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## Decolonial Practices around “Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit” (formerly “Portrait of an African”), in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter

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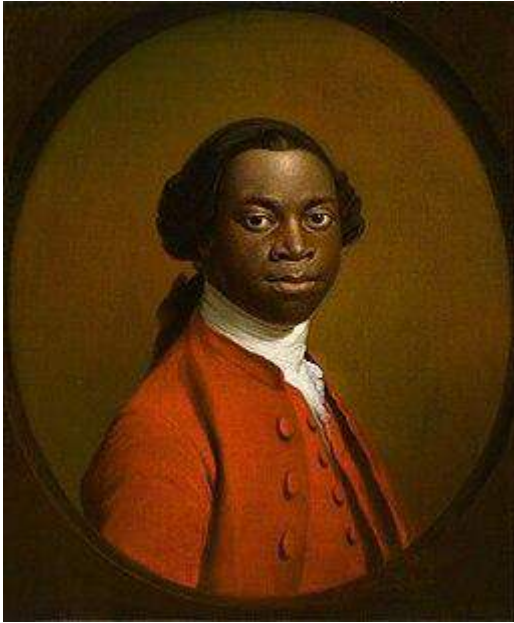
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*Pratiques décoloniales autour du «Portrait d'un homme en costume rouge»,  
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**Figure 1.** *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* (formerly *Portrait of an African*), c. 1757-1761. Oil on canvas, 61.8 x 51.5 cm.



© Acc. No. 14/1943. Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

- 1 This essay explores how a single artwork can be a focal point and catalyst for change. The piece in question—a finely executed, bust-length portrait of man of African heritage from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century—is a prized exhibit in the collection of Exeter’s Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Fig. 1). It has long been recognized that Black subjects in European art, where they do occur, overwhelmingly have an inferior commodity status: depicted as compliant servants and “exotic” accessories to well-heeled white sitters (Bindman et al., Dabydeen). Interpreting these works, Kim Hall and others have argued that emerging white subjectivities in the Early Modern period were defined against—and in denigration of—blackness, through formation of stark moral and aesthetic binaries. But as a portrait of a man, depicted on his own, with individualized features and ostensibly at ease, the RAMM painting is somewhat different from many other representations of Black subjects in European art from that time: it admits—at least in theory—the possibility of status and some kind of agency. As such it has been recognized for its important place in the history of art and race (Bindman et al. 190, fig. 184).
- 2 In 2014 RAMM collaborated with contemporary Black artist Nahem Shoa to redress the lack of portraits of Black and mixed-race sitters in British museums and art galleries. Shoa’s portrait of artist Desmond Haughton was exhibited alongside RAMM’s 18<sup>th</sup>-century portrait and donated to its permanent collection. In 2022 a much larger exhibition project came to fruition: *In Plain Sight: Transatlantic Slavery and Devon*. This brought historical facts about the region’s trading past to bear on exhibits from the permanent collection, and a new commission of contemporary art. With his calm demeanour and steady gaze, the man in the RAMM portrait enacted the “plain sight” of the exhibition’s title. He featured outside the museum on an advertising poster, and prominently inside the gallery space, as an eyewitness to the past, and a mediator for present-day audiences. It is hard to imagine the show having the same impact without this emblematic figure in place.

- 3 This essay explores the specific circumstances of the *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* and exhibition in relation to the wider intellectual and cultural framework of decolonization. In recent years the work to decolonize institutions, academic disciplines, classrooms, workplaces and individual mindsets has become an important area of activity. As Procter and others have shown, museums are weighed down by questionable past acquisitions, hierarchical and Eurocentric ways of classifying, and a lack of diversity among their staff. For similar reasons universities and educational establishments have been challenged to rethink their power and missions (Bambra et al.). If post-colonial studies laid the ground by heightening awareness of otherness and difference, then decolonization is more impatient and disruptive, urges readings "against the grain" and exhibits "epistemic disobedience" (Tim Barringer, James Ellkins; in Grant et al., 12, 22).
- 4 The Royal Albert Memorial Museum, founded in 1868 in homage to Prince Albert, was consciously modelled on the South Kensington museum complex that includes the V&A and Natural History Museum. As such, it has its own particular set of legacy issues. Steeped in Victorian imperialism (see Barringer et al.), it arguably can never be a neutral space. Yet the portrait of a Black man presented possibilities: to serve as a conduit to the era of transatlantic slavery and the contrasting lived experiences of privilege and injustice. Moreover the portrait has become highly sought-after as a loan by other museums on their own decolonizing journeys.
- 5 What were the successes and challenges of the project? Presented here is a unique set of articulations and reflections—at the intersection of academic, curatorial, and public discourse—that occurred over a five-year period (2018-2023) in the run-up to the *In Plain Sight* exhibition, over its duration, and subsequently. Covid-related delays to the schedule meant that there was more time for reflection than there might have been. Contemporary events inflected people's experience: the Windrush scandal (starting to come to light in 2018), the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum and hostile UK government policies on immigration, and, shortly after the close of the show, the death of Queen Elizabeth II, which opened up the possibility of examining the British monarchy's historic role in slavery. During this time public intellectuals such as David Olusoga have been actively shaping conversations about race. New cultural forces have emerged such as the blockbuster period Netflix drama *Bridgerton* where colour-blind (or colour-conscious) casting has served to normalize, even glamourize, bewigged black faces. As a professor of art history who studies 18<sup>th</sup>-century portraiture at the nearby university, I was compelled to reflect on my own white privilege within the art establishment, and to explore how decolonized modes of thinking can alter narratives and provide new ways of seeing the world.

## Rethinking evidence

- 6 When the portrait was donated to the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in 1943 by the influential London art dealer, Percy Moore Turner, the acquisition was recorded, in the racialized language of the time, as "Black Boy by Joshua Reynolds." The choice to place it in Exeter may have arisen because Devon was the artist's home county (he was born in Plymouth). The attribution to Reynolds did not hold, however, and nor did a subsequent one to the Scottish portrait painter, Allan Ramsay, and so for the present

the portrait is unattributed. In a disruption to traditional hierarchies of creativity, the artist has been displaced and the more pressing questions of the day revolve round the sitter.

- 7 Uncovering the sitter's identity has also proved problematic, and controversial. It was first proposed that the RAMM portrait depicted the writer Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), known in his lifetime as Gustavus Vassa. Equiano's remarkable life story is told in his autobiography: originating from Eboe in the Kingdom of Benin (present day Nigeria), he was enslaved and shipped to the Caribbean, and bought and sold several times before purchasing his freedom and, in London, actively pursuing the abolitionist cause. But in an essay published in *Apollo* magazine in 2006, John Madin, the then curator at RAMM, rejected the prior identification on the grounds that Equiano would have been too young. Instead he made the case that the sitter was Charles Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780). Born into slavery, Sancho none-the-less succeeded in becoming a prominent member of London society, where he achieved recognition as a composer, musician, writer and abolitionist, as well as being the first Black person to vote in a general election.
- 8 Hence the portrait was known until 2019 as "Portrait of an African (probably Ignatius Sancho)." But the "probably" and the brackets lingered awkwardly. In 2019 the identification as Sancho was emphatically rejected in an essay by Paterson Joseph. The acclaimed Shakespearean actor had devoted some twenty years of his life to researching Sancho, written a play about him and played the title role in a solo performance that toured the USA and Britain. In the play's preface, Joseph wrote about identifying with Sancho as his 18<sup>th</sup>-century forbear and his powerful sense of historical lineage: "[Sancho] struck me as a truly British model of survival without overt heroism, and indefatigability without bitterness. An Afro-Brit forerunner some 220 years before the HMT Empire Windrush set sail for Britain from Montego Bay" (xi). In a subsequent essay, "Staging Sancho," he described the experience of embodying the personage in his performances. So profound was Joseph's identification with the historical figure that he went on to write the memoirs of Sancho, a fictional autobiography interspersed with Sancho's actual letters, published in 2022.
- 9 Joseph's rejection of the portrait identification occurred in an essay published in October 2019 on the website of art charity *Art UK*, entitled "The Outrageous Neglect of African Figures in Art History." Here Joseph accused scholars of failing to give attention to the "ordinary African-Britons who have been an integral part of this nation's history since Roman Britain days. It is an act of snow-blindness that continues to this day." He also claimed that "racism is institutionalised in our most prestigious art establishments" and argued that art historians have not tried hard enough to identify the countless nameless pageboys and servants depicted in contemporary artworks, that gaze adoringly up at their masters, with their stereotypical features.
- 10 As it happened, planning for *In Plain Sight* was well under way by this time. Two weeks later, in November 2019, John Madin, who had retired from his position, published a piece on the *Art UK* site. Madin claimed to have done his best with the identification using what was known at the time, arguing that "The challenge [...] is not so much apathy on the part of curators and art historians but the scarcity of primary evidence." The RAMM curators then launched a discussion topic on the *Art Detective* website in the hope of settling once and for all the questions of identity and attribution. But after a

month of lively postings, in which the portrait was looked at from all angles, no new evidence emerged to shift the debate's parameters.

- 11 It is not clear from Joseph's essay exactly on what grounds he rejected the identification, but it was probably the lack of resemblance between the RAMM portrait and other images of Sancho, notably Thomas Gainsborough's famous and well-documented portrait (1768, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa).<sup>1</sup> One has to agree with Joseph—the two faces are very different. But where Madin had juxtaposed the physiognomical evidence and found a likeness, Joseph saw not just inaccuracy but an affront. For the lived experience of racial minorities is commonly to be mistaken for someone else. Scientists have been aware since the 1960s of a phenomenon known as Other Race Effect (ORE), whereby people are bad at identifying the facial features of another ethnic group. Recent research conducted at the University of Exeter (Civile & McLaren) attributes this deficit to a lack of cognitive visual experience rather than social bias. Raising consciousness of ORE within the art community—among dealers, curators, and art historians—seems an important step, not least because physiognomical judgements based on portraits are already tricky, requiring comparison of sitters at different ages, and representations by different artists and in different media. Judgements of value, about a person's status and identity, but also monetary value, depend on accurate identifications.
- 12 In his 2019 response to Joseph, Madin writes: "I argued in my article that as an exceptional African, it is most likely that the sitter would therefore have achieved social status and celebrity that is consistent with identified sitters in other comparable portraits. From that deductive reasoning, the case for Ignatius Sancho as the sitter was developed." It is true that, in order to sit for his portrait, the sitter of the RAMM portrait must have had social privileges that were denied to many of his heritage. But to conclude that, in his "exceptionality," he must be one of the handful of well-documented Black people in Georgian London, looks misguided. Gretchen Gerzina, whose research was first published in 1995, estimates that the number of Black people in Georgian Britain was somewhere between 4,000 and 15,000 (*Black England*, 23). This makes it statistically highly likely that the RAMM portrait represents another person entirely. The Sancho identification, along with the prior Equiano one, looks like a case of wishful thinking, of wanting to adapt circumstances to an available narrative.
- 13 By common consent, the case of the RAMM portrait lays bare the paucity of evidence. But a next step is a re-evaluation of what is considered evidence, and of method. For the empiricism of Madin's argument falls short even on its own terms, and at worst it exhibits an establishment defensiveness. Nor does Paterson acknowledge the challenges of working in this area, nor the credible efforts of many scholars and curators to come together and mobilize. The gaps and silences of the archives, compounded by the failure of scholars to interrogate them properly, are in themselves evidence of the systematic erasure of Black and other minority subjects from western histories. Through their works, historians such as Gerzina, David Olusoga and Olivette Otele have made abundantly clear that evidence does exist that had not been properly looked for or evaluated on the right terms. Other scholars have engaged fruitfully on the margins of the known and unknown: for example Jennifer Germann has written about Black women in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Britain, who were even less visible than Black men. Tools such as the Association for Art History's Resource Portal on Anti-Racism and Decolonial Approaches to Art History and Visual Culture, launched in 2021, are a

collective disciplinary effort to share knowledge and methods, and "to support academics in making meaningful change." Alternatively, less "scientific" approaches can also be called on to illuminate the past. Paterson Joseph's creative interventions are a case in point, both his use of embodiment as an actor and his writing technique: in his memoirs of Sancho, he consciously deploys Saidiya Hartman's technique of "critical fabulation" to imagine the missing parts of a person's life story (Joseph, *The Secret Diaries*, 413).

- 14 Not on the basis of new evidence, but prompted by other institutions' interest in the picture, in June 2023, it was decided to change the title of the RAMM painting from "Portrait of an African" to "Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit". Senior Collections Officer Julien Parsons explained the change in an announcement on the museum website: "Faced with the prospect of an accurate but soulless title such as 'unknown individual of African descent' we have opted for something more expressive based on his striking attire". The new title, politely sidestepping the sitter's ethnicity, avoids the blunt and potentially misleading label "African" (what of the sitter's connection to Britain, or perhaps elsewhere?). But it is an enigmatic name, and raises a new paradox of making him seem less distinctive. The conundrum of the subject's actual identity is ongoing, although Parsons hints that in future, science may bring answers where art history has failed.

## Rethinking identities

- 15 A central action of the acclaimed exhibition *Le Modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse* held at the musée d'Orsay in 2019 (New York-Paris-Point-à-Pitre, 2018-2019), was the restitution of identity to the Black models who posed for artists. The exhibition was underpinned by archival study conducted by Denise Murrell and involved the renaming of key artworks. One striking example was the painting by Marie-Guillemine Benoist (1800, Louvre), previously known as *Portrait d'une femme noire*, or *Portrait d'une négresse*, that was renamed *Portrait of Madeleine*, following discovery that the sitter was the Guadeloupian servant of the artist's sister-in-law. Importantly this portrait was produced in the slim interval between the abolition (1794) and restitution (1802) of slavery in France.
- 16 Naming is a complex business, and names given to Black people have routinely been bound up with historic acts of cruelty. But there is no denying the satisfaction engendered by Murrell's solution to the detective puzzle. Faced with the much more tantalizing state of affairs in Exeter set out above, is it possible to frame the question of identity differently? Instead of focusing on a circumscribed self, perhaps one could think instead about possible life experiences. What might the man in the portrait's status and prospects have been in Georgian Britain? That was a question that lay behind a blog entry I wrote to accompany the *In Plain Sight* exhibition. "What Portraits Can Tell us about Black History."
- 17 It is not immediately obvious what this clean-cut figure in European dress had to do with the organised cruelty of that era. With his assured gaze, he looks like someone who was spared the brutality of the slave ships and the plantations. Yet slavery was ubiquitous. It existed in Georgian Britain, but in a context of legal ambiguity that neither explicitly endorsed nor condemned it. Newspaper advertisements are proof that the buying and selling of humans took place. Families relocating back home from

the colonies often brought with them their domestic slaves who had been legally born or sold into slavery abroad. Of the people of African descent living in Britain during the period of the slave trade, many worked as domestics, but the catch-all term "servant" encompassed a wide range of practices, from service to servitude and slavery.

- 18 The story of Ignatius Sancho, previously mentioned, is one of tangible success, but also of compromise and fear of being returned to the galleys. If Gainsborough's portrait shows him at the height of his powers, then less well known is that Sancho worked for over twenty years as a butler and valet to the wealthy Montagu family, a position he held until 1773. Domestic service is therefore implicit in Gainsborough's portrait even if not overtly referenced. The Duchess of Montagu took Sancho to Gainsborough's studio in Bath and paid for the portrait. A gesture of kindness no doubt, but one that reflected well on her as an "enlightened" patron, while still keeping him in a position of inferiority.
- 19 Another proximate example can shed light on what may have been the experience of the man in *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit*. William Ansah Sessarakoo, a member of the powerful Fantu family from West Africa (present day Ghana), sat for his portrait with Gabriel Mathias in London in 1749 (The Menil Collection, Houston). His father was an intermediary in the slave trade with England and France and, in return for services, had secured an education for his son in England. The ship intended to carry Sessarakoo to school sailed via Barbados where, in a dramatic change of fortune, he was captured and sold. His father raised the alarm and Sessarakoo was rescued and sent to London. But in a further cruel twist, the English involvement in his rescue was turned into propaganda for the Royal African Company, itself responsible for shipping hundreds of thousands of Africans into slavery.
- 20 As Pointon and Lugo-Ortiz et al. have argued, the intersections between portraiture and enslavement are contradictory, antithetical even, for portraiture enhances identity whereas enslavement denies it, reducing the person, and their body, to a tool or commodity. The RAMM portrait, and also those of Sancho and Sessarakoo, cannot properly be termed slave portraits since it is unlikely that the sitters were enslaved at the moment of their depiction. But they do invite speculation on how slavery, even well away from Africa or the transatlantic colonies, marred the existence even of apparently "free" Black men and women. The first-hand experiences of slavery by Sessarakoo and Sancho, set alongside their impressive appearances in their portraits, are evidence that both privilege and exploitation were possible within a single human life span. Compared with others of their heritage, these men were fortunate to receive an education and the favour of influential white members of society. But fortunes could change, and they may have been only a step away from capture and deportation.
- 21 The precarious identities of Black subjects undercut the traditional function of portraiture, which is to project wealth and status, assured self-awareness, permanence and dynastic lineage. Moreover, for Black people even of relative privilege living in the age of Transatlantic slavery, the notion of self-expression must have been compromised: a range of possible selves may have been deployed not on a whim, but according to (sometimes urgent) necessity. Finding the right insights into this consciousness from a scholarly perspective is itself problematic. For, as Walter Johnson has argued in an important essay, the very notion of "agency" can be unhelpful when regarding Black subjectivities in a slave context since it is born out of western liberalism in contradistinction to enslavement.



- 22 To have been painted at all, the subject of *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* would have needed the recognition, if not the affirmation, of polite society. It is possible, like Sancho, that he was a domestic servant to a wealthy family. If so the portrait would likely have arisen out of a complex mix of emotional bonds, and a belief in "enlightened" sponsorship that enabled him to advance a certain way in British society but still kept doors closed. As Cécile Bishop has argued in relation to Benoist's portrait of a Black woman, the question of his "consent" to being portrayed is therefore a moot one, since he may not have commissioned his own portrait, and may even have been coerced into adopting a prescribed set of behaviours or aesthetic code.
- 23 If *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* raises troubling questions about historical Black lives then it simultaneously appears to offer a more transcendent interpretation. The man exhibits great poise and assuredness, something that speaks directly to modern day audiences. To draw on Anne Lafont's thesis, one could see the RAMM portrait as visualizing an emerging (albeit partial and imperfect) European consciousness of Black subjectivity in the Enlightenment era. That awareness fuelled discourses around citizenship, and Abolitionist movements. Lafont points to Maurice Quentin de la Tour's two depictions of a servant in the de Rieux family as displaying something of this (both 1741, musée des Beaux-Arts, Orléans, and musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva). In these the man is portrayed alone, and hence he is accorded the dignity of a distinct pictorial space, away from the demeaning context of being merely a servant, an exotic accessory to heads of household. Moreover, the Paris Salon of 1741 provided a unique and public (albeit contingent) set of circumstances whereby the Geneva portrait and La Tour's portrait of de Rieux were exhibited alongside each other on equal terms (Lafont 147-55). *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* is comparable to La Tour's works in temporality, genre and format. But whereas La Tour's sitter looks modestly to the side, the question of the RAMM sitter's humanity is presented directly, as he meets the viewer's gaze.

## Rethinking exhibitions: *In Plain Sight*

- 24 In the past two decades, numerous exhibitions have focused on the historical representation of Black subjects. These include: *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900* (Manchester and Birmingham, 2005-06); *Black is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas* (Amsterdam, 2008); *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe* (Baltimore 2012-13); *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary* (Winter Park 2017); and *Le Modèle noir* (Paris and Pointe-à-Pitre 2019). If these shows had a shared objective to make Black subjects more visible in the perceived exclusionary spaces of major art galleries, then more recent exhibitions have engaged more explicitly with the topic of slavery. With that comes a more profound recognition of how museums are implicated in past injustices: namely, for centuries the cruel trade in (primarily African) humans was integral to a global economy that funded luxury consumption (primarily in Europe), and the material legacy of that era persists abundantly in today's museum collections. Exhibitions that address slavery include: *Histórias Afro-Atlânticas* (São Paulo, 2018; an adapted version also travelled to the USA); *Slavernij: Tien waargebeurde verhalen* (Amsterdam 2021), and *Juan de Pareja, Afro-Hispanic Painter* (New York 2023).
- 25 The direct stimulus for *In Plain Sight* was a loan request for the RAMM portrait for the São Paulo exhibition. *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* is being lent for two further UK exhibitions: *Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance* (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

2023-24); and *Entangled Pasts, 1768–Now. Art, Colonialism and Change* (Royal Academy, London, 2024). Hence RAMM, and the portrait, have been pivotal in generating dialogue and activity through international networks, and the sharing of new themes and approaches.

- 26 Strategically positioned in the *In Plain Sight* exhibition, the *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* provided an opportunity to talk about the Black presence in Devon, on the face of it a green and pleasant part of the country not known for its ethnic diversity. Britain's history of slavery, and its cultural mediation, has hitherto been more visible in the larger and more multicultural port cities of Liverpool and Bristol, as well as London. Liverpool is home to an important museum of slavery, and the Bristol Museums consortium is engaged in numerous projects (eg. Bristol 2023). The RAMM exhibition undertook an important geographical reconfiguration of people and landscape. Taking issue with the symbolic purity of England's greenness and pleasantness took some courage on the part of RAMM's director and curatorial team, for at the same time as they were preparing, publication of the 2020 National Trust report on its historic properties' links with slavery prompted a furious backlash from "anti-woke" campaigners.<sup>2</sup> In the RAMM exhibition slavery was not conveniently offshored or held at the margins: instead attention was brought to the global trade—in goods and people—conducted from the lesser-known estuary ports of Topsham (where there was a sugar factory) and Exeter, and on its entanglements with Devon's country estates, institutions and individuals from all social strata. It was shown that prominent Devon families owned plantations in Florida and the Caribbean, and benefited from reparations after Abolition; one of them, John Rolle, was the largest owner of enslaved people in the Bahamas. Documents recording the monetary value of enslaved people on the Swete family's plantation in Antigua were juxtaposed with the attractive watercolours of Devon by the Reverend John Swete, now in the RAMM collection. The exhibition, enriched by new research, and collaboration with stakeholder and community groups, constituted the biggest effort to date in the region to bring these matters to mainstream audiences.<sup>3</sup>
- 27 In the exhibition, the anonymity of the male sitter in the portrait was used to affirm the presence of other unnamed people of African descent in Devon, the majority of whom would have been "servants," perhaps brought back from the colonies, or labourers. Among the handful of names that were actually recorded are "Philip Scipio... an African" in Werrington in 1784, and Katheren Blackmore, who lived at Shute House in 1619. Another visual artefact from the RAMM collection that was used to emphasize a visible if unnamed presence was an embroidered textile from mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. One of its motifs was a well-dressed woman being shielded from the sun by an unnamed Black page boy holding a parasol.<sup>4</sup> The juxtaposition of personages in a painting and a potentially overlooked detail on a piece of cloth, is a curatorial parallel to Anne Lafont's argument (135-37) about stories emerging unexpectedly from the slippages between genres and media, outside of mainstream classifications.
- 28 The historical presentation was enriched by two contemporary artistic expressions. Commissioned by RAMM, Black British artist Joy Gregory chose to make a large-scale textile piece, *The Sweetest Thing*. Its title foregrounds the history of sugar: sweet when consumed with tea in elegant European drawing rooms but ugly when construed as a trade in brutalized bodies. The artist used cyanotype impressions of her own hair to evoke the swell of the oceans, a backdrop against which were set contrasting images

done in machine embroidery: Devon's stately homes, elegant sugar shakers, the process of Caribbean sugar production and the physical restraints put on enslaved bodies. It is a powerful comment on the interconnectedness of things. Additionally a film was shown of Peter Brathwaite's *Rediscovering Black Portraiture* series. Begun during Covid lockdown as a response to the Getty Museum Challenge, the objective of which was to recreate known artworks (*tableaux vivants*) in one's own home, using household items as costumes and props, and to post them on Twitter, Brathwaite's activities quickly went beyond his opera singer's self-performance, and developed into a full-blown art project with multiple partners (London 2022, Bristol 2023). Brathwaite worked in the same vein as contemporary Black artists like Kehinde Wiley and Maud Sulter who have engaged with old master paintings and period costume. Critically and humorously he deconstructed the racialized elements of many historical artworks featuring Black subjects. If ridicule was a tool applied to debunk many stereotypes (notably the "adoring" gaze of Black servants deplored by Paterson Joseph) then Brathwaite connected in a more serious way with the RAMM portrait. In the man's image he saw his ancestor, Addo, born in Ghana, who endured the Middle Passage, and many years on a Barbados sugar plantation, before eventually engineering his freedom aged eighty-two.

- 29 Testimonies and responses were captured in different ways. A video was made about the portrait, and shown in the gallery, that captured the thoughts of artists, academics, and representatives from the British-African community. In common with other institutions presenting visitors with difficult and traumatic histories, RAMM provided a physical space—named the Reflection Room.<sup>5</sup> The most common reactions recorded in the visitor log-book placed in the room were sadness and shame; several described shock and anger.<sup>6</sup> One visitor wrote: "Part of me feels empty because I don't know the past of my ancestors. Slavery is part of my story and I feel so angry about [what] men can do to other human beings." Another commentator captured well their conflicting responses: "Annoying, boring, scary, difficult." Regret was expressed that the facts were not better known or had not been properly covered in school. There was appreciation for the way Devon's unique history had been brought to light, and also for how the exhibition addressed complex histories, such as the case of a woman named Margaret Taylor, herself of African heritage, who regretted losing an enslaved person who was bonded to her. One visitor commented: "As a black Devonian, I have experienced the exhibition with a sigh of relief, for at last someone had told the story, our story, and told it well, thank you." Reflecting on the portrait, another person wrote: "it gives me hope." Negative judgements tended to constellate around a perceived anti-white bias—manifesting in part as a need to assert Britain's role in slavery's abolition—but by and large the comments were positive.
- 30 As Laura Hodsdon and others have pointed out, exhibitions can be imperfect vehicles for decolonization. By definition they are ephemeral and performative, and it can be hard to avoid the bracketing off the exhibition space, and the message, both physically and psychologically. Some of the most telling visitor comments explicitly linked *In Plain Sight* with their experiences of RAMM's permanent collection. Allusions to the "stolen items" of the World Cultures collection, and the stuffed animals in adjacent natural history galleries showed that consciousness had been heightened of other narratives of cruelty. One lasting legacy of the exhibition will be the way it imprints onto RAMM's presentation and management of its permanent collection. For some years the museum

has been actively engaged in repatriation and restitution, and the Joy Gregory piece is a permanent acquisition.

- 31 To conclude, from a stubborn start, namely archival silence about the origins of sitter and artist, this essay has revealed that RAMM's *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* is highly pertinent to the present moment. Astutely deployed by the RAMM curatorial team and as a travelling exhibit on both sides of the Atlantic, it has become a powerful focal point around which can coalesce different viewpoints, experiences and knowledge bases. The portrait's decoupling from a specific identity creates the possibility for it to function at a symbolic, plural level, acknowledging and giving voice to a wider range of experience. However, there is a latent ethical problem therein: by treating the sitter as too much of an abstraction, too context-free, his presence potentially becomes tokenistic. Inserting him into a discourse on slavery, as was done in the various exhibitions he has featured in, removes him from a unique set of personal circumstances and could look like a forced inscription into a different context. To which an appropriate ethical response would have to be an ongoing search for the actual individual behind the portrait.
- 32 Decolonizing addresses the problems of not looking hard enough, looking the wrong way, or asking the wrong questions; it seeks new ways to address the overlooked, the silent, and the unsayable. The inherent privilege bias of portraiture in the European tradition—towards rich, powerful, western and white—can be countered, as in the *In Plain Sight* exhibition, through giving attention to people who were denied the privilege of portrayal. At various points this essay has pointed to the limitations of traditional art history, and suggested how these might be addressed with recourse to other academic disciplines or creative interventions by contemporary artists, writers and performers. In an exhibition context it has been suggested that disruptions to prevailing hierarchies and systems of classification can be brought about by consciously working across artefacts, genres and media. Finally the holistic methodology of this essay, giving equal weight to a variety of expressions, and attempting to cut across institutional, disciplinary and geographical silos, can establish new points of connection.

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## NOTES

1. This hypothesis was confirmed verbally by RAMM curators who had been in contact with Paterson Joseph.
2. This was coordinated by the Restore Trust pressure group. Despite their claims to political neutrality, there is credible evidence of links to well-funded conservative think-tanks. See Jansen.
3. The scholarship of Todd Gray was a starting point. The Legacy of Devon Slave Ownership Group (LDLG) conducts ongoing research into the region's historic links with the transatlantic slave trade: [https://www.globalcentredevon.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=105&Itemid=379](https://www.globalcentredevon.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=105&Itemid=379)
4. Embroidered panel, mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Accession number 64/1957/11/1.
5. For example, the African American History Museum in Washington DC has a "Contemplative Court," with a cylindrical fountain toplit by a skylight.
6. I am grateful to RAMM for giving me access to all visitors' comments, of which a digest is presented here.

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## ABSTRACTS

Recently renamed, the *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit*, in the RAMM (Exeter) collection, is a rare example from the 18<sup>th</sup> century of an autonomous portrait of a Black sitter. This essay charts a 5-year history of debates between 2018-2023, before, during and after an exhibition: *In Plain Sight: Transatlantic Slavery and Devon* (2022) where the portrait played a central role. RAMM, which connected with other institutions through a series of loans of the portrait, is one of many European and American museums and galleries who are engaging with the legacy of transatlantic slavery. The case of the RAMM portrait allows reflection on decolonizing practices and methodologies, and on the challenges and opportunities for scholars and curators to reframe old paradigms: rethinking evidence, the function of identities in portraiture and the way exhibitions are conceived and staged. The lack of a known sitter enhances the portrait's symbolic function to link with the past, to mediate for the voiceless and shape ongoing present debates, but also runs the risk of tokenism.

Récemment rebaptisé, le *Portrait d'un homme en habit rouge*, issu de la collection du RAMM (Exeter), est un rare exemple du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle d'un portrait autonome d'un modèle noir. Cet article retrace l'histoire de cinq années de débats qui ont eu lieu entre 2018-2023, autour de l'exposition : *In Plain Sight : Transatlantic Slavery and Devon* (2022) où le portrait a joué un rôle central. Le RAMM, qui a établi des liens avec d'autres institutions par le biais d'une série de prêts du portrait, figure parmi de nombreux musées et galeries en Europe et en Amérique qui se confrontent à l'héritage de l'esclavage transatlantique. Le cas du portrait de RAMM permet d'examiner les méthodologies et pratiques décoloniales, et d'identifier les défis et les opportunités pour les chercheurs et les conservateurs de musée. Trois aspects exigent des approches nouvelles: la réflexion autour de la notion de preuve, la fonction des identités dans le portrait et la manière dont les expositions sont conçues et mises en scène. L'absence d'un modèle connu renforce la fonction symbolique du portrait, qui permet d'établir un lien avec le passé, de servir de médiateur pour les sans-voix et de façonner les débats actuels, mais elle fait également courir le risque d'un geste de pure forme.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** portrait/portraiture, décolonialisme/décolonisation, esclavage, identité, évidence, exposition, musée

**Keywords:** portrait/portraiture, decolonizing/decolonization, slavery, identity, evidence, exhibition, museum

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