

HEW LOCKE

Holland Cotter, *The Eyes Have It in Hew Locke's Power-Challenging Show*, The New York Times, 15 September 2022



Hew Locke, *Gilt*, 2022. Courtesy of Hew Locke; Hales Gallery, London; and PPOW, New York. Image credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Photo by Anna-Marie Kellen

My introduction to the work of the Guyanese British artist Hew Locke, whose cranky, bling-gold, power-pricking sculptures are currently embedded in the Metropolitan Museum's facade, came in 2007 in a group show of contemporary Caribbean art at the Brooklyn Museum. Locke's contribution there was a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, the most — maybe only — interesting one I've encountered.

For it, he took a standard bust-length postage stamp image of the sovereign and translated into a 10-foot-tall wall relief mosaicked from hundreds, possibly thousands of small, carefully chosen down-market things: plastic toy guns and swords, rubber lizards and bugs, and red and yellow fake flowers.

The visual effect was sensational: molten and spiky, monstrous and fragile. Within the context of the show's anticolonial buzz and Locke's own biography

— born in Scotland in 1959, he grew up in a newly independent British colony — Locke's Elizabeth plainly had critical messages to deliver. But they were hard to read in his work. Was the queen attacking or under attack? Blooming or rotting? The one sure thing was that she hooked the eye and held it.

Twenty-five years later, Locke is back in a New York museum, this time solo and center-stage, as the creator of an impressive suite of sculptures installed in niches in the Met's Fifth Avenue exterior. He's the third artist invited to design work for the museum's Facade Commission, created in 2019. (Wangechi Mutu and Carol Bove preceded him.) And his contribution, called "Hew Locke, *Gilt*," is the most politically pointed, and the most Met-specific, so far.

It's made up of four sculptures, cast in fiberglass and painted gold, installed on either side of the museum's

grand entry staircase. The larger two pieces suggest monumental urn-like trophies set on ornamental bases and decorated with linear patterns and figures in relief. In the two smaller works, the bases are the main element, supporting what look like fragments of trophies that have been smashed.

The Met's 1902 Beaux-Arts facade, advertising as it does an institutional self-image of loftiness, is a loaded setting for certain new art. High up on the museum's wings stand allegorical statues, carved in smooth neo-Classical style, of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and Music. Tucked into the spandrels of arches over the main entrance are medallion portraits of white, male art deities — Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Dürer — in an ensemble designed, more than a century ago, to welcome visitors to a comfortably edited version of what "art" and "encyclopedic" meant.

By contrast, Locke's commission offers a culturally more far-ranging introduction to the art history that awaits within, and a realistic take on how art operates in the world. As with the portrait of the queen, power is the subject of this new work, controlled exuberance is the expressive method; and celebration and reproach are hard to distinguish.

Probably the first thing to know about the project — conceived in consultation with Sheena Wagstaff, former chair of the Met's department of modern and contemporary art, and Kelly Baum, curator in the department and its acting chair — is that many of its images refer to specific objects in the museum's collection, which the artist reviewed through the museum's online catalog during the Covid lockdown. Most of the objects he pulled out are antique in date and came to the museum after being "found" — to use a term that can cover a fair amount of archaeological larceny — by modern-day diggers, dealers and institutional hoarders. Enough to say that Locke's homophonic title, "Gilt," alludes both to the gold paint with which his sculptures are covered and to the politically instrumental uses and misuses of art over centuries.

Several items depicted, whole or in part, on Locke's trophies, were once active or passive players in power games, as diplomatic persuaders, ideological enforcers, or in the case of an eighth-century B.C. Assyrian ivory carving of a man leading an antelope by the horns, as booty to enrich a treasury.

As politics change, the reading and valuation of art changes too. Tiger-head finials that ornament the handles of two of Locke's trophies are copied from those on a gun once owned by the 18th-century India Muslim ruler Tipu Sultan, known in his day as the "Tiger of Mysore." For generations he's been

lauded in history books as an anticolonial freedom fighter. Recently, though, in a right-leaning national moment, he's being reviled as anti-Hindu and erased from the record.

Identity itself can be lost — and reinvented over time — with art changing meaning and value accordingly, as demonstrated by the image of a head featured on a second *Gilt* trophy. The original belongs to a full-length first-century B.C. bronze statuette of a chubby kid wearing tight pants and a pointy hat. His outfit seems to peg him as being from somewhere on the Hellenistic fringes, though he was discovered in Egypt and has had his existential status raised and demoted by scholars over the years, some identifying him as a Phrygian nature god, others as the princely son of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, still others, as a decorative fixture made for a lamp.

Two of the four trophies in Locke's series are mere fragments, each carrying an image of the bottom half of a broken face. From their visible features — mouths and chins — I took a guess at the Met works referenced: a 19th-century Kongo power figure from Central Africa in one case, the head of an 18th Dynasty Egyptian queen carved from yellow jasper in the other?

But no. Although Locke is thoroughly familiar with the museum's non-Western holdings and adopted a pre-Columbian motif for these half-faces, he basically invented them. Leaving us with what? Examples of art in a state of arrested formation or terminal disintegration? As he knows well, both descriptions still project the view of non-Western art held by many Western museums.

What visually binds *Gilt* are two recurring motifs. One is the presence of identically designed bases on which the four individual trophies rest. Adapted from Italian Baroque sculpture, they take the form of bent-back, gape-mouthed reptilian head that seems to be swallowing the trophies or vomiting them out. A funky-ugly image, it feels like a thumb in the collective eye of the facade's allegorical figures and art-saints.

Eyes are clearly important to Locke, as images and as instruments of power. Big, cartoony ones, cast in low relief, dominate the two large trophies, staring out, making them feel sentient. And everything about this artist's detail-intensive work — from a royal portrait made from guns and bugs, to gold vessels filled to the brim with cultural data — is eye-engaging, which means mind-engaging. You look at art; art looks at you; you both change. That's how it should be.