Exhibition Reexamines Transatlantic Slave Trade Through Eighteenth-Century Portraits

FIGURES OF EMPIRE: SLAVERY AND PORTRAITURE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ATLANTIC BRITAIN
Yale Center for British Art: October 2–December 14, 2014

NEW HAVEN—This October, the Yale Center for British Art will shed new light on representations of slavery in Britain through more than sixty paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, and decorative objects. Figures of Empire: Slavery and Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Britain will examine the ways in which portraiture reflected the perceptions, attitudes, and contradictions of slavery at the time.

The rise of the British Empire during the eighteenth century, fueled by enslaved labor on plantations in the Caribbean and the mainland of North America, contributed to a period of economic and cultural growth. It also brought unprecedented numbers of Africans and people of African descent, both enslaved and free, to Britain. Figures of Empire explores the impact of these developments on the most popular artistic genre of the time: the portrait.

In eighteenth-century Britain, portraits were a principal means of self-representation. Sitters conveyed information about themselves in a variety of ways—through clothing, setting, props, and, often, in relation to subordinate figures, such as servants or slaves. In many cases, these figures were modeled after life; however, in the eighteenth century, they were rarely regarded as subjects in their own right. By contrast, this exhibition challenges us to consider all of the figures depicted within a given portrait as individuals with histories and as “figures of empire”—as people whose lives were shaped by British imperialism and the institution of transatlantic slavery. Figures of Empire asks us to think again about what exactly a portrait is and how the answer to this question might change over time.

The exhibition opens with a selection of early eighteenth-century portraits, maps, and sculptures that trace Britain’s expanding commercial empire and engagement with the institution of transatlantic slavery. Anchoring this display

Sir Joshua Reynolds, Charles Stanhope, third Earl of Harrington, and a Servant, 1782, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Unknown artist, Garden statue with Sundial, ca. 1708, bronze, cast lead, and cement, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Ganson G. Depew, Yale BA 1919, Clarence W. Bowen, Yale BA 1873, Henry King Smith, Yale BA 1898, E. Byrne Hackett, Hon. Yale MA 1914, and R. Eden Dickson, Esq.; Unknown, Elihu Yale, the second Duke of Devonshire, Lord James Cavendish, Mr. Tunstal, and an Enslaved Servant, ca. 1708, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Andrew Cavendish, eleventh Duke of Devonshire
is an important and rarely exhibited group portrait that includes Elihu Yale, the founding benefactor of Yale University, along with an enslaved servant. The next section focuses on the role and representation of slavery in a number of mid-century portraits and conversation pieces, including William Hogarth’s Portrait of a Family (ca. 1735) and Francis Harwood’s remarkable sculpted Bust of a Man (1758). The exhibition continues with an exploration of imagery produced within the context of abolitionism later in the century, examining the particular impact of the antislavery movement on the practice of Britain’s leading portraitist, Sir Joshua Reynolds. Finally, the exhibition concludes by highlighting a number of cases in which portraiture became a means for some individuals of African birth and descent who crossed the Atlantic aboard slave ships to forge new identities as both black and British.

The exhibition presents the portraits and their historical context through a wide range of media and art forms. Selected primarily from the Center’s holdings, the display also will be enriched by loans from other Yale collections, and from the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Figures of Empire takes its place in a new body of scholarship and critical engagement with the legacy of slavery, including the recent high-profile films Twelve Years a Slave (2013) and Belle (2014). It also expands upon conversations begun by prior scholarly publications and exhibitions at the Center, most significantly Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and his Worlds (2007). While Art and Emancipation focused on slavery in British colonial Jamaica, this exhibition will turn its sights to Britain.

The exhibition includes a series of interviews with academic and curatorial scholars, as well as artists, to help place the works of art in a contemporary context. The interviews will be presented as part of an interactive presentation, accessible in the exhibition and on the Center’s website. In addition, a series of related programs, including lectures, exhibitions, a conference, and a film screening, is taking place across Yale University. Highlights include a pendant exhibition entitled Prospects of Empire: Slavery and Ecology in Atlantic Britain at the Lewis Walpole Library, and a major international conference planned in partnership with the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, entitled Visualizing Slavery and British Culture in the Eighteenth Century. Information on related programs is available at britishart.yale.edu/Empire.

CREDITS:

Figures of Empire: Slavery and Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Britain has

William Hogarth, Portrait of a Family, ca. 1735, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Studio of Francis Harwood, Bust of a Man, ca. 1758, black limestone on yellow marble socle, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; John Raphael Smith, Woman Holding a Mask (detail), ca. 1795–1800, pastel, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.
been organized by the Yale Center for British Art and is being co-curated by Cyra Levenson, Associate Curator of Education at the Center; Esther Chadwick, PhD Candidate, Department of the History of Art, Yale University; and Meredith Gamer, PhD Candidate, Department of the History of Art, Yale University.

OPENING PANEL DISCUSSION:
Wednesday, October 8, 5:30 pm
Figures of Empire: Slavery and Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Britain
A conversation with Tim Barringer, Paul Mellon Professor of the History of Art, Yale University; Kobena Mercer, Professor, History of Art and African American Studies, Yale University; and Titus Kaphar, artist.

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART
The Yale Center for British Art houses the largest and most comprehensive collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the university by Paul Mellon (Yale College Class of 1929), the collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, rare books, and manuscripts reflects the development of British art and culture from the Elizabethan period onward. Visit us online at britishart.yale.edu.

# # #

PRESS CONTACTS
Betsy Kim: +1 203 432 2853 | betsy.kim@yale.edu
Julienne Richardson: +203 436 3429 | julienne.richardson@yale.edu

Bartholomew Dandridge, *A Young Girl with an Enslaved Servant and a Dog* (detail), ca. 1725, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; “A Mungo Macaroni,” from *Macaronies, Characters, Caricatures &c published by MDarly* (detail), September 10, 1772 (Vol. 4, no. 14), etching with hand coloring, (BMC 5030), Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University