

HEW LOCKE

Alastair Sooke, Hew Locke: 'The British Museum has become a punching bag', The Telegraph, 13 October 2024



Portrait of Hew Locke, photo by Richard Cannon

Sitting inside a grand office at the British Museum, with a bright green scarf draped over his slim black suit, Hew Locke, the 64-year-old British artist, is casting his mind back to the first time he visited its collection. It was 1980, and Locke, who was born in Edinburgh, had just returned to Britain having spent his early years in Guyana, where his family (his father was the Guyanese sculptor Donald Locke) had moved when he was five.

“I remember thinking, ‘This is incredible’ – because it is,” says Locke, who still speaks with a Caribbean accent. Since then, he’s often returned, he says, “to think”.

Now, many of those thoughts, sparked by artefacts in its galleries, will be revealed in a new exhibition above the Great Court – one of the museum’s biggest collaborations with any artist (on a par with Grayson Perry’s hit 2011 show, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*). While selecting more than 200 objects to be shown alongside his own work, Locke has been rummaging through the museum’s stores. “You step behind the scenes here,” he tells me, “and it’s like,

‘Wow!’ It’s such a time warp. That’s why you sign up for this job.”

The exhibition, he explains, will examine “colonial history”, with which the British Museum’s own history is enmeshed. (In the catalogue, its curator, Isabel Seligman, writes that Locke was licensed to turn “a critical eye”.) “It’s like that William Faulkner quote,” Locke says. “‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’ You know?”

It’s a theme he has often explored – so much so that, before accepting the invitation, he asked, “You guys know what I do, right?” By which he meant, “the political tack I take in my work: unearthing hidden histories, questioning things”.

Two years ago, his installation *The Procession*, a carnivalesque parade of almost 150 life-sized figures in glittering masquerade, filled Tate Britain’s neoclassical Duveen Galleries to jubilant effect. Simultaneously attractive and, as he once put it, “scarily surreal”, it was, Locke says now, “a complex piece”, touching on various topics including the slave

trade and rising sea levels. “And people got that,” he tells me, “which was cool.”

At the British Museum, similar cardboard-and-fabric figures – called “Watchers”, akin to a “Greek chorus” – will be scattered throughout. Yet, Locke declares, presenting plundered objects and saying, “This is loot”, is “too easy”: “I’m not dictating how the public should think.”

Rather, one object he has chosen is the so-called “Asante Jug”, a 14th-century copper-alloy English ewer, looted by British troops from a palace in Kumasi, in present-day Ghana, during the Anglo-Asante war of 1895-96. “How did a medieval English ewer end up as an object of veneration in the Asante court?” asks Locke. “Was it loot? A gift from an ambassador?” He smiles. “I tend to embrace complication and nuance.”

This is the thing with Locke: he’s hardly some Britain-bashing, statue-smashing iconoclast. Long before demonstrators in 2020 toppled a bronze effigy of Edward Colston into Bristol harbour, Locke altered a photograph of the same statue by covering it with coins, cowrie shells and chains, alluding to the merchant’s involvement with the slave trade. He describes his intervention, *Restoration* (2006), as “mindful vandalism”.

Often, he swathes imagery in gleaming trinkets, like otherworldly vegetation. At the British Museum, he will display a 19th-century bust of Queen Victoria, crowned with a Medusa-like headdress embellished with hair extensions picked up in Brixton, where the artist lives. “I’m not a royalist, nor a republican,” he says. “I just find the whole thing fascinating.”

This maximalism, he explains, harks back to “childhood memories”. “In Guyana, you’re very aware of the undergrowth, particularly in the bush. There’s a seething ecosystem down there. Things rot away and decay. It’s a metaphor.” For what, exactly? “It’s about something falling apart,” he says thoughtfully, “but falling apart with style, you know?” He stares at me intensely. “It’s a metaphor for watching history pass by.”

One of his “obsessions”, he explains, is a passage from Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred*

*Years of Solitude* (1967), where explorers travelling through a jungle “come across this Spanish galleon filled with flowers and just abandoned”. He could be describing his own sculptures, such as *Armada* (2017-19), a ghostly flotilla of 45 suspended model ships.

Did the British Museum give Locke total freedom? “Within reason,” he replies – although, he adds, it became plain that some of his initial “plans” were “problematic”. One, he recalls, was an “image of the Elgin Marbles Photoshopped out of the gallery”. Locke calls them “the elephant in the room”.

“That was a step too far,” he continues, “because delicate negotiations are going on behind the scenes, and I would not want to mess that around.” A spokesman confirms that “discussions with Greece” about a “Parthenon Partnership”, which would maintain the collection’s “integrity”, are “ongoing and constructive”.

What does Locke think should happen to “contested objects” in the museum? It’s “complicated”, he replies. He has no “inside knowledge”, but believes that, eventually, the Parthenon sculptures are “going back – it’s just under what conditions, and what the deal is”. He will “be sad to see this stuff go”, but “it’s the right thing”.

That said, restitution, he believes, should proceed “case-by-case”. Consider the Benin Bronzes, plundered during a British raid that sacked the palace of Benin City in 1897. It’s easier, Locke says, for small institutions to “try to gain a bit of glory, by handing back their one Benin Bronze... It’s a different conversation when you’ve got hundreds of pieces.” (According to its website, more than 900 objects from the historic Kingdom of Benin are “cared for by the British Museum”.) For Locke, the British Museum has become “a convenient punching bag”. “Not everything here is looted,” he points out.

Still, he’s not “letting the Empire off the hook”. The British Empire, he tells me, “made people like me second-class citizens” – and its history has cast a long shadow.

Today, Locke appears firmly lodged within the establishment; last year, he was awarded an OBE:

“How more ‘insider’ can you be?” But, he tells me, he has sometimes felt excluded (“Oh God, yeah!”), and, still now, even though he was “born here” to a “white English” mother, the artist Leila Locke (née Chaplin), “I feel like an outsider-insider, because I always carry this feeling of being an immigrant.”

This is, he says, “to do with my age and generation, and how I was made to feel” in the early 1980s, when he worked as a clerk at Citibank in London (before studying at Falmouth School of Art), and “anti-immigrant” sentiment was running high. In those days, he recalls, “I was obsessed with trying to be English, whatever the hell that was.”

Later, though, “I realised I was losing some of my identity, trying to belong to something that doesn’t really want you, which is a weird thing. It developed into a kind of insecurity... But this is me talking about a younger version of myself. I sorted that s--- out a long time ago.”

His emotions remain raw regarding his father, who died in 2010 and with whom he was “very close”. “My dad spent all his time trying to get somewhere here,” says Locke. “I can get quite emotional about his journey and the humiliating crap he had to put up with in the 1970s.” Such as? “He’d leave Guyana carrying bottles of rum and rum cake to charm London dealers who were not interested in him at all.” Locke shakes his head. “I look back and I’m embarrassed on his behalf.”

In the decades since, says Locke, there’s been a “sea change” in terms of opportunities for black artists in this country – but, he reminds me, the transition has been hard. Locke graduated, with an MA in sculpture, from the Royal College of Art in 1994 – “Right in the white heat,” he recalls, “of that whole YBA [Young British Artist] thing.” It was, he says, an “exciting” moment, but it also “blew everything else out of the water”, and “wasn’t where my interest lay”.

At this point, Locke was squatting in an abandoned hospital in south London, where he met his wife, the curator Indra Khanna, whom he married in 1995. “I’d sit down with friends – Ghanaian artists, South African artists – and we’d say, ‘Where do we fit into this?’”

The trouble was “all the oxygen had been taken up”. As a result, various talented black artists “just disappeared”. “All of a sudden, people were saying, ‘Well, these artists were ignored because they weren’t any good.’ Now, people are going, ‘How the hell did we miss that?’”

What was the turning point? “The Black Lives Matter movement made a big difference,” he says, before identifying the opening of Tate Modern in 2000 as the moment “things started to shift.”

Even his father’s powerful abstract work is finally getting its due: three years ago, it was included in Tate Britain’s survey of 20th-century Caribbean-British art, *Life Between Islands*, opposite Locke’s own (“That was special,” he says). Next year, a show of his father’s art will travel to Bristol’s Spike Island and Camden Art Centre.

Locke smiles. “I miss the guy. I mean, if he was alive today, and I phoned him, ‘Hey, Daddy-Boy, look, the British Museum have given me a show, you know?’, A) he’d be jealous, but B) he’d be in hysterics: ‘Boy, they let you in! How did they manage to do that?’”

Over the years, whenever Locke sensed that an institution wanted to work with him for “box-ticking” reasons, he’d tell himself he didn’t care. But, “I was lying to myself: of course you care. The thing is, the art world is bloody hard enough as it is.” He pauses, before continuing emphatically: “If you’d asked me 10 years ago whether I thought that the British Museum would give me a show: no way on earth. No way. I couldn’t see that happening.”

It just goes to show, Locke says, “things can change. But, of course, things can change back. I keep waiting for the backlash.” Will there be one? “The art world can be very fickle,” he replies. “I worry about younger artists of colour. I hope they’re not caught up in a fashion moment.”

Locke fixes me with his steady, unblinking gaze. “You’re talking to an artist who has seen a lot of s--- come and go. So, nothing is permanent. And I even say that about myself, you know?”