Serving as Ornament: The Representation of African People in Early Modern British Interiors and Gardens

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Ruth Ellis's Suit

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Serving as Ornament: The Representation of African People in Early Modern British Interiors and Gardens

Article by **Hannah Lee**
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Abstract
Objects which featured representations of African figures in postures of servitude were common features in British houses and gardens of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This article focuses on three such sets of stands in the National Trust collections of Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park. Combining evidence found in letters and household inventories with analysis of the design of these objects, this article dissects the development of the decorative category of the "blackamoor". It argues that, by exploring the language used to describe these figurative pieces of furniture, the manner in which they were displayed, and the materials from which they were made, we can gain a greater understanding of how decorative objects reinforced racial hierarchies through the normalisation of black servitude and explicitly celebrated the wealth and status gained through the exploitation of enslaved African people.

Introduction

In the long gallery at Ham House in Richmond, a pair of stands flank a lacquered cabinet above which sits a portrait of Charles II (fig. 1). The stands are formed in the shape of two human figures made from carved softwood, which has been ebonised, painted, and then gilded. Over their heads, they support large tambourines into which each individual cymbal has been delicately carved. The two men depicted are naked to the waist. They wear skirts made from tobacco leaves or feathers, where the paint, which would once have made these highly colourful pieces, has now faded with time. They each wear a gilded turban on their heads and bracelets studded with bells around their wrists and ankles. There are quivers of arrows slung across their backs.

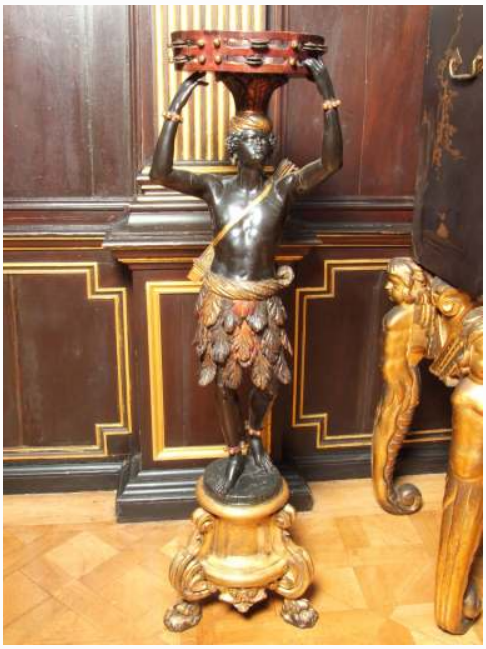

Figure 1

Unknown artist, *One of a pair of torchères*, circa 1675, painted and gilt softwood, 126 × 35 × 30 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Ham House, Richmond (NT 11400880). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Christopher Warleigh-Lack (all rights reserved).

This article begins with a discussion of the documentary evidence of the "blackamoor" stands at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park, with a particular focus on the language used to describe the stands in letters and household inventories between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. It examines what the shift in terminology can tell us both about a developing vocabulary of race and ethnicity and whether it provides any indication of where these objects were made. The second part of the article will focus on the function and display of these pieces. It will present a case for considering the relationship between these pieces and objects such as dummy boards, which were designed with illusion and entertainment in mind, and the connection between these objects and people from Africa and of African descent who lived and worked in these properties during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It will then move on to a discussion of the evidence of who might have made the sets of stands at Ham House and Knole whilst considering all three objects within the context of the growth of the domestic English lacquer industry. The third section will highlight how specific details of the stands' design place them within a long-standing European iconography of representing people of African descent. The set of case studies will broaden in the final section of the article to include examples of other objects such as candlesticks and sundials, which demonstrate the breadth of popularity for such designs.

Any examination of these pieces today must be framed within the growing body of literature which focuses on the country house, race, and empire. The release of *Slavery and the British Country House*, developed from a conference in 2009 of the same name and published by English Heritage in 2013, marked a significant moment in the field of country house studies. In the introduction to the volume, the editors Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann cite the work of

Alistair Hennessy on Penrhyn Castle and Simon Smith and James Walvin on Harewood House as early examples of research that explored links between individual properties and enslavement.[1] However, over the last decade, it is wide ranging research endeavours such as *Slavery and the British Country House* and the "Legacies of British Slave Ownership" project that have emphasised how many British families benefited from wealth gained from enslavement for generations.

Oliver Cox highlights a "global turn" in country house studies where "the country house and its collections increasingly function as pivot points out from the rural, the parochial and the English into global sites that help scholars explore the structures of power and inequality that sustained the British empire".[2] Object-led studies which focus specifically on the collections of such properties demonstrate how deeply saturated these colonial links often were, and, increasingly, the decorative arts are becoming part of this conversation. The "East India Company at Home" project, for example, highlighted how a wide range of objects, from porcelain to carpets and wallpaper "played pivotal roles in processes of imperial fashioning and refashioning".[3]

This study aims to contribute to the growing movement that calls for the decorative arts to be given greater value as complex historical sources. A number of scholars have argued that the European construction of the decorative "blackamoor" figure ought to be considered within a broader contextual framework. The scholarship of Adrienne Childs is foundational to this article's argument and presents a powerful case for thinking about how the "blackamoor" figure was "a means by which Europeans could celebrate, domesticate, and naturalize racial domination".[4] Childs has pointed to the ways that these figures functioned as "a celebration of black servitude in the guise of fashionable frivolity" in the form of German porcelain production.[5] More recently, she has also demonstrated that the trope of "blackamoors" as forms of ornamental blackness extended to furniture, including the examples studied in this article. The stands at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park, along with other comparable examples in British country houses, formed part of what Childs describes as the "multidimensional matrix of ideas and contexts that transcended the limits of their specific functionality, implicating larger social issues such as the concept of race itself, black slave labour in the colonies, and the presence of black servants in wealthy European households".[6]

"Two Indean Stands"

Central to understanding changing discursive practices around racialised decorative forms in the country house context are the references to these objects found in household inventories and letters, which provide a sense of how the vocabulary used to describe them changed over time. The set of stands at Ham House first appeared in the household inventory made of the property in 1677. It has been suggested that they were purchased by the Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale, John Maitland and Elizabeth Murray, as part of the extensive refurbishment of the property which followed their marriage in 1672. Positioned in the great dining room, the two figures were described in both the inventories of 1677 and in 1679 as "Two Indean Stands".[7] In 1683, they became "Two blackamore stands" and, in around 1729, when the cabinetmaker George Nix was employed by the 4th Earl of Dysart to restore the objects, Nix's billed "For new Gilding and Japanning 2 fine Indian figures … £4".[8] By 1844, when they were displayed in the picture gallery, the inventory describes "a pair of black figures on carved gilt pedestals—supporting two tambarines".[9]

The origins of the set at Knole are not as easy to determine. This set cannot be definitively identified within the household inventories of the property until 1864, when that year's inventory

described them as “A pair of finely carved and painted Ethiopian Figures on carved and Gilt stands each supporting a Tambourine” (fig. 2).[10] A number of sets of stands do appear in earlier Knole inventories, but the references lack any specific details which would directly identify these pieces as the figures with tambourines. In the inventory dating to 1706, twelve pairs of stands are mentioned, of which a reference to “One Looking glass 36 inches with Indian Table and stands” in the closet in the Lester Gallery provides the closest descriptive match.[11] It is possible that the stands came into the collection at Knole from the royal collection. In 1689–1695, Charles Sackville was Lord Chamberlain to William III and Queen Mary. As part of the role, which focused on managing the domestic affairs of the royal family, he was permitted to remove any furniture in the palaces that was no longer required. Similar objects were present in the royal collection at this time. The inventory of Kensington House of 1699 describes “two india figures of wood guilt” in the queen’s old bedchamber.[12] The entry in the inventory comes at the end of a long list of all the pieces of china which were on display in the room. As these objects are described as “wood guilt” these pieces were clearly not made of porcelain and could have been used as display stands for the ceramics they are listed alongside. It is possible that these pieces were sent, along with all the porcelain mentioned in this room, to the Earl of Albemarle. Despite lacking documentary evidence to directly connect the stands at Knole to the royal residences, the presence of similar objects in the queen’s collection emphasises that the style had at least once found royal approval, a fact which would presumably have driven demand for similar pieces.

Figure 2

Unknown artist, *One of a pair of torchères*, circa 1675, painted and gilt softwood, 122.6 × 35 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Knole, Kent (NT 129512). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Jane Mucklow (all rights reserved).

Similarities in design between the Knole set and the stands at Ham House suggest that the Knole stands can also be dated to the 1670s. Indeed, the stylistic similarities between the two sets are so evident that these two sets of stands were quite possibly the product of the same workshop. Their proportions are almost identical. The four figures hold the same posture; the Knole pair also

support carved tambourines above their heads, have bells around their wrists, and wear turbans on their heads. The main difference between the two sets is that the supporting figures of the Knole set are female. In place of the feathered skirts, the two women wear elaborately decorated tunics with red painted sashes and trim, which are rolled down to expose the left breast of each figure. Around their necks, they each wear a long necklace of red beads which end in a diamond-shaped pendant. A jewel is placed at the centre of each turban. Unlike the Ham House pair, the coloured paint used to add these finishing details has survived with much greater vibrancy. The tambourines of the Knole set, which in the Ham House set are brown, are still a bright red with the individually carved cymbals picked out with gold gilding.

The stands at Dyrham Park do not share these distinct visual connections with the sets at Ham House and Knole. However, a letter dating to 1700 suggests that they could also date to the latter part of the seventeenth century (fig. 3). On 5 December, John Povey wrote to his uncle, Thomas Povey, from Dyrham Park in Gloucestershire. John Povey was the guest of William Blathwayt, another of Thomas Povey's nephews. Throughout the letter to his uncle, John Povey describes the various locations in the house where the paintings and pieces of furniture which had once been in Thomas Povey's collection were now on display. A few years earlier, finding himself in difficult financial circumstances, Thomas Povey had sold a number of pieces to his nephew William Blathwayt, who had recently completed substantial renovations of the house at Dyrham Park.[13]

Figure 3

Unknown artist, *Stand*, 1680–1700, painted giltwood, probably beech, 98 × 64 × 56 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Dyrham, Gloucestershire. Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images (all rights reserved).

John Povey writes: "In these several Apartments your pictures have a Great share in the Decoration as the two Black Boys have a Proper Place on Each side of an Indian Tambour in one of the Best Rooms".[14] The "two black boys" to which John Povey refers take the form of two depictions of African men, each kneeling and supporting a large gold shell above their heads. Both figures are dressed in red shirts decorated with a pattern in gold and loose pale gold short

trousers. The skin of each of the figures has been varnished or lacquered, and the whites of the eyes have been picked out using paint. The facial expression of both figures is serious, and their brows are furrowed, perhaps to suggest the physical effort of supporting the shell. Each of the figures is kneeling upon a three-point gilded base. Their enslavement is clearly indicated by the gold shackles and chains, which feature around their ankles. This is highlighted still further by the gold collars, which are placed around each of the necks of the men. In addition to John Povey's letter in 1700, the stands at Dyrham Park appear in the household inventory of 1710, referred to here as "2 blacks". Karin M. Walton notes that by 1871 they were described simply as "stands for Flowers".[15]

The changing terminology used to describe these objects provides a unique insight into how these pieces were understood by those who saw them on display. The term "Indian", whilst possessing obvious geographical connotations, can also be understood as a reference to the materials and techniques from which the object was made. The terms "blackamore" and "blacks" would have been used both to describe living individuals and to describe functional objects. As such, the references in John Povey's letter and the 1710 Dyrham Park inventory to "the two Black boys" and "2 blacks" both simultaneously humanise and objectify the figures depicted, cementing a link between their skin colour and the state of oppressed servitude in which they are depicted.

Thomas Povey and William Blathwayt, the former owners of the Dyrham Park stands, played high-profile roles in England's colonial activity during the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. Thomas Povey, the original owner, had a career which was defined by his influence over colonial affairs from the 1650s. Povey was appointed to the Council of Trade in 1655 and to the Council for America in 1657. In the 1660s, Povey became receiver-general for the rents and revenues of Africa and America and secretary of the committee of foreign plantations.[16] Like John Maitland, Duke of Lauderdale, who later lived at Ham House and quite possibly commissioned the set of stands there, Povey is named in the charter of the Royal Africa Company in 1663. Indeed, the costumes and arrows worn by the stands at Ham House bear a striking resemblance to the "two blackamores" detailed on the company seal.[17]

Given his uncle's connections, it is unsurprising that William Blathwayt, who was brought up by Povey, also achieved success in colonial administration. Blathwayt joined the Plantation Office in 1675 and soon gained a reputation for the organisation of colonial finances. In 1680, he was made surveyor and auditor-general of the king's revenues in America.[18] Madge Dresser states that Blathwayt was "an energetic advocate of the slave trade", whose position in the Plantation Office reportedly made him "well placed and willing to take bribes from those merchants and planters who wished him to use his influence on behalf of their slaving interests".[19]

Both Povey and Blathwayt were beneficiaries of colonial activity during this period, both financially and for the political influence which involvement in the management of such affairs provided. Equally, they both seem to have been keen to invest some of their wealth into furnishing and decorating their homes. At Dyrham Park, the profits of Blathwayt's colonial career are woven into the interior structure of the building, which he extensively remodelled between 1692 and 1702. The main staircase is made from Virginia walnut with panelling to match.[20] To a visitor to the house today, the origins of the timber of the staircase and its connections to a past inhabitant's dealings in colonialism might need to be pointed out. However, the presence of the kneeling figures of two enslaved men make the connection more apparent.

Serving as Ornament

Function was at the centre of these objects' purpose and plays a large part in their objectifying nature. The stands at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park could have been used for a number of different purposes, from supporting light sources to other decorative objects such as pieces of porcelain or flowers. Many objects which fall within this category, some of which were designed to support trays or torches, mirror the tasks that would have been performed by living servants. It should be considered whether in some instances such pieces played a more performative role in the spaces in which they were on display. Comparisons can be made between these decorative figures and dummy boards, which were particularly popular in both England and the Netherlands from the second half of the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Deriving from the tradition of *trompe l'œil* and the inclusion of shadowy silhouettes in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, dummy boards were life-size figures of humans or animals, painted onto cut-out flat boards. They were placed in various locations within domestic spaces, and sometimes appear to have fulfilled a practical function, such as a fireplace cover or doorstop. Illusion was central to their purpose, imitating the presence of a living figure. As is the case with many of the torch-bearing figures representing African people, Clive Edwards has argued that both light and positioning played an important role in the deception of the dummy boards. "When they were to be seen at night, they were sometimes supplied with lighted candles, and in other cases they might be placed to be silhouetted against a lighted room, doorway, or staircase. For a successful illusion, a combination of lifelike painting, judicious positioning, and suitable lighting were essential".[21] Edwards cites the account of Arnold Houbraken, from 1719, which describes how a gentleman placed a dummy board depicting a servant at the door to a salon where guests were entering. Houbraken goes on to recall the laughter as some of the arriving guests mistook the board for a living figure and attempted to give it a tip.[22] Clare Graham provides another example of an unusual double-sided dummy board, thought to have once been in the collections of Clarendon House, which features the painted figure of a white liveried manservant on one side, and a depiction of a black man, who is naked to the waist and holding an axe, on the other.[23] This is a highly racialised object and it is possible to imagine that part of its entertaining purpose was its ability to provoke different responses from visitors depending on which side of the board was visible. While both figures were evidently intended to momentarily unsettle viewers, the uniformed, white male servant, an expected presence in a house of this type, is deliberately presented as a benign, "civilised" contrast to the more threatening armed black man on the other side of the board. While the kneeling and servile figures of the functional stands at Dyrham Park, Ham House, and Knole were designed to emphasise the concept of a racialised hierarchy through their presentation of black servitude, this dummy board reinforces the idea of European superiority through the representation of African people as violent and uncivilised. As Adrienne Childs argues, Africans were frequently portrayed as "the most barbaric and savage" and were "often featured as the antithesis of the civilised European. Hierarchies and binaries espoused by these theories were reinforced through visual and literary tropes such as the Noble Savage, the Allegory of Africa and exotic blackamoor".[24]

Given their scale, it is difficult to imagine that examples such as the stands at Ham House and Knole could have possibly been designed as visual deceptions in the same manner as dummy boards. The stands at Dyrham Park, however, could have occupied such a role. As three-dimensional figures rather than flat dummy boards, figures such as those at Dyrham Park took the illusion one step further. Some examples of stands such as the figure which was once in the

collection at the Old Court House, Hampton Court, appear to have been life-size and can be regarded as part of this wider culture of using artistic imitation and deception as a form of amusement (fig. 4).[25]

Figure 4

The Old Court House, Hampton Court, in *Country Life*, Vol. 84, Iss. 2176 (1 October 1938), 1938, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Country Life. (All rights reserved).

When we examine who might have encountered these objects in the spaces in which they were displayed, and under what circumstances, it is vital to consider that they were in houses where people from Africa and of African descent lived and worked. Although the provenance of the set of stands at Knole remains unclear, there is evidence to suggest that there were black servants working in the household during the seventeenth century and perhaps before. A document, dating to 1624, confirms the presence of two black servants who were working at Knole then. They are listed as Grace Robinson, who worked as a laundry maid, and John Morockoe, who worked in the kitchen and scullery. Both are described in the documents as "blackamoor".[26]
Gretchen Gerzina provides the example of references to a series of black servants employed at Knole who were all known as John Morocco, regardless of what their original name was.[27] Kim F. Hall has noted that the tradition of having a black servant with this name at Knole was continuous for over a century.[28] In her history of her ancestral home at Knole, Vita Sackville-West states that "there had always been one at Knole", since the days of Lady Anne Clifford, whilst noting, fairly casually, that the tradition had come to an end "ever since the house steward had killed the John Morocco of the moment in a fight in Black Boy Passage".[29] In 1662/63, the tailor James Abbot sent his bill to Knole for the task of making "the little blackamore's shute".[30] It is possible that the person described here was also one of the individuals given this name. Peter Fryer has described the common practice where African people who were enslaved or employed by titled families were renamed as the denial of "elementary human dignity".[31] The dehumanising nature of this process is emphasised still further in the Knole context with the use of a single name over many generations and the reinforcement of embedded perceptions of racial and social hierarchies masked as family tradition.
At Ham House, visual evidence suggests the possible presence of a number of individuals from Africa or of African descent who were part of the Tollemache household during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A portrait dating to the early 1650s by Peter Lely shows the young

figure of Elizabeth, Duchess of Lauderdale, during her first marriage to Lionel Tollemache. Dressed in a brown silk dress with full sleeves and swathed with a blue sash, the young duchess looks out to the viewer whilst reaching out with her left hand to touch some roses, displayed to her in a bowl by a stooping attendant who looks up to her face (fig. 5). The young man wears a pale green suit, with a single pearl drop earring hanging from his ear. The gold bowl in which he displays the flowers has a scalloped edge and is similar in design to the gold shells which the figures at Dyrham Park support above their heads. A second portrait, dating to about 1735, depicts Lady Grace Carteret, Countess of Dysart, with a small child and a young black boy in the attire of a servant (fig. 6). A spaniel and a cockatoo also feature in the painting. As is typical of the genre, the young black boy looks directly at the countess and the child, while the woman's gaze is fixed resolutely away from him to meet the eyes of the viewer.

Figure 5

Peter Lely, *Elizabeth Murray and an Unknown Attendant*, circa 1651, oil on canvas, 124 × 119 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Ham House, Richmond (NT 1139940). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images (all rights reserved).

Figure 6

Attributed to John Giles Eccardt, *Lady Grace Carteret, Countess of Dysart with a Child (Lady Frances Tollemache?), an Unknown Enslaved Child, a Cockatoo and a Spaniel*, circa 1735, oil on canvas, 132 × 130 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Ham House, Richmond (NT 1139940). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images (all rights reserved).

Although the two young men represented in these paintings are portraits of individuals, the compositional structure of the paintings form a disturbing visual alignment with the wooden stands in the same collections. The individuals depicted in the portraits perform a servile function, offering flowers and holding the bird, but equally they are being used by the white sitters and the white artists as fashionable accessories to emphasise status. When considering stands such as those at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park, it is evident that their designs were formed by the same oppressive racist ideologies, which shaped the lives of so many individuals including people living and working in the spaces in which these objects were displayed.

Makers and Materials

The language used in documentary sources to describe the stands at Ham House and Dyrham Park provides little indication as to where these objects might have been made. Geographical or stylistic origins often appear in inventories of this period as a descriptive term. Italian, French, or Dutch would have been included by clerks as a means of identifying specific items of furniture. More than this, these geographical descriptions would have indicated particular values, both cultural and economic. Although we must be cautious of reading decisions made by individual clerks as indicators of wider documentary trends, if the stands in question had been imported from the Continent, it seems possible that this might have been noted in the inventories.
It has been stated previously that the set of stands at Ham House are Venetian.[32] The association between these figures and the city is not unfounded. Objects which are described as *mori* or *moretti*, occasionally with the added detail of their function (torchbearer or a stand for vase), appear frequently in Venetian household inventories from the first half of the seventeenth century.[33] It is likely that a number of these figures that survive in British collections today were either made in Venice, or designed with Venetian examples in mind. A set in the collection at the House of the Binns in West Lothian includes the device of the Venetian Doge on their pedestals.[34] A chair in the collection at Sissinghurst Castle features the figures of two African men supporting each arm, and its design is directly inspired by the set of state room furniture which was created in Venice for the Venier family by the sculptor Andrea Brustolon in 1701 (fig. 7).

Figure 7

Manner of Andrea Brustolon, *Open armchair, Venice*, circa 1880, limewood, pine, textile (silk), 128 × 88 × 79 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Sissinghurst Castle Garden, Kent (NT 802613). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Charles Thomas (all rights reserved).

A set of “moor” figures in the collections of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris must also be considered as part of this discussion (fig. 8). Measuring 117.5 cm in height, they are slightly smaller than the tambourine stands at Ham House and Knole but certain elements of their design are strikingly similar. Bells feature around the wrists and ankles of all three sets of figures. In addition, the turbans of the male figure in the Parisian set and the figures at Knole all feature a central diamond-shaped decoration. The bases of all three sets are highly similar in form, as is the posture of all the figures—each stands with their weight on one foot, with the heel of the other foot slightly raised. Given these close visual connections, it seems likely that if the Parisian set were not made in the same workshop as the Ham House and Knole pairs, then they were certainly closely associated. The designs were clearly the product of the same visual influences.

Figure 8

Unknown artist, *Pair of Torcholders, Venice*, circa 1650–1660, carved lime tree painted black and gold, oak legs, height 117.5 cm. Collection of Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD), Paris (38364 (a) (b)). Digital image courtesy of MAD, Paris / Jean Tholance (all rights reserved).

The Parisian set has been dated to between 1650 and 1660, but no further information on its provenance is known. Nicolas Courtin has tentatively suggested that this set was Venetian in origin. Courtin notes that the style saw a particular rise in popularity in France during the middle of the seventeenth century with examples found in the inventories of elite French homes between 1652 and 1700.[35]

The Parisian set and its clear similarities with the pairs at Ham House and Knole raises the question of where these pieces were made, and by whom. Despite its enduring association with the design, Venice was by no means the only city in Europe where objects which featured figures of African people performing a functional or structural roles were produced. A design for a large gueridon by the engraver Jean Le Pautre enhances the possible French connection and a decorative cabinet in the collections of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam demonstrates that the use of African figures in Dutch furniture design was popular from the seventeenth century (figs. 9

and 10). This connection with the Netherlands is reinforced by an early reference to such objects in England. An entry in the diary of Henry Slingsby from 1638 describes a cast lead "blackamore", which sits "holding in either hand a candlestick to set a candle to give light to ye staircase". The artist of the piece is described as Andrew Karne, a Dutchman.[36] Over a century later, in 1761, J. Marsh notes a childhood fascination with a walking stick with "a Blackamores head upon it, curiously carved in the Dutch style".[37] Adam Bowett challenges the assumption that such objects were always continental imports. On the stands at Dyrham Park, Bowett states: "It is usual to state that blackamoor stands were 'Venetian', and although many were apparently made in Venice during the nineteenth century, there is no reason to suppose that the illustrated examples are anything but English".[38]

Figure 9

Jean Le Pautre, *A Large Guéridon, France*, late seventeenth century. Collection of the Getty Research Institute. Digital image courtesy of Getty Research Institute (public domain).

Figure 10

Unknown artist, *Cabinet, Antwerp*, circa 1670–1690, oil on marble, 265 × 150.5 × 55.5 cm. Collection of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (BK-16434). Digital image courtesy of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (public domain).

In their refurbishment of Ham House during the 1670s, the Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale employed a number of different craftsmen to create furniture for their home, patronising workshops both in Europe and in London. The records of a number of these commissions include descriptions of items which could refer to the figure stands; however, they could equally refer to other pieces which can still be found in the Ham collection today.

Peter Thornton notes the record of a payment made by the Duchess to a certain Mistress v. der Huva in Holland for "a cabinet of black ebonie with a table and two gardons cost 440 guilders".[39] In addition to this, James Yorke provides evidence of orders made by the Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale to a French furniture maker named Peletyer for a number of ebonised pieces to arrive during the summer of 1673.[40]

The Duchess of Lauderdale's accounts reveal a number of payments made to different cabinetmakers from 1672 to 1683, including Gerrit Jensen, Jorkim Andler, Balthasar Gray, and

Johannes van Santvoort.[41] Surviving bills indicate that Gerrit Jensen made furniture for both Ham House and Knole during this period. Although Jensen's birthplace remains unknown, Adam Bowett and Laurie Lindey argue that the craftsman's signature, specifically his use of the double dotted capital J, which stands for the digraph ij in old Dutch, suggests that he was of Dutch origin.[42] He was admitted to the freedom of the Joiners Company on 22 October 1667, when he was thirty-three or thirty-four years old. The "fine" of 30s. which he paid was the standard fee for admission by redemption, rather than the usual seven-year apprenticeship. Bowett and Lindey make the point that this, and his subsequent career, suggest that he did not complete his training in London, but in one of the great cabinet-making centres such as Amsterdam, The Hague, or Paris.[43] By 1673, Jensen was working from premises on the south side of Long Acre in Covent Garden, when the Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale were already customers. On 29 May 1672, "Mr Jensen Cabenett:Maker" was paid £9 "in full" for work produced at Ham.[44] If this payment represented a first commission from the Duke and Duchess then they were clearly impressed with the work he delivered. In 1674, he was paid £50 in part with a number of other substantial commissions recorded into the 1680s.[45] At Knole, bills for Jensen's work date from 1680 to 1697. The bill for 1680 relates to the commission of an elaborate silver cabinet with matching stands and a large mirror as part of the set.[46] His favour with both families is unsurprising, as, by 1674, he held the position of cabinetmaker in ordinary to Queen Catherine of Braganza. There is, as yet, no clear evidence to connect Jensen to the production of the figure stands at Ham House and Knole. Although he was clearly a craftsman favoured by both the Maitlands and Sackvilles, the documentary evidence which survives of his work for the families lacks a clear identifying reference to the stands that would confirm Jensen either made the pieces or imported them as finished goods to be sold.

If the stands at Ham House and Knole cannot be confidently attributed to Jensen, the details of a number of his high-profile commissions from the period do reveal the growing appeal of objects which display the application of the same materials and techniques, in particular the layers of dark varnish applied to create the skin tone of the figures. A bill sent to Knole by Jensen in 1690 details "Table stands and Glass Japan", which are still thought to be in the collection. Without clear evidence that the stands at Dyrham Park, Ham House, and Knole were imported, or conclusive documentary evidence which connects the objects to a particular maker, we must consider how such pieces fit within the domestic industry of furniture production and in particular the developing fashion for lacquer wares and chinoiserie.

The residents at Ham House and Dyrham Park clearly adopted the fashion for lacquered objects. John Povey's letter indicates that the "two Black Boys" at Dyrham Park had been placed either side of an "Indian Tambour", while the inventories of Ham House suggest that the "Indian stands" were positioned in close proximity to "two Indian screens".[47] In Venice, the increased appearance of pieces of furniture that featured depictions of African figures in household inventories directly correlates with the rise of the city's burgeoning domestic lacquer industry. By the 1660s, Venice was the foremost producer of lacquer in Europe, although by the eighteenth century it had lost some of its market to other centres of production such as Florence, Genoa, and Lucca.[48] It could be argued that the appearance of figures such as these in English homes during the 1670s could reflect a similar pattern. As in Venice, a clear correlation can be made between the development of the English lacquer industry and the growing demand for objects of this type. Although East Asian lacquerware was known in Europe from the sixteenth century, the establishment of the Dutch and English East India companies in the early seventeenth century marked the beginning of a steady flow of objects into centres such as Amsterdam and London.

This would soon be followed by the establishment of a domestic lacquer industry where makers would attempt to imitate the fine finishes achieved by their Chinese and Japanese counterparts. The production of lacquerwares in England initially relied upon the East Indies trade as the raw materials for lacquer production were not available in Europe. Gum-lac which formed an opaque varnish was imported by the East India Company from India.[49] The evident appetite for the style in England also drove innovation within the domestic industry and, as Maxine Berg notes, from 1700 to 1820, thirteen patents were registered for japanning and varnishes.[50] In 1688, John Stalker and George Parker published a *Treatise on Japaning and Varnishing* providing craftsmen with a step-by-step guide of the lacquering process, including suggestions for the types of pictorial designs which they might want to include, such as figures, buildings, and wildlife (fig. 11).[51].

Figure 11

John Stalker, *Patterns for Japan-work*, in George Parker and John Stalker, *A Treatise of Japaning and Varnishing* (London, 1688), 1688. Collection of the Getty Research Institute. Digital image courtesy of Getty Research Institute (public domain).

Close Readings

It is also clear that when used to represent skin tone, the material process of lacquering became central to the creation of a recognisable and racialised type within the decorative arts. In 1683, a bronze bust of Catherine Bruce, the mother of the Duchess of Lauderdale, was listed in the White Closet in the household inventory of Ham House as a "brasse head of her Grace's mother"; however, in 1728, after the bust had been painted with a coat of black shellac varnish, it was described as a "Black[a]moors Head over the Chimney".[52] Analysis of the piece by the V&A in 2011 demonstrated that there was evidence that several layers of this patination had been applied over time, suggesting that it was perhaps the desired original finish on the piece. While the application of such a technique was not unusual in bronze sculptures of many different subjects

during this period, it remains noteworthy that, by 1728, this lustrous finish of black paint or lacquer had become synonymous with the "blackamoor" genre.

The use of lacquer to represent skin tone ought to be understood as part of a wider cultural development of the racialised representation of the bodies of African people during the period. This was by no means limited to visual cultures, and both Chi-ming Yang and Benjamin Schmidt highlight the manner in which the skin of the two African characters (the prince and the enslaved woman Imoinda) in Aphra Behn's novella *Oroonoko* (1688) is likened to "perfect ebony or polished jet" and described as "japanned". Yang argues that Behn's representation of "African bodies as collectible artefacts" evinces how the text itself is an example of chinoiserie: "a fantasy of globality in the form of ornamentation". Schmidt likewise states that Behn's description of Prince Oroonoko invokes "a full inventory of material arts".[53] The bodies of Africans depicted in the form of the stands at Ham House, Dyrham Park, and Knole demonstrate the close association of black skin with precious and fashionable commodities such as lacquer. To understand this association purely as visual, with black subjects offering craftsmen the opportunity to work with a highly valued material, or solely in the context of the rise of the domestic English lacquer industry, would be to bypass the unavoidable reality that African people were themselves viewed as commodities by the British consumers who purchased such objects.[54]

Just like Behn's textual descriptions of the physical appearances of two African people, the costume worn by the figures at Ham House can be interpreted as a fusion of geographical references. Even the smallest details of design must be understood within the context of a wider European construction of African culture presented in sources such as travel narratives, cartographic sources, costume books, and performance culture.

When comparing their design with contemporary allegorical figures of the continents, the tobacco leaf or feathered skirts and headdresses more closely align them with figures representing America than Africa. Bows and arrows, however, were frequently shown in allegorical depictions of both continents. Again, this could be interpreted as a random assortment of design elements brought together to create a sense of the "exotic", but equally it could allude to a more nuanced understanding of the realities of the colonial world, albeit in a sanitised fashion. In her work on the tobacco culture of eighteenth-century London, Catherine Molineux demonstrates how shop signs and advertisements highlighted the widespread societal recognition of enslaved African labour on tobacco plantations in the Americas.[55] In fact, William Marshall's frontispiece to *The Smoaking Age or The Life and Death of Tobacco* (London, 1617) illustrates that this connection was already well established from the early seventeenth century (fig. 12). The engraving shows the small figure of a black man smoking a pipe displayed in the window of a shop. An early precursor to the carved shop signs of the eighteenth century, the figure is depicted in costume more closely associated with allegorical figures of Africans, including a breastplate, tunic, and a headband reminiscent of those worn by classical athletes.

Figure 12

William Marshall, *Frontispiece in The Smoaking Age or the Life and Death of Tobacco*, (London, 1617), 1617, engraving, 12.8 × 7.6 cm. Collection of The British Museum (Gg,4U.13). Digital image courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The bells worn by the figures at both Ham House and Knole connect the pieces intrinsically with the popular early modern dance of the *moresca*, where the dancers would wear such bells and, in some contexts, blacken their faces. Similar bells can be seen on the sixteen wooden sculptures of Morris dancers produced by Erasmus Grasser for Duke Albrecht IV of Bavaria in 1480 (fig. 13). Now in the Münchner Stadtmuseum, the set of dancers includes a depiction of a young African man. In *A Treaty on the Art of Dancing*, Giovanni-Andrea Gallini notes the custom of African dancers wearing bells around their ankles stating that "the women … have little bells tinkling at their feet".[56] The musical theme of the Ham House and Knole stands is extended by the tambourines which the figures support above their heads, an instrument which, Irene Alm has argued, was played by dancers representing African characters in seventeenth-century Venetian operas.[57]

Figure 13

Erasmus Grasser, *Morris Dancer*, 1480, painted limewood, 63 cm. Collection of Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich (K-Ic / 222). Digital image courtesy of Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich (CC BY-SA 4.0).

The wearing of earrings, such as the gold hoops seen on the figures at Dyrham Park or the small red gems which hang from the ears of the female figures at Knole, were part of a long-established visual trope in representations of African people produced across continental Europe and in Britain. Typically a gold hoop or a pearl drop, these small details feature in all forms of representation, from heraldic heads to carefully realised portraits of individuals.

Kate Lowe has argued that the connection between African people and gold jewellery can be traced back to accounts of the costume and adornment practices of African cultures in early modern travel texts, citing the example of the description of the gold ornaments worn in the nostrils and ears by the nobles of King Bormelli in the account of Diogo Gome's voyage to West Africa of 1456–1457.[58] It could be suggested that, by depicting these later carved figures wearing earrings, their makers were simply inheriting a well-established visual trope connected to textual accounts of African cultures in previous centuries. Yet, accounts of the adornment practices of other cultures continued to play a central role in travel narratives of the seventeenth century when these figures were being made. Thomas Herbert recorded the adornment practices of the people of Zaire and Angola. In his account, first published in London in 1634, Herbert notes that "their ears are long and made longer by ponderous baubles, they hang there, extending the holes to a great capacity, so put a link of brass or iron, others chains, glass, blue stones or bullets in them".[59] The earrings and other pieces of jewellery worn by the carved figures can be understood, therefore, as the product of a long-standing visual connection between African cultures and the wearing of jewellery established by descriptions in both older travel narratives and those which were contemporary to the period in which these figures were made.

These textual descriptions of adornment practices could certainly have contributed to the widespread association of African cultures with jewellery; however, it is equally important to

note the connections which might be made with the material culture of enslavement. Bells and earrings remain subtle details in comparison to the chains, shackles, and collars which are visible on the stands at Dyrham Park. The particular barbarity in the design of these stands is revealed when we consider the manner in which the chains which restrain the kneeling men are connected from ankle to neck, which presumably would have been devised to make it impossible to stand at full height and therefore enforce a kneeling position (fig. 14).

Figure 14

Unknown artist, *Stand*, 1680–1700, painted and giltwood, probably beech, 98 × 64 × 56 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Dyrham, Gloucestershire (NT 452977). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Clive James and Rod Stowell (all rights reserved).

The Most Extensive Sale

To argue that the kneeling shackled figures at Dyrham Park symbolically represent investments in exotic commodities such as sugar or tobacco, or a successful career in colonial administration, ignores what the objects are telling us. The shining varnish and colourful paint of these pieces did not attempt to tastefully disguise the racist ideologies; instead, they represent, quite literally, a gilded endorsement. The particular cruelty of the objectification in the design of Thomas Povey's stands, and the gold paint used to highlight the violent symbols of the figures' enslavement, demonstrates that these objects were deliberately made and commissioned by men who knew that the African men represented here were the commodity. They understood that it was as a direct result of the enslaved labour of African people that their fortunes and status grew and that this was something to be celebrated and prominently displayed in important parts of their homes through decoration.

The stands at Ham House, Knole, and Dyrham Park and the documentation on them which survives provide us with a sense of how racialised European constructions of African bodies

were represented in English decorative arts during the second half of the seventeenth century. The survival of other objects, however, demonstrates not only the different forms which this type of representation took, but also its apparent popularity well into the eighteenth century and beyond. Their constructed "exoticism" might lead to the belief that such objects were unusual or a rarity but surviving documentary and material evidence suggests the opposite.

A still life, dating to 1695 and painted in London by the artist Pieter van Roestraten, shows a silver candlestick in which the figure of a man, with knees bent, supports the candle above his head (fig. 15). In a reference from Ham House in 1756, the Count of Dysart paid £8 1s. for a "Sylver Black Boy branch Candlestick Gouderone Weight 23 ounces", where the silver boy's skin was patinated black to achieve the desired aesthetic effect.[60] Although now lacking the patination described in the case of the Ham House candlesticks, we can imagine that the design was not unlike a silver gilt pair sold at Sotheby's in 2007 (fig. 16). Made by the silversmith John Pero in 1733, this set features kneeling enslaved African men supporting holders for the candles in their outstretched hands. Their shackles, along with their triangular base with paw feet, make them reminiscent of the seventeenth-century Dyrham Park stands.

Figure 15

Pieter van Roestraten, *Teapot, Ginger Jar and Slave Candlestick, London*, circa 1695, oil on canvas, 68.6 × 54.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (P.2-1939). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Figure 16

John Pero, *A pair of George II silver-gilt two-light candelabra*, 1733, silver-gilt, 19 cm (height). Digital image courtesy of Sotheby's (all rights reserved).

The closest comparisons can perhaps be made with the lead sundials in the form of kneeling men of African descent, which were popularised by the Belgian sculptor Jan van Nost from his workshop on Piccadilly in London (fig. 17). Van Nost arrived in London at some point before 1686 and worked as a foreman in the workshop of Arnold Quellin. Following Quellin's death, he married his widow and took over his workshop, rapidly establishing himself with high-profile patrons such as the Duke of Devonshire.[61] At the turn of the century, Nost was awarded a

contract for an extensive programme of sculptural works at Hampton Court Palace, including a sundial in the shape of a "blackamore". The records state that Nost was employed "for modelling a figure of a Blackamore kneeling being 5 ft high holding up a sundial" and for "casting the said Blackamore in hard metal and repainting".[62] The sundial would be positioned in the privy garden of William III and was also accompanied by a kneeling "Indian" figure.[63]

Figure 17

Unknown artist, *Elihu Yale Sundial*, circa 1708, bronze, cast lead, and cement, 161.29 × 84.46 × 68.26 cm. Collection of Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven (1922.8). Digital image courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery (public domain).

It would appear that this royal commission to Nost would begin a fashion for such sundials in the properties of other members of the English elite over the course of the eighteenth century. The "blackamore" sundial had become one of Nost's signature pieces, and many of those which survive in collections today are either attributed to, or associated with, his workshop. Following his death in 1711, the style was adopted by other sculptors, who evidently wanted to capitalise on Nost's success with the design. The Dunham Massey example is thought to have been produced around 1735 by Andries Carpentier who worked as an assistant in the workshop of Nost before becoming an established sculptor in his own right.[64] When viewed from the south of the property, the example at Dunham Massey appears almost to support not only the sundial, but also the entire façade of the mansion above his head (figs. 18 and 19). During the 1730s, Carpentier was also employed to create a number of sculptural commissions for Wrest Park in Bedfordshire, including "a blackamoor and a gladiator" and a "little miller" with a pedestal and a "blackamoor". For this latter commission, he was paid the fee of £28.[65]

Figure 18

John Harris II, *A Bird's-Eye View of Dunham Massey from the South*, circa 1750–1751, oil on canvas, 132.0 × 200.7 cm. Collection of the National Trust, Dunham Massey, Cheshire (NT 932335). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images / Angelo Hornak (all rights reserved).

Figure 19

Dunham Massey, National Trust. Digital image courtesy of Mike Peel (CC-BY-SA-4.0).

Although Carpentier had worked directly in the Nost workshop, he was by no means the only London craftsman to recognise the commercial possibilities of the design. In 1741, John Cheere, whose workshop at Hyde Park Corner led the market for lead garden sculptures during the 1740s and 1750s, produced a "Blackamoor with a sundial after John Nost I" for Okeover Hall in Staffordshire for the price of £8.[66] A significant number of other examples, for which no clear artistic attribution can be made, still survive today, whilst numerous references exist to those which are no longer in their original location. A large number of these have been documented by Patrick Eyres and include examples found at Fetcham Park in Surrey, Glenham Hall in Suffolk, and Norton Conyers in North Yorkshire.[67]

Several nineteenth-century sources attest to the popularity of the "blackamoor" motif in garden sculpture during the eighteenth century. In his work on ornamental leadwork, W.R. Lethaby notes that "above all an African kneeling with a sundial upon his head found the most extensive sale". Lethaby provides the example of the sundial that can still be seen in place in the Inner Temple Garden in central London, which had previously been positioned at Clement's Inn. Lethaby notes that an engraving on the side of this example names the donor: "The sides have the initials of the donor, P.I.P., and the date, 1731".[68] He also states that other writers had claimed that the piece was brought back by John Holles, Lord Clare, following his travels in Italy during the seventeenth century, but he concludes that the inscription on the work renders this claim to be "local gossip".[69]

Given the number of documented examples which survive, it is clear that the sundial now at Lincoln's Inn was almost certainly made in England and in the style of those made in Van Nost's workshop. Nevertheless, this connection made between the object and Italy during the nineteenth century demonstrates how quickly the facts of the object's history were separated from it. Perhaps, even in 1893, it was more comfortable to think of the object as Italian, creating distance between the kneeling figure and Britain's deeply entrenched role in the enslavement of African people in the preceding decades and centuries.

Reframing and Reinterpretation

Frequently selling for high prices on the antiques market today, it would be wrong to assume that the market for objects which feature representations of African people performing a structural function is a past phenomenon. In the Italian context, the last two decades have seen a number of artistic interventions that attempt to catalyse further discussion about their past, present, and future significance. This includes the work of American artist Fred Wilson and his installation "Speak of Me as I Am" at the 2003 Venice Biennale and the project *ReSignifications: European Blackamoors, Africana Readings*, which took place at New York University's Florence Campus, Villa La Pietra in 2015. The project brought together artists and scholars from all over the world to discuss and produce responses to the thirty-six figures collected over the twentieth century by the British writer Harold Acton. The curator of the accompanying exhibition, Awam Amkpa, described the project as an opportunity to "reframe and refract the history of representing African and African diasporic bodies".[70]

For those which survive in collections inherited by heritage organisations such as the National Trust, key questions remain (and, as yet, are unanswered). Should such clearly racist objects remain on display? If they do, then how can they be interpreted for a public audience in 2021? Such debates are by no means new, as is demonstrated by the example of the lead sundial at Wentworth. At the time of its creation, it might have been interpreted as the material expression of Thomas Stafford's political and economic achievements and ambitions. For the students who resided in the house more than 200 years later, when the property had become a teacher training college, the presence of the statue, and what it represented, was regarded as an unacceptable affront. Patrick Eyres describes how, in protest, the students painted the black lead statue with white gloss paint in "a symbolic gesture of role reversal".[71] The statue has since been restored yet the story of the students and their protest raises interesting questions about the significance and interpretation of such pieces today.

At Dunham Massey, now owned by the National Trust, the decision was made in 2020 to temporarily remove the sundial from its position in front of the house and place it into storage. In its place, a sign explains that the sundial had been removed "to protect it from harm after complaints about the man's subjugated pose". The sign goes on to note that the National Trust are "taking time to review how to sensitively redisplay and interpret this historic object" and are "working closely with different people and organisations … on the next chapter of the statue's history".

Whether through more traditional formats of interpretation in the context of the heritage space, or through artistic responses, what must be central to our understanding of these objects today is the vital importance of a close analysis of each element of their design. Each of these details deserves consideration in turn for the specific social and cultural reference it relays. No clearer example exists as to why the decorative arts ought to be taken seriously for what they can tell us about the past. The objects with which people decorated their homes reveal both individual values and the values of the time. How we choose to interpret and discuss these objects today will tell future generations about the values of our own.

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