

HEW LOCKE

Precious Adesina, *In the U.K., Public Art Shifts Toward Black Experiences*, The New York Times, 28 October 2022

Hew Locke, *Foreign Exchange*, 2022. Photo by Shaun Fellows. Courtesy of Birmingham 2022 Festival and Ikon Gallery.

LONDON — At the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, a statue in Bristol, in the southwest of England was pulled from its plinth, stomped on, graffitied and thrown into the river. Before the incident, Edward Colston, the British slave trader and merchant the sculpture depicted, was a name generally only known by historians.

But the toppling of the Colston statue forced into the mainstream conversations about who is represented by public art in Britain, and where Black Britons' experiences fit within that.

Since then, numerous public sculptures of and by Black people have been erected across Britain. Last year, a bronze monument to Betty Campbell, the first Black woman to become a head teacher in Wales, was unveiled in Cardiff.

In June, two nine-foot bronze figures by the artist Thomas J Price titled "Warm Shores" were revealed outside Hackney Town Hall in east London. The statues were made using 3-D images of more than 30 Hackney residents with a personal connection to the Windrush generation, of people from the Caribbean who were invited to Britain to help rebuild the economy after World War II. In the same month, a monument dedicated to Windrush by the

Jamaican sculptor Basil Watson was placed at Waterloo Station in central London.

October is Black History Month in Britain, which this year arrives as the country is reflecting more generally on how it recognizes the contributions of Black Britons. It's easy to assume that these new works were responses to the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted across Britain in the summer of 2020.

But the monument to Campbell was three years in the making, and the British government announced its commitment to honoring the Windrush generation in 2018. According to Claudine van Hensbergen, an associate professor at Northumbria University who researches public art in Britain, the average time frame for erecting a sculpture is "from two to 10 years."

Instead, these pieces highlight how the statue's removal resulted from extensive and ongoing debates among academics, local government officials and art professionals around the role of public sculptures, what should be depicted and how.

Among 13,000 outdoor sculptures across Britain, just over 2,600 depict or commemorate named individuals and under 2 percent of those celebrate people from ethnically

diverse backgrounds, according to ongoing research by the cultural education charity Art U.K.

“Unsurprisingly, the majority of people portrayed are royalty — overwhelmingly Queen Victoria,” Katey Goodwin, Art U.K.’s deputy director who carried out the research alongside staff and volunteers, said in a video interview. Goodwin found that more than 175 statues, fountains and other artworks across Britain are dedicated to the monarch, who oversaw the expansion of Britain’s colonial empire in the 19th century.

In 2019, Tate Modern, a partially government-funded art gallery in London, chose the American artist Kara Walker for its annual Hyundai Commission, in which artists create installations for the gallery’s free-to-visit Turbine Hall. Walker made a colossal fountain that referenced Thomas Brock’s 1911 Victoria Memorial, a statue of a gilded winged Victory in front of Buckingham Palace, dedicated to Queen Victoria. Walker’s fountain, “Fons Americanus,” depicted scenes related to slavery, and directly questioned the romanticization of colonial narratives by public sculptures like the Victoria Memorial.

Frances Morris, the director of Tate Modern, said approaches to talking about representation in British public memorials has shifted in recent years. “Over the last few years, in a really interesting way, the discussion has become not just about who is represented, but what stories are being told,” she said in a video interview.

Van Hensbergen agreed that such conversations have wider implications. “It’s about racism and structural inequalities,” she said, and how these dynamics are represented in statues. These dialogues, she added, have been taking place in universities since the 1970s: “A huge amount of scholarship looks at these types of questions.”

In Bristol, people had protested the Colston statue before 2020. In 1998, an expletive was painted on it in red overnight. Subsequent initial exchanges between the Bristol City Council members, local academics and members of the public were centered around acknowledging Colston’s links to slavery, culminating in the council agreeing to attach a new plaque to the figure in 2018. That plaque would have clarified Colston’s “active role in the enslavement of over 84,000 Africans,” and would have been added alongside the existing description of Colston being a “wise and virtuous son of the city.” But an intervention by the city’s Society of Merchant Venturers, of which Colston was a member, led to a plan for less explicit wording, and it wasn’t added.

“The Colston statue was a pinnacle point of a lot of frustrations in Bristol around how the city wasn’t acknowledging the trans-Atlantic slave trade,” Shawn Sobers, a professor at Bristol’s University of the West of England, said in a recent phone interview. After the 2020 protest, Sobers collaborated on a temporary display of the statue at M Shed, a local museum focused on detailing the city’s history.

The museum chose to acknowledge the mixed perspectives on Colston by keeping the graffiti from the demonstration on the statue, and placing it on its side with protest placards nearby.

The Guyanese-British artist Hew Locke has dedicated much of his four-decade-long practice to reframing the sculptures that people in Britain passively walk by each day. Notably, Locke is known for photographing patriotic statues and decorating the resulting images in a garish manner, which he calls “mindful vandalism,” though he works in a variety of mediums.

Earlier this year, Locke took these efforts one step further, by adapting an existing statue of Queen Victoria outside Birmingham City Council for a project with Ikon Gallery, a contemporary art space in the city.

“Foreign Exchange” placed Victoria in a crate on a ship alongside five smaller replicas of herself, which Locke likened to how the monarch’s image was disseminated across the British Empire as a symbol of power. “There is one in Georgetown, Guyana, where I grew up,” Locke said in a phone interview, adding that in 1954, the statue in his hometown was the target of anticolonial protests. “The head was blown off, arms damaged.” In 2018, activists covered the same figure in red paint.

But the recent works by and of Black Britons popping up around Britain are not just about shifting narratives around existing statues, or re-emphasizing already-well-known people and stories. Some have also created sights for learning about lesser-known individuals. One example is by the multidisciplinary Nigeria-born artist Favour Jonathan, who won the televised Sky Arts “Landmark” competition.

As a result, Jonathan’s sculpture honoring the Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, the first Black actor to play Othello and the country’s first theater manager of color, is displayed permanently in Coventry, a town in the center of England.

“He did all of that before slavery was abolished in England, yet a lot of people still do not know his name,” Jonathan said in a recent interview. “My artwork is made to educate and help other people learn more about their history.”

It seems this shift of focus toward more varied public art in Britain will continue. “We’re going to see more public art, whether it’s sculpture, figurative, abstract, commemorating people or events, that relate specifically to the Black community,” said Goodwin, of Art U.K.

“Things are moving in the right direction, and people are really thinking about this,” she added.