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VICTORIANS LIVE

Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800–1900
SHEARER WEST

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BLACK VICTORIANS: BLACK PEOPLE IN BRITISH ART 1800–1900

By Shearer West

WRITERS ON VICTORIANS and race have generally seen Britain's nineteenth-century black population through the lens of largely white debates about abolitionism, scientific taxonomy, imperial politics, or missionary aspiration. This occupation with Victorian self-fashioning has been bound up with fantasies of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and the concomitant inferiority of Africans. As Douglas Lorimer cautioned in his classic *Colour, Class, and the Victorians*, we are drawn to this Eurocentric way of thinking by "scientific, literary, or graphic" representations of "race" which perpetuate stereotypes that do not fully reflect complex inconsistencies in attitudes and behaviour. Despite Lorimer's call for a more subtle approach to the study of British race relations in the nineteenth century, these stereotypes maintain a powerful presence.

One therefore might imagine that an exhibition entitled *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800–1900* (Manchester City Art Gallery, 1 October 2005–6 January 2006; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 28 January–2 April 2006) would fall into the trap Lorimer cautions us against, as visual representations of any sort are often partial, misleading, or reliant on a bold or simple effect to achieve their aims. However, the imaginative and revealing selection by the exhibition's curator, Jan Marsh, usefully topples any assumptions of monolithic attitudes to black people in Victorian Britain. Although racial stereotyping is not absent from the exhibition, there are very few examples of what could be construed as explicitly racist imagery. Scientific representations, like the offensive illustrations in Robert Knox's *Races of Men* (1850), are notably missing, and the few caricatures in the exhibition, such as the execrable *Tregear's Black Jokes* (1830), express social anxieties through giggly punning rather than the fear and venom that tend to accompany racially motivated visual representation. Marsh is quite catholic in her interpretation of both "black" (which here refers

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Figure 24. Thomas Jones Barker, *The Secret of England's Greatness*, 1863. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

to people of African origin, but includes some near Eastern examples) and "Victorians" (as objects in the exhibition sometimes predate Victoria's reign and are not exclusively British). These decisions reinforce the porous nature of geographical and temporal boundaries and reveal the history of black Victorians to be both circum-Atlantic and tied to legacies of slavery and abolitionism.

What *Black Victorians* exposes is the myriad ways in which black people were depicted in nineteenth-century Britain, and how resistant much of this representation is to a simple explanation. Very few objects in the exhibition are well-known, but those that are take on further nuances in the light of works hanging around them. One of these paintings, Thomas Jones Barker's mammoth *The Secret of England's Greatness* (1862) (Figure 24), depicts Victoria presenting a Bible to an African prince. Based on an apocryphal tale, but rooted in a convention of fêting African princes, the painting represents the anonymous black noble genuflecting to the gracious Queen, who solemnly bestows her largesse by metaphorically presenting both Christianity and British superiority to the African continent in the form of a Bible. The creation of this work during the American Civil War, in light of Victoria's well-known sympathy with the abolitionist cause, makes this a paean to her tolerance, piety, and generosity, while, as Neil Parsons has argued, African guests were inevitably bombarded with symbols of Britain's military, royal and religious authority.

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Looking at this work on the walls of the London National Portrait Gallery, where it normally hangs, it is difficult to see it as anything other than a piece of shameless propaganda. However, in the *Black Victorians* exhibition, the context is different: the painting shares the exhibition space with photographs of Victoria's adopted and pampered black goddaughter, Sarah Forbes Bonetta; an image of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first black bishop of the Anglican church; and a splendid portrait of a Nubian, *Mohammed* by Princess Victoria, who wrote enthusiastic letters to her mother about her progress on the work. Images such as these give a flavour of the diversity of both the black presence in Britain and Victoria's own relationship with the black population. Henry Room's engraving of an actual visitation by five Cape Province ambassadors – who arrived in London in 1836 to defend their land rights before the House of Commons – presents an antechamber full of African men (black and white) dressed and posing as Victorian gentlemen. It was, in fact, this rather bland image of diplomatic exchange, rather than the exotically garbed prince of *England's Greatness*, that was later appropriated by James Cowles Prichard in *The Natural History of Man: Inquiries into the Modifying Influence of Physical and Moral Agencies on the Different Tribes of the Human Family* (1845) as an "illustration" of ethnic types.

The exhibition quietly invites such multiple readings of many of its objects. Artists were capable of exploiting the Victorian obsession with narrative and moralistic subject matter to perpetuate knee-jerk anxieties about otherness, as in William Mulready's *Toyseller* (1857–62), which depicts a child shrinking from the strangeness of a black merchant. They could equally employ their black subjects to highlight the pomposity and thoughtlessness of white youths, as in Thomas Faed's *Visit to the Village School* (1852), where the teased black servant maintains a stoic composure amidst the caricatured schoolboys. Indeed, a kind of romanticised nobility dominates many of the images of blacks in the exhibition, often in contrast to the representation of white subjects. Thus John Bourne's comic *A Meeting of Connoisseurs* (1807) focuses its jest on the pot bellies and outré expressions of the seemingly bewildered artists. Although the black model is also the brunt of humour, this does not rest in his composed and brawny body, but in the broom he holds in the place of a weapon and the fright of the cat and children who have crept into the room to spy on the life class. Nobleness of composure and physique is particularly apparent in the polychrome sculptures by John Bell and Pietro Calvi. Calvi's *Othello* (1874), *African Queen* (c.1881) and *Arab Chief* (c.1860) all employ a stark contrast of materials to draw the black faces out of white marble with stern or contemplative expressions and powerfully delineated features. Genre paintings of life in Cairo by Frederick Goodall and John Lewis on the one hand perpetuate stereotypes of both gender and race in their scenes of harems and slave markets, but on the other, reveal the fascination, desire for and even strange familiarity with otherness that has been identified by John MacKenzie as part of the range of Orientalist imagery.

The polychrome sculptures and Orientalist genre scenes also reinforce another key theme of the exhibition – colour as both a social signifier and a practical artistic issue. It is notable that we do not know how many black people were inhabitants of Britain in the nineteenth century, as censuses did not record ethnic origin or skin colour. Caroline Bressey's excellent work on the photographic archive of Barnardo's has thrown open another issue: that it is not always clear even from photographs whether the subject was white, black, or of mixed race. It also seems that the colour black in itself had less overarching power as a signifier in the nineteenth century than, for example, "African" or "Negro." The Crimean War heroine Mary Seacole conspicuously called herself a "yellow woman" (Seacole 78). Works in the exhibition

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such as Frederick Goodall's *Song of the Nubian Slave* (1863) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Beloved* (1855–56) linger over the spectrum of skin shades from coal black to mocha to a bleached white. John Downman's portrait of the sailor Thomas Williams (1815) is a study in variations of the black palette, with Downman's handwritten notations to indicate his careful selection of shades, while William Etty's disturbingly homoerotic image of two *Wrestlers* (1840s) shows more assurance in the handling of black as opposed to white skin tones. Although it would be naïve to argue that these representations are innocent of imperialist or even racial assumptions, they also demonstrate the artists' sensitivity to variations in skin tone and account for the popularity of black models among Victorian artists who were eager to enhance their technical skills by exploring a range of different types of sitters.

Paintings, drawings, and prints both veer towards and pull away from the stereotypes that Lorimer felt were intrinsic to Victorian imagery. However, the objects in the exhibition that are the most ambiguous in the story they tell are, in fact, the photographs, many of which have no claim to be "art" at all. The photographs in the exhibition reveal how the extraordinary circumstances of ex-slaves, African kings, and émigrés from exotic places could be rendered ordinary in representation. Black celebrities such as Seacole and the visiting King Cetshwayo of Zululand were the subjects of carte-de-viste photographs—in Cetshwayo's case, the crowds had to be beaten away from the door when he visited Bassano Ltd. for the sitting. The conventions of the carte-de-visite were only mildly adjusted for the sitters: Mary Seacole shown mixing one of her famous cures, and Cetshwayo represented in both English and African dress. However, in another photograph, Queen Victoria's god-daughter, Sarah Forbes Bonetta, with her plain but fashionable dress, sits demurely with her hands crossed and a basket of sewing by her side like any other domesticated Victorian girl.

Henry Barnett's photograph of Makippo or George Watteau (c. 1910) (Figure 25) demonstrates how an attempt to emphasise his African heritage is undermined by other visual signifiers. Makippo was reportedly brought to England by Livingstone, and he settled in Kent as a gardener. Barnett attempted to exploit Makippo's exoticism by placing a wooden spear in his hand and cajoling him to assume a fierce stance and expression. However, the effect of otherness is undermined by Makippo's simple work clothes, untidy cravat and an expression that suggests he is sharing in a joke with the photographer, rather than preparing to attack an enemy. Celebrities apart, the black presence in photographs such as that of Greenwich Pensioners reveal that black British citizens in Victorian Britain could be as unremarkable as their white counterparts. Although most of the real individuals depicted in the exhibition were extraordinary in their achievements, courage, or associations, there are others represented here anonymously who were assimilated into the country as sailors, models, pugilists, servants and ministers.

It is this combination of photography and "fine" art that makes this exhibition unique and rich, for as Jennifer Brody has argued, the evidence for the lives of black Victorians lies outside the canon. Rather sadly, it is perhaps this very lack of familiar work that confined the *Black Victorians* exhibition to Manchester and Birmingham, as no major London venue would claim it. The commercial and governmental pressures on metropolitan galleries lead them to promote a particular view of art which is inevitably canonic and aimed at an educated, largely white, middle class. However, in Manchester and Birmingham, the exhibition attracted a culturally varied audience in line with the diverse populations of those two cities, indicating that thematic exhibitions like these can potentially expand gallery audiences, as well as challenge our preconceptions about the Victorians.

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Figure 25. Henry Walter Barnett. "Makippo, also known as George Watteau," c. 1910. Photograph. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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While the *Black Victorians* exhibition has opened up our understanding of the variety of the black presence in nineteenth-century Britain, a problem remains. There are no works by black artists or, as far as we can tell, photographers in the exhibition, and no extant paintings have been identified by the one black artist whose name has come down to us from this period, the Philadelphian, Robert Douglass. As Marsh points out in her introduction to the catalogue, "Except in the case of celebrity sitters, whose participation in the image-making may be assumed, those seen in these paintings, photographs and sculptures had limited or no power over the depictions" (14). Although we have slave narratives, poetry, and autobiographies to give us alternative black voices, we are bereft of Victorian imagery produced by black artists. *Black Victorians* inevitably presents white points of view, but it is diversity, rather than stereotype, that is most apparent in the exhibition.

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THE DARWIN EXHIBITION

By George Levine

WHICH VICTORIAN WRITER has had the greatest impact on modern Western culture? And which is the best known in contemporary America? Of course, this is a trick question, and the trick is in the word "writer." It is not a famous novelist like Dickens, despite many dramatizations on BBC and PBS, and it certainly is not George Eliot or Tennyson. It is

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