

REVIEW ARTICLE

Exhibition review: **Black Atlantic: power, people, resistance**

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A content warning states at several points throughout the exhibition: ‘This exhibition explores themes of enslavement and racism. It includes depictions of slavery and objects linked to violence and exploitation’.¹ This review does as well.

The Fitzwilliam Museum has skillfully delivered its most important exhibition to date: *Black Atlantic: power, people, resistance* (hereafter *Black Atlantic*). It is a triumph of curatorial collaboration and expert research, carefully crafted into a narrative that disrupts our historical understanding of Richard Fitzwilliam, the founding of the Museum, and our perceptions of European visual culture in the complicity of perpetuating and justifying the transatlantic enslavement of African peoples.

The name draws on Robert Farris Thompson² and Paul Gilroy’s³ respective writings on Black visual culture and the Atlantic’s ‘rich conceptual space for limitless imagination, transmission and exchange’⁴ that grew as a result of the violent 400 years of Europe’s barbaric mission to forcefully transport more than twelve million Africans across the ocean.

Stretching over the first three rooms of the Museum’s top floor, the exhibition is the first that visitors are inclined to peruse when coming through the grand staircase entrance, though it’s less obvious to guests requiring the lift found at the main entrance at the opposite end. At that end it does, however, have fair directions to *Black Atlantic* and signage explaining the tarnished origins of Richard Fitzwilliam’s bequest sum of £100,000 that allowed the museum to open.

¹ Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 8 September 2023 – 7 January 2024 <https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/plan-your-visit/exhibitions/black-atlantic-power-people-resistance>

² Thompson, R. F. (1984) *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

³ Gilroy, P. (1993) *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. London: Verso.

⁴ Avery, V., Richards, J. S. and Fitzwilliam Museum (2024) *Black Atlantic: power, people, resistance*. Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum, September 2023 – January 2024. Exhibition catalogue.



Figure 1. Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit, Unrecorded maker, and Portrait of the Hon. Richard Fitzwilliam, Future 7th Viscount Fitzwilliam of Merrion 1745–1816, Joseph Wright of Derby.
Photograph: Lewis Ronald. Photograph © University of Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum.

The objects on display are mostly from the Museum's collection, but are also drawn from other Cambridge museums, the Cambridge University Library, Herbarium, various colleges, and other international collections and institutions. The exhibition helpfully curates a narrative journey from West Africa to South and North America, the Caribbean and Europe, easily followed by the most novice museum-goer.

A provoking juxtaposition of *Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit* and *Portrait of the Hon. Richard Fitzwilliam, Future 7th Viscount Fitzwilliam of Merrion 1745–1816* greets you at the entrance (Figure 1). Comparing the two paintings – the former's sitter identity continually contested for hundreds of years, and the other's detailed persona, provenance and new-found links to the transatlantic trade and enslavement of African peoples – begs you to take this notion of questioning history with you through the exhibition.

A *Warri board in the shape of a boat, with play counters*, created by an Unrecorded maker, caught my eye and that of a colleague I was visiting with. Widely believed to be of Akan origin, *warri* (the name varies based on the country) is a popular game across West Africa and the world. My colleague recounted how their father used to play it with a street vendor in Abijdan and later brought home a set to their family. Seeing it within this context brought new, critical meaning to the game for them, a feeling I sense was a main goal behind the exhibition.



Figure 2. Pair of upholstered armchairs, William Kent, and *Sasa boa*, Osei Bonsu. Photograph © University of Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum.

Barbara Walker's *Vanishing Point* series, two of which appear in *Black Atlantic*, re-imagines well-known paintings to centre their largely undiscussed or dismissed black company. *Vanishing Point 29 (Duyster)* appears on the front cover of the exhibition catalogue and as the face of other promotional material.

Keith Piper's *The Coloureds' Codex (Enlightenment Edition)* re-colours the revolting trend of plantation owners assigning jobs to their enslaved subjects by complexion. It is a broader commentary on Richard Waller's grotesque article written in 1686 that, then, scientifically garnered acceptance that people were valued less or more based on their skin colour.

Questioning fashion and consumption trends, *Black Atlantic* then examines mahogany, 'a tropical hardwood whose English name derives from "m 'oganwo", a term used by the Yoruba and Ibo peoples of West Africa'⁵.

Intentionally placed between William Kent's *Pair of upholstered armchairs* (made from mahogany and beech, and upholstered with yellow silk) is a small sculpture called *Sasa boa* created by Ghanaian artist Osei Bonsu in 1935 (Figure 2). Also made likely from mahogany, it emulates *sasabonsam*, the Akan conception of evil spirits, often used to refer to enslavers. Their adjacency is a masterful comparison of how the formerly enslaved repurposed their oppressors' extraction of wood from Caribbean nations.

⁵ Avery, V., Richards, J. S. and Fitzwilliam Museum (2024) *Black Atlantic: power, people, resistance*. Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum, September 2023 - January 2024. 127.



Figure 3. Ifá, Alexis Peskine. Photograph © University of Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum.

Nearby, you're met with a sign titled 'Fiction in paint'. This describes the work it's attached to, painted by Dutchman Frans Post and called *A Sugar Mill Driven by Water with Ovens where Sugarcane Juice is Boiled to make Sugar*. Not only did Europeans employ enslaved labour for brutally extractive measures, but they also tried to erase any notion of its oppressive nature and their wrong-doing, as is evident in Post's romanticized landscape view of this plantation in Brazil. One of many text-based posters near the end of the exhibition declares plainly and aptly that these 'objects sanitise the transatlantic slave trade so successfully that they blind their owners to its abject violence.'

Alexis Peskine greets you at the end of the exhibition with *Ifá* (Figure 3), a self-portrait of nails on lumber, soaked with coffee and earth, next to an intergenerational poem on 'being' dedicated to his ancestors. *Ifá* is the Yoruba-West African divination system and is how knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. Peskine draws on this historic way of transmitting, emulating his fractured Brazilian family members to express being robbed of the past.

Carrying on to its left, I feel as though I have stumbled into a miniature Library with a wide selection of Black- and art-focused books. Next to this is an inviting space to sit and reflect on the exhibition with sprawling wall prompts like 'I am curious why . . .' and 'For me, the future looks like . . .' (Figure 4). Underneath the prompts are hooks where visitors hang their responses. An overwhelming number of them relay their conviction that the Fitzwilliam Museum has an obligation to make *Black Atlantic* permanent.

The accompanying exhibition catalogue, available for a reasonable £20, is an enriching aid for those who want further understanding of *Black Atlantic* and its objects.



Figure 4. Reflection zone. Photograph © University of Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum.

Guest contributions, such as Benjamina Efua Dadzie’s reflection on the cultural significance of Akan gold weights, Eleanor Stephenson’s description of the birth of scientific racism, and Esther Chadwick’s tracing of blackness in art before and after slavery are all deeply moving and made me stop to reflect at each turn of the page.

Against the backdrop of Cambridge University’s recent Legacies of Enslavement Report⁶ and similar past exhibitions that critically engage with Black visual culture in the same context, *Black Atlantic* builds on the public’s increased demand for institutional transparency, and is positioned perfectly as the first in a series of exhibitions and gallery interventions planned by the Museum for 2023–26.

A walk through *Black Atlantic* challenges you in a welcoming and accessible way to be critical of what’s around you and effectively to consider the validity of historical narratives. It is no longer acceptable to be a passenger to this narrative, evident by the curated space at the end asking you to leave your thoughts and ideas for the next visitors to ponder.

⁶ University of Cambridge (2020) *University of Cambridge Advisory Group on Legacies of Enslavement Final Report*. https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/legacies_of_enslavement_report_21.09.2022.pdf, accessed 3 January 2024.