

# Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic

## *Tate Liverpool Educators' Pack*

### Introduction

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Verso: London, 1993) identifies a hybrid culture that connects the continents of Africa, the Americas and Europe. Inspired by Gilroy's seminal book, this major exhibition at Tate Liverpool examines the impact of Black Atlantic culture on modernism and the role of black artists and writers from the beginning of the twentieth-century to present day.

Divided into seven chronological chapters, the exhibition takes as its starting point the influences of African sculpture on artists such as Picasso and Brancusi in the evolution of Cubism and Abstract art. The journey continues across the Atlantic tracking the impact of European modernism on emerging African-American Artists, such as the Harlem Renaissance group. It traces the emergence of modernism in Latin America and Africa and returns to Europe at the height of the jazz age and the craze for "Negrophilia". It follows the transatlantic commuting of artists between continents and maps out the visual and cultural hybridity that has arisen in contemporary art made by people of African descent. The final section examines current debates around "Post-Black Art" with contemporary artists such as Chris Ofili and Kara Walker.

This pack is designed to support educators in the planning, execution and following up to a visit to Tate Liverpool. It is intended as an introduction to the exhibition with a collection of ideas, workshops and points for discussion. The activities are suitable for all ages and can be adapted to your needs.

**Exhibition dates: 29 January – 25 April 2010, Tate Liverpool, Albert Dock, Liverpool L3 4BB**

**Available in the bookshop: Catalogue: *Afro Modern – Journeys through the Black Atlantic* by Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschluter, Tate Publishing, 2010**

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## Avant-Gardes

It has been well-documented that the pioneers of modernism in Europe took inspiration from non-Western sources including African sculpture, though it is important to note that their fascination with such art was purely formal. They had no interest in the historical, ceremonial or ritual use of masks and figurines but admired the vitality and expressive quality of what they recognised as “primitive” art.

An interest in ethnographic art in Europe was initially aroused through the objects brought back from the colonies by traders and explorers in the nineteenth-century. **Picasso** was a regular visitor to the ethnology galleries in Paris, but he also amassed his own collection of “strange wooden grimaces” as his friend, the poet André Salmon described the objects accumulated in his studio. Dissatisfied with traditional artistic conventions during the first decade of the twentieth-century, Picasso set out to re-invent art in his own terms, inspired by the direct approach of non-European culture.

The mask-like face, wood-coloured body and hatched planes of ***Bust of a Woman*** 1909 reveal the influence of African carving. This faceting and breaking up of form would eventually lead to Picasso’s development along with George Braque of Analytical Cubism.

Another artist influenced by non-Western culture was **Amadeo Modigliani**. His highly stylised heads and figures with their almond shaped eyes and oval heads are reminiscent of Cambodian carvings. In contrast to the angular almost geometric forms of the cubist artists, Modigliani emphasised the sensuous curves and rhythms of his figures in both his paintings and his sculptures.

One of the pioneers of abstract sculpture, **Constantin Brancusi** arrived at his reductive expression of form through the blending of non-European sources with the traditional wood carvings of his native Romania. He simplified form dramatically, eliminating detail and emphasising pure universally recognisable shapes such as the ovoid. ***Head*** c.1919-23, is part of a larger sculpture which Brancusi destroyed, retaining only the head, which he considered the vital part in expressing the human body. He said, “What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things”. This drastic simplification was intended to present a unified surface and also to emphasise the innate beauty of the materials.

***The White Negress I*** 1923 represents a complex blend of two different sculptural traditions in its combination of a smoothly polished head with a more roughly hewn base inspired by African art. It also performs a racial inversion through the use of white marble, reflecting the fusion of black and white cultures that was in vogue in Paris at the time.

**Look** at examples of other European art movements at the turn of the twentieth-century (e.g. German Expressionism, Futurism, Fauvism, Surrealism). Discuss colour, line, form, materials etc and also how these artists could have been influenced by non-Western cultures. Did any of them visit Africa? Where would they have studied African art? Look at some examples of ethnographic art

alongside these artists' work. (e.g. Walker Evans' photographs featured in the exhibition).

**Draw** an African mask or sculpture, first of all using pencil and then a crayon or pastel in order to get a more expressive result. Experiment with drawing materials and different colours and discuss your resulting works.

**Make** a portrait of a friend in the style of Brancusi using modelling clay and reducing the head to as few characteristics as possible yet still allowing the subject to be recognisable.

European Modernism had a profound global influence. Artists from other continents encountered modern art-forms through travelling or studying in Europe. **Tarsila do Amaral** was taught by Cubist **Fernande Léger** and was inspired by European artists' uses of non-Western culture. On her return to South America she turned to the indigenous art of her own continent. **Moro da Favella** 1925 represents a Brazilian subject in a style that fuses a wide range of influences experienced on her transatlantic travels. This "canabalistic" approach was shared by fellow artists who became known as the **Brazilian Antropofagist** movement. One of these artists was **Lasar Segall**, a Lithuanian who emigrated to Brazil in the 1920s. **Banana Plantation** 1927 uses a visual language derived from Cubism and German Expressionism allied to aspects of native South American art. The large Caucasian head that occupies the plantation signifies the continuing white exploitation of Brazilian agricultural land during the early twentieth century when black slaves were replaced by European immigrants.

In the United States, artists of African descent appropriated European modernism in order to express a new confidence and pride in the arts and cultures of Africa. One of the first artists to use this new visual language for depicting themes of African heritage was **Aaron Douglas** who became known as the "Father of Black American Art". **Aspiration** 1936 contrasts an image of slavery with that of an ennobled and educated future for African Americans. By combining influences from African and ancient Egyptian art with a contemporary Art Deco style, Douglas generated a hybrid form of expression which captures the sense of freedom and creativity of the jazz age and places the African American in a modern Western context.

In 1934, Douglas was commissioned by the Public Works of Art Project to paint a series of murals for the New York Public Library. His cycle traces the experience of the African American, from slavery in the Southern States to emancipation in the modern city, beginning with this evocation of a distant African past, **Aspects of Negro Life: the Negro in an African Setting** 1934. Douglas employs vibrant, stylised forms to express a modern interpretation of his racial history. He said, "I refuse to compromise and see blacks as anything less than a proud and majestic people."

As an important member of the **Harlem Renaissance** group, Aaron Douglas illustrated many of the key African American journals of the period and designed book covers for the circle's writers. The *Opportunity Art Folio* 1926 is one of his most successful artistic collaborations, pairing his characteristic

silhouetted illustrations with poems by Langston Hughes. The artist's subtle blending of stark depictions of contemporary black American life contrasted with African art-inspired imagery finds a perfect parallel in Hughes's blues-structured language.

The **Harlem Renaissance** was a cultural and intellectual movement originating in New York in the 1920s. Harlem became the centre of the New Negro Movement when its former white middle class housing became converted into dwellings for predominantly black labourers at the beginning of the twentieth-century. The neighbourhood's diversity is expressed in the paintings of **Palmer Hayden** and **Edward Burra**.

British artist Burra was initially attracted to Harlem through his love of jazz music. The area became the focal point of cultural and political development during the inter-war period which galvanised a generation of black Americans with new confidence and a strong sense of identity. In a letter, the artist described the neighbourhood's "non-stop twitchery night and day" which is captured in paintings such as **Harlem** 1934. The vibrancy of the modern metropolis is combined with vitality associated with African-American culture.

In Hayden's **Midsummer Night in Harlem** 1938, residents escape the stifling heat of the over-crowded apartments by congregating on the streets. Hayden's naïve style has been compared to folk art and cartoons, but this radical simplification of form has often been misconstrued as conforming to racial stereotypes.

**James Van der Zee** depicted a different side of Harlem life in the portraits he made over a period of six decades. His photographs provide a perspective on African-American life that was rarely seen at the time by presenting sophisticated middle-class subjects who were often transatlantic commuters. He took great pride in carefully posing his photographs, adding props and often retouching the negatives in order to remove blemishes. From the same privileged background as his clients, Van der Zee's aim was to beautify each individual and to present them in their best light.

The vibrant music scene of the Harlem Renaissance spawned a number of celebrities such as **Josephine Baker** who took her troupe, *La Revue Nègre*, to Paris in 1925. Famous for her outrageous costumes and highly energetic performances, she created her unique identity by subverting the commonly perceived image of the native African. Graphic designer Paul Colin launched his career with posters of Baker performing naked except for a string of bananas. The craze for "primitivism" and black culture in Europe during the 1920s was called "Negrophilia". Many Europeans, such as **Nancy Cunard** and **Kiki de Montparnasse** began to adopt fashions and style based on African and African-American culture.

**Discuss** photographs and paintings of Nancy Cunard, Kiki de Montparnasse and Josephine Baker. What image are they projecting of themselves? How do they control this image? Discuss their clothes, make-up, hair-style, pose etc.

**Design** your own outfits inspired by African culture – you could try making these as collages using real materials and fabrics.

**Find out** more about the Harlem Renaissance – read poems, listen to music, look at art by Sargent Johnson, Aaron Douglas, Edward Burra, James Van der Zee etc.

**Write** an imaginary interview with one of the figures in the art of the Avant Gardes section (e.g. the tall man in the Burra painting, one of Hayden's figures, a Harlem resident in Van der Zee's photographs etc) Ask them about their life, where they live, what they do, their family, friends etc).

## Maya Deren

The second room presents a film by the Ukrainian born American choreographer and artist Maya Deren. She spent periods in Haiti between 1947 and 1951, filming and participating in Voodoo festivals, rituals and rites. The result was the posthumously edited film and book, ***Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti***, which became an important documentation of Haitian voodoo.

This religion merges the beliefs and practices of the West African slaves brought to Haiti with Roman Catholicism. Deren's highly personal film reflects on the hybrid culture of Haiti and its importance as the site of the first slave rebellion, a key event that contributed to the eventual abolition of slavery.

**Watch** Deren's video. Pretend that you are a newspaper reporter and write a review of this film. What is it about? Where was it filmed? What are your personal responses to the film? How does it make you feel?

## Black Orpheus

The title of room three is taken from an essay by Jean-Paul Sartre from 1948, which prefaced a selection of poetry by French writers of African descent. Orpheus was originally a figure from Greek Mythology associated with music, literature and drama.

This section of the exhibition explores the development of **Négritude** in its different manifestations in the visual arts of Cuba, the Caribbean, Brazil and parts of Africa. The blending of cultures in the Caribbean was known as **creolisation** where artists reinterpreted modernism in a unique Creole style. This room also focuses on movements such as the Nigerian **Natural Synthesis** which fused European modernism with local African aesthetic influences.

**Négritude** was an international artistic, philosophical and political movement, partly inspired by the Harlem Renaissance. It aimed to reclaim the value of black culture, history and identity and was developed initially in Paris where artists demonstrated their rejection of French colonial racism.

**Rubem Valentim** participated in the *First World Festival of Negro Art* in Dakar, Senegal 1966. Having travelled extensively in Europe and Africa in the course of his studies, he drew on African tradition and combined this with the language of European geometric abstraction. The double-headed axe shape of **Composition** 1961 appears in much of his art. It is the Yoruba sign representing the thunder deity Shango which was also used extensively as a symbol of resistance against colonial enslavement.

**Creolisation** reflects a fluid blending of cultures within the Caribbean. It represents the appropriation and reinterpretation of non-native elements, such as European modernism into a unique Creole style.

Cuban artist **Wilfredo Lam** spent the early part of his career in Europe. He became a member of the Surrealist movement and also received encouragement from his friend Picasso whose work greatly influenced the development of his own visual vocabulary. On returning to his homeland after the outbreak of the Second World War, he experienced a renewed awareness of its culture and topography. Fearing that Cuba was in danger of losing its African traditions, Lam sought to reaffirm its heritage using a modern form of expression. Paintings such as ***Lumiere dans la Foret, La Grande Jungle*** 1942 were characterised by hybrid figures which combined elements taken from the tropical surroundings in a style derived from Picasso's proto-cubist period.

**Natural Synthesis** was a Nigerian movement which fused the visual language of European Modernism with influences of local African art. Devised by artist and theorist **Uche Okeke**, this movement encouraged a break with the past in order to produce a progressive art relevant to modern Nigeria. Okeke's ***Ana Mmuo*** 1961 is one of his most ambitious works. It demonstrates the concerns of Natural Synthesis in combining indigenous elements with a commitment to being contemporary. In this painting he has saturated the canvas with vibrant colours to suggest the fluid forms of displaced spirits moving in the land of the dead. It also points to the artist's growing interest in the linear Uli art tradition of the Igbo people inherited from his mother.

Another artist associated with Natural Synthesis was **Adebisi Akanji**. His large openwork screens are typical of the Oshogbo school which was established to create work along with a new social status for Nigerian artists and craftsmen. ***Untitled (Four Screens)*** c.1966 combines elements from local folk art with architectural features of Afro-Brazilian style Yoruba houses. A former bricklayer, Adebisi models free-flowing forms in soft cement over a supporting wire armature thereby reinterpreting a traditional art-form for a modern context.

**Look** closely at the works in the Black Orpheus room. What materials have been used? How do you think they were made? Would you describe these works as traditional African art or modern?

**Visit** Liverpool's World Museum or study Walker Evans' ethnographic photographs and explore African art. Discuss how you think they could have been made.

**Discuss** the influence of traditional African art on the artists featured in the exhibition. You could give students images of African sculpture to help them find examples in the gallery.



## Dissident Identities

This section examines art of the period beginning with the early 1960s when artists became more politically involved in response to events that were taking place around them, particularly in United States. Through their work and direct political activity, artists of African descent claimed their rights, freedom, equality and democracy. This section reflects the expanding boundaries for artistic practice from this experimental period in history. It encompasses aspects of political activism, street-based art and installations alongside iconic images by photographers who documented political movements such as the Civil Rights and Black Power.

**David Hammons** is a New York based artist whose art addresses social exclusion. A powerful statement of inequality, *The Door (Admissions Office)* 1969 was made during the turbulent era of the Civil Rights movement, Black Power struggle and the race riots that erupted following the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr in 1968. Hammons uses an emblematic body print in order to suggest social as well as racial exclusion. The hands on the glass can be read as either blocking an entrance or pushing for admission depending on which side of the door the viewer stands.

The groundbreaking photographs of **Gordon Parks** are amongst the most familiar images of the Civil Rights movement and of African-American experience. Parks was a trainee photographer with a government agency when he made *American Gothic, Washington, DC* 1942 and he risked dismissal with this controversial image. Referencing the iconic work by Grant Wood, Parks replaces the white Americans of the original painting with a black African American cleaner. He was incited to create this image of resilience after encountering racism on his arrival in the capital city of the USA.

In embracing a wide range of media, philosopher and conceptual artist **Adrian Piper's** work exemplifies what Gilroy calls "the polyphonic qualities of black cultural expression". Using painting, text, sculptural installations and performance works, she analyses issues of personal identity and social boundaries. *I Am Everthing You Hate and Fear* is part of the *Mythic Being* series where she adopts the persona of a young black male. By using the words "I" and "you" Piper places the work in the immediate present, setting up a direct relationship between viewer and art object.

In the 1970s Piper began to address issues of xenophobia, racial exclusion and gender through inter-active and often confrontational performance works which were documented by photographs. The *Catalysis* series was carried out by the artist on the streets and subways of New York where her actions included stuffing her mouth with a towel and wearing a sweatshirt marked "wet paint". The passers-by and commuters were unwittingly involved in the performance, being made to feel uncomfortable by Piper's presence and forced to confront their own prejudices about her appearance.

SAMO© graffiti appeared on the streets of New York between 1977 and 1980. This was the name used by **Jean-Michel Basquiat** who explained: "It was supposed to be a logo, like Pepsi". As he became famous, Basquiat abandoned this anti-establishment form of expression and transferred his art to canvas. Before the graffiti disappeared it was documented by a few photographers including Peter Moore whose images are included in this section.

Aware of his position in the fashionable New York art scene, Basquiat exploited the market for multi-ethnic culture with his "primitive" but politically charged paintings. ***Native Carrying some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari*** 1982 addresses the impact of colonialization in the visual language of the urban African-American. His direct form of communication incorporates naively drawn images and linguistic elements developed from the street art and graffiti that had made his reputation. Blending together a diverse range of influences, his work has been described as a visual equivalent of hip hop.

**Compare** Grant Wood's *American Gothic* painting of 1930 with Gordon Parks photograph of the same name. Discuss differences and similarities. Why do you think Parks chose to base his photograph on this painting?

**Look** at examples of graffiti art. Is this art or vandalism? Discuss other examples of art that you might find in the streets rather than inside an art gallery. Find examples of street art in your town. Design your own street art – where would you locate it?

**Imagine** that you were present when Adrian Piper carried out one of her performance pieces. Describe how you would have reacted – shocked? Amused? Scared? Uncomfortable? Think of a similar performance that you could act out in your classroom to have the same effect on your classmates.

## Reconstructing the Middle Passage

This section takes Paul Gilroy's concept of the ship as a central motif of the Black Atlantic as its starting point. It examines the approaches of contemporary artists to subjects such as slavery, migration and the retrieval of history and memory using the image of the slave ship and the Middle Passage.

The Middle Passage refers to the area of the Atlantic defined by the trade routes between Europe, Africa and the Americas when slaves were forcibly transported to the New World plantations. They were bartered for with manufactured goods from Europe and then exchanged in the Americas for the raw materials produced by the plantations, including cotton, sugar and tobacco which were then exported to Europe to complete the triangular trade. The Middle Passage witnessed appalling conditions of confinement, illness, death and torture and was responsible for destroying families, cultures, religions resulting in conflicted states of belonging and identity amongst these displaced communities.

The ship has been used by the artists in this section as a symbol of enforced migration, violence and global inequality. In *Bird in Hand* 2006, **Ellen Gallagher** explores the idea of a "Black Atlantis". The mythical undersea landscape of Drexcia is related to Gallagher's imaginative exploration of the most treacherous part of the Atlantic trading route. This underwater world is populated by the descendents of pregnant slaves thrown overboard and whose unborn babies developed into a new marine life-form. Gallagher's own identity as a black Irish-American is crucial to her interpretation of this myth which interweaves memories of oppression, migration and forgotten histories. The artist's use of the traditional technique of scrimshaw, adds a sense of peeling back layers to this complex image.

**Radcliffe Bailey** appropriates found objects in order to endow his sculpture with a sense of history. *Garvey's Ghost* 2008 uses a battered model ship to symbolise the Black Nationalist leader's hopes for returning African-Americans to their continent of origin. In 1919, Garvey purchased two steamships, *Shadyside* and *Kanawha* for this purpose but ran out of money after only a couple of journeys. He was a poor businessman and along with several of his movement, was imprisoned and charged with corruption. The sprinkling of glitter possibly suggests the impracticality of Garvey's ideals.

**Isaac Julien** has developed a multi-disciplinary approach towards his art which draws upon painting, drama and photography in order to construct a potent visual narrative. Many of his works relate to experiences of class, race and cultural history. His *Western Union Series no. 1 (Cast No Shadow)* 2007 forms part of an installation work which investigates the wider context of diaspora, taking in latter day migrations from North Africa, Cuba and across the Caribbean. This meditative image also recalls the "door of no return" through which Africans once passed to board slave vessels.

**Visit** the International Slavery Museum at the Albert Dock, Liverpool, or study one of the websites about slavery in the resources section of this pack and find out about life on a slave ship.

**Discuss** slavery throughout history – when did it take place? Where? Why? Who were enslaved? When was it abolished? Are people still being enslaved today?

**Imagine** what it would be like to be taken from your home and transported to the other side of the world as a slave? After some research (see resources) write an account of a slave's journey from Africa to America. This could take the form of an illustrated diary.

## Exhibiting Bodies

This section focuses on contemporary responses to the explicit objectification of the black body which was one of the most disturbing and damaging aspects of colonialism and slavery. Paul Gilroy refers to this as the “insidious side of modernity”. At the turn of the twentieth century, black people were often exhibited as fairground attractions and used in pseudo-scientific studies such as phrenology to demonstrate levels of intelligence and racial inferiority.

**Saartjie Baartman** was a young Khoi-San woman from Cape Town, South Africa who was brought to Europe in 1810 and exhibited as the **Hottentot Venus**. As a sideshow attraction, she was forced to gyrate her hips for audiences in order to demonstrate her exaggerated racial characteristics. **Tracey Rose** plays tribute to Baartman by posing naked in a bush setting and by adopting a position that draws attention to her digitally enlarged breasts and buttocks. Rather than ridiculing or alluding to its “otherness”, Rose reclaims the African body as an emblem of power.

In a series of satirical performances recorded in their video, *The Couple in the Cage* 1993, **Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña** exhibited themselves in public as “undiscovered Amerindians”. Dressed in outrageous costumes and carrying out a range of rituals and “native” activities, their performances were supported by authentic ethnographic display materials such as maps, guides and museum guards. The artists’ intention was to address the racist practice of human displays, however, these interactions revealed that many of their audiences believed the fictitious race to be real and yet, alarmingly had no objection to this display of human beings as exotic curiosities.

**Candice Breitz** often appropriates the content of her art from other sources such as magazines and photographs. Her tactics are intended to challenge the stereotypical and sometimes tasteless images that are accepted in the media and popular culture, by making the viewer feel uncomfortable. In ***Ghost Series*** 1994-6 she attacks the tourist postcards of semi-naked African women produced for a predominantly white market under the guise of “traditional cultures”. In “whiting out” the subjects with correction fluid, Breitz is metaphorically imitating colonial practice of replacing native culture, religion and ways of life with their own. The whitened areas also highlight the blatant exploitation of the black female subjects.

**Discuss** body art. Why would artists choose to use the body in order to create art? What impact would Breitz’s art have if she had used photographs of men’s bodies instead, or if she had “blackened” out white bodies?

**Research** the World Fairs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where people of other countries were displayed as curiosities. Why do you think this was considered acceptable at the time? What point do you think Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña are making in their video of the *Couple in the Cage*? What are your personal responses to this film?

## Post-Modern to Post-Black

The final section features contemporary artists from the continents of the Black Atlantic. It examines a wide range of materials and methods used by artists including appropriation, recycling and sampling, along with the use of popular culture, slang and black humour.

In his textual paintings, **Glenn Ligon** uses quotes from other people and presents them through the anonymous method of stencilling them across the surface of the work. This typography also recalls the documented histories of slaves which were recorded by a third person as it was illegal for slaves to learn to read or write. The lines featured in ***Gold Nobody Knew Me...*** 2007 were transcribed from the stand up routine of comedian Richard Pryor. In presenting an oral delivery as text, Ligon endows the words with permanence and transfers the voice to the viewer. The joke itself points to the relative accessibility or inaccessibility of Africa and a black heritage rooted in that continent.

During his residency at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Ligon distributed photocopies of pages from a 1970s "black-themed" colouring book to local schoolchildren and then made his own paintings based on their efforts with crayola. One of the images in this book was a drawing of the black activist Malcolm X. His face was defined only by outlines and so colour took on a new meaning as children chose a range of imaginative tones for the skin, indicating that unlike adults, they do not see race as being defined by colour. Ligon's copy of one of these drawings, ***Malcolm*** 2000, is featured in the exhibition.

This section also looks at a new generation of artists identified as "post-black" who resist classification as "black" artists even though their work is steeped in reference to their race and heritage.

**Lorna Simpson** accumulated fifty photographs of anonymous African-Americans for her work ***Photo Booth*** 2008, all found in thrift stores near her home in Harlem. They have been framed and are accompanied by fifty watercolour and ink drawings by Simpson that off-set the formality of the posed photographs. When Simpson bought them, the photographs were often already archived or bundled together into categories of social groups. Simpson became interested in how history has forgotten the individuals who posed in front of a mirror in the intimate space of the booth in order to present themselves for a particular purpose. Some were taken for a passport or identity card, some as a memento of a day out or to send to a loved one. Simpson invites the viewer to draw closer to the seemingly anonymous display in order to examine the individuals and speculate about their forgotten lives.

The section ends with a black and white film by **Kara Walker, *8 Possible Beginnings or; the Creation of African America, A Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker*** 2005. The distinctive silhouettes of Walker's art link her with the shadowy figures of Aaron Douglas at the beginning of the exhibition. Often crude and violent, Walker's figures subvert the genteel eighteenth-century

English cameos as they are used to narrative tales of physical and psychological abuse experienced by slaves. Her image of enslavement is a far cry from Douglas's utopias and iconic modern black heroes.

### Activities

**In the classroom:** Take a map of the world and mark the nationalities of artists featured in the exhibition. Draw the routes taken by the artists who travelled and who worked or studied in other countries. Discuss the artistic, musical, political social influences absorbed by these artists and the ideas they helped disseminate.

**In the classroom:** collect images from magazines or the internet connected with Africa. Find poems, films, books set in Africa. What does Africa mean to you? Use your ideas to make a collage incorporating images, maps, textiles and words. You could follow up this project with a survey of African-American or Afro-Caribbean culture.

**In the gallery:** put your students into small groups and assign each group a different section of the exhibition. With a structured question sheet ask them to find out the theme of their section, what subjects does it explore, choose one work to study in depth which they feel is representative of the section and then put together a five minute presentation of the room and its art for the rest of the class.

**In the gallery:** find out how different materials have been used in the exhibition; different processes for making art; how everyday objects have been incorporated in works; examples of performance art and different approaches to representing the figure.

# Work in Focus: Ronald Moody

## *Johanaan 1934*

An image of this work can be found at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?&workid=20449&tabview=image>

Ronald Moody was born in Jamaica in 1900 to a prominent, professional family. He moved to Britain in 1923 to pursue his chosen career of dentistry and by the end of the decade he had set up his own practice. However, visit to the British Museum in 1928 was to have a profound influence on his life. He later recalled the impact of coming across the Egyptian Art collection:

“To my utter amazement I saw...I felt, and I think, understood the tremendous inner force, the living inner silence, the irrepressible movement in stillness, which some of the pieces possessed, which also seemed to spread through my body. When I eventually left, people and things appeared to have changed. My relationship with them was clearer, closer and more distant.”

From that moment on, he became determined to sculpt, whatever hardships and obstacles lay before him. He taught himself through studying the sculptures in the British Museum, first of all copying them in clay and Plasticine and then moving on to wood, mastering the art of direct carving. In his own work, he hoped to evoke a sense of contemplation in the viewer; at the same time encouraging empathy as well as objectivity and distance. In other words, he aimed to recreate the effect that the Egyptian art had evoked in him.

In the 1930s, many artists from the African diaspora found a receptive European audience concerned with representing more authentic traditions in both content and process. Moody received critical acclaim for exhibitions in London and Paris where his work was displayed alongside Raoul Dufy and Henri Matisse. He was given a one man show at Galerie Billet-Vorms in Paris where *Johanaan* was first exhibited. His European success led to his move to Paris where he lived and worked until forced to flee during the Second World War.

*Johanaan* was made just before his move to Paris. Carved from a single piece of elm, weighing approximately half a ton, it was a challenge for the artist. He said of the process:

“Wood is a very difficult material. You can’t dispose of it as easily as plaster cast or clay model. Any mistakes stare accusingly at you forever, and it requires a great deal of physical



energy and concentration to give it form”.

As with all of Moody’s works in wood, *Johanaan* displays sensitivity in his handling of the material, sympathetically working with the grain and allowing the contours of the figure to follow the natural patterns in the elm. He has exploited the characteristics and faults in the material, such as the iris and pupil of the left eye which uses the woodgrain, and the navel which is emphasised by a natural crack in the material. In other places, the artist has used filler to disguise irregularities and the whole surface has been polished to achieve a smooth, subtly modulated finish. Despite this harmony, Moody has retained a tension between form and material, implying the presence of an inner force striving to be released.

The title links the work with John the Baptist whose biblical Hebrew name was Yochanan or Johanan. His spiritual gospel informed many of the philosophical religious discourses in which Moody was interested. His study of philosophy led him to the arts of India and China and he became preoccupied with themes of solitude and contemplation. At a time of increasing conflict in the world, his work embodied the tension between man’s drive towards self-destruction and a search for spiritual enlightenment. In *Johanaan*, he attempted to convey an image of power and the resistance of mankind against persecution. Curator Paul Moorhouse described it as seeing to “fuse racial types into a monumental image of man”.

Though influenced by African carving, *Johanaan* is very much a modern sculpture and a work of powerful originality. On his return to Britain, large pieces of timber were scarce and the scale of Moody’s work was compromised but he retained a sense of monumentality even in his reduced work. He stated “However small, sculpture should be massive”. Though he experimented with other materials later in his career, his relationship with wood remained strong.

“My first love was and still is wood. The harder the better. I love its warmth and the fact that it is living. I have always felt that it has a close connection with the thoughts and feelings that have informed my work”.

**Show** your students some examples of Egyptian, Eastern and African Art and encourage them to make connections with Moody’s work.

**Talk** about different processes of making sculpture: modelling, casting, carving etc. What tools would you need to carve a sculpture? Draw a cartoon sequence of the process involved from tree to finished work of art.

**Make** some rubbings of wood and other textures and use the patterns as the basis of a portrait.

**Think** about scale in sculpture. Where would you expect to see sculptures as big as *Johanaan*? **Think** about materials for sculptures. Why do artists use different materials? What properties does wood have that makes it ideal for works of this scale? What other materials could Moody have used? Make some drawings of

*Johanaan* made from other materials...e.g. bronze, clay, glass, stone, ice, plastic, paper, video.

# Work in Focus: Sonia Boyce

## *From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction 1987*

An image of this work can be found at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?&workid=1386&tabview=image>

Born in England in 1962, Sonia Boyce has explored her heritage through her work, often taking her family and friends as subject matter and depicting her own experiences as a black woman growing up in Britain. The media she employs ranges from simple chalk and pastel to digitally manipulated images. She has used brightly coloured textiles and patterns associated with the Caribbean alongside photographs, drawings and pictures from book illustration and comics.

*From Tarzan to Rambo* 1987 represents an attempt by the artist to establish her own sense of identity in response to images of black people offered to her since childhood by a predominantly white controlled media.

The work takes the form of a huge black and white photograph echoing the movie screen that showed the original Tarzan films. The format also invites comparisons with advertising hoardings. Boyce is particularly interested in how media images infiltrate our lives and their effect on our construction of self-image.

The photograph reproduces and enlarges a collage which Boyce constructed specifically for this work. It consists of rows of self-portraits taken in a photo booth, photocopies of traditional African textiles, cut-out, so-called "gollywog" figures and a drawing of Tarzan in a jungle setting with other figures.

As a child, Boyce recalls watching the Tarzan movies and being confused by his presence in Africa. The hero of Edgar Rice Burrough's novels and the popular Hollywood screen adaptations was a white male presiding over his adopted environment. The natural inhabitants of the jungle were portrayed as savage, primitive and without intelligence.

Growing up in the 1970s, Boyce remembered news reports of the Vietnam War and the series of films it inspired, including the Rambo movies. Though African-Americans have made up a great part of the US forces, their important role has often been neglected in these films as were the racial aspects of the war. Rambo, like Tarzan, was portrayed as a “noble savage” dominating a jungle setting – another powerful self image for the white male. In *From Tarzan to Rambo*, Boyce highlights the lack of positive role models that existed for a black person in the media during her childhood.

The scene featuring Tarzan is a stencil drawing that has been traced from an illustration in the comic, *Terrifying Tales*, no 14, Sept 1953. Boyce draws attention to the pale skinned hero by colouring him in with pink and white acrylic paint to contrast with the dark faces of “natives” peering from the jungle vegetation. The primitive and savage nature of these people is reinforced by the caption “THE BUZZING BIRD SENDS US A VICTIM” which refers to an aircraft with its passengers. Boyce has stated that “buzzing bird” also refers loosely to the poultry used for sacrifice in voodoo rituals.

Voodoo is also referenced in some of the photo booth portraits where Boyce adopts a trance-like state. She also assumes the wide-eyed expression of the stereotypical “Hollywood negro”. The portraits consist of a set of six shots which have been duplicated. One set has been underexposed, the other overexposed to give a variation in tones which the artist has exploited. She has drawn over the prints to accentuate her racial characteristics and to make herself look more like a comic strip figure. She also exaggerates the whiteness of her eyes and teeth to stand out against the dark colour of her skin, which she has tinted in places with ink.

Boyce’s repetition of her face alludes to the accusation often made by white people that non- Europeans “look the same”. The artist adopts a similar tactic with her duplication of the gollywog image taken from a 1920s Rupert the Bear comic. Each figure has been made slightly different by Boyce in order to establish its individuality.

The original collage used for this work incorporated real leaves that were sewn on to the work to offer a contrast to the drawn vegetation of the jungle scene. These leaves represent the role of nature in the construction of the “authentic” African identity. As a whole, *From Tarzan to Rambo* questions the way image can be created through myth, fiction and the media from a corruption of reality.

### Exercises

**Draw** your self portrait or use a photo if you prefer. Photocopy it many times and draw over these in order to alter your image. Change hairstyle, skin colour, clothes etc. Discuss your results!

**Use** these images to create a larger collage inspired by Sonia Boyce. Incorporate photocopies of personal belongings which you feel contribute to your identity and individuality.

**Discuss** Boyce's work alongside other portraits in the exhibition (e.g. James Van Der Zee, Glenn Ligon, Man Ray, Brancusi, Cecil Beaton, Lorna Simpson etc). You could give groups a portrait each to look at. Then ask them to describe the subject's projected image, lifestyle and personality for the rest of the class. (This could take the form of an imaginary interview between subject, artist and a news reporter)

## Further Resources

**Barson**, Tanya and **Gorschluter**, Peter, *Afro Modern: Journeys in the Black Atlantic*, Tate Publishing, 2010

**Baker**, Houston A, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Chicago University Press, 1989

**Baucomb**, Ian and **Boyce**, Sonia (et al), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain (A John Hope Franklin Center Book)* Duke University Press, 2005

**Earle**, S, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, Yale University Press, 2007

**Ellison**, Ralph, *The Invisible Man*, (Penguin Modern Classics)Penguin New Edition,2001

**Jules-Rosette**, Bennetta, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image*, University of Illinois Press, 2007

**Gilroy**, Paul and **Hall**, Stuart, *Black Britain: a Photographic History*,Saqi Books, 2007

**Gordon**, L, *Nancy Cunard Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist*, Columbia University Press, 2007

**Hatt**, Christine, *Slavery from Africa to the Americas*, Evans, 1997

**Littlefield Kasfir**, Sidney, *Contemporary African Art, (World of Art)*, Thames and Hudson, 2000

**Lucie-Smith**, Edward, *Latin American Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, (World of Art), Thames and Hudson, 2007

**Parks**, Gordon, *Bare Witness: Photographs by Gordon Parks*, Skira Editore, 2007

**Mercer**, Kobena, *James Van Der Zee*, Phaidon, 2003

**Rubin**, William, *"Primitivism" in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, Museum of Modern Art, 1988

**Webb**, V L, *Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1937*, Metropolitan Museum of Art,Yale University Press, 2000

**Willet**, Frank, *African Art (World of Art)*, Thames and Hudson,2002

## Online Resources:

[http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/brancusi/Brancusi\\_tkit.pdf](http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/brancusi/Brancusi_tkit.pdf)

<http://www.tate.org.uk/tarzantorambo/>

<http://channel.tate.org.uk/#media:/media/28700235001&context:/channel/search?searchQuery=lorna+simpson>

<http://channel.tate.org.uk/#media:/media/27966439001&context:/channel/search?searchQuery=glenn+ligon>

<http://www.africanaonline.com/>

<http://www.blackhistory4schools.com/slavetrade/>

<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/>

<http://www.recoveredhistories.org/>

<http://www.understandingslavery.com/teachingslavetrade/>

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