to the global super-rich so that they will see their own evanescent, transnational

rootlessness reflected in the city where they park their surplus capital. On the other hand has come a growing desire for micromanaged control of the way in which this 'globalisation' is to be showcased and represented; this means that individuals often have very little power to go beyond the traditional North-South paradigms which an exhibition such as this seeks to challenge, for they have to meet external quality monitoring procedures that are embedded in such paradigms and make individual agency and alternative visions very difficult to realise in practice.

Processes of governance stem from institutions and from the Home Office, with ever-more draconian visa rules making it harder and harder to bring, for example, a West African curator into the planning of an exhibition such as this. And the consequence of all this is that any desire to challenge historical inequalities and stereotypes in an exhibition is as likely as not to be trumped by the institutional frameworks which embed both those inequalities and the historical structures that have brought them about.

Wandering about the exhibition, then, multiple feelings were likely to have been produced. It's definitely a big step forward for such an exhibition to be part of the fabric of a major British institution for four months, with large flags and awnings draped across the piazza and along Euston Road for the duration, not just on the opening night. As Gus Casely-Hayford put it, 'West Africa is part of the British Library for four months', and this itself is something to be celebrated. Moreover, one of the main achievements of the exhibition is how it displayed such in-depth research on just one region and thus respected that Africa as a whole would be too difficult to explore in one exhibition. Choosing

to focus solely on West Africa is a great starting point and with much needed dialogue regarding future African exhibitions there are hopes that Central, East, and Southern will follow; that said, planning for the legacy and its impact on communities has been slow.

Narratives about West Africa and its past do need to be reclaimed with finality from the damaging imperial and post-imperial stereotypes and this exhibition is part of a series of changes which suggest that this is beginning to happen. As Casely-Hayford states, ‘...for too long, [West Africa] has been unjustifiably overlooked, and accomplishments of its key figures have been... obscured by a long history of misunderstandings, misconceptions and prejudice.’ It is also very important that these dialogues should occur in public spaces and through public discourses; while those in the academic discipline of African Studies have long been aware of the type of narrative promoted in the British Library exhibition, it’s a sign of just how embedded wider stereotypes are that very little of this has filtered through to popular consciousness.

So, there was much here to move debate and thought in the right direction. And yet the exhibition also invited us to think about how much has changed, as well as how little. The barriers to genuine exchanges across north-south divides are getting higher and higher, as immigration procedures are made more and more difficult to navigate and European societies in general seem to be turning radically to the right. The imperial narratives of racial and cultural superiority give way to a sort of financial apartheid to match the era of transnational finance, where those who have

capital can come and go at will, but everyone else must be kept in their place. Discourses of exclusion are increasingly often mobilised through narratives of poverty and wealth, reverting to questions of class.

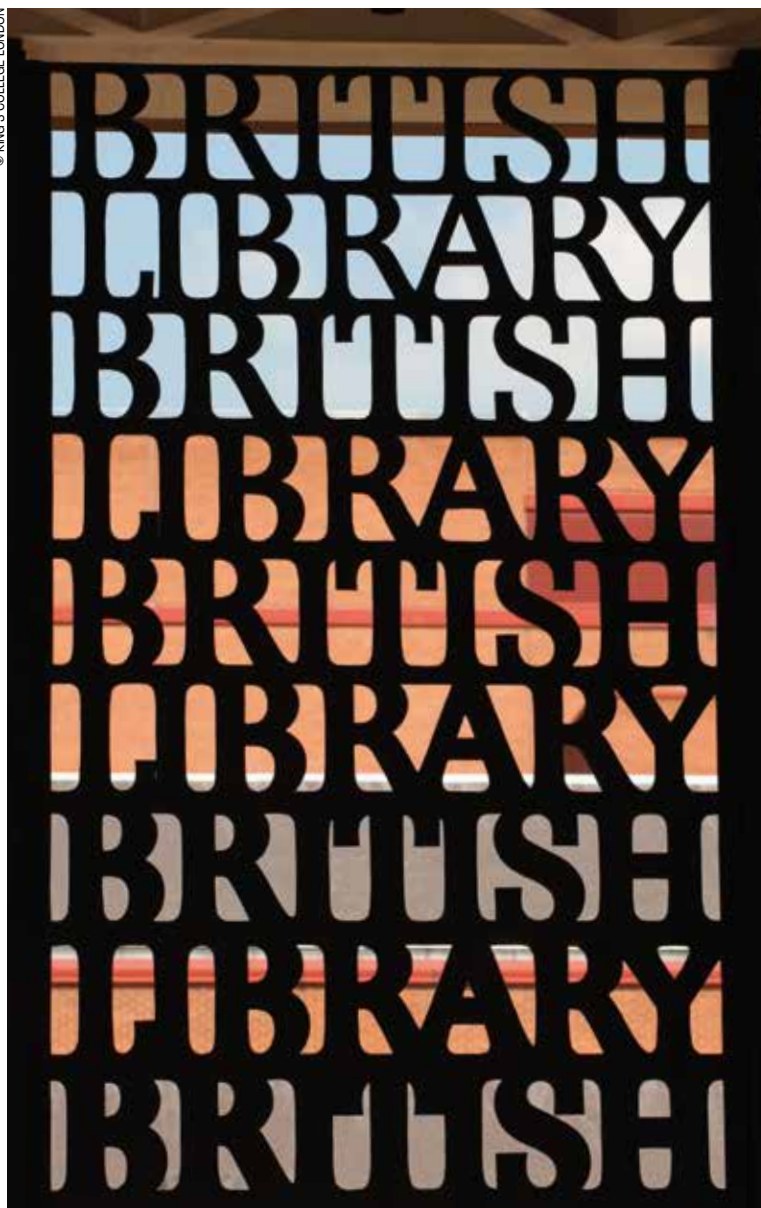
Ironically, the focus on West African cultures in the British Library exhibition thus champions a more complex understanding of culture where culture itself is ever more subordinate to the ‘bottom line’, and where marketing

**‘...a few months before the British Library show opened, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York opened a new show on Kongo religious art, taking the level of awareness of cultural specificity and historical change to an even deeper level. Such a show cannot be imagined as yet in London...’**

departments and accountants are the ultimate arbiters of value and significance. But even so, for those who recognise the importance of culture in producing a sense of self-awareness and self-consciousness, this curatorial approach should be welcomed with open arms. It is worth remembering here Amílcar Cabral's seminal essay, *National Liberation and Culture*, where he recognised the importance of cultural reappropriation to genuine deimperialisation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, with its focus on culture, the exhibition did good work. But there's still a way to go, a few months before the British Library show opened, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York opened a new show on Kongo religious art, taking the level of awareness of cultural specificity and historical change to an even deeper level.<sup>10</sup> Such a show cannot be imagined as yet in London, which shows a gap in history and discourse between Britain and the United States, which is in the end reflective of histories of empire and slavery, and of their legacies. You can take the British Empire out of West Africa but its afterlives have a curious habit of turning around and biting you in the ankle even when the empire itself is no longer thought to exist.

<sup>9</sup> Amílcar Cabral, *National Liberation and Culture*, Transition, 45 (1974): 12-17.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/press-room/exhibitions/2015/kongo>.



The gates to the British Library





# India Festival

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**India Festival | June 2015 – April 2016 | Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A)**

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**Exhibitions** *The Fabric of India* 3 October 2015–10 January 2016 | Curated by Rosemary Crill & Divia Patel *Bejewelled Treasures: The Al Thani Collection* 21 November 2015–28 March 2016 | Curated by Susan Stronge | *India and Burma: Photography of Captain Linnaeus Tripe (1852–60)* 24 June–11 October 2015  
**Small displays** *Musical Wonders of India* 16 September 2015–31 October 2016 | Curated by Nicholas Barnard *The Art of Indian Storytelling* 11 August 2015–24 January 2016 | Curated by Emma Rogers  
**Installations** *When Soak becomes Spill* by Subodh Gupta 24 October 2015–31 January 2016 | Curated by Divia Patel *Kalpataru: The Wishing Tree* by Sahil & Sarthak Design Company 10 November 2015–6 January 2016 | Curated by Divia Patel

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The V&A holds one of the most significant South Asia permanent collections in terms of range, scale, quality, and value not only in the UK but in the world. The origins of its large collection lie in the redistribution of Victorian London's India Museum in 1879, a legacy remainder of the East India Company. Its Nehru Gallery displays some of the more famed objects and treasures from India, such as Tipu's Tiger, Emperor Shah Jehan's wine cup, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's throne, and some of the finest miniature paintings, all of which attract tourists and visitors on a regular basis. In recent years the V&A has held several exhibitions and displays on a South Asia theme, for example showcasing the last works by the doyen of modern Indian art MF Hussain (2013), the blockbuster *Maharaja* exhibition (2009), and the *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms* (1999). The museum routinely undertakes outreach activities to involve the South Asian diaspora in the UK and has consistently developed strategic

partnerships with corresponding institutions in India. In other words, neither the region, nor its arts and crafts, nor indeed related audiences are uncharted territory for the V&A. Nevertheless, when the museum launched its *India Festival* in 2015 – its second ever since its inception in 1852 – it was a departure from the occasional exhibition and the permanent displays, if in terms of nothing else but scale.

Festivals are often conceptualised as events, or a series of events, that mark out the routine from the celebratory. As platforms for the performance of identities, they bring in audiences and participants, who perform cherished aspects of a society. Festivals are thus displays of both the ritual and the creative potential of societies. They are pageants of identification: of performances with a space, of a place with its people, of a people with their ritual productions. More importantly, festivals mark time, punctuate and make calendars, celebrate completions, beginnings, and renewals of temporal cycles. As temporal events, festivals impart an adhesive quality that binds the momentary, the fragmentary, and the temporary into a celebratory or commemorative whole.

The V&A's second *India Festival* commemorated 25 years of its Nehru Gallery, which houses the permanent Indian collection. The main components of this festival were two extensive exhibitions, the *Fabric of India* and *Bejewelled* and two smaller displays, *India and Burma: Photography of Captain Linnaeus Tripe (1852-60)*, and *Musical Wonders*. Other events included an installation by India's top contemporary artist Subodh Gupta, a lecture series, film screenings, occasional talks, a blog for each exhibition and other activities to engage audiences beyond their visit to the museum. In doing so, the curators of these exhibitions hoped to bring in newer audiences into the V&A, and in larger numbers than previous blockbusters with a South Asian theme (eg *Maharaja*, 2009). When it closed in January 2016, the visitor numbers for the flagship *Fabric of India* exhibition alone had surpassed 110,000 making it among the most well-attended exhibitions at the V&A.

The first *India Festival* at the V&A was a quieter affair by comparison and came about under very different circumstances not entirely dictated by the museum. In 1981, inaugurating a new chapter in cultural diplomacy, the Government of India under Indira Gandhi launched a series of 'Festivals of India' in major capitals of the world, the first of which was held in London in 1981-82.<sup>11</sup> The *Festival of India* was

<sup>11</sup> Other notable venues were Paris, 1982-83 and Moscow, 1987-88.





**The Fabric of India exhibition, V&A Museum**

launched at a time when British public culture was visibly marked by India and UK's relationship with it. Salman Rushdie won the Booker for *Midnight's Children* in 1981, *Gandhi* (dir. Richard Attenborough) was released in 1982, *Heat and Dust* (dir. James Ivory) in 1983, and *Passage to India* (dir. David Lean) in 1984. The iconic television series *The Jewel in the Crown* and *The Far Pavillions* were both screened in 1984.

If the 1980s were peak years for British interest in the India (or more precisely, for the Raj), then the Indian government launched its *Festival of India* with the exact opposite intention: to forge a postcolonial narrative of its past and present. One of the key curators of the Festival, the eminent art historian Kapila Vatsyayan wrote that the aim was 'to present India on its own terms'. In New Delhi's view, the relationship between India and the UK needed to be redefined thirty years after independence, and the *Festival of India* was an important instrument through which

**'When scores of specimens and exhibits are brought in view of visitors in 2016, many of which are on public display for the very first time, and some perhaps for the only time, is the imperial vintage of both the objects and the museum the only referent?'**

this image change was going to be delivered.<sup>12</sup> The V&A was one among five UK partner institutions that hosted a major component exhibition of the *Festival of India*. The entire Festival was an explicit exercise in cultural diplomacy and was born out of the deployment of culture as a tool of foreign policy, with one eye on popular engagement and the other firmly on Indo-UK bilateral relations. Its

agenda was created and driven significantly by governmental ministries and/or their nominees in New Delhi. Host institutions in the UK were accompanists rather than the main performers in a staging of this new era of India's place in the world. This then was the first 'India Festival' at the V&A, marking and celebrating the postcolonial turn in its bilateral relationship with the UK.

Prima facie, there seems little in common between the *Festival of India* of 1981-82 and the *India Festival* of 2015-16. And even though the curators do not draw any continuity or connection between the two, it is useful to read them side by side. Created thirty-three years later, in a very different age, the second *India Festival* is an altogether in-house production of the V&A, curated as much to showcase its own collections and its own narratives as to generate new value for these collections, measured through footfall, ticket sales, and merchandise revenues. The first *Festival of India* was explicit in its aim – not exactly to bring about a shift in meaning, but new terms for receiving Indian culture on the global stage. The overall aims of the second Festival at first appear less clear. If the first *India Festival* emerged from an (Indian) state driven agenda and addressed explicitly the strategic needs of the state, the second Festival is firmly set within the logics of the market, not that these are separable in any meaningful way now or back then. Even though the two Festivals celebrate and commemorate similar things – namely, notions of India and Indianness – as events they belong to two distinctly different registers

<sup>12</sup> K. Vatsyayan, 'India presented in its own terms,' *Museum*, vol. XXXIV, no. 3 (1982), pp. 204-213.

and punctuate two different calendars, that is, of imperium and of sovereignty.

In calling it explicitly the *second* India Festival what can one read into the V&A's urge to draw a continuity between the two? After all, this compilation of exhibitions and its related events could well have been called 'India Season', or some such. In order to gain any clarity, we may have to interpret the term 'festival' itself – away from its eventfulness and effervescence and instead pay attention to the qualities that have stayed in some sense constant across the two festivals.

Devised as a series of events, the V&A used the term 'festival' in the main as a celebration of 'India' (and not just any one aspect of its culture), as a way to signal an important milestone in its engagement with South Asian cultures. But are festivals just a series of events, or as a compendium, can they be opened up differently to reveal what else they might contain apart from their constituent events that may help bring to light a different set of relationships at play? The *Fabric of India* exhibition for example, was made up of a number of elements, for example its duration, its accompanying events and as part of a series of exhibitions. This exhibition also contained a vast number of display objects: objects on loan from other public and private collections; objects from the V&A stores and its permanent displays, new acquisitions, and; artefacts made especially for the exhibition. It was also made up of labels and descriptive texts; the physical space of the galleries; lighting and other assistive technologies. Further, it reflected the curatorial signatures of the gallerists and keepers; the distributed artistic, financial, and ethical decisions that went into the selection and creation of the displays in their final form; the budgetary and institutional policy arc under which this entire exercise was undertaken; the audiences that came to experience; the public life of the exhibition in local and global press and media. The list of such activities, persons, objects, and practices that make up the constituent elements of any exhibition is seemingly infinite and reveals the multiple forms of historical and contemporary labour that make possible any exhibition, in a specific location at a particular time.

Disaggregating the *India Festival* in a similar way and considering it as more than merely a collection of exhibitions and events opens up a space to interrogate the shift between the first Festival of the 1980s and the second Festival in 2015-16. In order to do so we need to attend to the constituent objects, collections, cataloguing techniques, curatorial



**Detail from bed or wall hanging, Gujarat, for export to Europe, c.1700, V&A**

practices, display conventions and attendant aesthetic regimes, the economic and political capital required to collect these artefacts, as well as the property forms and legal regimes that secure their acquisition, loan, and display. Furthermore, each object in turn envelops within it complex histories of production and exchange; abstract and numerical calculations that create notions of treasure; the histories of the hunts such treasures have launched; and the legal, aesthetic, and historical expertise that confers and confirms the authenticity of the value of these treasures as well as the veracity of such claims. Tracing the histories of some of the V&A's own collections and locating its place in the circuits of value-making allows us to ask new questions of old museum cabinets, and also shed new light on the Festivals.

The origins of the V&A and especially its India collections in the Great Exhibitions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were celebrations of empire. They made explicit Britain as an imperial power in and through the objects and artefacts on display, each of which signalled the overwhelming inequality of power relations. Over time these annexed and lost objects acquired different status and value, but often their journeys of uproot from their original homes to the stores and cabinets of the museum were long drawn, never less than murky, and almost always these objects played an active role in the constitution of imperial power.<sup>13</sup> The original collections from which the 2015-16 exhibitions heavily drew, are largely made up of artefacts that embellished courtly life and merchant homes in colonial India. By definition these objects were very high quality specimens of their kind. But they also belonged to individuals who would have been in some form of direct relationship of exchange (whether symmetrical or asymmetrical) with the colonial state. The movement of these objects away from their place of origin – whether through trade, or gift, or indeed annexation, was partly animated by these very relations of exchange. Thus, alongside an aesthetic signature, each object carries within it underlying power asymmetries of empire that linger to date in museum displays and cabinets.

When you disaggregate the Festivals not in terms of their events and activities but as a series of historical and contemporary relationships, between places (India and the UK), or between things and places,

**13** I describe in detail some of the contested journeys of objects that left India for the Great Exhibitions of 1851 and 1862 in a recent paper (K. Kapila, 'Opening the New Street almirah: objects of sovereignty and the properties of culture in British India.' Forthcoming.)

the celebratory appears rather less shiny. From this perspective then, as containers of cultural expression, festivals appear marked not by unalloyed human creativity and its breathtaking potential but by a whole range of acts of power on that creativity: political, economic, aesthetic. Some of these very objects might have been displayed in permanent collections and thematic exhibitions but they do not form the arc of celebration, cohesion and other qualities that are mobilised by the ritual arc of a festival.

But when scores of specimens and exhibits were brought in view of visitors in 2016, many of which were on public display for the very first time, and some perhaps for the only time, was the imperial vintage of both the objects and the museum the only referent? What if anything was post-imperial about the 2016 Festival and what kinds of attachment and identification did it summon and suture? Unlike other major galleries under review in this volume, India is neither foreign, nor distant, nor unfamiliar to the V&A. In what ways did the India it produced under the arc of the 2015-16 festival in any way depart from the India that is enshrined in its permanent collection?

The answer to some of these questions may lie in attending to the circuits of exchange and consumption in which the 2015-16 Festival was situated. The conduits of taste and power today are multiple, fast-moving, and distributed. There are new animators of commodity exchange and new sources of aesthetic value. If the first Festival was overwhelmingly committed to high culture and India's classical arts, then the *Fabric of India* for example, made a nod to the influence of Bollywood and the Indian fashion industry in the making of contemporary Indian aesthetics and tastes. The *Bejewelled* exhibition showcased the lifespan of a collection of rare gems and fine jewellery going back 400 years up to the present day. It is especially noteworthy that this formidable collection of invaluable Indian jewels that forms the basis of *Bejewelled* is neither British nor Indian but one owned by a Qatari prince Al Thani. Rare gemstones displayed in the *Bejewelled* exhibition may have once been mined and cut in India, now find themselves in the private collection of a Qatari royal, but not before they have changed a few royal hands, been repurposed for European aesthetics at a renowned Paris atelier and acquired by private dealers and auction houses. Embedded in any one object can be seen entangled histories of political power, economic frailty and prowess, and international circuits of luxury consumption.

**'In a neat reversal then, instead of merely being a receptacle for the collecting impulse of the empire, the V&A has now become the new animator of exchange, a conduit of taste, and an ultimate arbiter of value.'**

Interestingly, Al Thani began acquiring these gems and jewels after being inspired by the display of India's erstwhile royal collections at the Maharaja exhibition at the V&A in 2009. In a neat reversal then, instead of merely being a receptacle for the collecting impulse of the empire, the V&A has now become the new animator of

exchange, a conduit of taste, and an ultimate arbiter of value. It perhaps signals that today's imperium is formed by the sovereignty of capital and not of the state. Hence its locations are more diffused and distributed making it less easy to contest or even identify.

Nothing brings out the salience of the afterlives of the erstwhile empire and the premonition of newer empire(s) as powerful forces in their own right more than the response of audiences. Audiences experience and participate in festivals both as events and indeed as an important constitutive element of festivals themselves, but seldom in equal measure, or indeed in full awareness. While festival creators computed audiences in terms of footfall, or as outreach destinations, the audiences perhaps had slightly different view of why they were there. For most the experience of a visit to any of these exhibitions was likely to be catalogued as a gratifying leisure activity, an enjoyable and informative excursion, perhaps even boosting confidence in one's heritage and past.

What then was the India in the second *India Festival* of the V&A and was it any different from the ones it has displayed or indeed celebrated before? If one considers the contemporary objects that the V&A acquired or hired specifically for this festival, there is much to quibble about. All contemporary objects were firmly located away from the classical. Brash, Bollywood and bling are curious proxies for the contemporary, and certainly an odd message to convey in this day and age, not least because bling and Bollywood are not the only prevailing aesthetic in contemporary India. This was as much an assessment of contemporary Indian aesthetic practices on part of the V&A as it was a nod to make itself more accessible to its target audience for the festival, which was the Indian diaspora. In sharp contrast, the India of the first Festival, rooted as it was in the high offices of diplomacy was controlled by New Delhi and





Detail from sari designed by Neeru Kumar, Delhi, 2013, V&A Museum



Delhi's cultural czars, and thus had a very different audience (whether diasporic or not) in mind. The 1981-82 Festival thus celebrated a very statist idea of India and measured its success in political impact. The state having been replaced by the market as the chief context in the 2015-16 *India Festival*, success is an enlarged consumer base for the museum, achieved through a plethora of routes, eg tickets, merchandise, and widening the range of aesthetic practices. Whatever sells. But in making such clear choices, the V&A gives its own game away: by cleaving on to what looks like an older understanding of museum practice, where glory is always only in the past.

#### **Acknowledgements**

My sincere thanks to Katherine Bond and Professor Mark W Turner for their invitation, to Divia Patel and Rosemary Crill for their generosity with time and information, and especially to Ian Jack for his sharp editorial eye and beneficence with ideas. All shortcomings remain mine.



# Artist and Empire

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## Professor Javed Majeed

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### Tate Britain | 25 November 2015 – 10 April 2016

Curated by Dr Alison Smith (Lead Curator; British Art to 1900, Tate Britain) with Tate curators Dr David Blayney Brown (Manton Curator for British Art 1790-1850), Dr Carol Jacobi (Curator; British Art 1850-1915) and Dr Caroline Corbeau-Parsons (Assistant Curator; British Art 1850-1915)

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In 2001 a conference was held at Tate Britain called *Art and Empire*. In the book that came out of the conference, *Art and the British Empire* (2007), the editors expressed the view that histories of British art marginalised empire. They interpreted the term 'British' narrowly, only covering art produced in Britain which represented subjects particular to the British Isles. It is not surprising that the *Artist and Empire* exhibition took place in 2015-16: the term 'British' has been in crisis since devolution commenced in the UK in 1997 and after the referendum for Scottish independence in 2014. Some would argue that empire had already destabilised the term: in many ways J R Seeley's revealingly anxious work *The Expansion of England* (1883) was an exploration of how the category 'English', and by implication 'British' (like many until recently, he conflated the two), no longer had clear contours in the age of Britain's global expansion. While he famously argued that British domestic history could not and should not be divorced from its imperial history, British self-perceptions have been remarkably resilient in hiving off domestic British history from imperial expansion abroad. Seeley himself tried to safeguard 'Englishness' from what he saw as the consequences of expansion in India and the Middle East, arguing for a 'Greater Britain' in which white settler colonies like Canada and Australia 'would be to us as Kent and Cornwall'. For many years, the *cordon*

**'The convergence of internal and external crises, structurally, economically and geopolitically linked, meant that distinctions between what is internal and what is external to Britain became difficult to make at the level of everyday perception and reality.'**

*sanitaire* around the term 'British' was apparently impermeable, but this internal crisis within the British Isles opened up cracks in the edifice of Britishness into which other histories could now seep. This internal crisis dovetailed with the financial crisis of 2008 and the geopolitical interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and their consequences (themselves part of a history of earlier British interventions in those regions),

so that questions of what the term 'British' referred to became difficult to ignore. The convergence of internal and external crises, structurally, economically and geopolitically linked, meant that distinctions between what is internal and what is external to Britain became difficult to make at the level of everyday perception and reality.

This productive crisis opened up the conceptual space for the *Artist and Empire* exhibition. Whereas the editors of *Art and the British Empire* were of the view that Tate Britain kept the issue of empire away from the public, in the 2015-16 exhibition this was no longer the case. The keynote address by W J T Mitchell at the 2001 conference took as its title the insightful remark by William Blake: 'Empire follows Art, and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose'. The opening essay by Alison Smith, 'The Museum of Empire', in the wonderful catalogue accompanying the *Artist and Empire* exhibition also begins with this citation.<sup>14</sup> This link with the earlier conference shows how Tate Britain has now made good the lack of an exhibition then; but it also shows it had another aim besides the important one of shaping a new paradigm for the historiography of British art. As the role and value of the humanities and art in British education is increasingly questioned, the exhibition reminded us that art is not merely reflective of empire, it also plays a role in creating it. Art and literature shape, question and carry ideas of empire and the nation; they bear its symbolic burdens and express them too. William Blake plays an important part in contemporary English self-perceptions: his famous

<sup>14</sup> Alison Smith, 'Introduction: The Museum of Empire', in *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*, ed. Alison Smith (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), pp. 10-13



***Asafo Flags* (c.1900-1940), Fante Artists, Gold Coast, Africa**

poem, 'Jerusalem' (1808) is an unofficial English national anthem. The poem's call for a commitment to the building of another England reminds us again that poetry and art not only evoke the past and present but also shape how the future is imagined. The popular success of 'Jerusalem' today taps into a deep seated collective desire for a different kind of England to rise from the ruins of empire and the industrial modernity with which it was so closely entangled, but it is also appropriated by those who want a 'pure' England, free of the complications of migration and the geopolitical effects of global processes.

The venue of the exhibition, Tate Britain, an institution whose founding and history is linked to the colonial past via the patronage of Henry Tate and his sugar refining fortune, itself posed the question about London's role in the British Empire and in contemporary Britain. Its location reflected the accretions of empire as the building of wealth in London, its erstwhile capital; but it also reflected a long term effect of the British Empire: London's detachment from the nation state it is supposed to serve as it continues to develop its role as a world financial centre without a formal empire. As a pre-eminent world city, London's relationship with the rest of the world is analogous to its relations with the rest of Britain. *Artist and Empire* travelled to Singapore's National Gallery in October 2016, where other objects from its own collection were added. As a travelling exhibition, how *Artist and Empire* discards

and acquires art objects gives us an interesting insight into empire as a composite and unwieldy entity of interacting geographical, cultural and linguistic contexts and differing localised perceptions. Empire itself is a travelling concept which means different things in different places and times to different individuals and groups of people. And so it is fitting that the exhibition will travel elsewhere, morphing as it does into another set of objects – not completely different but not quite the same either, just as empire varies in its effects and composition from location to location, yet is always accompanied by an overall sense of a composite entity. However, a similar scenario would be raised if the exhibition travelled to Liverpool or Dundee or Bristol, cities with their own distinctive histories in the British Empire. The transnational and national cannot be so easily disentangled from each other, and this is captured in some of the art works of the exhibition in which what is British and what is outside Britain merge together in acts of creative and sometimes uneasy hybridisation.

Just as Blake's 'Jerusalem' can speak to different agendas, so the art works and artefacts in the exhibition were indicative of the ways in which the multifaceted nature of art can speak to different agendas, both imperial and anti-imperial. For some Elizabeth Butler's *The Remnants of an Army* is a representation of imperial heroism, while for others it is a critique of the debacle of imperial military adventures (see the *Daily Mail* and *Guardian* reviews of the exhibition, 21 July and 23 November 2015).<sup>15</sup> The two views are not mutually exclusive but the fact that they can appear to be is testimony to empire's divisive legacy, which the exhibition tried to overcome with its careful commentary and placing of objects. Butler's painting reflects another aspect of imperial art: while immensely popular in her day, until recently its subject matter was considered improper for high art and her painting was seen as fit for display only in regimental museums. *Artist and Empire* therefore also showed how the status of objects as art can fluctuate in accordance with the shifting historical perceptions of empire and its perceived relevance to contemporary events. In the early twenty-first century, Butler's painting speaks to us as an equivocal and complex work, articulating a carefully contained anti-imperialism in a desolate landscape dominated by British

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3170119/The-Empire-strikes-awesome-painting-bloodied-British-soldier-star-brave-new-exhibition-Empire-s-stirring-masterpieces-drive-PC-lobby-hopping-mad.html>; <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/23/artist-and-empire-review-tate-britain>

**'Artist and Empire therefore also showed how the status of objects as art can fluctuate in accordance with the shifting historical perceptions of empire and its perceived relevance to contemporary events.'**

figures, in which Afghans are conspicuous by their absence, which we cannot divorce from Britain's contemporary involvement in Afghanistan. This painting now speaks to us in new ways, helping to clarify our own perceptions and feelings about current interventions and processes.

Thus *Artist and Empire* also captured, alongside the historical changeability and vastness of empire, the fluctuations in the status of the art works that were entangled in its processes. Some fall by the way side, others re-emerge from the shadows with renewed energy to pose questions about contemporary preoccupations. Behind the question of the relationship between artist and empire lies another question: what is art? Because of the way empire meshed together different cultural realities in a range of contexts, the same object can appear as imperial ethnographic appropriation and as sacred ancestral presence, as is the case with Charles Goldie's poignant portraits of Maori warriors in the early twentieth century. On the one hand they are tinged with elegy at the dying remnants of a defeated culture, which points to the triumph of British power; on the other hand, they are viewed as treasures and manifestations of ancestral prestige and energy by Maoris. Symbols of defeat slip into expressions of recovered power, ironically preserved by the perpetrators of imperialism. Empire, then, sometimes symbolically undoes itself in its own art. Nor is the opposition between rational Englishmen and 'superstitious natives' always clear cut when it comes to art: as one imperial ethnographer, Thomas Donne (1860-1945), noted, the Maori regard for *heitiki* (neck ornaments) as objects of veneration to be passed down from generation to generation is analogous to the 'white man's' reverence for the paintings of his forefathers (see David Brown's essay in the *Artist and Empire* catalogue); while some of the military paintings on display became 'talismans' for the regiments who owned them, as lead curator Alison Smith points out in her introduction to the catalogue.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> David Brown, 'Trophies of Empire', in *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*, ed. Alison Smith (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), pp. 40-83.





Installation view of *Artist and Empire* exhibition, Tate Britain November 2015 – April 2016

The mobile and slippery nature of imperial art is beautifully captured in George Stubbs' (1724-1806) *A Cheetah and a Stag with two Indian Attendants* (c. 1764). On the one hand it is an expression of different levels of imperialism: as zoological imperialism it transfers an Indian cheetah to Britain, as a gift to the royal family. Its Indian handlers, also transported to England, are depicted in native dress and, like the cheetah, are exotic objects. (The painting was also exhibited at the *Empire of India* exhibition in 1895 at Earl's Court.) But at the same time, virtually every word in the title of this painting points to empire as an unstable reality. The picture was exhibited as *Portrait of a hunting tyger* at the Society of Artists in 1764. The stag is a hybrid recreation from the accounts given to Stubbs by its Indian handlers; it is neither an Indian *sambar* nor a British red deer but a combination of both (see David Brown's comments on the painting in his 'Trophies of Empire' essay in the *Artist and Empire* catalogue). Moreover, the painting is meant to be a recreation of the staging of a deer hunt with the cheetah by the Duke of Cumberland, but in actual fact the cheetah ran away and had to be recaptured by its



Indian handlers. Finally, in an ironic twist of history, it seems that the two Indian handlers depicted in the painting were victims of robbery in London: John Morgan and his ‘brother Mahometan’ had to give evidence at the Old Bailey in relation to this crime, but John Morgan is not conventionally a ‘Mahometan’ name. Being victims of theft in London, at the heart of the British Empire, is an ironic counterpoint to imperial ideologies about the spread of law and order under empire that became especially influential later under the notion of *Pax Britannica*.

Thus Stubbs’s painting dramatises interesting dimensions of the relationship between empire and art. Sometimes the very objects and figures represented by those art works, and even the paintings themselves, are difficult to categorise. For example, the three Indian women in Thomas Hickey’s *Three Princesses of Mysore* (1806) have been variously identified as temple prostitutes and Indian princesses, while the identity of the Maori group depicted in Hodges’ *Cascade Cove* (1775) remains unclear. In Johan Zoffany’s *Blair Family Portrait* (1786) the identity of the Indian girl is a mystery: is she an *ayah*, a companion, or in fact Blair’s illegitimate daughter? Likewise, what is the position of the *ayah* in Paton’s *In Memoriam* (1858)? The history of this last work’s composition shows how some of these paintings are fluid and changeable objects; its original composition had to be altered because of public criticism at its representation of impending sexual violence, while Brunias’ painting of *Sir William Young’s Treaty with Black Caribs* (c. 1773) has been exhibited and reformatted under a variety of titles, in which the location of the treaty’s signing as well as the party with whom it was conducted has changed. While Empire strived to identify and categorise people and objects, it also had the opposite effect and these paintings

capture this: they pose questions about the identity of some of the figures they represent, yet some have themselves been catalogued differently in the course of their lives. Furthermore, some of them are also contested objects in terms of ownership; it is not always clear to whom or where they belong. Stubbs’ *Australian Dingo* (1772) is competed over by the National

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Gallery of Australia and the National Maritime Museum in London, while other objects, such as the figurative brass plaques from Benin City in southern Nigeria, were forcibly taken from Benin by a British punitive expedition in 1897. In empire, it is not just human individuals and groups that are uprooted, objects, too, are deracinated. The question of who owns these objects is another counterpoint to imperial ideologies

which focused on how the British Empire created and stabilised property rights throughout its territories. The mobility of these objects puts into question the nature of ownership; their histories of production, acquisition and circulation is at odds with this powerful narrative of empire as securing and clarifying property rights.

Stubbs' beautifully composed painting illustrates another effect of empire as well as one of its anxieties: empire sought to make clear distinctions between British and 'native', but by bringing different cultures together it also produced cultural syntheses and mixtures that threatened to undo Britishness. In Stubbs's painting the stag is a hybrid figure that cannot be categorised; zoological imperialism gives rise to a new third animal, neither wholly Indian nor wholly British. Many of the paintings in the exhibition exemplify the hybridising effects of empire, with the artists combining and experimenting with techniques of composition from different artistic traditions. These include the tobacco pipe depicting a paddle-wheel steamer by a Haida artist (1836-65), Ghulam Ali Khan's representation of Colonel James Skinner's durbar (1827), R Hotz's portrait of Maharajah Pratap Singh Bah Ju Deo (c.1925), Yousuf Karsh's depiction of Sir John Buchan (1937), and the works of Abanindranath Tagore (1905) and Gaganendranath Tagore (1917), to name just a few. The hybridising effects of Empire also throw well-worn categories like 'British' and 'Indian' into confusion; can we see John Griffiths' *The Temptation of the Buddha* (1875-6) and Christiana Herringham's *Fragment of the Hamsa Jataka* (c. 1910) as Indian art alongside Amrita Sher-Gil's *Flying Apsara* (1939), or as both Indian

and British art? Synthesising techniques from different aesthetic traditions was key to the creativity of avant-garde art, and also to postcolonial artistic movements such as the Zaria Arts Society and the work of a whole host of artists of Indian, African and Caribbean heritage, as Carol Jacobi's essay in the *Artist and Empire* catalogue shows.<sup>17</sup> Empire was in obvious ways economically and politically oppressive, but it also opened up creative choices for painters, writers and thinkers, who were able to synthesise and experiment with the cultural resources produced by its bringing together of diverse cultures and groups, albeit structured by hierarchies of race, class and gender.

Many of the paintings in *Artist and Empire*, then, were a testimony to the hybridising effects of empire. Zoffany's *Blair Family Portrait* is another vivid illustration of this. In this portrait, the domestic interior is furnished and decorated in European style shuttered against the Indian outside with the door slightly ajar. The presence of the pianoforte is an important cultural signifier because of the strong and rich tradition of Indian music: it is as though the family are announcing their European roots through music. But the interior has an Indian girl in Indian dress in it, with three paintings of Indian scenes on the wall – a landscape in the centre, alongside paintings of sati and hook-swinging (Zoffany himself had done a painting of sati so there is playful self-reference here). These three paintings show how complicated the place of space is in empire, which tries to both organise it and yet also disrupts it. In Zoffany's painting the interior is guarded against the exterior, but that exterior is reproduced in the paintings on the wall of the interior space. In many ways, these three paintings, under which the family are grouped, are at

the centre of the portrait. It is as though the painting cannot exist on its own, instead it is part of a chain of representations which empire in India has set in motion, and the domestic interior and the Indian outside are so closely interleaved that it becomes difficult to distinguish clearly between the two.

**'In Stubbs's painting the stag is a hybrid figure that cannot be categorised; zoological imperialism gives rise to a new third animal, neither wholly Indian nor wholly British.'**

<sup>17</sup> Carol Jacobi, 'Out of Empire', in *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*, ed. Alison Smith (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), pp. 206-239.

**'Empire was in obvious ways economically and politically oppressive, but it also opened up creative choices for painters, writers, and thinkers, who were able to synthesise and experiment with the cultural resources produced by its bringing together of diverse cultures and groups, albeit structured by hierarchies of race, class and gender.'**

For Zoffany, as for many of the artists in this exhibition, empire was an artistic opportunity. In some ways, as this four-in-one painting shows, the problem artists faced was how to frame and discipline that creativity and the chain of representations that empire produced. Imperial objects were problematic because they did not always do what they were supposed to. In Stubbs' *A Cheetah and a Stag with two Indian Attendants*, the cheetah as imperial trophy turns out to have its own agency

and does not behave according to imperial script. William B Wollen's *The Last Stand* (1842) was redolent of imperial heroism and bravery, but in 2000 it was appropriated in postcard form in Kabul as a symbol of resistance by some Afghans. What appears as eyewitness reportage turns out to be partly reimagined. Iconic last stand paintings necessarily require the re-arrangement of battlefields, or the re-staging of events using local actors (as in George W Joy's *Death of General Gordon*, 1893) and elaborate reconstructions from eye-witness accounts, uniforms and objects, and on the spot drawings (Benjamin West's *The Death of General James Wolfe*, 1779). The outcome of imperial theatricality is uncertain and has to be imaginatively recreated and replayed in order to secure it, just as Stubbs' stag and 'dingo' has to be re-imagined from the verbal accounts of others. The Indian potter Bakshiram, whose haunting portrait formed the poster to the *Artist and Empire* exhibition, was brought over to Britain for the *Colonial and Indian Exhibition* of 1886 along with other artisans in order to display traditional Indian crafts to the British public, but the majority of these artisans had in fact been prisoners trained in handicrafts in Agra Jail. The question of who is an artist in the empire therefore has some surprising answers as craftsmen become artists and artists craftsmen, and sometimes the status of the artist is invented and re-invented through dubious means. 'Native' authenticity in the British Empire is an imaginative recreation for an imperial public's ethnographic appetite, and later for postcolonial nationalist elites' equally voracious appetites.



**Installation view of *Artist and Empire* exhibition, Tate Britain November 2015 – April 2016**

Thus, there was an irreducibly imaginative component to the British Empire, as there is to all empires, but these imaginings could not always be contained by imperial ideologies. Walter Crane's *Imperial Federation Map* (1886) points to how maps were important pieces of imperial art, but in this case, the imperialism of the map is called into question by the way it is framed, suggesting another counter-narrative to empire: that of empire as a development of capitalism giving birth to socialism. The intertwining of socialism with imperialism is reminiscent of Marx's own writings on the British Empire: in two essays of the 1850s on British India, he was at pains to point to the productive effects of imperialism in India, and later Lenin was to explain empire as a stage in the development of financial capitalism preceding the eruption of worldwide communism. Empire disorientated conventionally understood political positions: being on the left did not necessarily mean being anti-imperial; there were liberal imperialists (and still are) as well as conservative imperialists. It is not surprising, then, as Alison Smith says in her introductory essay to the *Artist and Empire* exhibition catalogue,

**‘Empire disorientated conventionally understood political positions: being on the left did not necessarily mean being anti-imperial; there were liberal imperialists (and still are) as well as conservative imperialists.’**

that imperial objects can often be ‘slippery’ and equivocal. They can bear signs of their instability in their constitutions. Andrew Gilbert’s re-creation of Crane’s map comes out of the very fissures in the latter; it skilfully brings to a satirical crisis the slippery equivocations in Crane’s work. The weaving together of documentary fact with private fantasy in Gilbert’s work

(pointed to by curator Carol Jacobi) pushes to its logical conclusion the imaginary component in the British Empire that sometimes bordered on fantasy. The Singh Sisters’ *EnTWINed* (2009) is a telling response to Henry O’Neil’s *Eastward Ho!* (August 1857) and *Home Again* (1858). The first two paintings remind us of how migration from Britain changed the population profile and ecosystem in a range of continents in the modern age and wrought massive cultural and linguistic transformations, and how migration into Britain, so problematic to many, is also changing Britain today (although nowhere near on the same scale or at the same intensity as British migration to Australia, New Zealand and North America). *Home Again*, O’Neil’s painting of British soldiers returning from suppressing the 1857 rebellion in India, was not unequivocally triumphalist, as is evident from reviews at the time that picked up on the sense of exhaustion and pain in the painting. *EnTWINed*’s postcolonial response, thus also emerges out of *Home Again*’s ambiguity as imperial art. Like Crane’s map, it contains the seeds of the narrative that other artworks in the chain of representations of empire bring to fruition, experimenting in exciting ways with new techniques and media.

Empires are imagined communities (to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase about nations) and, like nations, the styles in which they are imagined distinguishes them.<sup>18</sup> *Artist and Empire*, through its judicious choice of objects and organisation of themes, showed us some of the styles and objects in which the British Empire and its legacies have been imagined. Historians are beginning to ask if empire was primarily a political and economic phenomenon or a cultural one. It is not clear if

<sup>18</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

this question can be definitively answered but this exhibition showed us the ways in which the British Empire, like other empires, was a cultural project, sometimes giving rise to forms of creativity that were at odds with its economically and politically repressive dimensions, themselves complex because of the way British imperialism often worked through the hierarchies of caste, class, ethnicity and language within the societies that came under its rule. The hybridising effects of empire, which were wonderfully foregrounded in this exhibition, pose a challenge to the powerfully dominant narratives of both Britishness and postcolonial nationalisms that continue to define national cultures in exclusive and now increasingly repressive ways, closing off the productive possibilities of the crisis in postcolonial national identities that opened up the space for the *Artist and Empire* exhibition.





# Conclusion

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The residual pressure of the colonial past exerts a powerful, if indirect, influence over contemporary British political and cultural life. Its lingering historical force is habitually denied but the challenging effects are felt nonetheless. They still shape the embattled psychology of our increasingly anxious and fearful nation as it attempts to assemble a new place for itself in a networked, post-imperial and post-secular world – a world that is currently being re-centred far away from the old circuitry of North Atlantic modernity.

Ancient residues have been bequeathed to the present from the different phases in which Britannia dominated the modern world system. They have become enmeshed with a number of specifically twentieth-century issues bound up with Europe's post-1945 political, moral and economic settlement and, in particular, with Britain's disavowed history of *decolonisation*. Lastly, there are problems which arise directly from the belligerent neo-imperial adventures that are currently underway. This latest period of apparently unending war mobilises, cites and signifies upon past colonial experience, using a heavily filtered imperial history to make current conflicts intelligible and legitimate, and assembling meaning for contemporary suffering from representations of past trauma and loss. Britain's institutions of heritage and culture – museums, galleries, country houses and public and private estates – are all implicated in the resulting low-intensity conflict over the history and memory of empire. That struggle also encompasses the settlement of postcolonial, commonwealth citizens after 1945 and therefore recycles all the ambiguities in the nation's wider politics of belonging, race and immigration.

The 2016 elevation of the artist Sonia Boyce to the Royal Academy in the category of painting was a historic development. Boyce, an influential

artist whose work is widely appreciated, is also a leader of the Black Artists and Modernism project recently funded by the AHRC. She is the first woman of African Caribbean heritage to achieve this order of distinction. At the very same time, a host of new initiatives around the themes of black, African and post-imperial art and culture were curated at major venues: Tate Britain, the British Library, the V&A (as discussed in this report) and the Southbank Centre (the 'Africa Utopia' festival). At the British Film Institute, a national project, 'Black Star' (October-December 2016), aimed to celebrate 'the range, versatility and power of black screen icons on film and television'. At the National Portrait Gallery, the successful *Black Chronicles* photographic exhibition originally organised by Autograph ABP at Rivington Place, reopened in an expanded version as *Black Chronicles: Photographic Portraits 1862-1948* (May-December 2016). At Tate Modern, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* is on display from July through to the end of October 2017. These initiatives were counterpointed by international developments. For example, in 2016, a major exhibition at Eindhoven's Van Abbe museum was devoted to work produced by black British artists during the 'long 1980s'.

The above survey suggests that there is something particular about the work that emerged from Britain's Black Arts Movement and that it continues to be both important and useful. We need to ask what it might mean to employ black British work from that critical period to exemplify a particular phase in the development of 'multicultural' Europe's art and culture and, implicitly, to suggest that the origins of many of today's debates and innovations reside in the vexed phase suggested by the organising concept of the 'long 1980s'?

The Dutch exhibition was part of a remarkable sequence of curatorial interventions addressed from Europe to the problems that are identified with or accessible through the arts of empire and of racial orders, in colonial as well as postcolonial histories and beyond. In many locations, this turn involves difficult attempts to unearth and work through the forgotten colonial past. However, those rising concerns extend beyond new curatorial initiatives into a more extensive desire to transform and adapt cultural institutions to the new demands of an irreversibly postcolonial world.

To a predictable chorus of approbation from the xenophobic and nationalist right, the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen

recently announced its intention to follow the example set by Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum and remove colonial terminology from the management and display of its historic collection. Peter Noergaard Larsen, the museum's Deputy Director explained that the word 'negro' will in future be replaced by the term 'African' in the titles and descriptions of fourteen works produced by Danish artists between 1609 and 1959. Other major institutions in Denmark have, so far, declined to pursue that course of action.

These multifarious and uneven developments have been a long time in the making. In part, they are belated responses to the pressures exerted by several vocal generations of migrant and migrant-descended art-practitioners, critics and curators who effectively reshaped the institutional field and forced the importance of themes like identity, belonging and plurality on an often reluctant and sometimes hostile mainstream. These events also reflect the great transformation in the professional training of curators that has developed during the last decade and a half. However, the current profusion of cultural initiatives has coincided with and been reinforced by an international debate over the questions of racial hierarchy, inequality and representativeness in the cultural sphere. The emphasis placed on differences of faith and civilisational clash that followed the launch of an interminable 'War on Terror' seems also to have released a little more institutional space in which questions around ethnicity, nationality, racism, culture and empire could be safely explored.

Concern with many similar issues is thought to be at stake in distant locations and in private as well as public bodies. The segregated workings of the mainstream US film industry have, for example, come under renewed scrutiny in light reflected from the Obama presidency and as a result of the energy released by the North American #blacklivesmatter protests against police impunity. US criticism of the whiteness of the Academy Awards, often transmitted via social media, has contributed to the climate in which greater recognition has been sought for work done by 'black and minority ethnic' (BME) creative workers, producers, curators, writers and actors in this country. The impact of a Trump presidency on these issues remains to be seen.

A new wave of protest has been focused specifically on the civic and public responsibilities of the BBC. Sir Lenny Henry has been prominent in extensive criticism of the organisation's commitment to diversity

and its patchy record of employing black and minority staff as well as commissioning work from under-represented groups: 'I worked at the BBC for 35 years before I had a meeting with anyone who looks like me... The only people like me were cleaning the corridors, and that is not right.'<sup>19</sup> Henry pursued these arguments in the context of the political debate over the BBC's licence fee, drawing attention to the democratic responsibility at stake in the corporation's public service obligations as well as its moral duty to be representative of the paying population as a whole.

Nationally, this difficult discussion about representativeness and equality of opportunity in a demonstrably unequal society has been intensified by a number of other factors. Faced with the ugly consequences of budget cuts and the related retrenchment of class hierarchies in a system where lifelong debt supplies the rising tariff for acquiring a higher education, David Cameron's Conservative government began to accuse Britain's universities, armed forces and businesses of 'ingrained, institutional and insidious' attitudes that hold too many people back. In a historic statement that far exceeded anything previously said by a British Prime Minister on the subject of racial inequality, Cameron berated Oxford, his alma mater, for 'not doing enough' to accommodate non-white and poor students. Doubtless he had an eye on the country's changing demographics and the problems involved in renewing the Conservatives' electoral bloc while purging the party's racist legacies, but his chastening commitment was clearly articulated. He outlined what he called an 'ambitious 2020 agenda' for Britain's 'BME' communities in these terms:

*Not just greater numbers at university, but many more jobs, apprenticeships and start-up loans... I am determined to fix [the] stubborn problem of underrepresentation in our police and armed forces... I want to issue a great call to arms to institutions all across our country. It's not enough to simply say you are open to all. Ask yourselves: are you going that extra mile to really show people that yours can be a place for everyone, regardless of background? We can all dig deeper...*<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/may/16/bbc-lenny-henry-will-smith-white-black>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/watch-out-universities-im-bringing-the-fight-for-equality-in-britain-to-you-article-by-david-cameron>

**'...Britain's politics of race and ethnicity is being transformed..., once the commitment to diversity has been accepted as a routine, corporate and managerial norm, uniform normative whiteness can begin to appear as an embarrassing anachronism.'**

Pragmatic considerations aside, the mentalities and techniques of corporate diversity management seem finally to have started to trickle into institutional conduct. As institutions become saturated, they promote new expectations about equality of opportunity and alter the range of policy options that appear appropriate and realistic given the persistence of these problems.

A resurgent discourse of individual uplift resonates strongly in a neoliberal environment where the inability to succeed in life gets regularly explained as a personal failing rather than a structural matter. The inability to achieve wealth, status and security is frequently imagined by dominant ideologies of the day to result from individual failure to develop the correct aspirations, resilience and values. The general intensification of inequality that has been lately evident can thus be re-interpreted. As its deeper causes remain either intractable or inaccessible, inequality's cultural manifestations provide straightforward targets for political intervention. Operating only on an interpersonal scale, this view sees rising inequality as a result of either personal prejudice by gatekeepers or personal failure by applicants. The London-born, *Star Wars* actor, John Boyega recently admonished his peers at the Screen Nation Awards ceremony to stop complaining and 'be the change you want to see'. In a similar vein, Adam Afriye MP, the Conservative politician whose origins lie in a Peckham council estate, spoke for many – both rich and poor – when he announced 'I consider myself post-racial... I don't see myself as a black man. I refuse to be defined by my colour or pigeon-holed in that way'.<sup>21</sup>

These sentiments are on the rise. They capture a vernacular translation of neoliberal pieties. Their advocates are prominent figures whose political formation and trajectory require something more in response than mere abuse of them as either inauthentic or insufficiently black. They point to how Britain's politics of race and ethnicity is being

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/adam-afriye-from-peckham-council-house-to-shadow-minister-6735252.html>

transformed and how, once the commitment to diversity has been accepted as a routine, corporate and managerial norm, uniform normative whiteness can begin to appear as an embarrassing anachronism.

The inequalities that frame this unjust state of affairs have also been explained as effects of the way that private education impacts upon the uneven chances of accessing a professional career in the rapidly-changing arts field and its associated institutions: journalism, publishing, museums and galleries. In those settings, employment data reveal patterns that are unrepresentative of the national population profile. This diversity deficit has been increasingly associated with the near monopoly of Oxbridge and Russell Group graduates in the acquisition of internships and the securing of informal privileges: apparently class-based points of access to those desirable sectors.

Britain's burgeoning inequalities of wealth and income enable some young people to work in their favoured fields and gain valuable experience without being paid, thanks to parental support. This pattern encompasses the increasing dominance in public-sector educational provision of varieties of secondary schooling in which the arts are often judged to be peripheral or even luxury items. The result is that, here in London, black and minority ethnic workers are significantly underrepresented in the workings of the broadly-defined cultural industries. The old patterns of inequality associated with absolutist conceptions of cultural difference and black and brown family pathologies have been augmented by the emergence of Islam as a racial trope and of the Muslim as a racial type that is repeatedly wheeled out to explain and mediate what we've been told is ubiquitous inter-civilisational conflict.

Much more can be said about the generational specificity of the curators and administrators involved in developing the current wave of innovative cultural and artistic programmes and framing their angular address to Britain's discomfiting and largely overlooked post-imperial predicament. However, changes in curatorial education are insufficient to account for the timely reach of these themes and concerns, which extend beyond London and beyond Britain.

For many institutions, both at home and abroad, taking on the politics of race or working through the residues of the colonial past signifies the possibility of overdue entry into a necessary process of cultural modernisation and renewal. It enables institutions to draw a welcome line between the past and the future and thereby to project their reformed or

transformed practices into an expanding range of sponsors, markets and publics.

The difficulties involved in analysing these changes have been multiplied by the fact that the term ‘multiculturalism’ has effectively been forbidden, excluded from serious analysis and critical conversation. That debate has been succeeded by a much more diffuse consideration of social and cultural diversity. These days, it is less likely to be centred on racism and ethnicity than to be directed towards the management of sexualities and the transformation of gender relations.

The battle for recognition of Britain’s cultural plurality had drawn attention to the ways that democracy might be enhanced by the undoing of racial hierarchy and its associated structural effects. Significant problems arose from governmental attempts to change those entrenched patterns and the fallback was an attempt to combine the mechanisms of redress directed at different dimensions of inequality into a unified approach that would be conducted under the general heading of Human Rights. The expanding cohorts of professional diversity consultants and trainers seized on this opportunity to relocate their efforts. They decamped to the supposedly easier territory staked out by a generalised opposition to all varieties of unfairness. This change would hopefully be secured by intervention into the hidden and unconscious mechanisms of implicit bias that underpinned woeful institutional outcomes.

With that shift, Britain’s cultural planning and administration of the arts have entered what might be termed their post-multicultural phase. Indeed, the idea of multiculturalism is now so widely scorned and trivialized that it suggests only a sequence of unsavoury commitments: unbridled enthusiasm for ‘cultural relativism’, the endorsement of the forms of segregation chosen by minorities and their supposed rejection of integration and assimilation into the official values that are said to bind Europe’s modern, democratic national states.<sup>22</sup> Even where they mesh with the rhetoric of humanitarianism, all of these themes are today held hostage by the imperatives of security.

**22** See, for example, David Cameron’s 2011 speech to the Munich Security Conference: [www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/](http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/); Kenan Malik, ‘The Failure of Multiculturalism: Community Versus Society in Europe’, *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2015): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/western-europe/failure-multiculturalism>; and David Goodhart, ‘A Vote Against the Mass Immigration Society’, *Prospect* (14 July 2016): <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/a-vote-against-the-mass-immigration-society>.

**‘...Britain’s cultural planning and administration of the arts have entered what might be termed their post-multicultural phase.’**

The major riots of 1981 promoted an epochal change in Britain’s political culture. The thirty-five years since have seen the long-denied possibility of being simultaneously both black and English become, at the very least, a

theoretical possibility. The all-conquering culture of neoliberalism seems comfortable with that unlikely prospect, so the traditional exclusion of blackness from Britishness has indeed been modified. We should also be scrupulous in acknowledging the transformative processes that have unfolded at a slower tempo and defy all suggestions of simple, linear, upward progress where race and nationality are concerned. It is not only that our sense of time and understanding of Britain’s postcolonial history assume a different aspect once the absurd saga of institutional and structural racism is placed in the foreground; the significance of racial hierarchy in shaping Britain’s polity and, in particular, strengthening the hateful but endlessly productive populist strand in its political life also becomes harder to overlook.

The rise of the xenophobic, populist right has brought an end to political bipartisanship with regard to issues of discrimination and equality. Britain is deeply-divided, yet it is seeking an altered self-understanding and a transformed relationship with previously colonised places from which successive waves of settlers originated but which have once again become significant as the political and economic geography of the networked planet evolves. Our nation’s cultural habits and institutions can communicate to the world that a postcolonial settlement is finally underway. That overdue adjustment promises a healthier relationship with the colonial past and the persistent appeal of departed greatness that is still sanctioned by postcolonial melancholia and prospective nostalgia alike. It can signify to the world that the old problems are being dealt with at last and that the world’s future dealings with us will be conducted on a new footing, uncorrupted by distortions and fantasies that now belong to the past. This hopeful transmission is

**‘...the long-denied possibility of being simultaneously both black and English become, at the very least, a theoretical possibility.’**



being articulated by the conflicted institutions of art and heritage in advance of either political or academic discussion. Whether it can survive the political turbulence and economic retrenchment of a 'post-Brexit' Britain, or, in the wider context, a Trump presidency, is another matter altogether.



**Image (left):**

**A scratch choir gather  
to perform in London's  
Somerset House to  
celebrate *UTOPIA 2016:  
A Year of Imagination  
and Possibility*.**

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