

Woke In Art and Science



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In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo de Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did they produce? The cuckoo clock. – Orson Welles.

Since the BLM protests began, actions to increase information of slavery and colonialism have become ordained facets of social, political, and cultural organizations. No person doubts that slavery was an evil or that our ancestors were responsible for appalling behavior, or that past attitudes and views on race, gender, and social class are unacceptable today. Nevertheless, the revelations of these unacceptable actions should not cause confusion of mind. It is questionable for the National Gallery in London to start a project

indicating the link of 19th century donors of collections of its great paintings with the slave trade. The project is to find out what links to slave ownership can be traced with the Gallery and to what extent the profits from plantation slavery impacted early history. The data gathered aims to present, objectively, facts relevant to the long and complex history of the transatlantic slave trade. Observers therefore will be able to determine for themselves the nature and extent of these connections.

But is action of this kind an appropriate function for internationally renowned museums such as the National Gallery which is now carrying out an audit of artworks that may have been owned by anyone linked to slavery. At this point, the NG has examined paintings acquired between 1824 and 1880. Already in 2019, Harvard Art Museum began updating the wall labels of some of its holdings to provide information of the complex histories of works such as Ingres' Grande Odalisque, or Toulouse-Lautrec's The Black Countess. Visual art, directly or indirectly, can convey or reflect political or social views or be political barometers in sending coded messages without violating artistic integrity. Yet, visitors to the art museums of the world go to enjoy the rich heritage of artworks on display, not to be subjected to history lessons, available in many fashionable places, of individuals who acquired their wealth through unacceptable means as slave owners or colonialists. It is more appropriate for them to enjoy the cultural experience and to evaluate, and even assess the authenticity of the art works.

John Keats thought "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." The National Gallery in London does not agree, in a sense giving voice to the argument of the French philosopher Foucault that how you structure information is a source of power, and that it can be used as a form of social control.

Orson Welles was right. The National Gallery has its share of

the Renaissance and much more. A few of the treasures as well as the donors and their shortcomings can be mentioned.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* was bought from Henry Howard, the 18th Earl of Suffolk, but his ancestor the 17th Earl had owned slaves. The NG has *The Hay Wain*, the masterpiece by John Constable, and it is more enticing to see it as representation of a perfect English summer day rather than know it is a painting given by Edmund Higginson who inherited money from an uncle who traded in goods made by slaves in South Carolina. It has Raphael's *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, more appreciated as a version of ecstasy and religious passion rather than as an item owned by the rake William Beckford who had plantations in the West Indies.

Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*, an unusual mixture of joy and sad premonitions, may have been influenced by Savonarola, but the NG shows it as once owned by William Ottley who had slaves in Antigua. Raphael's *Pope Julius II* is more important as a work that influenced papal portraiture than one bought from the collection of John Julius Angerstein, London businessman who had slave estates in Grenada, and who gave 38 paintings to NG.

Rembrandt's *Self Portrait at the age of 63* was bought from George Brodrick, Lord Midleton, who came from a slave-owning family. Titian's *Allegory of Prudence*, a strange painting of different images, was once owned by the Rothschild family. Coincidentally, Hannah Rothschild is chair of the Gallery's board of trustees.

The problem for both museums and visitors is that hundreds of art works were either bought by or donated by people whose ancestors were in some way involved in profiting from the slave trade. Are there degrees of separation? Former owners may have been responsible for nauseating or repulsive things but knowledge of this guilt, misplaced or not, made articulate by the museums, should not be allowed to impede aesthetic

appreciation or enjoyment.

Wokery is hard at work in the prestigious National Gallery. Now the guilt occasioned by BLM protests is steaming ahead. Steam engines are being reassessed for their role in the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of colonial power, and links to slavey. The British National Railway Museum in York tells the story of rail transport in Britain and its impact on society. Now the Museum and universities in the north of England, the White Rose University consortium, have begun a large research project, "Slavery and Steam," investigating the economic, social, and infrastructure legacies of steam across the 19th and 20th centuries, and the possible links between slavery and the global slave trade and steam power and the development of railways. The project is interested in the extent to which steam aided imperial expansion and drove sugar mills on plantations and cotton gins in industrial cities, and was a stimulus to industrialization.

It is considering the adoption of steam power on plantations, the global distribution of materials and products, and the stimulus or industrializing of the wealth generated in the colonial economy after the abolition of slavery in the UK and U.S.

Trains are being assessed for their role in facilitating expansion. Steam engines replaced wind power on the plantations and waterpower in British cotton mills. Railways were vital for expansion of colonial power. One example is the KF7 locomotive built in 1935 for the Chinese railroad which was paid for by reparations from an indemnity fund that China had to pay into after the crushing of the Boxer Rebellion. The project research reveals the concern about the train that in 1965 carried Winston Churchill's coffin, from Waterloo station in London to Handborough, Oxfordshire. The fear was that this train would become the object of violent protests because of allegations that Churchill was linked to "colonialism and

empire." That steam engine is now safely at the Museum in York.

Also, Robert Stephenson's Rocket engine built in Newcastle in 1829, which became the model for all subsequent steam locomotives, is endangered because Stephenson's benefactor, Liverpool and Manchester Railway had links to profits stemming from the slave trade., and can be the focus of protest. This railway, the first inter-city line in the world, is said to have been financed by slave owners to transport textiles grown by enslaved Africans, and the deputy head of the rail, John Moss, himself owned slaves. Engines named after Gladstone and Lord Nelson are also in the list of displays considered challenging because of BLM objections to them.

Harry Potter fans may be disappointed that the Hogwarts Express is not to be found in the Museum in York, but will be interested there is a platform 9 3/4 plaque.

After art and science where does wokery go next? Somewhere there's cancel culture, how faint the tune, somewhere it's not heavenly, how high the moon.