RACE, SEXUALITY AND DISORDER IN VICTORIAN SCULPTURE

THE COLOUR OF ANXIETY

25 November 2022 - 26 February 2023
In the second half of the nineteenth century, British sculptors began to move away from the whiteness of Neoclassical marble and started to incorporate colour, using bronze, silver, gold and ivory, as well as semi-precious stones, tinted waxes, enamels and paint. The adoption of these materials has typically been attributed to a renewed interest in medieval history and craftsmanship, discoveries about the application of colour (known as polychromy) to ancient sculpture, the allure of exoticism, and the introduction of new industrial processes. The impact of profound changes to society, science, imperial rule and the established patriarchal order, as well as new ideas about race has, however, received less attention.

**The Colour of Anxiety: Race, Sexuality and Disorder in Victorian Sculpture**

The Colour of Anxiety: Race, Sexuality and Disorder in Victorian Sculpture examines the rise of coloured sculpture in relation to widespread anxieties about the disorder that would result from social and scientific change. It focuses on the way that sculptors, most of whom were male, reflected and reinforced these anxieties in their conception of the cisgender female body, with the use of colour becoming increasingly significant. As fears about the changing role of women, racial intermingling and the dark side of progress or ‘degeneration’ of society as a consequence of modern life increased, sculptures of female subjects became increasingly sexualised and began to incorporate colour. Colour in this context was more than just a decorative tool: it was used to bring to life the artist’s fantasy of the ideal woman and fears about her powers to destroy him, as well as to convey race, and to evoke symbolic meanings.

Bringing together works that either incorporate colour directly or imply it by means of subject matter and titles, the exhibition draws attention to a fascinating but largely overlooked body of work, and offers new insights into a Victorian fascination with colouring people and people of colour.

The Colour of Anxiety is guest curated by Dr Nicola Jennings (Director, Athena Art Foundation and Visiting Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art) and Dr Adrienne L. Childs (Adjunct Curator at the Phillips Collection, Washington D.C. and independent scholar).

Sir Alfred Gilbert R.A., *St Elizabeth of Hungary* 1899
The Kirk Session, Kippen Parish Church, Stirling
Antonio Canova’s Venus (The Hope Venus) 1817–20 and The Mother (Woman and Child) 1860–1910 (attributed to Raffaelle Monti), both in white marble, exemplify Victorian ideals of female chastity, purity and motherhood. Absence of colour was a key characteristic of Neoclassical sculpture, based on the belief that the sculptors of ancient Greece — considered to be the fount of Western culture — were interested above all in form, not colour. Although this view was soon proven to be mistaken, it nevertheless continued to govern the making of British sculpture for much of the nineteenth century. This was no doubt related to the belief that absence of colour was the sign of a civilisation capable of abstract thought and moral rectitude, in contrast to the painted figures of animist and pagan societies.

“A key characteristic of Neoclassical sculpture... [was] the belief that absence of colour was the sign of a civilisation capable of abstract thought and moral rectitude”

In 1859 Charles Darwin published On the Origin of Species, setting off a chain reaction which would have a lasting impact across society. Darwin’s scientific theories of natural selection and evolution were soon translated into unscientific and alarmist notions of what could happen to society, including concepts such as ‘survival of the fittest’ and ‘degeneration’. Artworks such as G.F. Watts’ Found Drowned c. 1848–50 — depicting a victim of the sex work that many women were forced into — exemplified what could happen to the poor, weak and ‘degenerate’. The education of women and the imagined threat posed by the so-called ‘Orient’, considered to be a place full of barbarism and unbridled sexuality, further challenged the ideal of female chastity. Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave 1844 — depicting a white woman sold at an Ottoman slave market — became one of the most widely reproduced sculptures of the nineteenth century.

By around 1860 Powers’ Greek Slave had become the subject of a colour stereograph, The Captive c. 1860, transforming the white marble of the original into a flesh-and-blood woman. John Gibson’s Tinted Venus 1851–6, exhibited in London in 1862, underwent a similar transformation in sculpture. The public loved the lifelikeness of the goddess’ ivory-tinted skin, blue eyes and rosy lips, but Gibson’s fellow sculptors were outraged. At the same time, sculpted femmes fatales such as the French artist Henri Baron de Triqueti’s Cleopatra Dying 1859 were beginning to be bought by British collectors. This work typified not only a taste for coloured materials but also a late Victorian fascination for all things Egyptian. Here again, colour was significant, for example playing a central role in the Theosophy preached by the cult mystic Madame Blavatsky (1831–91).
John Gibson R.A. (1790–1866)  
Venus c. 1850  
Plaster  
Lent by the Royal Academy of Arts, London

Gibson was one of few Neoclassical sculptors to colour sculpture. This plaster sculpture is a model for his Tinted Venus 1851–6, which used coloured wax to tint the marble Venus. Most of Gibson’s colleagues were outraged, considering polychromy a barbaric practice detracting from the purity of Classical sculpture. For them, white marble was a symbol of Western civilisation. Nevertheless, when the Tinted Venus was exhibited at the International Exhibition of 1862, the public was enthusiastic. Despite their reputation for prudery, Victorians were avid consumers of sculptural nudes.

“Most of Gibson’s colleagues were outraged, considering polychromy a barbaric practice detracting from the purity of Classical sculpture.”

Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849)  
Minerve Du Parthenon from Le Jupiter Olympien, ou l’art de la sculpture antique considéré sous un nouveau point de vue: ouvrage qui comprend un essai sur le goût de la sculpture polychrome (Statue of Athena Parthenos from The Olympian Jupiter, or the art of ancient sculpture considered from a new point of view: a work that includes an essay on the taste for polychrome sculpture)  
Paris, 1814, Plate VIII  
Lent by the Royal Academy of Arts, London

Based on extensive study of ancient texts and visits to Italy, French art historian Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849) challenged the belief that ancient Greek sculpture was never coloured. He coined the term ‘polychromy’ to mean the use of paint and coloured material to achieve chromatic effects. Le Jupiter Olympien re-imagined lost works and highlighted the popularity of chryselephantine sculpture, a technique combining gold and ivory.

Hiram Powers (1805–73)  
The Greek Slave 1844  
Marble  
On loan from Lord and Lady Barnard, Raby Castle

American sculptor Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave was one of the most celebrated sculptures of the nineteenth century. The Neoclassical nude represents a Christian captive for sale in a Turkish slave market during the Greek War of Independence (1821–32). Many viewers understood this work to be an abolitionist statement that indirectly indicted American slavery, while others considered the depiction of a white slave by an American sculptor as a deliberate dismissal of the problem of African American enslavement. Nonetheless it received widespread acclaim for its idealised beauty fashioned in white marble — characteristics that appealed to Victorian audiences.

Minton & Co., after Hiram Powers  
The Greek Slave 1862  
Parian porcelain  
Victoria and Albert Museum  
Given by C. H. Gibbs-Smith

The popularity of Powers’ Greek Slave made it a prime candidate for translation into decorative sculpture. The Staffordshire-based Minton porcelain factory reproduced the work at a reduced size in Parian ware, an unglazed ceramic designed to resembled marble. Reductions of ‘fine art’ sculpture in ceramic form afforded more people opportunities to collect and offered commercial opportunities for manufacturers. Reproductions of The Greek Slave circulated widely in a variety of media including the popular press, photography and printmaking. Even the celebrated African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass (c. 1818–95) owned a ceramic replica of The Greek Slave.
“This work typified not only a taste for coloured materials but also a late Victorian fascination for all things Egyptian.”

Henri Baron de Triqueti (1803–74)

*Cleopatra Dying* 1859

Ivory and bronze on a marble and ebony base, with traces of polychromy and gilding

Victoria and Albert Museum


Continental sculptors began to experiment with the ancient chryselephantine technique in the 1840s. This figure was the first chryselephantine work to arrive in the UK where it was displayed at London’s Colnaghi gallery. Cleopatra was the archetypal *femme fatale*, a popular subject in Victorian art. Triqueti’s figure not only typified a growing taste for coloured materials but also a fascination for all things Egyptian.
While women of colour, fashioned in white marble or coloured materials, were unusual subjects in nineteenth-century sculpture, there are significant examples of works representing them as erotically charged and bound slaves, sexualised Venuses, or a hybrid of both. These reveal conflicting attitudes towards race, sexuality, slavery and abolition. White male sculptors such as John Bell and Charles Cordier intended to bring the pathos of the institution of slavery to public attention, yet they nonetheless traded on the allure of illicit sexuality born of that same system. Many works in this gallery evoke both vixen and victim.

Using white marble – the traditional medium of Neoclassical sculpture – to represent the Black body created a tension that challenged the material’s association with white Western culture, morality and purity. Using coloured materials to depict Black bodies was one approach to resolving this quandary.

Although limited in scope, images of Black women in sculpture were transformed and widely circulated through the processes of reproduction within the industrialised decorative arts. Large-scale works were scaled down and reproduced in bronze, plaster, porcelain and other metals. Bell’s Octoroon 1868 was reduced and reborn in Parian ware by Minton and Co. Even though these editions afforded a larger audience access to the works, the commodification and commercialisation of the image of the enslaved woman as a luxury object echoed the practice of slavery itself.

“White male sculptors such as John Bell and Charles Cordier intended to bring the pathos of the institution of slavery to public attention, yet they nonetheless traded on the allure of illicit sexuality born of that same system.”

Charles Cordier, La femme Africaine 1857
Rotherham Museums, Arts & Heritage

John Bell and Elkington & Co.
The Manacled Slave / On the Sea Shore 1877
© Aberystwyth University School of Art Gallery and Museum
John Bell (1811–95)  
*The Octoroon* 1868  
Marble  
Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery

Bell’s Neoclassical-styled white marble nude *The Octoroon* depicts a woman whose one eighth percentage of African blood renders her a slave. Her visibly white physiological characteristics testify to generations of forced racial mixing that left some enslaved peoples at an impossible racial crossroads — as neither Black nor white. The octoroon character appeared in popular Victorian entertainment, often dying tragically as she could not reconcile her white beauty with the fact of her Black blood. Racial mixing, a fact of life in the colonial world, was the source of considerable anxieties in Victorian culture.

Sanford Biggers (b. 1970)  
*Nile* 2021  
Marmo nero / Black marble  
Courtesy of the artist and MASSIMODECARLO

American contemporary artist Sanford Biggers’ *Nile* fuses Classical African and European sculpture to create a hybrid work. Part of Biggers’ *Chimera* series, *Nile* challenges the primacy of Western Classicism and brings the shared histories and mythologies of African and European cultural inheritance into conversation. The body is based on French sculptor Antoine Coysevox’s La Seine 1703/6 and the head is a West African Dan mask form. Biggers’ use of black marble speaks to the idealisation of white marble, revealing that colour in sculpture and people of colour were both part of West’s Classical inheritance.

Charles Cordier (1827–1905)  
*La femme Africaine* 1857  
Onyx, marble and bronze  
Rotherham Museums, Arts and Heritage Services

French ethnographic sculptor Charles Cordier combined bronze and onyx marble in this depiction of an Egyptian fellah, or peasant woman, carrying water. Picturesque images of life in North Africa were part of the craze for Orientalist art in the nineteenth century and often included sexualised women of colour. Cordier was particularly interested in the physiognomy and costumes of exoticised Black figures from North Africa. *La femme Africaine* was fashioned with marble extracted from French colonial Algeria, reflecting how luxury objects embodied colonial power relations in both subject matter and materials.

Maud Sulter (1960–2008)  
*Calliope* 1989  
Cibachrome print  
On loan from City Art Centre  
City of Edinburgh Museums & Galleries

Scottish-Ghanaian feminist artist Maud Sulter was a pioneer of the British Black Arts Movement of the 1980s. Sulter was among a cadre of activists who sought to bring attention to the work of marginalised Black artists who were women. *Calliope* is from her 1989 *Zabat* series of photographs that depicts Black women posing as Classical Greek muses. *Calliope*, the muse of epic poetry, is a self-portrait that draws upon celebrated photographer Félix Nadar’s (1820–1910) photograph of poet Charles Baudelaire’s (1821–67) mixed race mistress Jeanne Duval (c. 1820–c. 62). Here, Sulter employs Black self-representation to start a conversation about Black women as muses in Victorian-era visual culture.

By contrast, the reduced version of British sculptor John Bell’s *American Slave* 1853. The work is Bell’s abolitionist response to Powers’ *Greek Slave* and was intended to elicit sympathy for the plight of Black slaves in America. The nudity and sensuous rendering of the figure both exposes the widespread sexual exploitation of enslaved women within the American system while trading on her alluringly taboo sexuality. The use of bronze rather than marble reinforces the links between skin colour, race and enslavement.

“Racial mixing, a fact of life in the colonial world, was the source of considerable anxieties in Victorian culture.”
James Havard Thomas (1854–1921)

_A Slave Girl_ 1885

Marble

Ar fenthyg gan / Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru
- Museum Wales

Thomas was part of the ‘New Sculpture’ movement of the late nineteenth century in which British artists moved away from the idealism of Neoclassicism towards a more naturalistic and sexualised depiction of the human body. _A Slave Girl_ lacks the chains, jewellery and other garments that defined exoticised slave bodies in sculpture. Thomas was influenced by Greek sculpture and _A Slave Girl_ is likely a reference to slavery in antiquity, yet her individualised face and fleshy body give the work the immediacy of a contemporary nude.
The education of women and the prospect of female emancipation were also sources of anxiety for men. The pioneering British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley’s 1874 pamphlet, ‘Sex in Mind and Education’, claimed that education would damage the female reproductive organs, turning women into ‘monstrosities’ threatening the survival of the human race. Such anxieties were no doubt a factor in the proliferation of femmes fatales in late Victorian painting and sculpture, in which colour was used to symbolise women’s dangerously seductive nature. Harry Bates’ *Pandora* 1890 was the first British sculpture to employ the ancient chryselephantine technique to draw attention to the jar full of evil that this mythical woman had unleashed upon the world. Sir George Frampton used ivory, bronze, opals and glass to create his sculpture of the serpentine temptress *Lamia* 1899–1900.

Another popular subject was the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, in which the sculptor Pygmalion, having rejected real women, sets about carving his perfect partner from marble. Ernest Normand’s painting *Pygmalion and Galatea* 1881 captures the moment when the white stone flushes with colour as the goddess Venus grants Pygmalion’s wish to bring Galatea to life.

Women were also associated with death in stories involving female vampires such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and ‘Sleeping Beauty’, a dark medieval tale retold as ‘Briar Rose’ in the popular *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (first published in 1812). Inspired by Edward Burne-Jones’ series *The Legend of the Briar Rose*, the sculptor Sir Alfred Gilbert encircled *The Virgin* and *St Elizabeth* 1899 with pink rose briar on his tomb for the Duke of Clarence (1864–92) at Windsor Castle, depicting the women as if in the sleep of eternal maidenhood. Harry Bates’ *Mors Janua Vitae* 1899 — also chryselephantine and produced in the final months before his death — features another woman with her eyes closed. She represents Life but is about to be engulfed by the dark wings of the male figure of Death. They stand on a sphere depicting a Christian Last Judgement and imagery from ancient Greek myths about death.

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Sir George Frampton R.A., *Lamia* 1899–1900
© Royal Academy of Arts, London
Harry Bates A.R.A. (1850–99)
*Mors Janua Vitae* 1899
Marble, bronze, ivory and mother of pearl
National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery

*Mors Janua Vitae* means ‘Death, gateway of Life’, and Bates finished this sculpture just before he died. Its iconography points to an existential search for meaning in both Christianity and Greek mythology. Death, the dark figure with wings, looms threateningly over the ivory Life. The crown and a now lost butterfly symbolise the transience of mortal existence, and the bronze sphere is decorated with images of the Last Judgement, singing angels and Greek ceremonial processions.

Sir George Frampton R.A. (1860–1928)
*Lamia* 1899–1900
Ivory, bronze, opals, and glass
Lent by the Royal Academy of Arts, London

Lamia was an ancient Greek *femme fatale* who was well known to Victorians, thanks to a poem by John Keats (1795–1821). Half-woman, half-snake, she was said to seduce young men and then feed on their flesh afterwards, not unlike the female vampires in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). The repeated appearance of figures such as Lamia and Pandora in late Victorian art and literature suggests deep-seated anxieties about female sexuality. Colour was often used to heighten the danger symbolised by these women.

Sir Alfred Gilbert R.A. (1854–1934)
*The Virgin* 1899
Bronze, painted

*St Elizabeth of Hungary* 1899
Bronze, ivory, tin inlaid with mother of pearl and semi-precious stones
Kirk Session of Kippen Parish Church of Scotland

Gilbert’s inspiration for these figures was Edward Burne-Jones’ series *The Legend of the Briar Rose*. This was the name the Brothers Grimm gave to the story of ‘Sleeping Beauty’. The theme of sleeping women was popular with late Victorian artists, perhaps because depicting them in this way rendered them submissive. Originally intended for the tomb of Queen Victoria’s grandson, the Duke of Clarence (1864–92), but later sold for financial reasons and replaced with replicas, these were Gilbert’s first works incorporating polychromy.

Ernest Normand (1857–1923)
*Pygmalion and Galatea* 1881
Oil on canvas
Lent by The Atkinson, Lord Street, Southport

The Roman poet Ovid’s story ‘Pygmalion and Galatea’ was very popular with Victorian artists. Pygmalion is a sculptor who, having rejected living women as impure, carves a perfect ivory virgin and prays for her to be brought to life. His prayers are granted, and the white marble flesh turns pink as he watches. The sculptor John Gibson described having similar thoughts as he made his own *Tinted Venus* 1851–6, exclaiming ‘How was I ever to part with her?’

“The repeated appearance of figures such as Lamia and Pandora in late Victorian art and literature suggests deep-seated anxieties about female sexuality.”
The Colour of Anxiety is an exhibition that features largely white male artists who drove the art world in the nineteenth century. The narratives about race and gender that their works embody have come under scrutiny in recent years by contemporary artists reconsidering historical works that reveal racist and sexist attitudes. These artists also question the centuries-long exclusion of women and people of colour from the world of art-making in the West. Works in the exhibition by American conceptual artist Sanford Biggers and the late Scottish-Ghanaian photographer Maud Sulter offer a reminder of the relevance of this inquiry in today’s critical landscape. Together they bring Black voices — and in Sulter’s case, a female voice — to the conversation, interrogating the power of the European Classical tradition and the contested figure of the Black female in Victorian visual culture.
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

We run a varied programme alongside our exhibitions to encourage people of all ages to engage with sculpture as learners, thinkers and makers.

FAMILIES
Younger visitors to the exhibition can borrow an Explorer Bag, filled with objects and activities designed to encourage looking, thinking and making in response to The Colour of Anxiety.

Visit our alcove area to play with colour, texture and light to explore how the surfaces and materials used in sculpture can drastically change their appearance and meaning.

Our family workshops will explore the themes of The Colour of Anxiety through creative artist-led sessions during school holidays. Visit our website and social media channels for full details and booking information.

SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES
Schools and community groups can book free guided visits to The Colour of Anxiety, led by our Engagement Curator Alison Smith. Visit our website to enquire and book a visit.

SCULPTURE RESEARCH LIBRARY
Visit the Sculpture Research Library on the first floor to find further reading related to the exhibition. Open Monday - Friday 10am-5pm Free entry

 henry-moore.org/institute-engagement

ONLINE EXHIBITION EVENTS

Join us for a series of free online research events which accompanies the exhibition.

Actuality and Sculpture
Lecture by Professor David J. Getsy (University of Virginia)
Wednesday 14 December 2022, 6pm

Professor Jennifer DeVere Brody (Stanford University) in conversation with Dr Adrienne L. Childs (Co-curator of The Colour of Anxiety) Wednesday 25 January 2023, 6pm

What is the Colour of Heaven?
Women, Spiritualism and Art in the Late Nineteenth Century
Lecture by Professor Roger Luckhurst (Birkbeck, University of London) Wednesday 15 February 2023, 6pm

Book your place at:
henry-moore.org/colour-of-anxiety-events

Harry Bates, Pandora 1890 (detail)
Photo: Tate
Henry Moore Institute

We welcome everyone to visit our Galleries, Research Library and Archive of Sculptors’ Papers to experience, study and enjoy sculpture from around the world. Find us in the centre of Leeds, the city where Henry Moore (1898–1986) began his training as a sculptor.

Our changing programme of historical, modern and contemporary exhibitions and events encourage thinking about what sculpture is, how it is made and the artists who make it.

As part of the Henry Moore Foundation, we are a hub for sculpture, connecting a global network of artists and scholars, continuing research into the art form and ensuring that sculpture is accessible and celebrated by a wide audience.

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