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Abstract
In 1725 James Houstoun, in a book on Africa, addressed the Directors of the Royal African Company as 'a Society of the politest Gentlemen ... in the known World.' Who were these 'gentlemen' and in what ways were they 'polite'? Answers to these questions involve an understanding of the social changes in the art world of the period. Art collecting and connoisseurship, once the preserve of the aristocracy, had become the business of the mercantile middle class. In 1720 we find the Theatre reflecting on the prestige of this class, citing a Mr Sealand, an eminent East-India merchant, as the true pattern of that kind of Gentry, which has arose in the World in this last Century: I mean the great, and rich families of Merchants, and eminent Traders, who in their Furniture, their Equipage, their Manner of Living ... are so far from being below the Gentry, that many of them are now the best Representatives of the ancient ones, and deserve the Imitation of the modern Nobility.
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In 1725 James Houstoun, in a book on Africa, addressed the Directors of the Royal African Company as 'a Society of the politest Gentlemen ... in the known World'. Who were these 'gentlemen' and in what ways were they 'polite'? Answers to these questions involve an understanding of the social changes in the art world of the period. Art collecting and connoisseurship, once the preserve of the aristocracy, had become the business of the mercantile middle class. In 1720 we find the Theatre journal reflecting on the prestige of this class, citing a Mr Sealand, an eminent East-India merchant, as the true pattern of that kind of Gentry, which has arose in the World in this last Century: I mean the great, and rich families of Merchants, and eminent Traders, who in their Furniture, their Equipage, their Manner of Living ... are so far from being below the Gentry, that many of them are now the best Representatives of the ancient ones, and deserve the Imitation of the modern Nobility.

There were thousands like Mr Sealand, men who strove to escape the taint of being tradesmen by investing their money in the acquisition of Old Masters with which to adorn their houses and stake their claims to taste and politeness. The extent to which these businessmen were involved in collecting, as a social gesture, becomes evident when we single out the South Sea Directors for attention. The South Sea period is particularly apt because of the multiplicity of images of the 'social upstart' in Bubble prints and poetry. Stories of tradesmen and the like striking it lucky and being transformed into the condition of lordship abound: we read, for instance, of Duke, an Exchange Alley porter, who is reported to have made £2,000 'by the Bubbles, and is about to set up his Chaise, with a handsome Equipage', or of Lord Castlemaine's porter winning £4,000 and doing likewise. As one poem puts it: 'From a Dunghill to a Coach/ A Rascal rises in a Touch.' The ape dressed as a gentleman, symbolic of such social transformation and mimicry, became...
a standard motif in Bubble prints, as in William Hogarth's *South Sea Scheme* (1721). The true 'rascals' of course were not the common people, who could hardly afford the money to speculate in stocks, but the middle class, and specifically its representatives, the Directors of the South Sea Company. (The Company incidentally had trading interests of a wholly colonial nature — it had been granted the monopoly of supplying African slaves to the Spanish West Indies.) John Blunt, for instance, the son of a cobbler, who was the architect of the Company's fortune and catastrophe in 1719/20. Blunt, whose favours were courted by the very Nobility, was made a Baronet. It was rumoured that Robert Knight, the son of a grocer, who rose to become the Cashier of the Company, would receive a Knighthood. Four of the five South Sea Directors who were Members of Parliament voted against the Peerage Bill of 1719 which was designed to limit the future creation of Peers — they obviously entertained hopes of social elevation for themselves and their progeny. In France there were moves to make John Law, the wizard of stockjobbery, a Duke, or so it was reported. Social status, then, was of paramount importance to such men, and art was a valuable investment in this respect. When the estates of the Directors were seized and auctioned off, the size and splendour of their art collections were revealed: some £8-9,000 were fetched at one sale alone.

Hogarth’s *Rake’s Progress* (1735) is the classic satire on the social aspirations of this moneyed class. In Plate 2 we see Rakewell, the son of an East India investor and businessman, attempting to acquire the graces associated with the aristocracy, by patronising the arts. He surrounds himself with musician, poet and landscape gardener, and an Old Master, *The Judgement of Paris*, hangs on his wall. In *Industry and Idleness*, Plate 6 (1747), Goodchild, a factory worker made good (he rises to become Factory Owner, Sheriff of London and Lord Mayor) learns to sip tea and to hold the cup delicately and politely in his hand; in one drawing study for the series, Goodchild becomes a connoisseur and art collector, in line with his elevated social position. But Hogarth, earlier in his career, when he was a struggling, unknown artist, was only too grateful for the opportunity of glorifying these same types in paint. They commissioned paintings of themselves, to display to the world their presence and prestige. The needy Hogarth took their money gladly, and did his best. He painted Thomas Walker admiring a Monamy painting — Walker, Commissioner of Customs, owned a collection of Dutch and Italian paintings which elicited admiring comments from George Vertue. Captain Woodes Rogers, Governor of the Bahama Islands, and his son William, who was to become one of the three chief merchants of the
Royal African Company, were also Hogarth’s subjects. He painted Richard Child and his family in the magnificent interior of Wanstead House — the Childs were among the most opulent of English families of the period; Richard, the son of Sir Josiah Child, the great East India merchant and City businessman, built his house at Wanstead in the classical Baroque style, spending some £100,000 in the process.

Blacks inevitably figure in the paintings of these splendid families. In Hogarth’s *Wollaston Family* (1730) we see gathered elegantly around tea and whist-tables representatives of the new moneyed class — one the daughter of a Bank of England Director, another a Portugal merchant and Director of the Royal Exchange Assurance, a third a future Director of the South Sea Company and Governor of Virginia. A black servant serves tea to this polite gathering. He is a silent, undistinguished, background figure. The whites are clearly delineated but the black is shadowy and featureless, for the Wollastons have not commissioned the artist to depict the *character* of their black slave. He is included merely as a token of their affluence and colonial connections. At the time blacks were status symbols, ownership of them indicating social prestige and economic well-being.

Hogarth of course (when his finances allowed, or his true feelings took precedence over material necessities) also savaged such polite environments. In the *Harlot’s Progress*, Plate 2 (1732) he seats a common whore (dressed up as a Lady) at the tea-table and makes her kick it over, dashing the tea-pot and china crockery to the floor. The setting is a vulgarisation of the Wanstead-like interiors he had painted a few years back. The merchant figure is again present — this time as a patron of whores as well as of the arts. Old Masters, with the usual religious themes, hang on the wall. The social aspirations of the merchant are evident in his polite way of holding his teacup (identical to Goodchild’s, in Plate 6 of *Industry and Idleness*, and to one of the Ladies’, in the *Wollaston Family*). A black house-slave is present, too, but as a vulgarising touch: in the *Wollaston* painting the black is a mute, expressionless presence, but here he gasps and his eyes pop at the whore’s exposed nipple. In *Marriage à la Mode* (1743) Hogarth was to employ the black servant to hint at the sexual indecencies that lie beneath the mannered and polite surfaces of aristocratic settings: the black served tea to the English Lady but refreshed her in other ways too. In the *Harlot’s Progress* a similar notion of obscenity is comically introduced.

Obscenity is also the tone of *Taste in High Life* (engraving, 1746) which again uses the black to vulgarise and ridicule the polite world of art collectors and connoisseurs. The latter are disgustingly pretentious —
they are disfigured in appearance and grotesque in their admiration of culture-objects. Pictures on the wall, of the Venus de Medici in hoop-petticoat and high-heels, and of effeminate ballet dancing, satirise their culture values. The Persian carpet on the floor, and the Egyptian pyramid of Chinese dominoes, are instances of their exotic collections. The black boy is as much a culture-object, as much a collector’s item or ‘curiosity’ as the statue of the Chinese mandarin he holds in his hand. He is being admired as much as the china cup and saucer are being admired. Notice too the elegantly attired monkey which holds up a French menu. Both black and monkey are obviously exotic playthings, creatures to be dressed up and toyed with. There is in addition a hint of obscenity in the lady’s gesture to the black youth.

Both the Harlot’s Progress and Taste in High Life are concerned with the falsity of social ambition: Moll, the country girl, aspires to the condition of ladyship; the merchant collects paintings and strives after politeness. In the Harlot’s Progress, Plate 2, Moll is artificially dressed up. From her simple, natural appearance in Plate 1 she is now the sophisticated mistress of a wealthy merchant. The mask lying before the dressing table’s mirror is an emblem of the corruption of identity and of the loss of the sense of reality. The monkey, traditionally emblematic of mimicry and deceit, is also a detail relevant to the theme of distortion and disfiguration. The elaborately costumed black, like his fellow black in Taste in High Life (who, symbolically, sits before a large mirror flanked by candles: the mirror and candles setting up the theme of appearance and reality), is part of the picture’s representation of falsity. He is far removed from his natural condition and African environment; his sartorial elegance, his silver collar and his polite domestic labour also belie the sordid reality of the servitude of naked and manacled blacks in the colonies.

The multiple ideas about slavery, pretence, illusion and reality operating in these pictures had been foreshadowed earlier, in a superbly comic fashion, in Hogarth’s painting of the Beggar’s Opera (4th version, 1728/9). The little black boy on the right of the picture, engrossed in Polly Peacham’s pleadings amounts to one of the most comic details in the whole of Hogarth’s art. He is a totally unexpected detail, his short stature, shiny bald pate and intense concentration on the play being in comic contrast to his tall, wigged masters and elders who are apathetic to the drama. Hogarth’s Beggar’s Opera is concerned with the blur between reality and illusion; it illustrates a scene from John Gay’s play in which Polly and Lucy plead with their fathers (one a corrupt turnkey, the other a fence and an organiser of whores and thieves) for the pardoning of
Macheath, a highwayman and gang leader whom they both love. Hogarth blurs social distinctions by placing the audience on the stage, on the same level as the low-life criminals (that is, the actors who play Macheath, Peachum and Lockit) as well as by dressing up Macheath not in the garb of a common highwayman but in the elegant costume of a gentleman — he is as elegant in his hat, wig, coat and necktie as any of the gentlemen in the audience. The equation between the gentleman and the lower-class thief (or between the 'great' and the 'small'), which was a central satiric aspect of Gay's play, was not far from the truth: Sir Archibald Grant who commissioned Hogarth to do a copy of the Beggar's Opera painting around 1729 was soon after expelled from the House of Commons when the news broke of his theft of funds belonging to the Charitable Corporation for the Relief of the Industrious Poor, a charitable foundation of which Grant was a director. In a later version of the Beggar's Opera painting Hogarth makes clear his intention of equating the gentleman and the thief in the detail of the inscription of the coat-of-arms hanging over the scene of the action — 'Veluti In Speculum' ('even as in a mirror').

None of the members of the audience seem concerned with the action of the play — they either ignore it outright or they are engaged in conversation and love-making among themselves. Only the black boy is conspicuously attentive to the action, his gaze fixed on Polly as she pleads with her father. It is as if he recognises in her distress and in her submissiveness the conditions of his own servitude. Gay's play extends into the West Indian colonies, the place to which pimps and whores and thieves were transported as punishment for their crimes, and set to work — the sequel to his Beggar's Opera, entitled Polly, is in fact set in the colonies. Hogarth's Polly is here begging her father not to allow her lover Macheath to be transported to the colonies to be enslaved there, a servitude that was little different in status from that of the African slaves: Polly's humanitarian plea is therefore as relevant to Macheath as to the African who was transported from Africa to the British Colonies — hence perhaps the black boy's attention to Polly's arguments. The black boy is also part of the Beggar's Opera images of enslavement — Hogarth's picture contains manacles, chains and leg-irons, and both Polly and Lucy kneel in positions of submission (the picture in these respects recalls Hogarth's painting of the investigation of Bambridge by Oglethorpe's House of Commons Committee, a painting done in the same period, 1728/29, as the Beggar's Opera painting). The black boy, whilst undoubtedly a comic figure, nevertheless has a poignant significance.
His own status is an ambivalent one — he is a slave (blacks in England were legally slaves at the time, not paid servants) and yet not a slave — he wears a silver collar, not an iron one and his dress is rather elegant. As a household pet to the Ladies, the equivalent of their lap-dog, he leads a pampered life, unlike his black brothers in the colonies. Polished and dressed up, he is as much an ‘actor’ as the characters on the stage, his ambivalent status complicating Hogarth’s theme of appearance and reality. His condition is also meant to be an indication of the condition of his white masters. They have taken a naked and smelly ‘hottentot’, polished him, decked him out in finery and introduced him to the theatre, a situation incidentally that had many parallels in real life: black and Indian ‘savages’ on their visits to London from Africa and America were invariably taken on a tour to the theatre and opera-house, these visits being recorded in the newspapers of the day. This process of ‘refining’ the black is meant to reflect upon the white’s ‘refined’ culture, their ‘civilizing’ influences. Hogarth, by making the black boy a comic, ridiculous, misplaced figure, is inviting the spectator to laugh at the culture of his masters, its ridiculous artificiality and pretentiousness.

For the mercantile middle class art was a matter of social status but also of citizenship. They sought to counter traditional scorn of being tradesmen by acquiring the necessary elegance and politeness. They could thus claim a place among the leading ranks of English citizenry. There was also an aspect of nationalism in their patronage of the arts, the argument being that English prestige was enhanced by its cultivation of the arts, and by becoming leading patrons, the middle class were therefore supporting the cultural status of the country, supporting its leading position in the civilized world. Leonard Welsted, in a patriotic poem of 1720, celebrating the genius of Britain, heaps praises on such patrons — ‘I see arise a new Augustan Age,’ he proclaims. Other eighteenth century poets, like James Thomson, Edward Young, Richard Glover and John Dyer, were enthusiastic about merchants and their commercial activities in relation to the growth of civilized values and tastes. Glover for instance writes of the mathematics, philosophy and poetry that result from commercial activity: ‘Barbarity is polished, infant arts/ Bloom in the desert,’ Glover announces. Young makes similar claims for the civilizing power of commerce:

Commerce gives arts as well as gain,
By commerce wafted over the main,
They barbarous Climes enlighten as they run;
Arts, the rich traffic of the Soul
May travel thus, from pole to pole,
And gild the world with Learning’s brighter sun.¹²

The merchant, the agent of commerce, was also celebrated as the agent of progress and civilization. Through him there have been ‘a general improvement in the habits of life, a refinement in public taste and sentiments; in short all those intellectual and moral acquirements which dignify mankind’.¹³ What this last writer really means is not ‘those intellectual and moral acquirements which dignify mankind’ but rather ‘those intellectual and moral acquirements which dignify Englishmen’ — for in fact all the poems and essays celebrating commerce were fiercely nationalistic. They were in reality proclaiming the commercial supremacy of the English over the Spanish and the French. The Glover poem for instance was written in 1739 at a time when competition between English and Spanish merchants broke out into war, the War of Jenkins’ Ear.¹⁴

There was one dark blot in all this literature on commerce and civilization. The one detail out of moral keeping was the slave traffic. The commercial system that Glover et al. proclaim were rooted in the Slave Trade. The same merchant who supposedly brought wealth and prestige and civilization to Britain also actually brought blacks to the colonies. In Hogarth’s Marriage à la Mode, the little black boy kneeling beside the basket of artistic baubles and the art auction catalogue is symbolic of the connection between art and slavery. It is a symbol that dwelt in his mind for in the previous decade he had sketched a black boy in a similar relation to art objects.¹⁵ Hogarth, in juxtaposing blacks and artistic bric-a-brac, is being faithful to fact for in the eighteenth century many dealers in ‘Black Masters’ (or Old Masters) were also dealers in black slaves. Both commodities — i.e. blacks and art — were sorted out into ‘lots’, to be inspected by prospective purchasers with the minuteness of a connoisseur. In England both commodities were auctioned in coffee-houses. Lillywhite’s book on London Coffee Houses contains much information on the auction of blacks and of art under the same roof. In eighteenth century newspapers (e.g. Daily Journal of 2 July 1723), notices of the auction of newly arrived slaves from the West Indies and newly arrived paintings from Italy lie side by side. In the colonies slaves and pictures were also sold under the same roof: Buckingham’s book on the Slave States in America contains an illustration of blacks and art being sold simultaneously:
Buying blacks was as much an investment as buying art — hence the same care spent on inspecting the goods, the care of a connoisseur. It is most appropriate that in the eighteenth century the term patron still had the dual meaning of ‘owner of slaves’ and ‘supporter of the arts’, for some of the outstanding connoisseurs and collectors of the age were heavily involved in the slave trade. James Brydges, the first Duke of Chandos, is a classic example. He built a baroque palace, Canons, in Middlesex, which he stocked with enormous quantities of art shipped from all over Europe. Chandos was a leading and active member of the Royal African Company and invested much money in its stock. ‘‘Tis reported that the Duke of Chandos hath lately gained near £200,000 by Africa Stock,’ the Original Weekly Journal of August 1720 announced. There was even a Company slaveship named Chandos. William Beckford Sr is another prime example. His seat at Fonthill was similarly lavish and loaded with expensive paintings. Beckford, who was described by one contemporary as a ‘West Indian hog’ and as a ‘Negro tyrant’ belonged to an extremely affluent slave-owning family with considerable estates in Jamaica. Others included Sir Hans Sloane, whose contributions to the foundation collections of the British Museum were of such importance that it earned him the title of ‘Father of the British Museum’. Sloane’s wife was a substantial slave-owner in Jamaica, and in England much of Sloane’s money for the purchase of his collection of coins and manuscripts came from his dealings in sugar and cocoa — he marketed the cocoa as ‘Sir Hans Sloane Milk Chocolate’. We can mention too Christopher Codrington who left his considerable library of rare books to All Souls College, Oxford; in the eighteenth century Horace Walpole was openly appalled by the contradiction of man of culture and learning who was also a slave-owner and whose will of 1710 specifically forbade the manumission of his blacks. A final example would be Sir Gregory Page, a leading investor in Africa stock and a member of the Court of Assistants of the Royal African Company. Page’s investments in Africa Stock are to be found in the subscription books of the Company; his investments in art are to be found in the surviving auction catalogues of the period.

When James Houstoun in 1725 wrote about ‘politest Gentlemen’, it was to men like Sir Gregory Page that he was referring. When Allan Ramsay in 1762 wrote that the revival of classical taste and classical
architecture all over Europe was financed by colonial wealth, it was to men like Sir Gregory Page that he was referring, men who used the revenues of slavery to erect beautiful, palatial country-houses, glitteringly decorated with silver and chandeliers and Old Masters, with lovely landscaped gardens — houses upon which the finest craftsmen in Europe worked. There is thus this extraordinary connection between the harsh mud huts of Guyana and Jamaica, and the breathtakingly grand houses in Wiltshire and Middlesex. There were two connected plantations: the sugar plantation hacked and ploughed by blacks, the other the landscape garden exquisitely fashioned and embellished by artists. The eighteenth century was indeed a period in which the High Civilization of England and the Barbarity of the Colonies were, literally, two sides of the same coin.

A final irony — which is that some of the paintings bought by those slave-owners and investors in Africa stock contained images of black people, but images not of manacled and brutalized slaves, but of stately, dignified, religious figures. Paintings of the Adoration of the Magi figure many times in the collections of slave-dealers. In European religious art, one of the Magi was commonly a black man, who is either a gay and sumptuous figure or else a man of quiet but regal dignity, or else a proud, imperious character: people of status and strength far different from the crippled blacks in the colonies. The slave-dealer possessed both kinds of blacks — the regal image of the painting and the slave of the plantation — possessed both seemingly without any consciousness of the contradictions involved in all this.

So far we have been dealing with blacks and art collectors. Let us end by saying something about blacks and the artist. The importance of the black to the artist lay in the variety of ways in which he could be used. If he was exploited to the full in the plantation, he was also exploited to the full in the studio, the aesthetic benefits (as opposed to the economic benefits) from his servitude being most apparent in Portrait Painting. In Van Dyck’s painting he serves multiple purposes — his colour helps to throw into relief the whiteness of his Mistress’s skin and to qualify the deep blackness of her dress. Her tallness comes out in relation to his smallness, and her elevated status in his upward gaze of adoration which she ignores in her superiority. The black boy looking up at the Lady is the external spectator internalized: we, the spectators of the picture are also meant to look up respectfully to the Lady. Her dignity, breeding and cultivation are conveyed in the sombre, restrained colour of her dress as opposed to his brighter, blood-coloured clothing — in other words she is civilized and he is natural, in the pejorative sense of the word. Van Dyck solves
Van Dyck, Henrietta of Lorraine. Oil on canvas, n.d.
the problem of what to do with her hand, a constant one to artists, by resting it on the black boy’s shoulders. Finally the possession of a black slave is a reflection of her economic well-being. The artist, therefore, by merely including the black is able to bring out with a minimum of effort and without cluttering up his canvas with narrative detail, the stature, the status, the whiteness and the wealth of his subject. The black is thus a versatile figure, an elaborate shorthand, a labour-saving device almost — as he was in the plantation of course.

NOTES

2. The Theatre, No IV, January 1720.
3. The Original Weekly Journal, 2 July and 27 August 1720.
5. These details are to be found in J. Carswell, The South Sea Bubble (London, 1960).
8. See Chapter 4 of my doctoral dissertation for an elaboration of this: Some Aspects of William Hogarth’s Representation of the Materialism of his Age (London, 1982).
12. The Merchant (London, 1741), Strain II, I.
17. Defoe for instance uses the term ‘patron’ (and ‘patroon’) several times in Robinson Crusoe to mean slave-owner.
NISSIM EZEKIEL

Smoke

'I think Shanta is more suitable,' Ashok Mama said, putting another bidi in his mouth and fumbling with a matchbox.

If that was his uncle's opinion, Vishnu thought, Shanta it would have to be. He was not in a position to oppose Mama's wishes. Besides, he could think of no objections to Shanta.

'What does Dhondu say,' he asked, but already he had lost interest in the subject. Better to go down at once and speak to Shanta's parents about it.

'Let Mama say why Shanta is more suitable than Sakhoo,' Dhondu replied. He, too, put another bidi in his mouth. Of the company assembled in the field, he was the youngest. The burden of the morning's work had fallen largely on him. All that wood carried from the village! Vishnu should really have asked someone else to do the job.

'Shanta's parents will agree at once,' Mama said, but did not look at Dhondu. What business had he to ask such a question? As Vishnu's uncle, he had the right to suggest a girl, hadn't he? If Vishnu's parents had been alive, they would have chosen a girl for him.

'Do you think Sakhoo's parents will not agree at once, then?' Dhondu asked.

'It is time for Shanta to be married,' Mama went on, as though Dhondu had not spoken. 'She is already fourteen years old.'

'What do the others say?' Vishnu asked. He was anxious not to displease anybody.