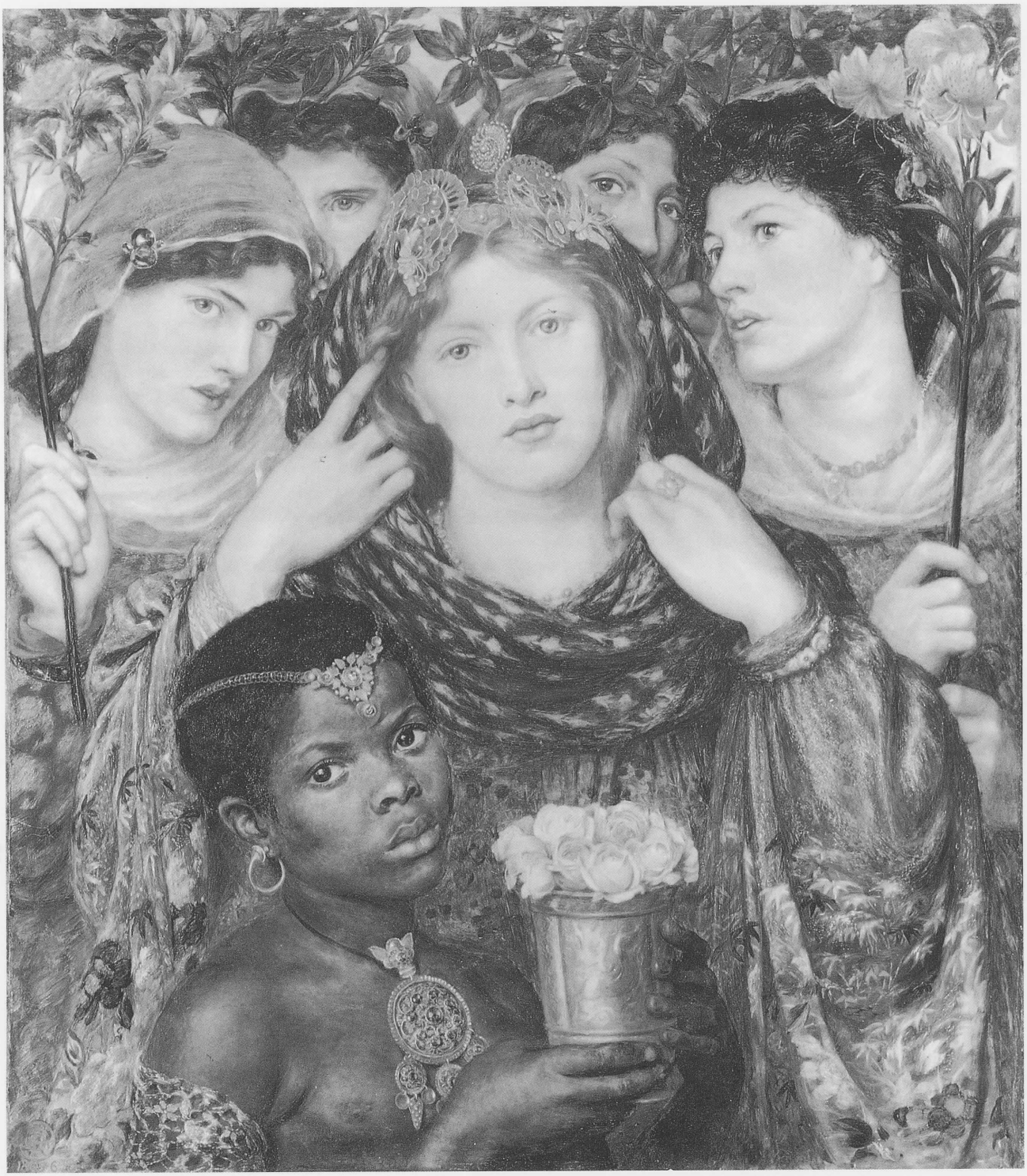
Picturing Blackness in British Art

1700s – 1990s



28 November 1995 – 10 March 1996

Tate Gallery

PICTURING BLACKNESS IN BRITISH ART

Any discussion of the representation of blackness in British art demands political as well as aesthetic sensitivities. Settlement in this country by people from Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas has been taking place for at least four hundred years. Yet the presence of black people in Britain is still sometimes imagined to be a recent development. Such a basic error can encourage us to misread the shape of our national community and misunderstand its still-evolving cultural life. Furthermore, when so ignored by official history, black British citizens, and indeed citizens of any minority group, can become vulnerable to exclusion from the nation's sense of itself.

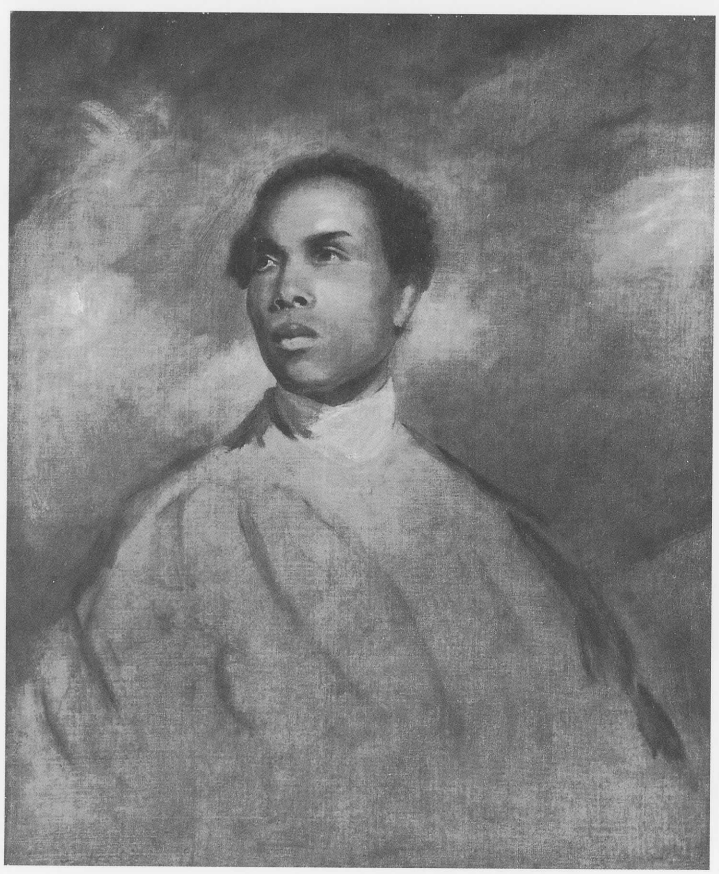
Since 1945, Britain has frequently been perceived as a society disrupted by the arrival of colonial immigrants who have supposedly brought disharmony, division and a brash, assertive multi-culturalism. This idea of intrusion has triggered appeals to a mythic past, an imaginary, culturally simple, racially homogeneous and monochrome Britain in which there were no blacks. Such misinterpretation has served to soothe continuing uncertainty surrounding Britain's post-war, post-imperial identity, culture and national character.

This display addresses some of the myths of Britishness by arguing for fresh thinking about the nation and its changing cultural habits. The range of works drawn from the Tate Gallery's Collection (plus one loan) span more than two centuries of British history. Brought together, they suggest that 'racial' differences have been a persistent feature of artistic expression, and that the complex and shifting symbolism of 'race' has been important to successive generations of British artists. This small group of works can only hint at the larger processes in which images of black people and images about 'race' were employed creatively for a range of divergent purposes. They were produced to explore perception, colour and beauty, to investigate identity, humanity, nationality and morality and to determine the status of difference itself. The protean presence of racialised themes and codes reveals longer, more complex and more intimate relationships between blacks and this country than have usually been supposed.

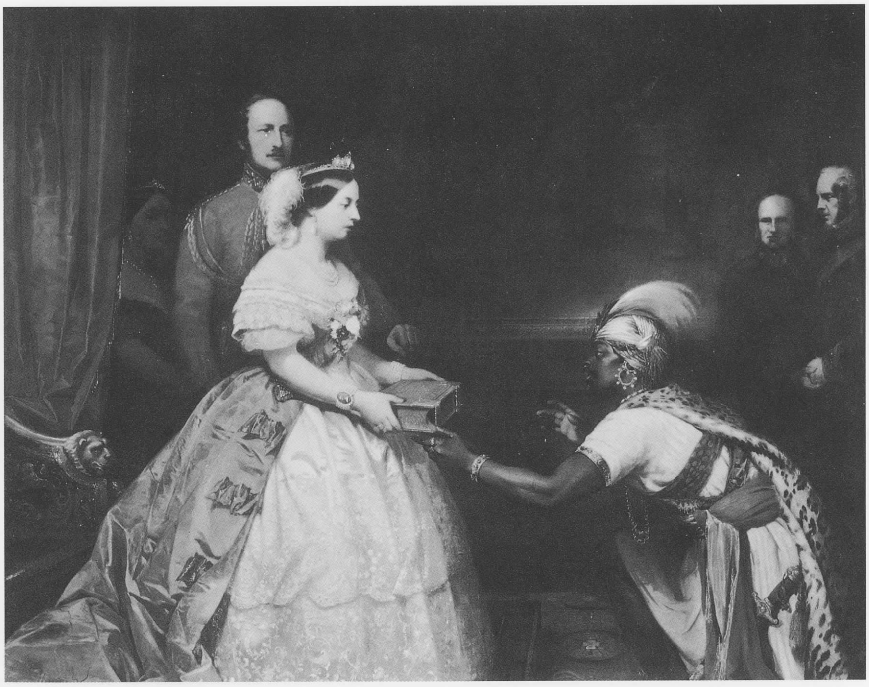
We urgently need a more exhaustive account of how slavery, imperialism and colonialism contributed to the formation of modern British cultural styles and aesthetic tastes. This display asks the viewer to consider how the relationship between Britain's colonial outside and its national inside was constantly negotiated and presented in artistic form. In 'Punch or May Day' (no.7), for example, a bustling urban scene captured by Benjamin Haydon, ordinary black folk are shown doing the commonplace things appropriate to their lowly station in the social hierarchy. Their ready visibility sustains the sense of metropolitan Britain as the dynamic centre of a worldwide network of trade and travel. The transformation wrought by slavery and an expanding colonial economy upon social life is signalled by this type of work. It can also be deduced from the extraordinary life stories of the black models who posed for artists at a time when classical ideals of beauty were strongly associated with intellectual capacities and the meaning of physical difference was itself being hotly debated. Haydon made many studies of one particular African-American model, a seafarer named Wilson who had arrived in London in 1810.

The solitary black male figure visible in the throng in William Powell Frith's 'The Derby Day' (no.5) provides a more grudging acknowledgement of black participation and belonging. Frith's work was produced at a time when the significance of the black presence had been changed, not only by the abolition of slavery in the British Empire but by violent conflicts in India. While 'The Derby Day' was being painted, the word 'nigger' was achieving wider popular currency in the wake of slaughter at Lucknow, Cawnpore and Dehli.

The public accommodation to blackness suggested in these works was preceded by less spectacular, more private gestures of inclusion. The half-hidden servant in 'An Elegant Company Playing Cards' (no.6), attributed to Gawen Hamilton, was something of a cipher for the prestige and



manner of Joshua Reynolds *A Young Black (?Francis Barber)* (no.11)



Thomas Jones Barker
*Queen Victoria Presenting a Bible in the Audience Chamber at Windsor c.*1861
(no.1)

fashionability of that household. Francis 'Frank' Barber, a Jamaica-born servant, attended Samuel Johnson for some thirty-two years and became his master's favourite. Sir Joshua Reynolds's striking portrait of him presents a black man as an autonomous, even gentlemanly, figure whose life does not require the presence of his master for its validation. Two versions of the original painting, now in the Menil Foundation Collection, Houston, are shown in this display (nos.10, 11). Reynolds's painting gains additional resonance when we appreciate that the affectionate relationship between Johnson and Barber developed at a time in the eighteenth century when anxieties were increasing about the size and disreputable activities of London's black population.

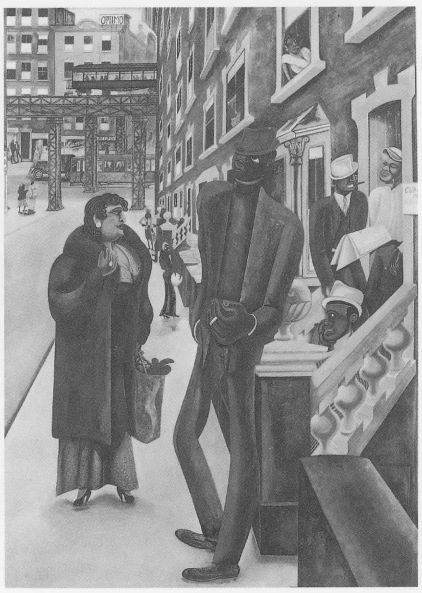
If contemporary racism works by forgetting and sometimes erasing black contribution to society, then this display will acquire a therapeutic importance. But the significance of these works goes beyond their collective capacity to jog the nation's memory. Thomas Jones Barker's 'Queen Victoria Presenting a Bible', also known as 'The Secret of England's Greatness' (no.1), for example, may not record an actual event and it is perhaps better interpreted as a neat allegory of the imperial obligations to govern and civilise. Precisely through being invented rather than merely reported, the subject demonstrates that the signs and symbols of 'racial' difference were being used to clarify ideas about the purpose and power of government and its great mission in the Victorian period. Observing Lords Palmerston and John Russell as they view this imaginary colonial encounter in the audience chamber at Windsor, we learn that the Empire was not external to Britain after all, but shaped ideas of honour, duty and obligation at the nation's core. The natural, submissive blackness of the crouching king is emphasised by his close proximity to the dazzling feminine whiteness of the beneficent empress. The picture does not simply translate 'racial' differences into art but creates them in a distinctive imperial form.

These works offer more than an opportunity to restore elements of national history that have been erased. They also reveal the contrasting meanings given to the signs of 'race' in different periods. Several of the works were painted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, coinciding with the struggle to abolish slavery. This was the era in which distinctive scientific definitions of race and biological difference took hold and created new hierarchies and political rationalisations for conflict and inequality. Biblical accounts of the meaning of human variation, and the ancient colour symbolism in which blackness was identified with evil, were being supplemented and partially replaced. Initially this was achieved by new conventions that associated blackness with savagery, and later by scientific pronouncements about 'race' in which the black degenerated into the primitive. This shift made time and evolution the principle of 'racial' comparison rather than either ignorance or sin. Scientific racism, craniology, ethnology and anthropology created new ways of comprehending and representing 'race' after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. In this context Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'The Beloved' (no.12), might quietly endorse the suggestion that the black would always remain a child in relation to more highly evolved Europeans. The painting was exhibited in the year that Governor Eyre's handling of the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica split the Victorian intellectual community.

In the early twentieth century, New York superseded London as the location for the largest urban black population outside of Africa. Artists made their own transatlantic crossings. The modernism of painters such as Edward Burra (no.4) celebrated, and perhaps envied, what was perceived as the primitive vitality of blacks. Their supposedly uninhibited, childlike lives were testament to a quality of life that had been lost, denied or sacrificed with the advance of modern civilisation.

Taken as a group, the works in this display chart the way in which those whose bodies have been used to explore the meaning of 'race' or to make difference into a source of beauty, pleasure and fascination, come, at last, to represent themselves. There is an implicit progression as blacks cease to be passive objects being represented by others and become active subjects who shape their own images and assign symbolic value to their bodies. F.N. Souza's

Edward Burra
Harlem 1934
(no.4)



F.N. Souza
Crucifixion 1959
(no.14)

'Crucifixion' (no.14) reorders the moral drama of the Crucifixion in a binary 'racial' code of black and white. Sonia Boyce and Lubaina Himid in different ways have created art that addresses the disabling categories of 'race' (nos.2–3, 8). In doing this, they hope to affect what this country is now, and what it can be in the future.

The changing perception of blackness and Britishness presented in this display is not a minority issue. It is not something of significance primarily only to those who have previously been excluded and ignored. It is an essential ingredient in the development of a sense of nationality free of 'racial' division. That is an urgent goal for us all.

Written by Paul Gilroy
Cultural historian and writer

Cover illustration:
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
The Beloved ('The Bride')
1865–6 (no.12)

List of Works

Unless otherwise stated, all works are from the Collection of the Tate Gallery. Measurements are given in centimetres followed by inches in brackets, height before width

1 Thomas Jones Barker
1815–1882
Queen Victoria Presenting a Bible in the Audience Chamber at Windsor c.1861
Oil on canvas 167.6 × 213.8 (66 × 83⅛)
National Portrait Gallery, London

2 Sonia Boyce born 1962
Missionary Position II 1985
Watercolour, pastel and crayon on paper 123.8 × 183 (48¾ × 72)
Purchased 1987
T05020

3 Sonia Boyce
From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction 1987
Photograph and mixed media 124 × 359 (48⅞ × 141⅜)
Purchased 1987
T05021

4 Edward Burra 1905–1976
Harlem 1934
Brush and ink and gouache on paper 79.4 × 57.1 (31¼ × 22½)
Purchased 1939
N05004

5 William Powell Frith
1819–1909
The Derby Day 1856–8
Oil on canvas 101.6 × 223.5 (40 × 88)
Bequeathed by Jacob Bell 1859
N00615

6 attributed to **Gawen Hamilton** c.1698–1737
An Elegant Company Playing Cards c.1725
Oil on canvas 69.2 × 57.7 (27¼ × 22¾)
Purchased 1967
T00943

7 Benjamin Robert Haydon
1786–1846
Punch or May Day 1829
Oil on canvas 150.5 × 185.1 (59¼ × 72⅞)
Bequeathed by George Darling 1862
N00682

8 Lubaina Himid born 1954
Between the Two my Heart is Balanced 1991
Acrylic on canvas 152.4 × 121.9 (60 × 48)
Presented by the Patrons of New Art (Special Purchase Fund) through the Tate Gallery Foundation 1995
T06947

9 Ronald Moody 1900–1984
Johanaan 1936
Wood (elm) 155 × 72.5 × 38.8 (61 × 28½ × 15¼)
Purchased 1992
T06591

10 manner of **Sir Joshua Reynolds** 1723–1792
A Young Black (?Francis Barber)
Oil on canvas 45.1 × 36.2 (17¾ × 14¼)
Bequeathed by Mrs Mary Venetia James 1948
N05843

11 manner of **Sir Joshua Reynolds**
A Young Black (?Francis Barber)
Oil on canvas 75.6 × 87.9 (29¾ × 34⅝)
Bequeathed by Alan Evans 1974
T01892

12 Dante Gabriel Rossetti
1828–1882
The Beloved ('The Bride') 1865–6
Oil on canvas 82.5 × 76.2 (32½ × 30)
Purchased with assistance from Sir Arthur Du Cros Bt and Sir Otto Beit KCMG through the National Art Collections Fund 1916
N03053

13 John Simpson 1782–1847
Head of a Negro ?c.1827
Oil on canvas 55.9 × 55.9 (22 × 22)
Presented by Robert Vernon 1847
N00382

14 F.N. Souza born 1924
Crucifixion 1959
Oil on board 182.9 × 101.6 (72 × 40)
Purchased 1993
T06776

Published by Tate Publishing, Millbank, London SW1P 4RG

Printed in Great Britain by ICON Colour, Surrey