

## **BLACK HISTORY MONTH: Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900**

10 October 2005 Deborah Gabriel

### **An exhibition that is long overdue**

Jan Marsh is a well-known biographer and historian who specialises in artists and writers and has done extensive work on women artists.

She was co-curator of the Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists exhibition 1997-8 at Manchester Art Gallery and co-author of the accompanying book.

This time Ms Marsh has turned her attentions to an area that has been largely overlooked in putting together the exhibition: Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900.

At the exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery Black Britain asked her why she decided to focus on black subjects in Victorian art. She said:

**I think that it's important to show that contrary to one's expectations and understanding, Victorian art is not exclusively white. It has a wide range of people from all ethnic origins."**

Ms Marsh said that she decided to look at people from the African Diaspora, whether born in Britain, the Caribbean or Africa as she felt it important **"to show that the diversity and inclusivity of the society that we value today is not a recent invention."**

She told Black Britain that she consulted with and received a lot of support from scholars from the black community. However, she revealed that her greatest challenge in putting the exhibition together was trimming it down to size:

**"There were hundreds more items that could have been included but for various reasons you can't introduce everything you would like."**

The exhibition and book is detailed and informative, providing a comprehensive look at an important part of British history which educationalists do not currently include in the national curriculum.

Ms Marsh told Black Britain that she feels people are aware of the diversity of Britain's population through historical periods but resource material is not always available to illustrate and demonstrate this in teaching. She added:

**"I hope that some of this material that has been brought together here will be available for educational purposes and enable everybody to get a much more lively view of real people."**

Her favourite piece of art from the exhibition is a portrait of Louis Black (picture in gallery), an ordinary but well-known and popular citizen of Montrose in Scotland. She said:

**"It's just such a beautifully painted portrait and I think that the character of [Louis Black] shines through.**

**The face and the whole personality really beam through and show the artist's pleasure in painting this sitter."**

Louis Black was born into slavery in 1820 in Brazil and later acquired by Alexander Mackay, a

merchant who traded between Liverpool and Rio de Janeiro.

Black was brought to MacKay's home in Scotland as a youth and sent to school. In 1836 when MacKay returned to Rio where slavery was still in existence, Black remained in Scotland as a free man and employee of Mackay.

The portrait by James Irving was thought to be the only black person that this artist ever painted. James Irving was a well-established and high-earning painter during the Victorian era who was based in Edinburgh.

## **What we can learn about black people of the Victorian era**

Jan Marsh concedes that there are many similar images of black people in the 18th century produced by other scholars and there have also been exhibitions in the past that have depicted 18th century figures.

However, in the book: 'Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900, of which she is editor, Jan Marsh cautions:

**“A display of black figures in visual culture is not a history of the black presence in Britain from 1800-1900”, nor “a history of black experience.”**

When national statistics were first compiled in 1837 and the national census began in 1841 a person's skin colour and ethnic origin was not recorded.

However, recent studies suggest that black residents in London, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Kent were commonplace.

Visual records from the early 19th century show that black people were mainly employed as seafarers or servants. However, they were also prevalent in other occupations as churchmen, sportsmen, entertainers and professionals.

It should also be remembered that between the 1840s and 1850s the black population in the UK increased as runaway slaves from America fled to Britain seeking refuge and asylum. There were also black students in London studying theology and medicine.

Ms Marsh told Black Britain:

**“We have forgotten that aspect of our history and it seems to me that it is very much a part of our British history that needs to be remembered.”**

Unfortunately no black artists or photographers feature in the exhibition or the book. In the book 'Black Victorians...' Ms Marsh writes:

**“As yet no black British artists active in this period have been identified...the subjects therefore are like actors in a show written and cast by whites.”**

A few black American artists did visit Britain during the 19th century including Robert Douglas (1809-87) and Robert Scott Duncason (1817-72) but none of their works have been located.

Speaking to Black Britain at the exhibition in Manchester Ms Marsh said that although racism was prevalent during the 19th century, not all of the works of art within this period reflect this:

**“Victorian attitudes to race in general were very old fashioned. Certainly the white population**

**believed in white superiority [but] it seems to me that artists in general enjoyed painting people of colour and actively sought them out.”**

When asked what she thought people of colour can draw from the exhibition, Ms Marsh replied:

**“I hope that like me, people in the black community will find discoveries that they didn’t know about and gain pleasures of looking at these images.”**

## **How positive action helps black individuals gain employment in museums**

Carli Douglas is currently working at the Manchester Art Gallery under the Museum Association’s positive action traineeship scheme and has been involved with the Black Victorians exhibition.

The curatorial trainee of Trinidadian and English parentage already has both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in Archaeology but decided that she wanted a career in museums and beat off 19 other applicants to win a place on the programme.

Under the traineeship Ms Douglas works three days a week and is also studying for a master’s degree in museum studies by distance learning at Leicester University.

The positive action programme is run on a nationwide basis but each year only one region is selected. When the scheme was first introduced national museums and art galleries were less than enthusiastic about it.

However, the Museums association has since partnered with the British Museum, the National History Museum and some of the larger university museums.

Ms Douglas told Black Britain that the positive action programme is about **“merit, qualifications and experience”**, and does not give jobs to black people for the sake of it.

Referring to the fact that not many black people visit museums and art galleries Ms Douglas said:

**“Most visible minorities are quite intimidated by galleries and museums and I think if they see more ethnic minorities in these institutions it will encourage them to come and visit and to realise that it is for them.”**

When she began her placement at the Manchester Art Gallery Ms Douglas voiced her interest in the Black Victorians exhibition. She told Black Britain:

**“To come to a Black Victorian exhibition and not see any black people working in the gallery [would be] a bit odd.”**

Ms Douglas said that although the exhibition only goes back to the Victorian period that as her background is in archaeology she would be keen to trace the first black presence in England.

BBC newsreader and presenter Moira Stuart paid a visit to the Black Victorians exhibition at the Manchester Art Gallery and was impressed with the range of art on display.

Her favourite piece of work is the portrait by Louis Black also admired by Jan Marsh. Ms Stuart told Black Britain that many of the paintings in the exhibition of Black Victorians: **“depict a certain strength of character and dignity that evokes a sense of pride.”**

Ms Stuart said that she hopes the exhibition will be able to find a home in London where the majority of Britain’s black population reside, so that they can enjoy and appreciate a collection that

is an important part of black history and an integral part of British history.

### **WHERE TO SEE THE BLACK VICTORIANS EXHIBITION**

Black Victorians is at Manchester Art gallery until January 8 2006. Admission is free. Manchester Art Gallery Mosely Street Manchester M2 3JL Tel: 0161 235 8888

The exhibition travels to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery 28 January 2006-2 April 2006

There will be a full colour catalogue produced by Lund Humphries.

*Black Victorians is supported by the Professional Footballers Association.*

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