

## BLACK IS COLOUR: COLOUR IS RACE

by

**Petrine Archer-Straw**

---

In the exhibition "Black as Colour" Dr David Boxer, [Curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica] aptly shows the importance of black to the Jamaican artist's palette. His iconographic perspective brings to the National Gallery an exhibition of enormous scope. This lecture lends to his vision a social context for the artistic use of black. With an art historical view, I hope to unify many of his ideas under the single theme of race.

Expanding themes already introduced in the exhibition, let's begin by considering how European ideas about the colour black shape our language, visual expression, and imagination. Then, exploring history and more specifically, Jamaican art history, we can examine the significance of black as a political and racial statement looking at artists who use the colour black as an affirmation of race; how black came to be an adjective of derision; how attitudes to colour were communicated under colonialism; how Marcus Garvey's advocacy of the negro redefined the colour black; the impact of black power and Rastafarian philosophies on later generations of artists; and the use of black in contemporary Jamaican art can all be considered. Finally, this lecture suggests that our artists today cannot avoid the significance of black as an indicator of race.

In his catalogue essay Dr Boxer eloquently discusses the contents of the exhibition and defines his curatorial approach. He takes us thematically from dark into light, from our more negative perceptions of the colour black as dark, sinful, sexual, satanic and

mournful to more positive abstract associations with God, race pride, dignity, love. And if we view the exhibition as a journey through history, we find similar transitions, where we move from primal and negative responses to the colour to contemporary enlightened views where black is beautiful. That sense of progression is inherent in much of our thinking. We unwittingly assume that to move from ignorance to knowledge means we have been enlightened. Even black people consider someone dark if they are ignorant or bright if knowledgeable.

The reason we think in this linear and hierarchical fashion is rooted in the dark ages of western history and related to primitive man's fear of the dark and difference. By the Middle Ages these fears were translated into real terms like, black magic, the magic practised by conjurers and witches; black bile a Middle Age malady of the spleen creating melancholy; a blackguard, an unscrupulous foul-mouthed person; and blackamoor; a dark-skinned person or negro. These negatives were further rationalised and absorbed into Western thinking after the enlightenment.

When Europe encountered blacks and their carvings, they considered them to be fetishes. Both the black image whether real or represented in carving, signified racial difference, magic and mystery. Negro is the Spanish and Portuguese word for black. Europeans called the art they found in Africa "l'art nègre", "feitico" or, in West African pidgin, "fetisso". That term meaning fetish

was used generally to describe any carving. It was more specifically applied to metal and nail-covered wooden figures from central and western Africa created by the Kongo people. These objects were essentially medicine containers and their contents used for healing, protecting, punishing or divining, and were usually administered by a local priest or doctor to the individual or community.

In the Americas, the authorities banned the use of such carvings under slavery and severely punished their adherents. Those who knew how to create such objects and had the medical knowledge that empowered them went underground or disguised them in Christian forms now recognised in Obeah, Santeria and Voodoo. Blacks in the Americas inherited Europe's fear of the dark and effectively a fear of themselves, the colour of their skin, the black image in the mirror, on canvas or in carving.

Today, black imagery figures significantly in Jamaican art but it carries different, more positive, meanings. The presence of the black, and particularly the black male in painting and sculpture is a symbol of race pride and nationalism. This is mainly due to the influence of two important figures, Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey and the artist Edna Manley. Marcus Garvey was the champion of the peasant, working and immigrant classes who were more rooted in an African tradition than Jamaica's brown middle class.

It was Marcus Garvey who conceptually promoted black as a colour of dignity. He wrote, "Black Queen of Beauty thou hast given colour to the world", and his emphasis on black awareness challenged African-Americans and Afro-West Indians to redefine themselves in relation to Africa rather

than Europe. Garvey scholar Tony Martin tells us that although Garvey's direct involvement in the visual arts was limited, his Race First doctrine was the ideological underpinning of race issues for Jamaicans in the 1920s and 1930s. This was accomplished through his work as a councillor and his activities at Edelweiss Park in Kingston, where gala evenings with all-black operas, spiritual singing, comedy and folk culture, and poetry reading (including his own) were attended by thousands from all walks of life. Garvey's message of Pan-African unity was absorbed into the "new negro" intellectual debates of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s, and later, the ideals of the Black Power and Rastafarian movements.

Ideas of the "new negro" also fed into the circle that gravitated around Edna Manley, and had broadest appeal to the creolised Jamaican middle class during the 1930s and 1940s. As with the Harlem Renaissance, emphasis was placed on matching negro and European standards. This manifested itself in literary terms, with black subject matter written in a European prose style. In the arts, it meant the creation of a negro aesthetic that was heavily stylised, and rendered in popular impressionist and post impressionist modern styles of the day. Significantly, the term negro then was used more regularly as a descriptor than the word black, which would become more popular after the 1960s. But even without a strident advocacy of black as colour, emphasis was placed on the negro as a symbol of blackness.

A sort of local version of the British Museum, the Institute of Jamaica was the main cultural outlet in the 1940s, whose authority and Eurocentric approach was gradually usurped by these young liberals who nurtured a more local and dynamic vision. A small

group of expatriates and local teachers that included Manley, Vera Cummings, Vera Alabaster and John Wood started Saturday morning classes tutoring youngsters such as Albert Huie, Henry Daley and David Pottinger. The black physiognomy was the focus of these classes where they were taught how to render tonal values of black skin, how to capture black features and facial expressions. The concern however was not the use of the colour black, but the symbolic nature of the black image as something local and relevant.

The Institute fostered a nationalist expression that was both colour and race conscious, and had a profound effect on a later generation of painters, facilitating the liberation of the black vision and the black image in painting. In this lineage one can also include Osmond Watson, Barrington Watson's "Women at the Well", Karl Parboosingh, and later Kofi Kayiga and Christopher Gonzalez. Although exposed to art movements and tuition abroad, these artists cultivated a more local vision directly related to race pride and Africa. In discussing their use of the black image, these artists all relate similar battles, at home and abroad, for acceptance of the black themes in their painting.

By the 1960s, despite a message of race unity in Jamaican art, it is possible to discern a split within the fledgling art movement based on divisions of class and colour, between an approach to creativity which has been labelled "mainstream" and self-taught artists. Mainstream art is characterised by a preoccupation with Jamaican iconography, an emphasis on more formal artistic training and an openness to art, historical styles from abroad but reinterpreted to suit the Jamaican context.

The second strain which has been labelled "intuitive", like Garveyism, maintains stronger links with African forms of expression. In the work of many self-taught painters, black symbology and black imagery are completely integrated. There is no divorce between black the colour and our blackness as a people. Intuitive work relates more closely to an African aesthetic that is traditional and spiritual, as opposed to a black aesthetic that is diasporal, urban and modern. It is characterised by a tendency to overall patterning, a varied and integrated use of colour, flatness of forms reminiscent of textile design, and decoration.

Kapo's work is a fusion of magic rituals and Christian content historically associated with Obeah philosophies, but today is better understood as representing his visions as a shepherd of a revivalist church. His use of black is real and symbolic. Hard, dark woods surrender their tree forms to become every-day black people from his community. When these works were first viewed in the 1950s, they were considered devilish because they represented a tradition of fetish carving that had been outlawed under colonialism. Jamaican artists from lower class and rural backgrounds such as Everal Brown and Woody Josephs were viewed similarly. In their communities, tied more closely to African suspicions than middle class areas, art -- sculpture in particular -- is seen as a black science associated with devious African practices. A perception, of course, carried over from the colonial period.

The sense of dread related to the black image was to be exploited still further by the Rastafarians, whose belief in a Garvey-type Pan-Africanism combined with an interest in Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the idea of Africa as home. Rastafarianism

dominated the Jamaican sub-culture through much of the 1960s and 1970s paralleling and reinterpreting the African-American Black Power movement of the same period. Their Africanicity was marked by the wearing of red, green and gold and characteristic dreadlocks that identified them uniquely with King Solomon of the Tribe of David whose locks were, according to the Bible, black and comely.

Christopher Gonzalez's controversial sculpture of Bob Marley is the archetypal black image of this period. The events surrounding its eventual rejection show that our fear of blackness remained deeply rooted, even in a period of heightened race consciousness. Commissioned in 1981 by the government to honour the late singer, this work is decidedly black in its symbolism, despite its brown tones. Ambiguity and tension are communicated by the constant interchange of forms: head and loins are embraced by root-like forms that flow from head to base. It is rigid, phallic, bulbous and yet lean, naked, but clothed in symbolism. Its rejection on the grounds that it did not resemble the mixed race features of Bob was all the more telling because it so aptly captures the philosophy and stridency of his lyrics. Gonzalez's sculpture is as black as Bob's music.

In the 1980s and 1990s, between these two strains of intuitive and mainstream art, has sprung up a group of young artists far more rooted in their blackness as a Pan-African and regional experience. Their imagery reflects an eclectic mix of stylistic and conceptual sources. Their local art school training is subverted by a gutsy, raw response to art-making sympathetic to intuitive or self-taught practices. Fused with this is a self-conscious promotion of black awareness, political issues and a refreshing approach to Garvey's Pan-

African ideals. Add to this a spiritual polemic informed by Rastafarianism, popular culture, Santeria and Voodoo and the result is a uniquely articulated brand of black philosophy and imagery that has been successfully exhibited both here and abroad.

Forerunners in the group are Nettifnet Maat, Stanford Watson, Kalfani Ra and Omari Ra. Both Kalfani Ra and Omari Ra teach at the Edna Manley School for Visual Arts, suggesting that their influence on a younger generation of artists is germinating. These artists delve into European history as well as African history and embrace those images and icons that the civilised have been taught to fear. Like Petrona Morrison, they revel in discarded materials. But unlike this sculptor, who strives for an ordered classical dignity, they cultivate crudity and celebrate chaos. Conceptually, their work is about regression and transgression similar to those of the white dissident surrealists of the 1930s.

Their work is more valid, however, because they are espousing their own culture, rather than flirting with another. What they paint is transgressive because of what it stands for and where it attempts to take the viewer--into what Conrad has called, "the heart of darkness". It is a journey backwards to recover a lost heritage. Occult practice and imagery found in regional syncretic spiritual groups such as Obeah, Santeria and Voodoo, are all employed. From their obscure naming of themselves and their work, punning, and secret-society symbolism, they suggest that an understanding of the mystery they create is a remedy and transformative process of renewal for black souls.

Unlike the underlying assumptions of this exhibition that move from dark to light, the work of these contemporary black artists is

an invitation to devolve and to reverse the hierarchical trajectory of Western modes of thinking. Black artists are now revisiting the sites of our lost racial heritage, confronting European models of fear and fantasy, repainting our past as black rather than coloured and challenging not only white, but black fears of black.

A recognition of our blackness is a recognition of another way of thinking that is not always linear, progressive, moving from dark to light, but a spreading out, an enveloping and pantheistic recognition of our being in everything. The use of the colour black in this sense is a powerful decolonising, political, racial and creative act. Those artists who use blackness knowingly recognise the significance of that colour's history to our present--that black is more than colour and that colour is race.

Extract from National Gallery of Jamaica lecture by Dr. Petrine Archer-Straw on the occasion of the exhibition "Black as Colour", 15 October, 1997