

The West Indies brought vast profits to the European colonists, particularly as the sugar industry took off. But they also required a constant flow of slaves from Africa to work the plantations. Two-thirds of these slaves were used in the production of sugar. The rest were forced into harvesting coffee, cotton and tobacco, or in some cases, mining. By the late 18th century by far the most successful West Indian colonies belonged to Britain, with British Guiana and key islands such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados giving it an edge over all other competitors. This advantage was reinforced when France lost its most important colony, Saint-Domingue (western Hispaniola, now Haiti) to a slave revolt in 1791.

Rudolph Walker OBE
Actor

Born in Trinidad in 1939, Rudolph broke many barriers by working extensively in theatre and becoming the first black person to star in a major television series. He arrived in Britain in 1960 and established himself in repertory, including the Nottingham Playhouse, the Mermaid and the Malvern theatres. His big break came in 1972, when he was cast as one of the main characters in the television series *Love Thy Neighbour*. Despite its controversial use of racist language, this was a popular series, unprecedented on television at the time. Walker continued to perform at the Tricycle, the Theatre Royal Stratford, the Royal Court and the Young Vic. He regularly appears on the BBC television soap *Eastenders*. Rudolph received an OBE in the 2006 Queen's Birthday Honours List for his services to drama.



PORTRAIT OF FRANCIS WILLIAMS

Unknown Jamaican, British or American painter, about 1745, oil on canvas. Museum no. P.83-1928. Room 52, *Portraiture*

Francis Williams was born around 1700 to John and Dorothy Williams, a free couple who within ten years of being given their freedom had amassed significant property and wealth through Jamaica's sugar industry. When his father died in 1723, Francis inherited a substantial fortune, including land, trading interests and slaves, but he preferred to live off his inheritance than attempt to increase it. Although to modern eyes Francis is compromised by his profiting from enslaved Africans, he is also a notable example of a rich, free black man who wrote Latin verse and enjoyed a European lifestyle.

The portrait presents Francis as a scholar in his study. The accoutrements of his education and learning – a celestial and a territorial globe, dividers and other instruments – are clearly visible. Beautifully bound books line the shelves behind him, and his left hand rests on an open book headed *Newton's Philosophy*. But while the painting clearly locates Francis within the tradition of European scholarship, it also – by virtue of the open window that reveals the sparkling landscape of Spanish Town – sets him firmly within a Jamaican setting.

"Notice the European setting of the painting, the representation of the 'exotic' background also. Remember too, that black people over the centuries held prominent roles within British society."

COMB CASE

Jamaica, 1673, tortoiseshell. Museum no. 524-1877. Room 56C, Case 4: *Britain and the Indies 1660–1720*

The tortoiseshell case and combs are among the earliest surviving works of art made in Jamaica that reflect European influence. The style of the decoration suggests that they were all made by the same unknown artist. The decoration on the case relates directly to Britain's seizure of the island. The newly awarded arms of Jamaica are engraved on one side, while three plants important to Jamaica's economy are represented on the other.

"All made by hand, maybe by an African or Arawak. See the artistry that existed, fantastic creativity. Growing up in Trinidad you made your own objects – even a scooter, we probably invented the wooden wheels for it! The image on the case reminds me of a theatrical setting."



SNUFF GRATER

Britain, about 1700, silver with steel grating plate. Museum no. 1348-1902. Room 56C, Case 4: *Britain and the Indies 1660–1720*

Europeans first discovered tobacco through their encounters with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, who used it in barter and trade. A robust and easily adaptable plant, it was transferred in the early 17th century to Britain's colonies in the southern states of America and the West Indies.

This snuff box has a hinged lid and two compartments. A block of compressed, powdered snuff would have been kept in the smaller one, while the larger compartment, fitted with a perforated grater, would have held the grated snuff powder. The tightly closing lid is essential for keeping snuff dry. This lid is engraved with the monogram 'HE' for the Edmonds family of Yorkshire and the family crest of a three-masted ship in full sail.

"Interesting that a ship is the engraved image on the grater, particularly when you remember the way slaves were transported from Africa and the agonising torture of the Middle Passage, many to harvest this tobacco crop. Interesting the accessibility to cigarettes today and the numerous health warnings that come with them."



SUGAR BOX

Possibly by John Sutton, Britain, 1683–4, silver. Museum no. 53-1865. Room 56C, *Britain and the Indies 1660–1720*

Made for storing sugar, this box has a clasp and can be locked. Its decoration, in a style known as 'Chinoiserie', is similar to that used in embroidery. The motifs were usually taken from the decoration on Chinese porcelain and other works of art imported from the East.

Sugar was produced in such terrible conditions that the slaves rebelled. Between 1640 and 1713 there were seven slave revolts in the British sugar islands. The situation in Jamaica was especially volatile. There, plantation slaves ran away to join settlements of escaped slaves, or 'maroons', established during the earlier Spanish colonisation of the island. In Britain, too, sugar provided a focus for the abolitionist movement. Like today's Fair Trade campaigners, abolitionists in the late 18th century urged a national boycott of West Indian sugar.



WILLIAM BECKFORD AGED 21

From a 1782 oil painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, etched and engraved by T.A. Dean, 1835. Museum no. E.2046-1919. Room 120, Case 22: *William Beckford, the Collector*

William Thomas Beckford was one of the great collectors and patrons of his era. To house his collections, he built a vast Gothic extravaganza known as Fonthill Abbey.

The enormous wealth on which Beckford's lifestyle depended came from the exploitation of enslaved Africans. His father was England's first sugar plantation millionaire and his mother was the widow of Francis Marsh, another Jamaican planter. With the abolition of slavery, however, the Jamaican plantations ceased to be profitable. Falling sugar prices caused Beckford to sell some of his estates, but the income raised by the devalued plantations was not enough to meet his debts. Forced to sell Fonthill Abbey and its contents, he retired to Lansdown Crescent, Bath, with a small selection of his art. He died at Bath in 1844.

Beckford's legacy is preserved in the objects collected by him now residing in the National Gallery and the V&A.

"Amazing. Everyone would hail, 'Beckford, look at what he's done for British art and design', not really understanding on whose back he acquired such wealth and fortune. The text panel here is even misleading, as it should first relate to how Beckford amassed his wealth, which for me is the most important piece of information."

