



## Uncomfortable Truths – the shadow of slave trading on contemporary art and design

*An exhibition marking the bicentenary of the outlawing of the British slave trade – part of a national initiative, 'Remembering Slavery'*

20 February to 17 June 2007

Two hundred years after the bill outlawing the British slave trade was passed by Parliament, the V&A is marking the event with an exhibition of work by eleven contemporary artists from Europe, Africa and America. Their work draws directly on the legacies of imperialism and slave trading, prompting the viewer to consider the impact of slavery historically and in today's world.

The V&A has commissioned new works by four leading international artists. Former Turner Prize nominee **Yinka Shonibare** MBE will display *Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing*, a headless archer dressed in period clothes made of African textiles. Beninese artist **Romuald Hazoumé** will create a sculpture of a huge serpent for the John Madejski Garden. Fellow Beninese artist **Julien Sinzogan's** mural of a slave ship below deck will be in the Grand Entrance. British artist **Keith Piper** will create pieces in response to the V&A's own collections in a series of interventions entitled *Lost Vitrines*.

American artists include **Fred Wilson** who represented America in the 2003 Venice Biennale. Wilson's *Regina Atra*, a sumptuous copy of the British Royal crown encrusted with black diamonds, will be on display. Video artist **Michael Paul Britto's** irreverent and thought-provoking film of black slaves dancing to the Britney Spears hit *I'm a Slave 4 U* will be on view for the first time in the UK.

Other African artists are Ghanaian **El Anatsui**, one of Africa's foremost contemporary artists, and **Tapfuma Gutsa**, one of the most exciting sculptors working in Zimbabwe.

European artists will include **Lubaina Himid** who will be displaying over a dozen of her life-size, painted figures of black slaves from the series, *Naming the Money*. Emerging British artist **Anissa-Jane** will show recent works that incorporate materials of the slave trade such as coffee beans and cocoa butter; and German artist **Christine Meisner** will show her film documenting the life of a Brazilian slave.

The works will be displayed throughout the Museum, drawing attention to the hidden, overlooked and even contentious histories that link some of the historic objects on permanent display to the slave trade of past centuries. A series of trails will lead visitors to objects in the collections that will underline this theme.

Curator Zoe Whitley said: "We hope these contemporary interventions will encourage people to think about slavery in today's world as well as its historic connections to British culture. This exhibition shows up some uncomfortable truths, such as how the lifestyle of the privileged classes was dependent on the suffering of slaves."

**Uncomfortable Truths** is part of a nationwide initiative to commemorate the abolition of slavery, 'Remembering Slavery'.

**ENDS**

#### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

It is estimated that 12 million Africans were put onto slave ships before slavery was abolished.

The UN estimates that 100 million children are exploited in forms of slavery today.

The V&A will host a two-day conference, *From Cane Field to Tea Cup: The Impact of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on Art and Design* on 23 and 24 February 2007. It aims to examine the links between slavery and the production and collection of objects of material culture as domestic and decorative artefacts. The conference will focus on the V&A collections, including furniture, ceramics, metalwork and textiles, sculpture, architecture, prints and painting.

For more information, or to book a place, call 020 7942 2211.

For details of the national initiative to commemorate the abolition of slavery visit the DCMS website at [www.culture.gov.uk](http://www.culture.gov.uk).

Entry to *Uncomfortable Truths* is free. For PUBLIC information, visit [www.vam.ac.uk/uncomfortabletruths](http://www.vam.ac.uk/uncomfortabletruths) or call 020 7942 2000.

**For further PRESS information please contact Frankie Arnold or Meera Hindocha in the V&A press office on 020 7942 2502/2497. E-mail [press.office@vam.ac.uk](mailto:press.office@vam.ac.uk) (not for publication). A selection of high resolution press images are available to download from [www.image.net](http://www.image.net).**

## NOTES ON ARTISTS

### **Anissa-Jane**

Anissa-Jane explores the qualities of brown paper as a metaphor for skin; paper is treated with materials such as cocoa butter, grease, and human hair. *Lucy* is a photographic image printed on brown paper of a shackled ankle which will be shown among the costume displays at the V&A. The Henrietta Street parlour in the British Galleries will provide a temporary home for four formal dining chairs, stuffed with coffee beans and reupholstered with treated brown paper.

### **El Anatsui**

El Anatsui from Ghana is one of Africa's foremost contemporary artists. His installation *Akua's Surviving Children*, originally created for a Danish project, consists of charred pieces of driftwood bound together in anthropomorphic shapes. Anatsui's work will be displayed in the British Galleries.

### **Michael Paul Britto**

The American video artist and graphic designer will present his work in Britain for the first time. His work shows scenes of black slaves dancing choreographed moves to the Britney Spears hit *Slave 4 U*, confronting issues of language and shared histories.

### **Tapfuma Gutsa**

Gutsa is one of the most prominent sculptors working in his native Zimbabwe. He has broken free of traditions by using a combination of materials such as stone, metal, wood, wire, paper and string. His work *Ancient Voyages*, depicting a musical instrument, will be displayed next to a bust of Handel. *Tribute to Sango*, a granite sculpture, will be presented in a gallery adjacent to the British Sculpture Gallery.

### **Romuald Hazoumé**

In his own words, Romuald Hazoumé's work represents a "warning against all forms of modern slavery". Using found objects, the Beninese artist will construct a sculpture for the John Madjeski Garden of a serpent eating its own tail, creating a circle to represent the continuing slave trade.

### **Lubaina Himid**

Over a dozen life-sized, painted figures of black slaves from Himid's series *Naming the Money* will be interspersed throughout the British Galleries. The painted figures will offer a reminder of the often invisible role black slaves had in British history.

### **Christine Meisner**

This will be the first time that German artist Meisner's work has been shown in the UK. Based on research in Nigeria and Brazil, her "video tale" *Recovery of an Image* recounts a moving epic of the life of a freed slave. Select drawings from the series *Quilombolisation* will also be on view.

### **Keith Piper**

Piper was a member of the BLK Art Group, a West Midlands-based association of black British art students. The group sought to explore issues relevant to aspects of black political struggles through contemporary art. More recently, he took part in the artistic web project Black Atlantic (2004) hosted by the House of World Cultures, Berlin. His newly commissioned work questions the aesthetics of display and assumed hierarchies of knowledge.

### **Yinka Shonibare MBE**

Best known for his *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, Yinka Shonibare's commission will be *Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing*, a headless archer dressed in period costume made of African textiles – a comment on the leisure classes who benefited most from the slave trade. The work will be shown in the opulent Norfolk House Music Room.

### **Julien Sinzogan**

Beninese artist, Sinzogan, will be showing a new commission – a large-scale painting of a slave ship, which will be displayed in the Museum's Grand Entrance.

### **Fred Wilson**

Wilson is renowned for his subversive reconfigurations of museum collections. His featured work *Regina Atra* raises issues of imperialism and race, and will be displayed in the Norfolk House Music Room.