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The Chelsea Porcelain Case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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When visitors to the museum encounter carefully curated displays behind glass, the arrangements they see are the outcome of intense discussions, conversations, and dialogues, many of which span years. In an effort to open up the curatorial process to a broader audience, *British Art Studies* invited a group of curators and academics to participate in a round table discussion focusing on a case in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's British Galleries containing Chelsea porcelain, which each discussant had seen in person. The display, which served as a case study for pondering the challenges of curating and interpreting race and empire in a decorative arts gallery context, is unusual in that it combines useful porcelain wares such as plates alongside sculptural forms made as art works (figs. 1 and 2). Such an arrangement is not typical of decorative arts displays, which tend to separate wares for the table from ornamental sculpture. Even prior to the opening of the British Galleries in the spring of 2020, the case proved particularly challenging to configure, given its location in the central axis of the space devoted to the eighteenth century. An earlier iteration featuring Joseph Willems's (1715–1766) terracotta sculpture of a Black man holding a mixing bowl in the center of the case prompted questions for the curatorial team of how race figured in the broader narratives of the British Galleries (fig. 3). Save for Josiah Wedgwood's antislavery medallion, the sculpture marks the only Black presence in the entire suite of galleries (fig. 4). Although the decision was ultimately made to pivot the figure so that it faced north instead of being on axis, the impact of such a slight change in the arrangement prompted a larger discussion about what role the placement of works and museum displays play in propagating or challenging narratives from the past. The coordination or disjuncture between object and label, case height, as well as the visual and spatial relationships

established between works within a display became crucial factors in recontextualizing and generating new perceptions in a three-dimensional format. Following the round table discussion, each participant contributed a response to the case, which provided a rich "object" for rethinking the British decorative arts.

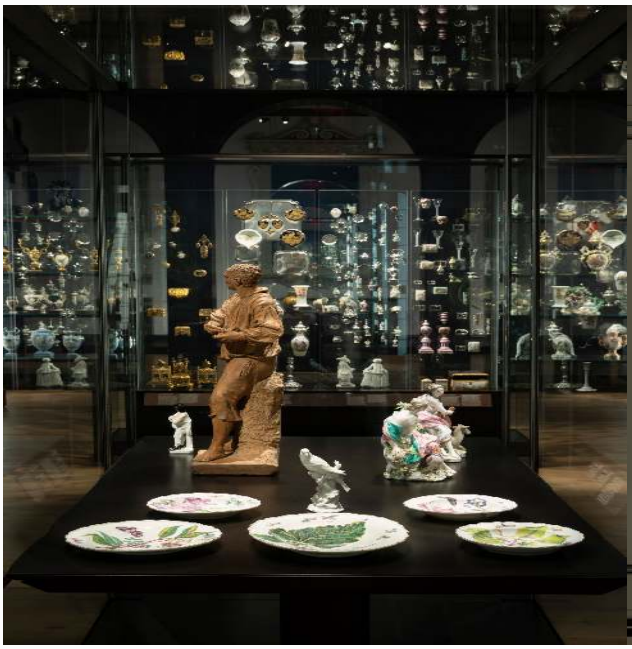

Figure 1

The Chelsea porcelain case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

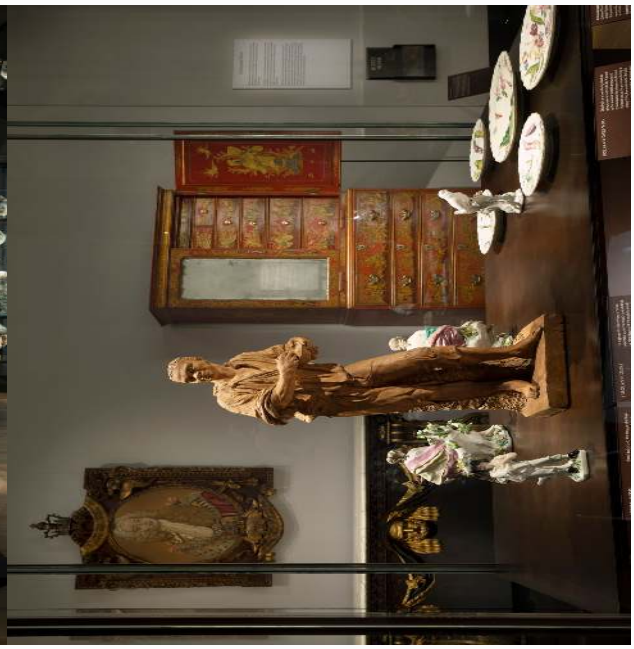

Figure 2

The Chelsea porcelain case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

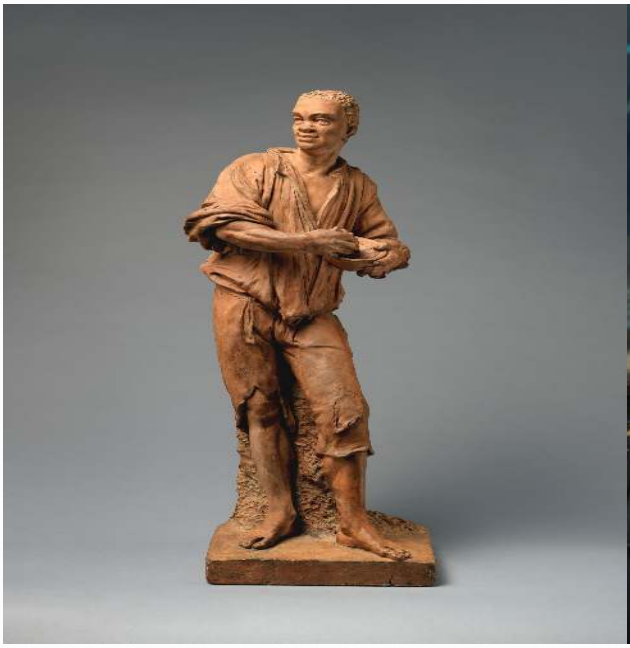

Figure 3

Joseph Willems, *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, 1736, terracotta, 74.3 × 29.2 × 22.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Gift of Wildenstein and Co., Inc., by exchange; Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation Incirca and Charles Ulrick and Josephine Bay Foundation Incirca Gifts, by exchange; and Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, by exchange, 2013 (2013.601). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

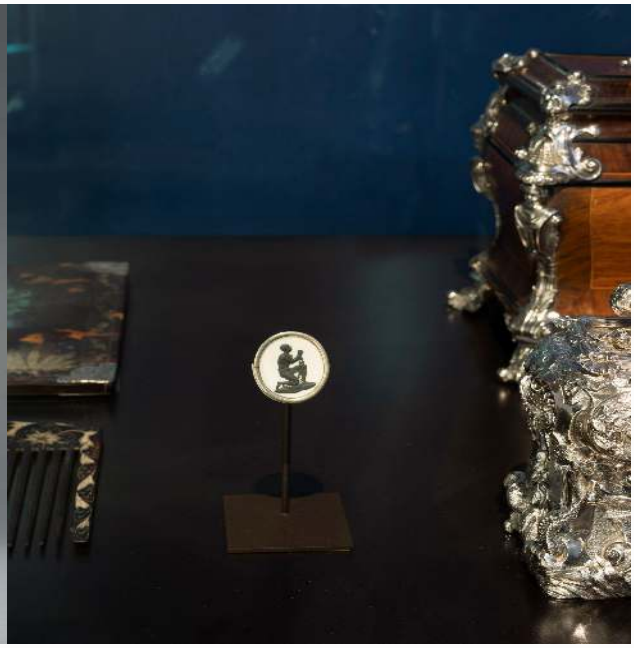

Figure 4

Josiah Wedgwood, *Antislavery medallion*, circa 1787, jasperware, 3 × 2.7 cm. on display in the British Galleries. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Frederick Rathbone, 1908 (08.242). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

RESPONSE BY

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Amoy Chinqua, Joseph Willems, and the Politics of Scale

The Chelsea porcelain case in the newly reinstalled British Galleries of The Metropolitan Museum of Art seems to be a study in the scrambling and strangeness of scale. At one end of the waist-high vitrine, a group of botanical-print dinner plates evokes an imaginary table setting and its larger human theater of genteel domestic sociability.[1] The plates are joined by four white porcelain statuettes, which depict in turn the miniaturized forms of a finch, a beggar, and the allegorical personifications *Hearing* and *Sight*. Finally, Joseph Willems's 1736 terracotta figure of a Black man holding a mixing bowl stands at center, towering over the ceramic bodies and casting an outwards gaze that, in turn, meets ours. As spectators, we are confronted with an array of bodies and objects (or, in many instances, bodies-as-objects), each of which asks us to consider how scale shapes our perception of the material world.

Amidst the constraints of the coronavirus pandemic, I have written most of this response not from the museum but from my apartment, where the contents of the Chelsea porcelain case are most readily accessed through the Met's online collection page. They appear here in small square icons, placed specimen-like against gray backdrops that give little intimation of their respective sizes or scale in relation to one another. On the Internet, the figurines and dinner plates exist in a "gossamer virtual space", as Jennifer Roberts has written of reproductive surrogates of works of art, "released from any link to their real size".[2] Of course, a visit to the museum restores the realities—and surprises—of scale. Bodies in the vitrine may be larger than they appear, or smaller.

The Chelsea porcelain case is not the only vitrine in the British Galleries where the incongruities of scale come to the fore. In the adjoining gallery stands a case dedicated to Chinese export art that displays the sculptor Amoy Chinqua's 1719 polychrome unfired clay and wood figure of a European merchant, likely created as a luxury souvenir likeness of an official of the English East India Company (fig. 5).[3] Chinqua's figure appears alongside a hard-paste porcelain punch bowl created in China for European markets in the late eighteenth century (figs. 6 and 7). The punch bowl, which features minute renderings of the architecture and bustling activity of European trading outposts in Canton (now Guangzhou), is itself quite large, especially in juxtaposition with Chinqua's 12-and-15/16-inch-high figure.[4] If the latter were placed on its side, it could comfortably fit lengthwise inside the former, whose diameter measures just over fourteen inches.

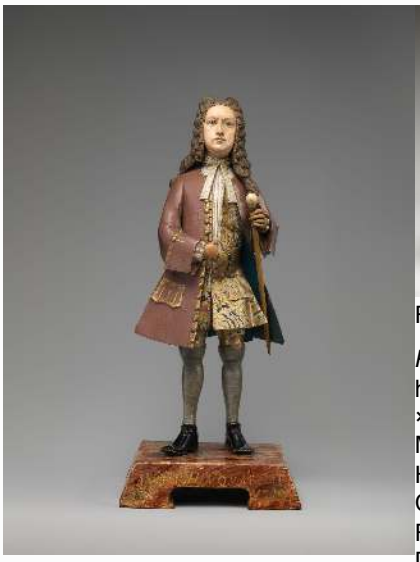

Figure 5

Amoy Chinqua, *Figure of a European Merchant*, 1719, polychrome unfired clay and wood, 32.9 × 14.1 × 13.7 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Louis V Bell, Harris Brisbane Dick, Fletcher, and Rogers Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest and several members of The Chairman's Council Gifts, 2014, 58.52. Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

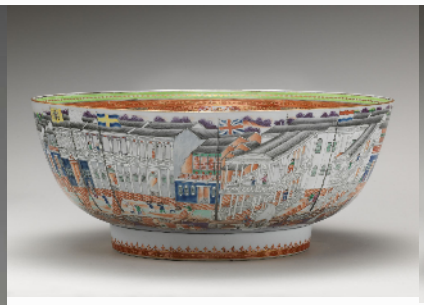

Figure 6

Punch bowl, circa 1782–1785, hard-paste porcelain, overall 15.1 × 36.2 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Helena Woolworth McCann Collection, Purchase, Winfield Foundation Gift, (1958, 58.52). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

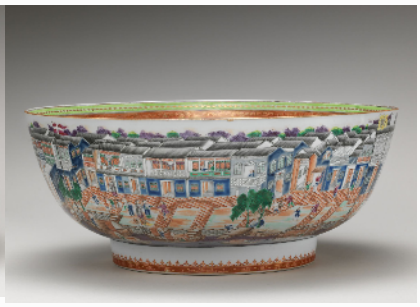

Figure 7

Punch bowl, circa 1782–1785, hard-paste porcelain, overall 15.1 × 36.2 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Helena Woolworth McCann Collection, Purchase, Winfield Foundation Gift, (1958, 58.52). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Scale is bound up with race, power, and agency. Scholars across disciplines have shown how it is no anodyne operation; to scale often means to enclose or contain. Susan Stewart suggests that the act of scaling, and miniaturization in particular, is fraught with the human desire to possess or control.[5] Katherine McKittrick understands scale as something "coherently hierarchical" and, following Neil Smith, "a technology according to which events and people are, quite literally, 'contained in space'".[6] Or, as Roberts succinctly reminds us: "The material implications of scale are always also political".[7] Scale is at once relative and relational, and as such it asks us to attend to the asymmetrical and oftentimes hierarchical power dynamics that structure our world.
I am interested in the politics of scale because the vitrines of Chelsea porcelain and Chinese export art display bodies, themselves already miniaturized and rendered as objects, that alternately dwarf or are dwarfed by other objects. Both also implicate people of color as creative agents—as models, in the case of the unnamed Black man who posed for Willems in Tournai; or as makers, in the case of Chinqua, a Chinese artist who worked in major trading ports in Canton and Fujian provinces. As such, the two sculptures stand out amidst the many depictions of white people by white artists on view in the British Galleries. Yet their spatial and scalar proximity to wares like bowls and plates also opens onto a history of racial capitalism that, as Cedric Robinson has shown, was borne out of the consumptive patterns of Europeans and the exploitation of people across Africa, Asia, and the Americas.[8] The deadly logic of racial

capitalism turned—and continues to turn—upon the idea that some, but not all, bodies might be fungible as capital and objects. How and on what terms might the space of the museum, and the objects within its walls, challenge this logic? The juxtaposition of Chinqua's figure with the punch bowl allows us to begin to answer this question for the ways it demands that viewers see Asian makers as important creative agents in a narrative of British art, and indeed, exposes the limitations and exclusions of the term "British art" in and of itself.

But what further narratives would be possible if Chinqua's and Willems's figures were placed next to one another? What histories of making would they open onto? Certainly one beyond Britain, for starters. As a pair, the figurines evince a world of artists, artisans, and artists' models that was decidedly mobile and multicultural, with nodes not only in European cities but also in the African and Asian continents and their diasporas. "Diaspora" in this context is far from a neutral term but rather one contingent upon the plural histories of mercantile exploitation, enslavement, and imperial invasion that shaped—and often coerced—the movements of people around the globe. There is a stark difference and asymmetry in the circumstances of how a man of African descent came to model for Willems in Tournai versus how a senior official of the East India Company came to model for Chinqua in China, but the movements (or, conversely, the fixity) of all four men were without a doubt impacted by accelerating European imperial projects in one manner or another. The British Galleries tell a largely triumphalist narrative of capitalist entrepreneurship that begins with the ornate oak paneling from the house of a seventeenth-century merchant venturer and ends with the dazzling manufactures of the Industrial Revolution. The bodies of Amoy Chinqua, Joseph Willems, and their anonymous models might interrupt this narrative, but the scale at which they do so hinges upon the manner in which they are displayed.

RESPONSE BY
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Between the Lines: Unpacking the Label of Willems's *Man with a Mixing Bowl*

Anchored in the center of one room in the newly renovated British Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art sits a thematic compilation of works by Joseph Willems before and during his tenure at the Chelsea porcelain manufactory. The case itself is varied, containing a small figure of a bird, allegorical figures of *Sight* and *Hearing* (fig. 8), botanical plates, a massive terracotta *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, and, at its foot, *Figure of a Beggar* (fig. 9). The outsize scale of the terracotta figure, which stands at just under two-and-a-half-feet tall, is exaggerated by the low profile of its neighbors and dominates the case in a way that is almost certainly intentional, as if the scale of the figure itself is meant to suggest that it communicates a "big idea". Though incredibly beautiful and evocative, the *Man with a Mixing Bowl* seems foreign not only because of this significant height disparity, but also because of the difference in materiality that strongly contrasts with the largely white porcelains below. A quick glance at the accompanying labels reveals that Willems transformed the terracotta figure into a miniaturized porcelain version, thereby casting a thread of comparison between the two figures on display. Surely, viewers are meant to focus on the figures, but instead my eye wanders down to the labels, unpacking their content line by line to understand the story of this terracotta figure, but ultimately realizing that it is little more than a totem used to narrowly discuss economic exploitation, racism, and representation.

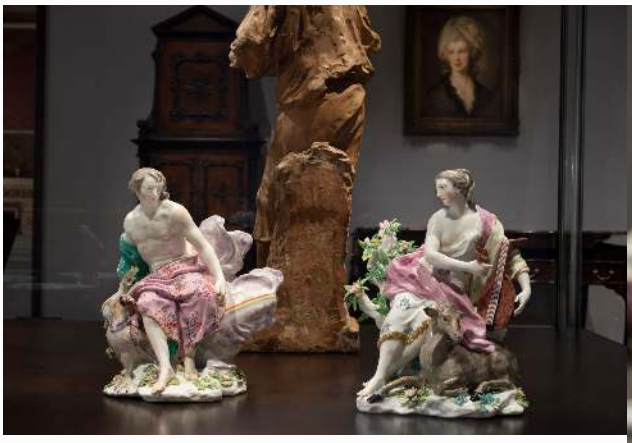

Figure 8

Joseph Willems, *Sight and Hearing*, both circa 1755, soft-paste porcelain with enamel decoration and gilding, 28.3 cm. Chelsea porcelain manufactory, on display in the British Galleries. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of John L. Cadwalader, 1914 (14.58.117 and 14.58.118). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

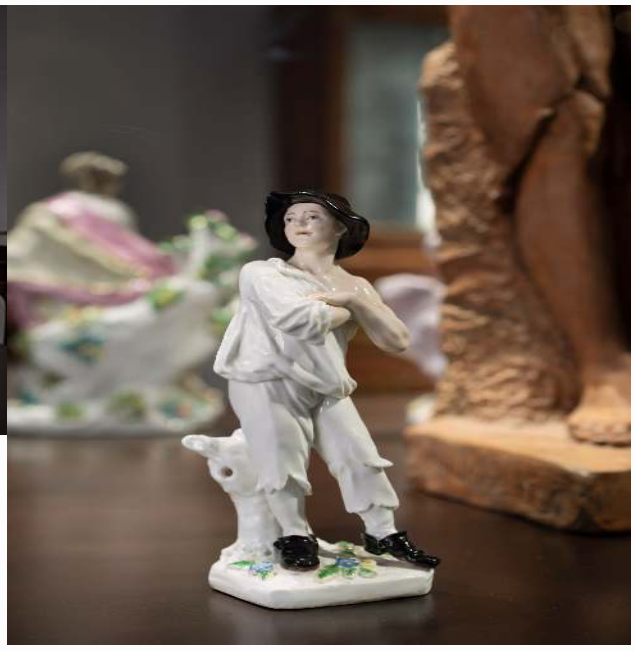

Figure 9

Joseph Willems, *Figure of a Beggar*, circa 1754–55, soft-paste porcelain with enamel decoration, 19.2 × 7.6 × 6.7 cm. Chelsea porcelain manufactory, on display in the British Galleries. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Austin B. Chinn Gift, in honor of Danielle Kisluk-Grosheide and Jeffrey Munger, 2013 (2013.600). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

The opening line of the label accompanying Willems's terracotta figure, which depicts a Black man in tattered clothes, firmly acknowledges that the English luxury market in the eighteenth century directly benefited from the exploitation of slaves and the laboring class. Of course, label limits probably preclude the lengthier discussion of the direct and indirect financial implications of the slave trade and the marginalization of the laboring class that this topic deserves. As generalizable as it is to nearly every object in the gallery and to the idea of trade and empire, the acknowledgment of the luxury market's dependence on subjugation and enslavement should not rest on a single object and might be better placed on wall text for the entire space. Instead, *Man with a Mixing Bowl* is almost solely saddled with the ideas of slavery, race, and caricature, which in some ways diminishes and tokenizes the figure. Why is the discussion of slavery, marginalization, and racism reserved for the sole object depicting Black life? It seems like a classic case of those suffering under the burden of oppression to also bear the charge and the weight of leading conversations about racism and oppression. Moreover, the text adds little value to telling the story of the work or life of Willems, which is supposed to be the unifying thread of the ensemble. It is confounding that there is no discussion about the skillful modeling of the subject or the rarity of the object as: first, only a few examples of Willems's terracotta figures are known to exist; and second, one of the only signed and dated objects by Willems on display in this gallery.

Although the label does explicitly say that this model was transformed from terracotta to porcelain, it seems unlikely that a viewer approaching the case and seeing the two figures would draw the connection. Both figures stand in similar stances with heads in profile and are in masterfully articulated, draped clothing, a true testament to Willems's skill with a variety of media—but this is where the similarities end. Beyond the difference in scale and perceived race, the different materialities of the two figures, porcelain versus terracotta, allow for interesting contrasts. The way that the gallery lights interact with the terracotta translates to a legibility in sculptural detail and visual interest that is absent or minimized in the glassy enamel of the porcelain *Figure of a Beggar*. In the label for *Figure of a Beggar*, the figure is upheld as a testament to Willems's competence and skill as a modeler and a symbol of "Willems's grasp on human anatomy", sentiments which could be equally applied to the terracotta figure as well. For example, the hair and expertly sculpted facial features of the terracotta figure go much further in "humanizing" the subject of *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, as opposed to the painted features of the porcelain figure. While the *Figure of a Beggar* stands with hands tucked away, with strong, articulated biceps peeking out from the tattered shirt, the terracotta figure shows Willems's ability to model both hands and feet in a natural way along with a great degree of muscle definition in the forearms and lower legs. The terracotta is enlivened by the implied movement of the subject, communicated by the folds and creases in the clothes and the suggested action of mixing, and the label notes that this figure itself was supposedly modeled from life. The labels could have also addressed or acknowledged one glaring question: Why would the subject's race change between the two figures, if one indeed inspired the other? Although the *Figure of a Beggar* is similarly draped in tattered clothes, in the case of the terracotta figure, the torn trousers and facial features are said to be a racial caricature. But in thinking about the terracotta as a caricature and the figure's transformation to the porcelain, is the racial caricature erased or is the significance of these features transformed as well? How then is the ragged clothing of the porcelain figure to be interpreted? It is unclear what Willems's views on race were and whether this object was meant to be a caricature or how it fits more broadly with the depictions of Black people during this period in England. There are no other examples of Black people in the gallery save perhaps for the Wedgwood antislavery medallion, so addressing these questions without prior or outside knowledge is difficult in this space.

On its own, perhaps the label accompanying *Man with a Mixing Bowl* is not distinctly problematic, but taken together with the label accompanying *Figure of a Beggar*, these texts are emblematic of the broader challenges faced in the discussion of race, racism, and prejudice in America. Specifically, there tends to be a reliance on minorities in largely white spaces to be the spokespeople for racial injustice and prejudice, a role sometimes assumed involuntarily; a role filled by *Man with a Mixing Bowl*. The societal and cultural implications of racism and prejudice extend beyond only those directly affected, and the conversation should be taken on by more people than just the oppressed. Certainly, the perceived race of the terracotta figure should not be wholly ignored but it seems that, in the context of this display, the piece could have done so much more work than serving as a point to briefly discuss race, wealth, and exploitation in eighteenth-century England. Surely, a balance must be struck between when and how to discuss race in labels and other museum texts and advancing the narrative of an exhibition. This case also raises broader questions about how British galleries in museums engage with their audiences and discuss race in spaces dedicated to Euro-centric stories, especially considering ongoing civil rights discussions and a re-examination of racism in America. Taking a more bird's-eye view of the case, one of the biggest strengths of this arrangement is that it inspires conversation and

provokes critical thought. The case itself, supported by the rest of the gallery space, makes an important first step in creating a space for these conversations to take place.

RESPONSE BY

Iris Moon

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Am I Not a Who or a What?

What is he? Who is he? I oscillate between these two questions and how to order them when I stand before the terracotta figure of a Black man that looms large in a case dedicated to white painted Chelsea porcelain in the British Galleries. This case is particularly unusual in that it places Chelsea's sculpted figures alongside plates in a way that does not create a service, but rather a disparate ensemble of objects that clearly do not look as if they belong together. On the one side, lobed plates depicting botanical specimens, some native to England, others exotic, and on the other, a set of porcelain figures ostensibly modeled by Joseph Willems, the only sculptor at the manufactory whose name we know for sure. Then, the terracotta figure, which is so much larger than the diminutive porcelain figure of a beggar that mimics his pose. Unbalanced and incongruous, the strange nature of this case became clear when I showed an image of the Chelsea case to a group of curators of the decorative arts: remarks were made about the ugliness of the ensemble of objects. Or perhaps, I wondered, if it wasn't the terracotta figure alone that bore this burden?

What is he? Who is he? If I were to start by answering the question, what is he, an answer might sound something like this: made in 1736 by the Flemish sculptor Joseph Willems before he began his long tenure as a modeler at the Chelsea porcelain manufactory in London, the figure depicts a Black man who stands in a *contrapposto* pose stirring something in a bowl. The smooth and unwrinkled forehead is a contrast to the folds, crinkles, and creases found on the man's shirt, as well as the jagged tears of his pants. With pliant features and strong sinewy limbs, the male figure is shown wearing a billowy shirt open to the center of the chest, with a pair of pants torn at the knee. Shoeless, the splayed feet stand assertively on the base of the sculpture, even as structurally such a large figure requires support in the form of a plinth modeled into a textured surface that resembles the hair of the figure. The figure gazes off to the right.

The terracotta figure represents Willems's early and ambitious start as an academic sculptor before he eventually turned to making models for porcelain. Born in Brussels in 1715, Willems arrived in London sometime in 1755, and exhibited his works at the Society of Artists of Great Britain while working as a modeler at the Chelsea porcelain manufactory. Willems returned to Tournai in 1766, where, after his death, an inventory listed "plusieurs grouppes de rondes bosse de terre cuite et colorées en blanc de sa composition, et par lui modelées".[9] This either suggests that Willems was unable to sell these terracotta models, or perhaps they represented works that he hoped to use as the basis of new porcelain compositions when he took on the job as chief modeler at the Tournai porcelain manufactory in 1766, the year of his death.

But what about the question, who is he? Here is where the facts become much murkier. How many Black people were there in Tournai at the time of Willems's active period in the 1730s, before he moved to London? How many were free? Could their labor be claimed as their own during this period, or were all Black people who lived and worked during this period conditioned by servitude, exploitation, and enslavement? Could he be himself? Is he an allegory meant to signify something else?

The sculpture was made in the years before Wedgwood's antislavery medallion in 1787, and while it clearly lacks the ideological thrust of the kneeling enslaved African on the medallion, there is something about this man that makes one pause and ask who he is; in other words, to ask about his singular identity as a historical person, how he lived and worked in his time in Flanders. Is it possible that rather than being an imaginary figure, a fiction of the sculptor, the man mixing the bowl could have been modeled from life? Then who was he, so that Willems felt confident in depicting this Black man on his own, rather than choosing to show him supporting fruits, plinths, or capitals as was so commonly the case with the fetishized bodies of Blackamoors? His gaze is confident, looking directly at the viewer rather than positioned in a downcast glance. He is evidently confident enough in his task that he has no need to see what he is doing in order to make sure that the contents of his bowl do not spill out onto the floor. But mixing, stirring, taken as a metaphor, is also unusual in the lexicon of Black representation during this period. The picture of a man of African descent at work forms a strikingly subjective contrast to the many allegories of Africa made of porcelain that show the figures in heroic but ultimately ornamental poses. Unostentatiously dressed, powerful, but unshod, this figure troubles what we think we know about the immobility of the Black presence in the eighteenth century. Just about everything is wrong about this figure in the right way, because it does not settle neatly into the narratives that have been constructed out of the erstwhile beautiful luxury products born of a "creative entrepreneurial spirit" that is the central narrative thread of the British Galleries. How can we disassociate the desire to know about him without reifying his lived experience into a label that puts him on display?

The oscillation between what he is and who he is challenges the possibility of writing a single fifty-word panel that sits on the deck of the case. How can we squeeze all of the unsettling qualities of this piece into a small text meant to smooth out the wrinkles of curatorial wrangling into a single narrative that reaches multiple audiences—specialist, connoisseurial, wealthy, poor, middle class, curious, bored, righteous, disinterested, Black, White, Brown, Yellow?

RESPONSE BY
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University of Cambridge

Curatorial Fabulation

The roundtable discussions preliminary to writing this piece revealed a major difference of opinion in the interpretation of the Chelsea porcelain case's most prominent object, the terracotta sculpture by Joseph Willems, *Man with a Mixing Bowl*. The difference of opinion can be summed up by the following question: is there a probability that this man of African heritage was entirely imaginary? A respondent's particular inclination on the answer seems to inform their range of opinions about how the work could be appropriately displayed in the Chelsea porcelain case, and even whether it should be displayed there at all.

I would like to consider the possibility that a person of African heritage may have contributed to the creation of this object by posing or by serving as indirect inspiration. This approach may be accused of displaying, at best, a naïve belief in the "indexicality" of a work of art and, at worst, a failure to acknowledge the degree of racial stereotyping that a work by a white sculptor working in Brussels in 1736 would inevitably display. If it could be justified, however, *Man with a Mixing Bowl* may be read not only as a work by Willems, but also as a trace of an historical presence left by someone else, even if whatever level of participation was filtered through the racialised

perspective of the person who signed and dated the work. This presence may even be said to persist into the works in which the figure's pose was recycled by Willems nearly two decades later in London in circa 1755 in his capacity as a modeller of Chelsea porcelain (see figs. 9 and 10).[10]

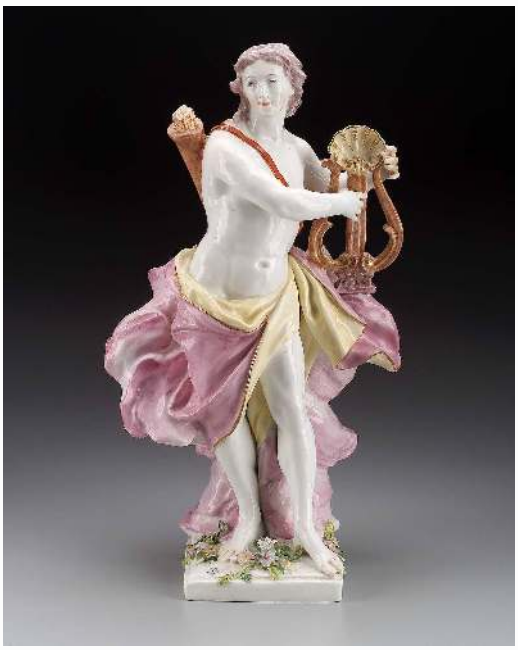

Figure 10

Chelsea porcelain manufactory, *Apollo*, circa 1755, soft-paste porcelain, 29.21 cm high. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Jessie and Sigmund Katz Collection (68.809). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (all rights reserved).

I believe this argument to be worth making because of the fact that in London and Brussels there would have been people of African heritage participating in manufacturing industries who left no historical record, either through the general omission of their forms of labour from archives, or because of the active necessity for them to avoid leaving a legal trace. Such is the situation that has inspired innovative historical approaches such as Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation".[11] An important fact about the London porcelain industry in the 1750s is that because it was outside the City of London it was legally possible for people of African heritage to work there in a skilled capacity, in that they were not subject to the City's prohibition in 1731 on their apprenticeship.[12] To place the figure alongside Chelsea porcelain, therefore, can be read as an assertion of the presence of figures of African heritage in the world of craft industries such as porcelain manufacture. Adapting Hartman, this approach might be called "curatorial fabulation". In the absence of positive evidence, my argument for an historical analogue may also be made negatively, by arguing that the alternative is equally speculative. This alternative is that the inspiration for depicting a figure of African heritage came exclusively from within the artistic conventions of the era, with no specific human analogue required. Such conventions included that of racial caricature embodied by contemporary Flemish genre painting, where the characterisations are such that the figures clearly do not reflect any trace of presence by a real person.

However, for an example of Willems working in this kind of mode, we would have a much stronger example than the terracotta in his figure of Aesop reciting (fig. 11). Considering the storyteller's well-established mythical origins in Africa, Aesop had nevertheless mostly been depicted in art as a white man before this work, which was almost certainly modelled by Willems for the Chelsea manufactory. With its intersection of racist and ableist stereotyping, as well as the ambiguous tone of its presentation, this work is extremely problematic. Whether Aesop is intended to be magnificent or ridiculous, the work performed by this flamboyantly dressed orator is an antithesis to the manual labour of the man depicted in the terracotta. The racial stereotyping of the face, and the idea of an "African" physiognomy are both very different in the two works. If *Aesop* shows Willems working within artistic conventions of race as he understood them, the result could not be more different from *Man with a Mixing Bowl*. Perhaps the latter is merely the expression of a "naturalistic" convention while the former is that of a "caricatural" one. Even so, it still seems more likely to have required the presence of a real person to be achieved.

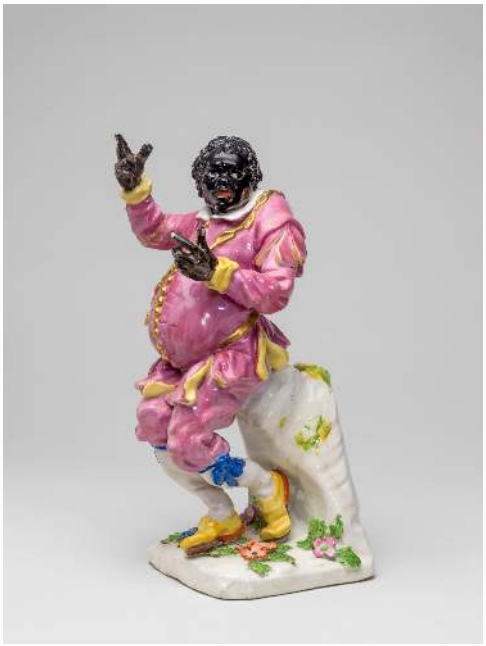

Figure 11

Chelsea porcelain manufactory, *Aesop*, circa 1755, soft-paste porcelain, 24.7 × 10.2 × 13.3 cm. Collection of The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge (C.21-1932). Digital image courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge (all rights reserved).

Any kind of "fabulation" may be considered a misleading or irresponsible approach for a museum to take. In the case of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, however, I would consider this case as a corrective approach not applicable to all institutions, specifically in order to debunk the idea of European crafts as exclusively white. New York remains the home of Donald Trump, who said Europe was "losing its culture" to immigration. The fantasy of European culture being exclusively white is expressed in his properties, with nineteenth-century Meissen and French ceramics furnishing Trump Tower and Mar-a Lago (figs. 12 and 13). The former is literally built on the site of the house where the core of the Met's collection of Chelsea porcelain was originally located (fig. 14). In this context, it is not enough for curators to interrupt or question existing narratives; new ones need to be presented, even though the means are imperfect. As well

as the casualties of racial capitalism, curators must foreground the fact of skilled and creative involvement in historical European crafts by people of colour.

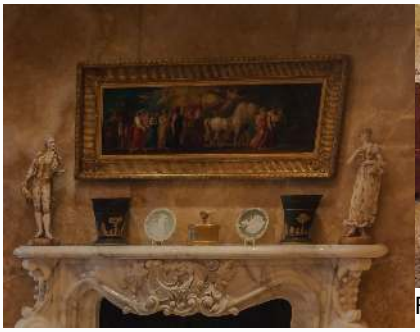

Figure 12

Mantelpiece in the penthouse at Trump Tower, Fifth Avenue. Digital image courtesy of Sam Horine (all rights reserved).

Figure 13

The "master suite" at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, 1993. Digital image courtesy of Splash News (all rights reserved).

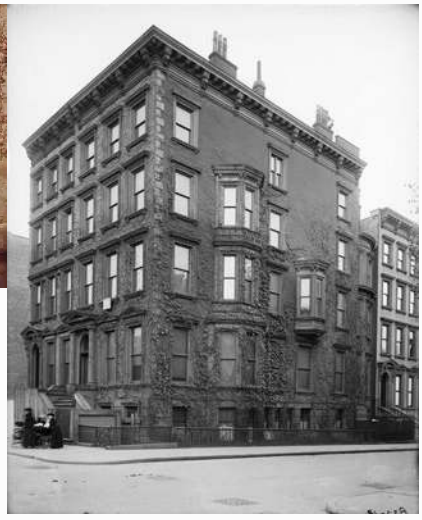

Figure 14

House of John L. Cadwalader. 3 East 56th Street, on the site of Trump Tower, Fifth Avenue, 1915. Digital image courtesy of Cronobook.com (public domain).

RESPONSE BY

Elyse Nelson

Assistant Curator, Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Representation of Black Life and Labor in Eighteenth-Century Flanders

Situated on the central axis of a gallery featuring The Metropolitan Museum of Art's newly installed collection of eighteenth-century British decorative arts is a large glass vitrine in which a varied assortment of Chelsea porcelain is presented alongside a monumental terracotta sculpture of a man of African descent stirring a substance in a bowl. The sculpture was made in Flanders by Joseph Willems, who is thought to have later modeled some of the Chelsea porcelain on display. The earthen medium, which stands out against the shiny surfaces of the surrounding plates and figurines, befits its modest subject who appears unshod and donning threadbare pants. The brawny muscles in his forearms and legs indicate a life of labor.

Unlike the various eighteenth-century representations of Black figures bound captive in decorative furniture and fixtures or fashioned as domesticated symbols of luxury in portraits of white aristocracy, this *contrapposto* figure stands upright and alone. Demanding to be seen, his outsized presence haunts the surrounding display of fancy wares with the specter of stolen African labor upon which much of the wealth of the British luxury market was built. Yet Willems's figure does not represent an individual whose labor supported the demand for British luxury goods, as this context would suggest. Rather, the deftly modeled statue, made in 1736, provides evidence of Willems's early ambitions as a sculptor, long before his name first appeared in the ledgers of the Chelsea porcelain manufactory in London in 1748.[13] Willems probably

created the piece after a Black model in Brussels. What can we know about the Black presence in Flanders that might inform our understanding of this work?

The arrival of Africans in the Catholic Netherlands was precipitated by the Portuguese trade networks established between the African continent and Portugal in the fifteenth century. Goods obtained from the Spanish territories in the Netherlands were traded in return for the labor of stolen Africans, who arrived in Antwerp on ships carrying raw materials.[14] The distribution of sought-after commodities, including sugar, through the cosmopolitan shipping center made Antwerp the richest city in Europe in the sixteenth century. While no documentation exists to approximate the number of Africans living in Flanders at the time, travel accounts of foreigners visiting the commercial center attest to the fact that people of African descent inhabited Antwerp and its surrounding regions, some as servants, and others illegally enslaved by powerful Spanish and Portuguese merchants who lived there.[15] In seventeenth-century Flanders, African pages and servants became a common status symbol in the households of wealthy white residents, but Black labor was not limited to domestic spaces. A painting by Abraham Teniers shows a seated Black man polishing pistols in a guardroom as a group of white men, presumably off-duty guards, loiter in the background (fig. 15).[16] The juxtaposition of his work to their pastime provides evidence of a social hierarchy, while the sensitive delineation of the figure—and brilliant reflections on the pistols and armor to which he attends—suggest that the model was an individual acknowledged for his skill. Black residents of Flanders also posed as models for painters such as Rubens, van Dyck, Breughel, and Jordaens. Character heads, or *tronies*, to use the Dutch term, sometimes depicting Black subjects, were made and collected by Netherlandish artists as naturalistic studies of expressive types (fig. 16). Practiced by master painters and apprentices alike, the copying of character heads comprised an essential aspect of an artist's training, and the rendering of dark skin tones in depictions of Black persons presented painters with a new technical challenge for honing their skill.[17]

Willems's portrayal of a Black man has aesthetic and conceptual roots in this enduring Netherlandish tradition. The figure may have developed from a character study or academic exercise intended to exhibit the sculptor's range and ability to model popularizing typological categories of human difference—in this instance, an impoverished Black laborer at work. But the skillful naturalism seen in the folded drapery of the shirt and balanced pose is notably lacking in the rendering of physiognomic details, where the lips, nostrils, eyes, and forehead appear exaggerated in their proportions.

The slippage between type and stereotype seen in the Willems occurs rather consistently in eighteenth-century Flemish art featuring scenes of everyday life. The French preference for decorative Flemish genre paintings and tapestries was fueled by the *goût moderne*, a new taste for quotidian subject matter, devoid of academicism, and spiced with everyday amusements, including references to "exotic" non-Europeans and the laboring lower classes.[18] Considered in this context, the French provenance of Willems's prominently signed figure is unsurprising. Not only does the sculpture conform to the French vogue for large-scale terracottas that would gain in popularity throughout the eighteenth century, it also fits right into the milieu of Flemish art that catered to a French aristocracy preoccupied with gazing at the objectified bodies of the lower classes. Neither a commissioned portrait nor an index of an individual likeness, this representation—mediated by the assimilative act of artmaking—connects Blackness with destitution and labor, manifesting the ideologies that underpinned the oppressive systems of racial capitalism and slavery. Indeed, Willems's representation of a laboring Black man in ragged

clothing is nothing if not an image of alterity, produced in heroic scale for visual consumption by the European aesthete.

The history of Willems's figure opens onto a set of complex questions about racialized labor, representation, and the lived and imagined circumstances of people of African descent living in Europe during a period of accelerating imperialism and colonial enslavement. These complexities are largely lost in a display that frames the work primarily through the story of its maker's connection to London as a modeler of Chelsea porcelain. Imagine an alternative display in which the representation of Black life and labor were afforded greater consideration. The Willems figure would find meaningful context in a case dedicated to critically examining the construction of "types" in European decorative arts, for instance, or in a display of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Flemish art where it would provide visitors with crucial insight into the history of the Black presence in the Low Countries. This artwork has many stories to tell: not just about its maker, but also its subject and audience, and the power dynamics that existed between them.

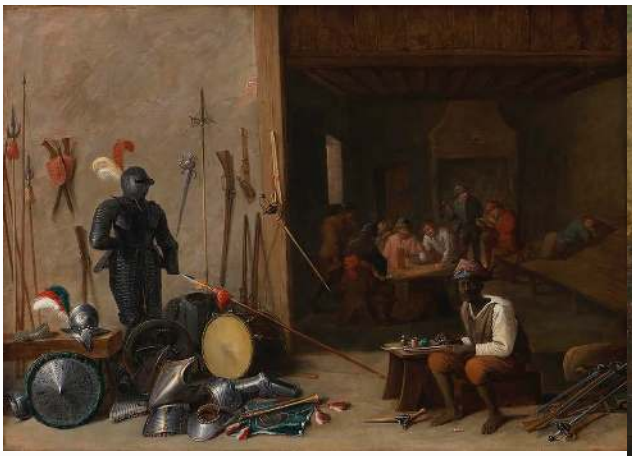

Figure 15

Abraham Teniers, *Guardroom Scene with African Soldier Cleaning Pistols*, circa 1650–1655, oil on panel, 69.2 × 88.9 cm. Collection of the Chrysler Museum of Art (2020.7). Digital image courtesy of Chrysler Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

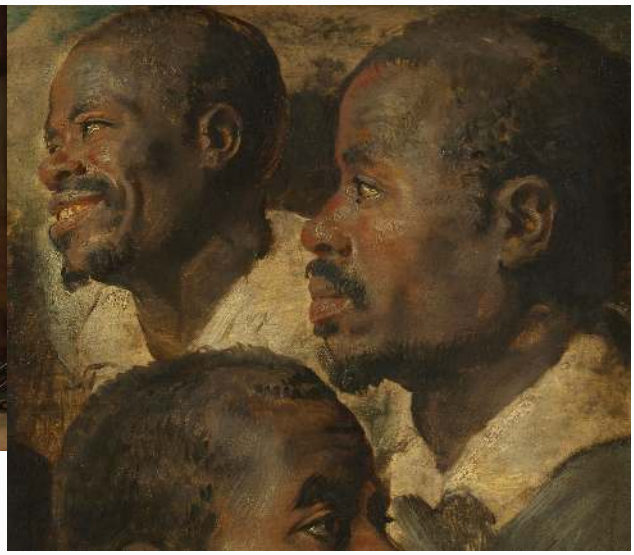

Figure 16

Pieter Paul Rubens, *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man* (detail), early 17th century, oil on canvas, 55 × 74 cm. Collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (3176). Digital image courtesy of Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (public domain).

RESPONSE BY

Yao-Fen You
Acting Deputy Director of Curatorial/Senior Curator and Head of Product Design and Decorative Arts
Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

A Case for Joseph Willems

Outside of England, the largest holdings of one of the most important modelers working in the English porcelain industry, Joseph Willems, can be found at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Despite this unrivaled strength in examples of the highly original models he created for the

Chelsea porcelain manufactory, the recently installed British Galleries do not spotlight him in any monographic way, perhaps owing to him not being British born but a foreigner. His finely modeled works are dispersed in three disparate moments in the eighteenth-century room (Gallery 512) of the British Galleries. Each time, the Flemish-born artist is made to play a supporting role. His *Chinese Musicians* (circa 1755), a tour de force of porcelain sculpture documented in the 1756 Chelsea sales catalogue, is displayed to the left of the gallery's entrance, set on the central shelf of the double-sided glass case set into the archway (fig. 17).[19] Grouped with vessels mostly of flat and curved surfaces with painted decoration, including plates and soup plates, punchbowls, and vases, the centerpiece, with its trio of figures exquisitely rendered in high relief, appears somewhat anomalous (fig. 18). The assembled group of Chinese-y and Chinese export objects are meant to speak to the keen popularity of chinoiserie in eighteenth-century Britain, as indicated in the nearby text panel ("The Near and Far East"). Masterfully decorated, it is also the only object in the case that best embodies how chinoiserie, as "colorful flights of the imagination", can be both beautiful and bizarre.

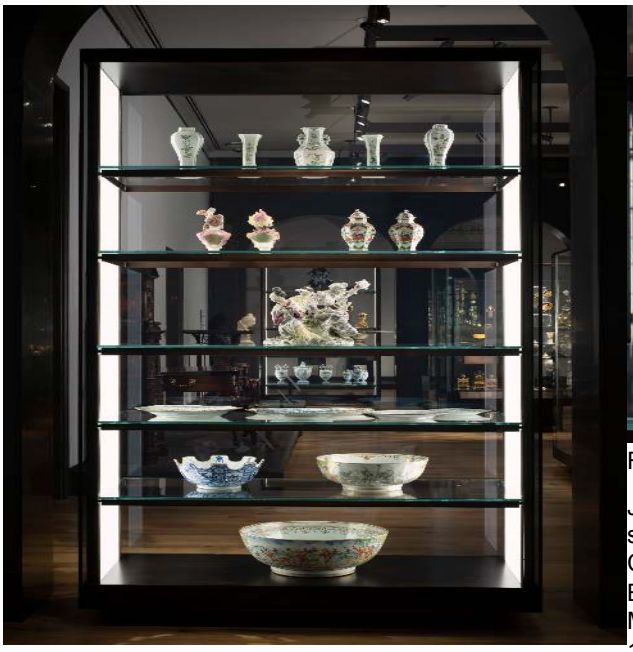

Figure 17

Case featuring Chinese Musicians, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

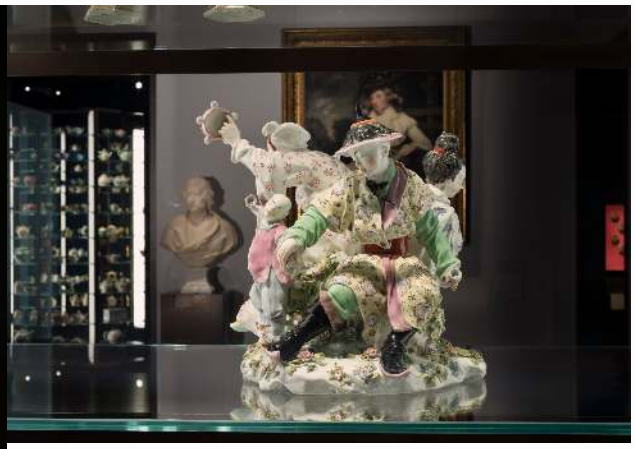

Figure 18

Joseph Willems, *Chinese Musicians*, circa 1755, soft-paste porcelain, 36.8 × 36.8 × 37.1 cm. Chelsea porcelain manufactory, on display in the British Galleries. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964 (64.101.474). Digital image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

Further examples modeled by Willems are displayed prominently in the free-standing case in the center, which is dedicated to the story of the Chelsea porcelain manufactory. His strong and sensitive modeling skills are represented by no less than four figures—two from the rare *Five Senses* series (see fig. 8) and a visually dissonant pairing of an outsized terracotta figure, titled *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, with a diminutive porcelain figure of a beggar (see fig. 9)—but still Willems is only allowed a cameo appearance. The remainder of the case is taken up by flat tableware not designed by him. He pops up again in the form of *The Music Lesson* (circa 1765) —presumably among his last designs for Chelsea before returning to Flanders—which one

encounters when exiting the gallery, in the glass case on the right, displayed with other "bocage" figural groupings (figs. 19 and 20). A label calls out Willems's composition as "among the most ambitious examples of 'bocage' groups".

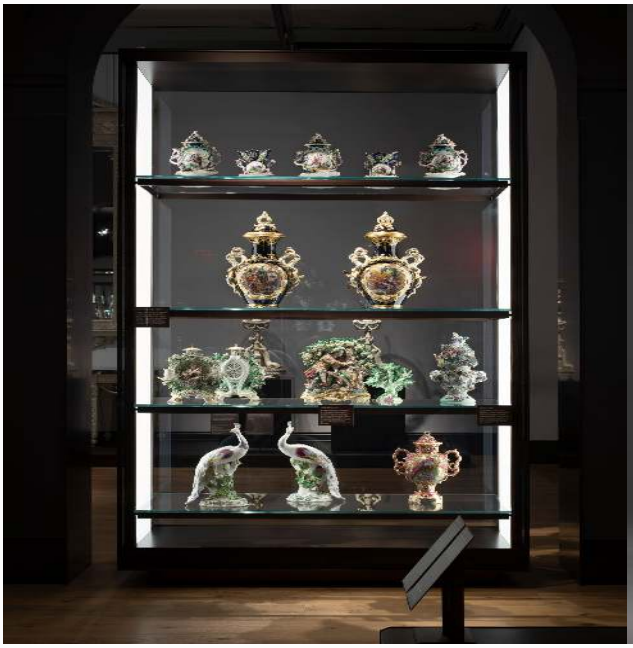

Figure 19

"Bocage" case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

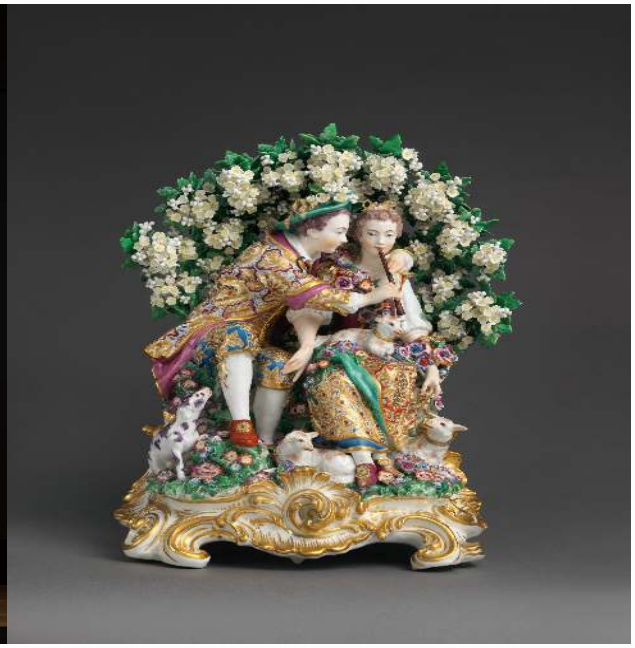

Figure 20

Joseph Willems, *The Music Lesson*, circa 1765, soft-paste porcelain, 39.1 × 31.1 × 22.2 cm. Chelsea porcelain manufactory. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964f (64.101.519). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Willems, I contend, deserves his own plexiglass case. As the leading figure modeler at Chelsea from 1748 to 1766, I want him to have a starring role in the eighteenth-century gallery: that of the versatile and entrepreneurial Flemish artist who immigrated to London to work with the Liège-born Huguenot silversmith Nicholas Sprimont (1716–1771) to launch the first English porcelain factory to enjoy commercial success. A consolidated display would help to underscore Willems's wide range as both a sculptor and modeler, who was instrumental in helping Chelsea porcelain manufactory capture different market segments, whether following the latest rococo fashion from France and Germany or reviving popular seventeenth-century Flemish compositions. It would also serve to expand on the discussion of foreign artisans working in London and to amplify their vital contributions to the host community—a storyline seeded by Torrigiano's portrait *Bishop John Fisher (1469–1535)* in Gallery 509. Assembling the figures modeled directly and indirectly by Willems in a discrete case, or perhaps even in a series of cases grouped together, would, for example, force a dialogue between *Chinese Musicians* and *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, signed and dated 1736, to engender a fuller discussion about Willems's relationship to the representation of racialized bodies.

A dedicated case, moreover, would force us to interrogate Willems's sculptural practice and the extent to which his figures were modeled after living persons. Contrary to the prevailing assumption expressed in the accompanying label that the terracotta "depicts a laborer of African

descent who likely worked as an assistant in one of the Flemish studios where Joseph Willems was employed", I want to raise the distinct possibility that Willems may not have modeled the figure from life. This would help account for the curious mismatch between the head and the body—the head seems very small in relation to the muscular body—which contributes to the reading of his facial features as racial caricature. The haphazard fashion in which the hair has been depicted by a pick further reinforces this impression. The torn and tattered trousers, belonging to a long sculptural tradition of caricature of lower socio-economic classes dating back to Giambologna's *Fowler*, combined with the classicizing stance of the body reminiscent of late seventeenth-century Flemish sculpture, further suggests to me that Willems was not working from a live model.

Although we know very little about Willems's artistic training, there is a strong likelihood that Willems, like other Flemish artists of his generation, may have drawn inspiration for the Black man from the work of his prodigious predecessor Pieter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), as he has elsewhere.[20] The celebrated Antwerp artist continued to cast a long shadow over visual production in the Southern Netherlands well into the eighteenth century. Rubens's altarpieces dominated the most important of Antwerp's churches, as well of those in nearby Ghent, Mechelen, and Brussels, where Willems was born in 1715. Black male figures, ranging in skin color (from deep black to golden brown), age (from young to old), and facial expressions (from joyful to pensive and reserved), featured prominently both as kings and as acolytes in the great series of *The Adoration of the Magi* that Rubens made over the course of his life.[21] Starting with the monumental canvas commissioned in 1609 for the Chamber of States (*Statenkamer*) in the Antwerp Town Hall, Rubens would go on to execute many versions of them for important churches throughout the Southern Netherlands, including the main altarpiece of the Capuchin Church at Tournai, where Willems is documented as active by 1739, based on his marriage to Marie-Josephe Lahaize in November of that year (fig. 21). A similarity in likeness can be detected between the terracotta and the acolyte on the left in the Tournai painting (now in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Belgium) when viewing the sculpted head from the side. It is entirely possible that Willems could have been there as early as 1736, when the terracotta figure was executed.[22] The resemblance is even stronger when we compare Willems's head to one of the four heads represented in *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man* (figs. 22 and 23), which was one of several studies from life that Rubens used frequently. I am particularly struck by the closeness in the overall shape and facial proportions (high forehead, short distance between nose and lips, spacing between the ear and the mouth) with the head that is facing left (almost in three-quarters view) and smiling.[23]

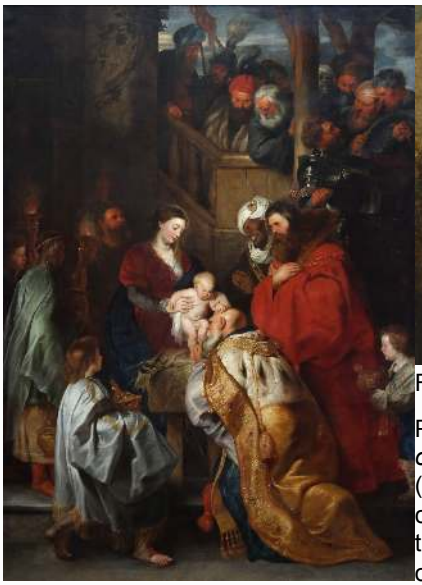

Figure 21

Pieter Paul Rubens and his studio, *The Adoration of the Magi for the Capuchin Church in Tournai*, circa 1620–21, oil on canvas, 384 × 280 cm. Collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (165). Digital image courtesy of Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (public domain).

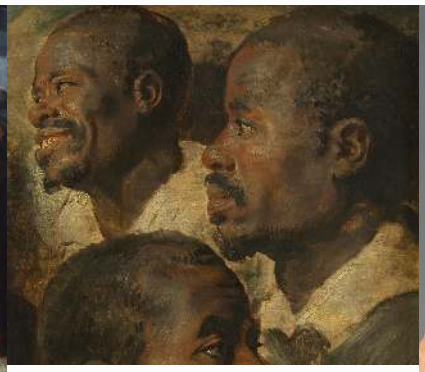

Figure 22

Pieter Paul Rubens, *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man* (detail), early 17th century, oil on canvas, 55 × 74 cm. Collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (3176). Digital image courtesy of Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (public domain).

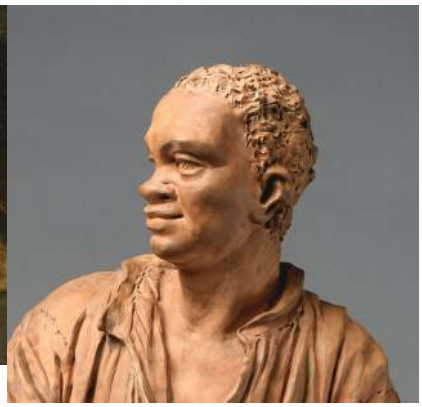

Figure 23

Joseph Willems, *Man with a Mixing Bowl* (detail), 1736, terracotta, 74.3 × 29.2 × 22.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Gift of Wildenstein and Co., Inc., by exchange; Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation Incirca and Charles Ulrick and Josephine Bay Foundation Incirca Gifts, by exchange; and Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, by exchange, 2013 (2013.601). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

It is difficult to imagine how Willems could not have been familiar with the many iterations of Rubens's innovative treatment of this popular Counter-Reformation subject in which the figure of the black Magus was constantly reinvented and widely circulated, even after Rubens's death. Not only were engravings made after his paintings during his lifetime and remained in circulation (after his death), but as early as 1608 Rubens collaborated with publishers to conceive of Adoration of the Magi designs for illustrated books. Like Rubens exercising artistic license in moving between genuine likeness and imagined biblical characters, Willems, having reached his twenty-first year (in 1736), may have felt equally compelled to adapt and experiment with recognized visual predecessors as we know him to have done later during his time at Chelsea.[24]

RESPONSE BY
Tim Barringer
Paul Mellon Professor and Chair of the Department of the History of Art
Yale University

Racial Capitalism and the Ragged Man

The opening text panel of the British Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 24) launches a tendentious broadside of raw ideological aggression:

> *Creative risks. Artistic choices. Leaps of imagination and ventures for profit. The Met's wide-ranging collection of British art and design from 1500 to 1900 captures a bold, entrepreneurial spirit and complex social and political history. The objects within embody a*

complicated past, shaped by a commercial drive that developed among artists, manufacturers, and retailers over the course of four hundred years. This is the story of a rising economy fueled by global trade and the expansion of the British Empire, a time when innovation and industry yield both financial rewards and a defining national confidence.

This is a text clearly written for a particular kind of viewer. Think of the word cloud: Risk! Choices! Venture! Profit! Bold, entrepreneurial spirit! Commercial drive! Rising economy! Global trade! Financial rewards! National confidence! It is the Trump-era lexicon of venture capitalism, the argot of the boardroom in the age of the hedge fund and the corporate buy-out. It is the language, above all, of powerful men, men in suits, white men. Cliché after cliché flatters this patron class, the museum board member, the nouveau riche in search of cultural cachet.

The text locates the triumphal agency within the British Galleries, indeed finds the very essence of British culture and society, neither with artists, designers, theorists, or writers, nor with those who made the objects on view in the galleries. There is no hint of the mass of the population, nor of the vastly greater number of colonial subjects of the British Empire. Even the great aristocratic patrons—formerly credited with forming that apogee of good taste, the English country house—have no place in this account. The agent of change here is capital itself, in the hands of the entrepreneur, the capitalist. It echoes Thomas Carlyle's description of "Captains of Industry" as "virtually the Captains of the World".[25] These agents of world-historical change, the text implies, were *people like us*, rentiers, investors. An identification between the plutocratic billionaires of late capitalist New York with their bewigged forerunners in early modern England could hardly be posited more plainly. What Threadneedle Street was then, Wall Street is now. Josiah Wedgwood, meets Steve Jobs. This makes comfortable reading for the one percent, the evening preview crowd between cocktails and dinner, but surely less so for most of the Met's five million visitors whose diversity of social and ethnic identity reflects that of the world beyond Fifth Avenue.

One final sentence is appended. "It is also a chronicle of brutal colonialism and exploitation". *Also*. The conjunction says it all. The human cost of empire—slavery, genocide, famine, ecological catastrophe, cultural destabilisation: these fall into the category of *also*. It's someone else's problem, far from 1000 Fifth Avenue.

The Britain celebrated here is that of Warren Hastings, Cecil Rhodes, Margaret Thatcher, Boris Johnson; not that of William Blake, Mary Wollstonecraft, Clement Attlee, Stuart Hall. It's the Britain of the Poor Law and the Poll Tax, not the NHS; a place of competition—Hobbes's war of all against all—not community and compassion. My critique here is of the opening texts and not of the galleries themselves, which are in many ways revelatory in their content and potential. The range of object types, the subtle and telling juxtapositions, the exploration of themes both familiar and recondite: all these have much to offer the visitor on repeated visits. The collection has expanded significantly; the installation of materials is often beautiful and in places brilliantly suggestive. With a different framing, the displays could foster a complex polyvocality, could give voice to multiple histories, mount critiques, open up debates.

Let us enter Room 512, the largest in the British Galleries, an open space at the core of their labyrinth. The former installation was notable for gilded mirrors and pairs of Georgian chairs. In the new galleries, by contrast, this room is marked by a harassing excess of form and colour, a forest of gewgaws suspended in Perspex cases. This postmodern assemblage reveals at a glance that eighteenth-century Britain was a cacophonous visual environment.

Before us stands a display case that mimics the size and height of a large dinner table. This association is only strengthened by the presence of five striking Chelsea plates, circa 1755,

decorated with botanical motifs. A cluster of small, ornamental figural compositions, modelled in porcelain in the rococo taste, inhabit a cognate idiom and scale, demonstrating the skill of their designer, Joseph Willems. There are many delights for the eye in this group and detailed labels offer learned commentaries.

How does all this fit into the overarching "story of a rising economy fueled by global trade" that we were promised as we entered? Well, the ensemble illustrates quite nicely the rising technical and aesthetic acumen of the London ceramics industry, newly embracing porcelain production and harnessing a burgeoning consumer market among the "middling sort". Capitalism is doing its work on the dining table. Willems, born in Brussels, was an immigrant who, by the mid-1750s had brought renewed flair and expertise to Nicholas Sprimont's Chelsea ceramics factory, founded in 1745. British commercial pluck, suggests the installation, draws out the commercial possibilities of the Flemish rococo: our hero (Sprimont, not Willems) makes a killing and we embark on the teleological pathway to the mass production and commercial innovations of Wedgwood. Buy shares now.

However, as anyone entering the room must immediately see, there is a further opus of Willems's on view here, dating from 1736. It is identified on the label as *Figure of a man in ragged clothes*, but the museum's database now uses the title *Man with a Mixing Bowl*. Massively out of proportion with the other works on the table, the large *contrapposto* figure is modelled in terracotta. He is dressed in rough, ripped clothing and carries a basin. Moreover, the caricatured physiognomy leaves no doubt: this man is Black. There is a poor, Black labouring man standing at the heart of the British Galleries.

The rigid ideological matrix proposed by the opening text is here subjected to a moment of crisis. The ideological valence of *Man with a Mixing Bowl* cannot be contained within that larger purpose, and instead punctures through the heroic schema, revealing its underlying politics. These are the politics of racial capitalism, a politics of astonishing, and continuing, violence, a politics that inevitably alienates many of the Met's visitors.[26] This figure stands as an unmistakable material signifier of a central fact of the eighteenth-century British Empire: the obscenity of slavery. At this key node of the galleries, the Black body refuses to be placed in the category of *also*, insisting, against the grain of the text panels' narrative, that "Black Lives Matter".

The labour of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean plantation system and the trade in human beings through the Middle Passage were key sources of the very wealth that these galleries so unquestioningly celebrate. We do not know the circumstances of this particular individual; indeed, we have no idea who the model was, or whether any particular person ever sat for Willems. Nonetheless, the sculpture demands that the labour of Black men and women is acknowledged in relation to the larger histories proposed here. The *also* takes centre stage and upends the heroic story of capitalism.

Man with a Mixing Bowl is accompanied by a small label acknowledging that "the eighteenth-century luxury market depended upon the wealth amassed via the slave trade and the exploitation of the laboring classes". Indeed so: but this is too little, too late (and of course incorrect: it was not just the trade, but the institution of slavery over generations, indeed centuries, on plantations and elsewhere that generated profits for the slaveholding class). Such a phrase could usefully have been included in the opening paragraph of the first text panel of the British Galleries, in place of the hymn to the white entrepreneur.

Next to the massive, brooding form of the *Man with a Mixing Bowl* stands a small, decorative porcelain figurine. It is a graceful rococo portrayal of a picturesque male English beggar, clad in

rags. These are decoratively, if not erotically, ripped away to reveal smooth, milky skin. This object of desire acts to efface class difference; yet, the poor were harshly treated in eighteenth-century London.

The two paupers on the rich man's table, black and white, are related formally, and, from this imperfect rhyming of postures, specialists can speculate about Willems's working practices. But such matters of technique pale in comparison to the drama of race and representation embedded in the juxtaposition of a delicate, glazed figurine and rough terracotta model. Enculturated in the visual languages of an era of slavery, they offer up drastically differing associations: where whiteness and smoothness suggest refinement, consumption and luxury, blackness and roughness conjure labour, subjection, and abjection. Visually and ideologically dissonant on the Met's dining table, the *Man with a Mixing Bowl* demands a different context, materially and discursively. He stands for voices that need to be heard.

The objects in the British Galleries do indeed reveal the origins of our own world order, but they do so in ways that are painful to behold. Far from a heroic teleology from British commercial innovations to American boardroom triumphs, the galleries lay out in material form the brutal and continuing narrative of racial capitalism, the determining economic and social system of our own times. This history (to repeat that phrase buried in a label) "depended upon the wealth amassed via the slave trade and the exploitation of the laboring classes". The proletarianisation of the urban working classes under the factory system was the inevitable correlate of the geographically more expansive and even harsher regime of slavery and the plantation. Modern formulations of class and race are overlapping categories produced by capitalism. During the period covered by the British Galleries, new forms of racial oppression and new regimes of labour were interwoven, on the Jamaican sugar plantation and in the Manchester textile works. The gorgeous products of this era cannot truly be understood without a fuller picture of these circumstances of production. The *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, unlike the porcelain beggar, is at work.

What would the British Gallery's collections look like if these questions had been in the viewer's mind from the outset? The curators do indeed present several important case studies in this vein throughout the galleries, but each requires further interpretation. The tiny Wedgwood medallion bearing the figure of a kneeling enslaved man bearing the text "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" for example—here virtually invisible through its placement deep in a case—offers the possibility for a consideration of the ambivalence of abolitionist strategies (see fig. 4). Unlike *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, Wedgwood's supplicatory enslaved labourer is on his knees. Likewise, throughout the gallery, a scattering of exhibits and their didactics militate against the overall schema—a sugar bowl here, a tea caddy there, trade goods from India and China. But rather than undermining the fundamental thesis, they hover at the margins of the narrative, retaining the status of *also*.

Presented under the sign of late capitalist triumphalism, the British Galleries do indeed unfold a "story of a rising economy fueled by global trade". But divested of rhetoric comforting to the donor class, and understood as a history of racial capitalism, that narrative can be seen to embody a pernicious logic in which hierarchies of race and class are naturalised and bound into a single entity. In the Met's narrative, the winners take all. The British Galleries, then, represent a paradox, an oxymoron, an open sore: the objects of refinement, beauty, utility, and originality on display emerge from a history of slavery and wage slavery, whose legacies are alive and reverberating into the present day. It's magnificent to see the Met's panoply of objects relating to

Britain and its empire. But the *Man with a Mixing Bowl*, standing his ground among the luxury trinkets, demands that, from them, different histories be told.[27]

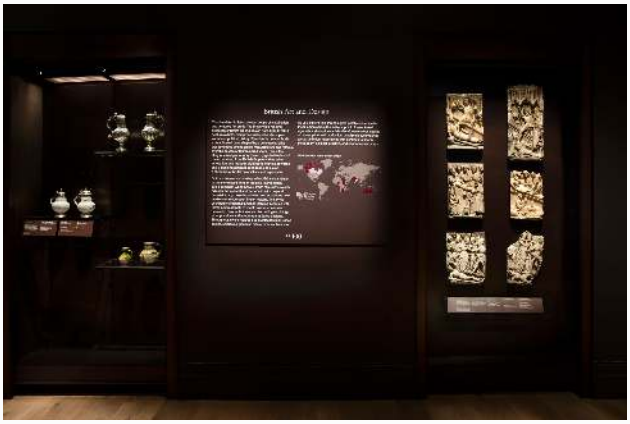

Figure 24

Opening text panel, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021. Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

About the author

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Footnotes

1. See Mimi Hellman's now-classic essay, "Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century France", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 415–445.
2. Jennifer L. Roberts, "Introduction: Seeing Scale", in *Scale*, Vol. 2 of Terra Foundation Essays, ed. Jennifer L. Roberts (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 13.
3. For further on Amoy Chinqua, see William R. Sargent, "'The Features are Esteem'd Very Just': Chinese Unfired Clay Portraits of Westerners", in *Picturing Commerce in and from the East Asian Maritime Circuits, 1550–1800*, ed. Tamara H. Bentley (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 195–219.
4. This measurement comprises the figure (which measures just under twelve inches high) and the base on which it stands, upon which, as Roberta Wue has recently pointed out, the artist signed, "Amoy Chinqua Fecit 1719" painted in a manner so as to recall the polychromed marble bases of European statuary. Roberta Wue, "Portrait-Objects: Amoy Chinqua and the Early 18th Century Export Clay Portrait", Lecture, The Society of Fellows and Heyman Center for the Humanities, Columbia University, New York, May 2021.

5. Susan Stewart, "The Miniature", in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 37–69, DOI:10.1215/9780822378563-002.
6. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 74 and 83.
7. Roberts, "Introduction: Seeing Scale", 18.
8. See especially Cedric J. Robinson, "Racial Capitalism: The Nonobjective Character of Capitalist Development", in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 9–28.
9. Arthur Lane, "Chelsea Porcelain Figures and the Modeller Joseph Willems", *Connoisseur* 145 (1960): 247.
10. For the dates of Willems's movements, see Arthur Lane, "Chelsea Porcelain Figures and the Modeller Joseph Willems", *The Connoisseur* 145 (1960): 245–251.
11. See, for example, "A Note on Method", in Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), xiii–xv.
12. Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 77.
13. Matthew Martin, "Joseph Willems's Chelsea Pietà and Eighteenth-Century Sculptural Aesthetics", *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 52, 4 July 2014, https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/joseph-willemss-chelsea-pieta-and-eighteenth-century-sculptural-aesthetics/.
14. While recent scholarship has enriched our understanding of the Black presence in the Dutch Republic, less is known about the Black populations in eighteenth-century Flanders, leaving us without an adequate historical record from which to reconstruct the social roles Black people may have played in the region. Yet, by looking to the history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Flanders, a general impression of the Black presence in Flemish art and society can begin to emerge. On the Black presence in the Dutch Republic, see Mark Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650", in *Black in Rembrandt's Time*, ed. Elmer Kolfin and Epco Runia (Amsterdam: Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 2020), 44–65. Lisa Lowe has emphasized the necessity of reading across archives to recuperate omitted histories of slavery and subjugation. See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 5–6.
15. Bernadette van Haute, "Black *tronies* in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Art and the African Presence", *de arte* 50, no. 91 (2015): 19; and Carl Haarnack and Dienke Hondius, "'Swart' (Black) in the Netherlands: Africans and Creoles in the Northern Netherlands from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century", in *Black Is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas*, ed. Esther Schreuder and Elmer Kolfin (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008), 90–91.
16. Many thanks to Tim Barringer for bringing this painting to my attention.
17. Van Haute, "Black *tronies* in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Art and the African Presence", 26. Black portraiture existed to a lesser degree as well. In the late 1640s, in Amsterdam, Black servants began to appear as the subjects of single-person portraits in which they assumed active poses, engaging in various aspects of their domestic labor. See Elmer Kolfin, "Black in the Art of Rembrandt's Time", in *Black in Rembrandt's Time* (Amsterdam: Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 2020), 22.
18. Koenraad Brosens, "Eighteenth-Century Brussels Tapestry and the *Goût Moderne*: Philippe de Hondt's Series Contextualized", *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 14, no. 1 (Fall–Winter

2006–2007): 62, DOI:10.1086/studdecoarts.14.1.40663288.

19. It was described in the sales catalogue as: "A most magnificent LUSTRE in the Chinese taste, beautifully ornamented with flower and a large groupe of Chinese figures playing on music". See Elizabeth Adams, *Chelsea Porcelain* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 132.
20. Some sources indicate that Willems, born in 1715, was the student of the Antwerp-trained sculptor Pierre Denis Plumier, who died in 1721. Since their life dates don't quite match up, I am disinclined to accept this claim. It remains probable that Willems would have been familiar with Plumier's public sculpture around Brussels, including his allegorical representation of the Scheldt River that remains *in situ* in the inner courtyard of the Brussels Town Hall at the Grand Place. See Léon Lock, "Flemish Sculpture: Art and Manufacture c. 1600–1750", unpublished dissertation (London: University College London, University of London, 2008), 160.
21. For further discussion, see Elizabeth McGrath, "Rubens and his Black Kings", *Rubensbulletin* 2 (2018): 87–101, https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/5898720/rubens-and-his-black-kings-koninklijk-museum-voor-schone-.
22. Willems most likely would have arrived in Tournai after having completed his training elsewhere since the Academy of Fine Arts in Tournai was not founded until 1756. It is very possible he trained in his native Brussels, where the Royal Academy of Fine Arts was established in 1711, shortly before he was born, but we cannot rule out the possibility of him having studied in Antwerp.
23. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I have not been able to gain access to the latest scholarship on this head study, which is one of 136 *tronies* attributed to Rubens and his studio assembled and studied in the latest installment (Part XX) of the *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* by Nico Van Hout. See Nico Van Hout, *Study Heads and Anatomical Studies: 2 Study Heads*, Part XX, Vols. 1 and 2 of *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard: An Illustrated Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of Peter Paul Rubens Based on the Material Assembled by the Late Dr Ludwig Burchard (1886–1960) in Twenty-Nine Parts*, edited by Bert Schepers and Brecht Vanoppen (London: Harvey Miller for Brepols, 2020). The sheet under discussion graces the cover of Volume 1.
24. See Arthur Lane, "Chelsea Porcelain Figures and the Modeller Joseph Willems", *The Connoisseur* 145 (May 1960): 245–251; and Matthew Martin, "Joseph Willems's Chelsea Pietà and Eighteenth-Century Sculptural Aesthetics", *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 52, 4 July 2014, https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/joseph-willemss-chelsea-pieta-and-eighteenth-century-sculptural-aesthetics/.
25. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 1843, Book IV: Horoscope, Chapter 4.
26. The concept of "racial capitalism" originated in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); the new 2020 edition has a foreword by Robin D.G. Kelley.
27. I am grateful to Meredith Gamer for her comments on this text.

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