

“Artist and Empire”: A Journey through Britain’s Imperial Past

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Global Research, December 11, 2015

[Middle East Monitor](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

In a work by the Irish painter George William Joy, set during the Anglo-Egyptian administration in Sudan at the time of the British Empire, General Charles Gordon looks down onto an uprising led by the Mahdi army, each member of the revolt advancing upwards towards him with spears in their hands.

When the painting was created in 1893 General Gordon was considered a national hero; today the painting raises different questions: “Should Britain get involved in the areas outside that are not really beneficial to Great Britain, or should it be supportive of regimes where they had influence. It was quite a divisive point and this painting became really iconic,” says Alison Smith, lead curator at the Tate Britain, British Art to 1900.

“It became overlooked in the twentieth century,” she continues, “it became one of those really embarrassing pictures seen to be quite racist in its assumption of European white superiority. He’s shown to be calm at the moment of death, in contrast to this disorganised mob. But recently people have focused on this in light of ISIL, jihad and political Islam,” using another acronym for Daesh. It’s a timely analysis given that the day we meet British MPs voted to support airstrikes in Syria despite the long shadow cast by the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

It is precisely parallels like these which capture a central theme in *Artist and Empire*, the exhibition at the Tate Britain where *The Death of General Gordon* hangs: how has the British Empire shaped art and how has this art shaped our perceptions of the Empire not just in the early colonial period, but right up to the present day?

By 1922 the British Empire had grown from several overseas possessions and trading posts to covering almost a quarter of the world, an expanse of land which went on to inspire the phrase “the Empire on which the sun never sets.” *Artist and Empire* offers an insight into the Empire’s painful and brutal history: the arbitrary carving up of continents, the slave trade, the wars, the destruction and displacement to name but a few. But at the same time it draws attention to the Empire’s legacy, which is everywhere: in public monuments, social structures, contemporary politics and, of course, British art, which came through imperial networks and took on artistic influences from the countries it conquered.

Some observers may feel a certain sense of guilt admitting or recognising there is beauty and diversity in work that has come out of such destruction, but Smith says the show attempts to look beyond this narrative: “Now with so much interest in the Empire I think we’re moving beyond that binary, good thing, bad thing, and we can accept that this is the world we live in now politically, culturally socially and we can’t just ignore it.”



[click to enlarge]

Image: Wenceslaus Hollar 1607-1677, the settlement at Whitby 1699. Pen and ink with watercolour on paper – The British Museum, London

The exhibition takes the viewer back to one of Britain's first colonies overseas, Tangier, which it controlled between 1661 and 1684. When Charles II of England married the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza he acquired Tangier and Bombay as part of the dowry settlement. On display are two watercolours which the Prague-born draftsman and engraver Wenceslaus Hollar produced after an expedition to document fortifications and settlements.

One image shows Tangier from the north, the other looks at a settlement in an area which has been named after the English seaside town Whitby: "It's quite interesting how the whole thing is domesticated. It could almost be mistaken for an English scene. These rolling hills and the place names" comments Smith as we look at the images. "This colony only lasted a few years because it was vulnerable and isolated and I think it fell apart through internal discord, disagreements as well as pressure from outside."

On the other side of the room is a map entitled *Imperial Federation: Map Showing the Extent of the British Empire in 1886*. Britain has been placed right in the middle of the map and in proportion to Africa and America is over-sized. "As a child I was used to maps like this, you thought Britain was the centre of the world, but it's not," says Smith. The map has also marked Gambia and Lagos in the wrong place, "which is quite interesting for a map which purports to be the truth," she adds.

"One of the things we wanted to bring out in this room is how unprovocative maps, charts and surveys are because they're to do with shifting boundaries and taking existing boundaries and superimposing others and taking away existing place names so you get this layer cake of different names and what is the true identity. It's problematic."

Like maps, paintings were taken to be objective. Before photography and television, artists would present history paintings as visual tributes to a notable occasion and yet they were often sympathetic towards the Empire. They would be circulated widely, other artists would create similar depictions on the same subject and then these images would play a central role in conditioning people's understanding of battles and heroic moments.



[click to enlarge]

Image: Felice A. Beato (1832-1909), Interior View of the North Fort of Taku 1860. Albumen print – Victoria and Albert Museum

In Robert Home's *The Reception of the Mysorean Hostage Princes by Marquis Cornwallis* the sons of Tipu Sultan, ruler of Mysore, are taken hostage by the British Lieutenant-General Cornwallis, governor-general of India, to ensure Tipu Sultan pays his war reparations. Although kidnapping and hostage taking are now considered horrific and frightening, says Smith, in this painting the act is shown to be quite benign.

“This subject was painted again and again and again and again in a sentimental way, the Empire being rather like a mother or paternalistic and welcoming and kind. So anyone brought up in the nineteenth century will have known this iconography. Today we don’t really learn much about the Mysore wars in history.” The repetition of certain battles meant that countless others were simply written out of history.



[click to enlarge]

Image: Robert Home 1752-1834, The Reception of the Mysorean Hostage Princes by Marquis Cornwallis, 26 February 1792 c.1793. Oil paint on canvas – National Army Museum

With the advent of photography the genre of “polite history painting” died out because it was believed photos could show the real nature of war. But a photograph by Felice A. Beato of the 1860 Second Opium War in the Taku Forts in China reveals a different story. “It seems to be an objective eyewitness account but there seems to be quite a few he did of these dead Chinese soldiers but he had rearranged the corpses to get the maximum vantage point. I think the point of this is it’s just as manipulated in its own way as the paintings,” says Smith.

During the 1960s work from artists of the former Empire grew in profile; many came to work and study in London after the Second World War as the Empire was being decolonised. An iconic work during this period was Guyanese artist Donald Locke’s *Trophies of Empire* which is based on the plantation system where the slaves worked in Demerara. Ceramic bullets are tied together, a reference to slavery, shackles and colonial violence but also a comment on how objects have been uprooted from their places of origins and put on display in museums, explains Smith.

Many of these works of art came into Britain through discovery voyages, individual agents, officials working overseas; some were commissioned, others given as gifts, she says. Recently much attention has been paid to the acquisition of big works of western art by the Gulf countries, purchases which are helping to secure their place as a major player in the art world.

“It’s a reversal really because a lot of those paintings they’re collecting, like J. F. Lewis, a lot of his works go back to the Gulf states,” she says. “He was an artist who travelled overseas and painted in places like Egypt and continued doing that when he came back to Britain and now it seems right that those works should go back in a way.”

Exploring the Empire through art, says Smith, can be an entry point into history, an insight into relationships and encounters or the human angle to the story; but this is just some of what can be taken away from *Artist and Empire*. “It’s not an exhibition with a conclusion. Everyone has some kind of relationship with the British Empire or ancestral relationship, people will bring their own experiences and memories or assumptions to bear on this exhibition, maybe they’ll be reinforced or maybe they’ll be challenged in some way.”

Artist and Empire can be seen at the [Tate Britain](#) until 10 April 2016.

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