

Beyond Colour

Reflections on 'London, Sugar & Slavery' at the Museum in Docklands, London¹

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Introduction

This paper reviews the recent opening of the gallery “*London, Sugar and Slavery*” at the Museum in Docklands, in London, England. By looking at the exhibition from inside as well as from a wider context, this text links the main aims of the gallery and the Museum with current discussions of museology and material culture. Thereby this work assesses and underlines the importance of the historical object as a trace and representation of the social; the museum as a meeting place of contemporary debates and the material culture studies as a common place to bring together, objects, people and social and cultural phenomena. These three points have been found clearly within the gallery and therefore it becomes a watch-worthy example of one of the several roles of material culture in society.

The context and the exhibition

On the 25th of March 1807, Britain abolished its [Atlantic] slave trade, its slave system in 1833, and its [Caribbean] colonial apprenticeship in 1838³. One would assume that after nearly two centuries, issues of slavery, including its historiography as well as the practice itself, have been studied in depth and abolished. However, neither of these things has happened. On the contrary, and surprisingly, humanity had to wait about two hundred years to see the first studies

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³ DAVID RICHARDSON (Ed.). *Abolition and its Aftermath: The Historical Context 1790-1916*, London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1985, p.8.

of Atlantic slave trade and sadly humanity is still waiting for the abolition of all forms of slavery.

Thus, besides being the bicentennial of the British slavery abolition, and a mark upon the time, the year 2007 saw a rise in exhibitions, publications, group activities and other types of academic and political activity around slavery in the British context.

As my particular interests are currently centred on the study of the flow of goods between Europe and Latin America in the 19th century, this particular exhibition grabs my attention not only because its geographical nearness but also because I believe that after analysing and finding the culprit and the victim, what may become more important is to understand the Atlantic slave trade as a form of *cross-cultural exchange*. Thus, beyond the blood on the floor and the human cruelty, what we have is an important study of economic and political history as well as a material culture and historical culture one.

As Herbert Klein points out:

The Atlantic slave trade was one of the most complex economic enterprises known to the preindustrial world. It was the largest transoceanic migration in history up to that time; it promoted the transportation of people and goods among three different continents; it involved an annual fleet of several hundred ships; and it absorbed a very large amount of European capital³.

Even though the human drama was terrifying and over 20 million African slaves were transported and “used” as slaves, it is important to underline that the main idea that sustained the Atlantic Slave trade was not a war of race or colour, but an economic enterprise. In looking at this phenomenon in this way, we can grasp not only the human

drama but also the importance of material and symbolic exchange and its consequent impact in the hybridization processes. Africans were transported without regard for their beliefs, languages and traditions, but of course, by moving people European slave traders were literally moving cultures as well.

The importance of African culture is undeniable in the formation of identities in the Caribbean and a large extension of Latin America. Indians, Europeans and Africans were to become an inseparable unity that shaped contemporary Latin America and the Caribbean. The forced migration of African people did affect the founding of new societies in the Americas as much as its European counterpart did.

Within the context of the two-hundredth anniversary of the Act of Abolition in Britain and the intention of connecting a fact of the past with the plurality of a place like London, the new permanent gallery at Museum in Docklands is opened to face the challenge of tying historical facts with the contemporary shape of London’s society.

The Museum in Docklands is tinted by a number of contrasts. Geographically placed in the most modern area of London nonetheless, it is housed in an early-nineteenth-century Georgian sugar warehouse. This fact appears to be the essence of the “*London, Sugar and Slavery*” exhibition.

The Museum is an offshoot of the Museum of London; therefore it deals with London-related issues. The surviving building lies on the Thames banks and is surrounded by skyscrapers along with a network of restaurants and cafés, old ships -that seem to be part of a post card-, and busy executives who rush through the streets of what is known today as Canary Wharf.

The Museum in Docklands aims to “make public” the commercial life of London. By displaying

³ HERBERT S. KLEIN, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 75.

artefacts, models and pictures the museum tells the history of the port of London from Roman times to the closure of the central London docks in the 1970s.

The new permanent gallery was opened on November 10th of 2007. This exhibition has become a part of the permanent museum display and it does seem to be placed spatially within the same chronological order. Therefore, it has been sandwiched between the 16th and the 19th century galleries.

After passing through a theatrical scenario that attempts to reconstruct some of the different elements which were to be found in London's late 18th century Legal Quays, in terms of architecture, lights, sounds and people's voices, you will face a black wall with the name of the gallery on it: "*London, Sugar and Slavery*". Forming a straight angle, the same black wall extends its vertical surface to house several hundreds names of people who were reported in slave-trader books of that time.

After this simple but attractive element you find out the main purpose of the gallery, which is to bring together the untold past of London to the Londoners. The introduction gets straight to the point of connecting historical fact to the way Londoners feel about the city nowadays. By screening a continuous video we can see a good brief of ideas from the people behind the gallery.

In this introductory stage you encounter then, reference points to the past, such as William Ansah Sessarakoo portrait from the mid-1700s as well as images of black communities in London. There are also a few African masks in a display case. Four or five panels shape the introduction to the gallery. The small and very one-way corridor takes you to the main gallery.

Once you reach the main gallery the exhibition becomes a collage of objects, posters and



▲ BROCHURE launched along with the exhibition. Downloadable from: <http://www.museumindocklands.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Special/LSS/>

well-lighted display cases. Letters and objects are organized by themes and posters and interactive elements play a pedagogical role. A few computer screens allow visitors to challenge themselves through interactive questionnaires. There is a particular table that seems to be the meeting point for students and special groups. While I was there, a group of school children received a talk by a woman dressed up in clothes of the era.

As there is no proscribed order to go around the gallery I just followed the elements that caught my eye. There is a very illustrative map showing the "so-called" Atlantic slave trade triangle. A few account papers from an English slave trader, showing the economic and financial facet of slavery. Few

iconic objects, such as chains, bracelets and a walking stick, all locked in display cases. Finally, there is a piece of propaganda against the apprenticeship system printed on a sugar sack of that time hanging from the wall. Personally I found this a very impressive and iconic object.

This part of the gallery may be circulated several times in different order. Since there is no chronological reference, the visitor may not have to jump orderly. This permits people to trace their own route but, they might lose any chronological reference they may have. Roughly speaking, we are looking through three centuries of slave trade, with different stages, characters and conditions. The gallery is a clear attempt to present the particularities of different forms of slavery as well as the impact on the way an urban society behaves (e.g. London).

Contemporary accounts are placed at the back of the gallery, opposite the entrance. There, photos of people in ex-British colonies are displayed, along with them the surviving marks of African culture that are now celebrated and admired a most direct reference to the African Diaspora. However, the gallery path does seem to be incomplete: you come from the 18th century and head on straight to the still miserable condition of people in the twenty-first century. The processes of how African culture was appropriated up to the present are missing and the long battle, not only for freedom but also for cultural emancipation, seems to be irrelevant.

Apart from a brochure and a pedagogical pack, both of which can be downloaded through the Museum-in-Docklands website, a lack of promotional material such as catalogues, leaflets, books or printed material is evident. Tom Wareham comments: "there is no one at the moment. We produced one for the launch. There were no plans to produce a book to go with it [...] we're also planning a [...] publication to go with the

gallery which may come out in November this year, sort of an anniversary of the opening of the gallery"⁴.

Along with this exhibition, 2007 saw a hectic group of academic, political and museum activities around the Atlantic Slave Trade. In Liverpool, one of the largest slave ports throughout 17th and 18th centuries, a permanent gallery that was housed at the National Museums Liverpool, became an entire museum under the name of the International Slavery Museum. The Victoria and Albert Museum also held a temporary exhibition titled "*Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design*" which ran from February to June of 2007. Questions about slavery and its connection to the present 'were explored in this exhibition via the works of eleven international artists. [...] the interventions created a visual dialogue between historic design objects, many rooted in imperialism, and compelling, emotive examples of recent art and design'⁵. In Bristol, The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum holds a temporary exhibition titled "*Breaking the Chains: The fight to End Slavery*"⁶. The National Waterfront Museum in Wales held the exhibition "*Everywhere in Chains*"⁷ which was opened until last November of 2007. Likewise, The National Portrait Gallery⁸ in London 'has created a new gallery trail that highlights some of the individuals in the Collection who have been associated with the history of the slave

⁴ TOM WAREHAM, Personal Interview, April 4th 2008. Conducted by the author.

⁵ http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/contemporary/past_exhns/uncomfortabletruths/curatorsintro/index.html

⁶ See: <http://www.empiremuseum.co.uk/exhibitions/st2007.html>

⁷ See: http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/news/?article_id=400

⁸ See: http://www.npg.org.uk/live/abo_tr_1.asp



trade⁹. The Birmingham Museum has dedicated all its efforts to display the account of Equiano, one of the key characters in the studies of slavery from the slave's perspective. The display at Birmingham is simply titled: "*Equiano Exhibition*"¹⁰.

To cite some international examples of the slavery buzz in 2007 we can mention: "*A Slave Ship Speaks: The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie*" held at Historical Museum of Southern Florida¹¹, in the United States. In the same country the University

▲ PICTURE TAKEN by the author. April 2008

of Virginia Art Museum is holding the exhibition: "*Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*"¹² from January to April 2008.

Connected to these international events, UNESCO, has grouped a wide range of research projects under the name: "*The Slave Route Project*"¹³, since 1993. Through this five-continent endeavor-

⁹ See: http://www.npg.org.uk/live/abo_tr_1.asp

¹⁰ See: <http://www.bmag.org.uk/index.php?type=event&maincat=3&subcat=0&subelement=0&eventid=8>

¹¹ See: <http://www.historical-museum.org/exhibits/hm/sss.htm>

¹² See: http://www.artknowledge.com/University_of_Virginia_Art_Museum_Landscape_of_Slavery.html

¹³ See: http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.phpURL_ID=25659&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

our we may find different kinds of projects such as libraries, centres of research, exhibitions and local-community activities.

By naming some of the new galleries and exhibitions that have been opened we can understand that studies on this particular area seem to be a place of common interest both in the academic and political community.

The Curatorship and the Content

It is very obvious that the gallery is focused on the socio-cultural phenomenon caused by the sugar trade between the Americas, namely the British Caribbean Colonies and England, namely the port of London.

Roughly speaking the display concentrates on the period from the late 16th to the early 19th century. There is no object, display or screen, related to previous forms of slavery, not even previous forms of sugar and slavery. Even though '...the identification of slavery with sugar was well established long before the conquest [invasion] of America. The techniques of sugar production and slave plantation agriculture, which developed on the Atlantic islands and later in the New World, had their own origins in the eastern Mediterranean in the early Middle Ages'¹⁴.

The exhibition focuses on the role of the port of London in the sugar and slave trade. 'A key artefact in the new gallery, the surviving papers of Thomas and John Mills, who owned plantations in St. Kitts and Nevis, provides us with glimpses into the lives of both the enslaved and the slaver. They provide important insight into life on the plantation'¹⁵

along with these papers may I also mention as important and very representative objects, the letters by Ignatius Sancho, which gives us a good understanding of an African slave's life. As a part of the material culture closely related to that time the museum has displayed a table from about 1823-1833 that 'was used by members of the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery to draft the Abolition Bill'¹⁶. A sugar bowl from about 1825 has been displayed too. 'It was designed by Josiah Wedgwood and adopted as the seal of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery in England in the 1780s [...] The bowl is inscribed on the reverse with "East India Sugar not made By Slaves. By Six Families using East India, instead of West India Sugar, one slave less is required"¹⁷.

The main curator of the gallery was the Maritime Historian Tom Wareham, and according to him:

[The gallery] was designed with a number of things in mind. One of the most important things we thought about was the fact you can put so much information into the gallery but you can never tell the whole story and you can never provide all the answers. [...] as a curator what you hope is you can get people to think and to react, so the gallery is designed in a way to, I wouldn't say provoke, but to invoke ideas and discussions and that happens. People go up there and they want to talk about it. But the other key thing about [...] it is a gallery, which was intended to be used by teachers, in particular. So basically the teacher can go with a group of school children¹⁸...

Reflection

At first sight the contents of the new gallery seems to be superficial and generalised. Nonetheless as soon as you relate, not only the new

¹⁴ KLEIN HERBERT S. *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 8-9.

¹⁵ *London, Sugar and Slavery* press pack downloaded from www.museumdocklands.org.uk. p. 4-5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁸ TOM WAREHAM, Personal Interview, 4 April 2008. Conducted by the author.



gallery but also the entire museum, to a 14-year-old target audience, the methods, the display, the routes and the content become more sensible and appropriate.

It is clear then that whatever the content of the gallery is, it needs to be explained through symbolic, pictorial and interactive resources. In this particular case, the exhibition needs to attract the attention of the visitors first of all, then involve them in a sort of mutual game and lastly, make the museum experience as enjoyable as possible. Throughout these different stages, information must be transmitted to the visitor.

In this sense I would say that the exhibition is a mixture between traditional display methods –ver-

▲ **MAN OBSERVING A VIDEO** that is integrated with the rest of the components of the gallery. Picture taken by the author. April 2008.

tical and immaculate surfaces where images are hung and tend to keep a nonexistent, yet measured distance between the object and the spectator – and on the other hand, a small sample of interactive display methods in which the spectator is invited to touch and modify the exhibition in a sort of custom-made museum experience.

Generally speaking, the display is clear, effective, well balanced and well designed. I may conclude that the museum experience is a good one. However, although the port of London's history

frames the entire gallery that is also contextualised within the earlier and later periods of London trade activities, sugar and slavery, or in a broader sense slavery, was (is?) a global phenomenon. And although London did play an important role, there were others players during the more than 300 years of transoceanic slave trade.

The causes and consequences of a three-century socio-economic phenomenon are very little explained in the new gallery. For instance the role of the Dutch is totally dismissed, as Klein notes:

The rise of the French and British sugar colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries had been made possible by the dynamic intervention of the Dutch in the first half of the 17th century. Until the late 1650s the British and French West Indies had been dependent upon Dutch assistance in all aspects of production, commercialization, and the provisioning of their African slave labourers¹⁹.

If I went there without any previous knowledge I would feel that slavery and particularly sugar and slavery was a British or even a London-centred phenomenon. There is no mention of French, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch slave systems, even though the Atlantic slave trade was a dynamic economy that did involve Europe, the whole Caribbean (not only the Antilles) and the West Coast of Africa.

There is no mention of other products that were also cultivated in the British colonies and more generally in the whole Caribbean. Tobacco and coffee were important too.

Apart from slave traders, slave owners, African slaves and the group of opponents, there were another cast of characters, consisting of the sailors, captains and African 'slave hunters', just to mention a few that indeed were involved with the

slave trade. These 'other' characters were missing from the gallery. In general therefore, the exhibition lacks a wider context and consequently no comparison or contrast between different forms of slavery can be made.

Nevertheless, the new gallery constitutes a contribution to the study of slavery from diverse perspectives, including historical, material, immaterial and social reflection, in a field that surprisingly has been studied very little. As Klein has pointed out:

The Atlantic slave trade remained one of the least studied areas in modern Western historiography until the past quarter century. This late start was not due to any lack of sources, for the materials available for its study were abundant in both printed and manuscript form from the very beginning. Rather [...] it was ignored because of this close association with European imperialism, which resulted in a lack of interest in a morally difficult problem and to a lack of methodological tools by which to analyze the complex quantitative data²⁰.

Finally, I would like to underline the very useful work of Herbert Klein, in particular his Bibliographic essay, in which he summarises the development of slave-trade studies. Furthermore, the author goes beyond that by listing most of the work done throughout the world until very recently.

The recently published book by James Walvin; *The Trader, the Owner and the Slave* gives us the opportunity to look the same phenomena through three of the main characters of the conflict.

Census reports, personal accounts, economic history, cultural history, diaries and letters have been published recently, which constitute a very fruitful source for all who are interested in the routes of objects and the formations of hybrid material cultures. Unfortunately, very little about

¹⁹ KLEIN, *Op. cit.*, p. 57-58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213.



the relation between material culture and slave trade has been written so far.

Conclusion

Through the study of socio-economic phenomenon, framed in a particular historical context, we may be able to better understand the shape of our contemporary material culture. We can argue, once again, that the economic, political and social issues became as important as the study of the objects (*objectology*) themselves.

On the other hand, it is worth pointing out the importance of material culture studies and its exhibitions, as a way to make people reflect upon social and political incidents through objects and

▲ **INTRODUCTORY PANEL** to the gallery that shows slaves' names. Picture taken by the author. April 2008

the gallery as a space of reflection. The historical object becomes a vehicle of critical reflection by playing the social role of linking past facts to present events.