In Conversation: Tara Munroe on the Lost Leicester Casta Paintings

In 2009, Tara Munroe – curator and creative director of Opal 22 Arts and Edutainment – found five remarkable paintings in the store rooms at Leicester Museum and Art Gallery. Since then she has been researching and raising awareness about the complex stories of racial classification these images tell. A major Heritage Lottery Funded exhibition of these paintings will open in Leicester in August 2023. MAP special issue editor Kate Nichols spoke to Tara earlier in 2022 to find out more about these images and their connection to society today, how they ended up in the Midlands, and how Tara plans to curate them.

Collection: Leicester Museum and Art Gallery

Kate Nichols (KN): The story of you finding these paintings in the store rooms at the museum is so evocative and exciting, and just to start off, I wondered if you could describe what your first impressions of these paintings was; what was going through your head when you first chanced on them?

Tara Munroe (TM): This is something that I get asked all the time, and you know initially, the bit that we're not meant to talk about is that they were ready to be disposed of; they were at the back door. And there was initial shock that these massive paintings were going to be removed in the first place, but then I went and investigated and looked at the paintings. And immediately it was quite obvious that they were images of a white man, a black woman, and a child, and they looked like a family. And the next one was the same, there were definitely some racial mixtures within the paintings.

From working in museums beforehand, every historic painting I'd seen with black people in them, they were either in servitude or slaves. They were never in home settings with families. With these paintings there was clearly some kind of prestige in their clothing, and there was just something very interesting there! And then when I saw that text on the paintings, that blew me away. I've learnt a lot more Spanish since, but at that point I knew enough to know what 'negro' and 'Español' meant. There was just something that I couldn't walk away from. I was very lucky with the curator that was with me, because he gave me that space to just have this as my project and look further into it and guide me.

KN: You've tantalisingly given us a sense that these paintings appeared to show mixed-race family scenes. Could you describe them in more detail?

TM: The original sets of these paintings would have come in sets of 16, and they would have identified every single hybrid that you could get from the mixing of people.

The first one shows a Spanish man in military uniform, and a black woman, who's not lavishly dressed, and a mixed-race child (fig. 1). The woman is making chocolate and then the child is handing the chocolate to the man in the uniform. They are in a kitchen setting, there's fine, expensive looking pottery behind them. Then above the people, is written 'De español y negra se produce un mulato' [a Spanish man and a black woman make a mule].

The next one says 'A black man and an Indian woman produce a wolf'. By Indian it means an indigenous person, a native American woman. The man is dressed as a coachman, and the woman is dressed in a very fine kind of turban and a Mexican tunic (fig. 2).

The next one is 'An Indian and a wolf make something you throw up into the air'. So the idea was that the more mixed, and the less Spanish someone became, the Spanish saw those people as having no real use to anybody, so there were things that you just throw up in the air (fig. 3).

I'm always trying to work out where I would have actually fitted into these mixes because my family are from the Caribbean, my mum's Trinidadian and my dad's Jamaican. His father was white Jewish and his mother was African. My mother, her mum is half Chinese half African and my granddad is Venezuelan African, so I don't know where they would have fitted me into this.

The other two paintings in Leicester are a bit different. One is called 'The Barbarians': they were the indigenous people that wouldn't conform to European ways of living (fig. 4). It's just a complete stereotype, they've got feathers in their hair, and bows and arrows. The next one shows people referred to as 'Indios otomíes'. These are the indigenous people that conformed more; they wore Western clothing and were allowed to work in the Spanish markets (fig. 5).

I've always said that the paintings we have at New Walk Museum could be one of the first sets in this genre. Ilona Katzew (author of *Casta Painting: images of race in eighteenth-century Mexico*, 2004) is excited to see them for these reasons, but without her having actually seen them, I should say: we think that these are probably one of the earliest sets of these images. There are only 100 of these paintings in the world so it's amazing that we have what is certainly a very early set of them in Leicester. We know they are early because they have no numbers on them; later sets of these paintings were numbered, and ranked in terms of racial hierarchy (certain mixes of peoples as superior to others), so they told you clearly: 'you're at the top of the set, you're at the bottom'.

KN: So, you started to research these paintings and established that they were Spanish colonial era paintings called 'Casta Paintings'. Could you tell us more about what these were, who made them, and why were they made?

TM: They are a visual representation of a class system, and they were initially made in Mexico. Mexico had been colonised by the Spanish and was called New Spain. Predominantly men went over, and started relationships with enslaved women and native American women. Being Catholic they had to legitimise the relationships once children were involved, so the viceroy at the time, decided to have these sets of paintings developed to show the King, that they were able to drain out all the other races and bring everybody to white. So these images show that if a Spanish man had a child with a native American, it would only take three bloodlines to come to white; with an African woman, it would take five.

The King received them, but wasn't impressed; these images then became tourist/commercial images, to show how strange and exotic things were in the Spanish new world, whether that's details like textiles and pottery, or in the variety of people. As the painting genre develops it also becomes more about how different 'types' of people would behave; with ideas that some mixes of people were violent, or less intelligent or capable; some paintings show women of colour about to hit their white husbands for example.

This is just my thought on it, but I feel as though these images are about keeping people who might 'pass' as white in their place; to make sure they didn't jump that barrier they'd be shown as violent and people to be wary of. For me, those stories and visual representations in the paintings have just moved on, they're connected to where we are now because we still have those visual representations on the TV, in the media, in the words that have been said by our Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. All of those kinds of connotations have an effect on how we understand each other, on how we look at each other. These paintings are just one of the early starting points. But I think if we do show these paintings properly, we can show how ridiculous the labels defined by race are and where they've come from, and how we really have to stop using them, and stop using visual representations to identify character.

KN: As you know, this particular issue of MAP is exploring similar relationships between colonialism and arts and heritage today in response to the Commonwealth Games, so it's really interesting to hear you talking about connections between these historic images and the legacies of these colonial ideas about race and identity for society today. Could you say a bit more about these connections and what you hope these images might be able to do being displayed in the Midlands?

TM: We are doing two exhibitions. The first one is a bit of a soft opening. We were showcasing them in March to June 2022 in the state that they're in now. I want to see the shock on people's faces when they see them as I did. Because they are in a very bad state. They've been totally unloved. They've been damaged, there's tears in them and they've been used to teach conservation.

There won't be any descriptions to force people into any kind of conversation, and I want to encourage people to leave their comments, so we can understand what other people see when they first see them. I just want to see people's reactions and I want to understand if they want to see the same things that I want to see.

Then in the lead up to the actual exhibition in 2023 there will be a collection of interactive events that will provoke the audience into having a conversation about race and identity and creating that dialogue before the exhibition takes place.

But then I want to talk about the actual genre of paintings themselves and how through colonial societies this racial dialogue that was forged by power developed, and became really deeply entrenched in society.

And then I want to take it right up to today and look at all the things that have happened, I want to try and keep it UK based because there's so many elements about black history and black power struggles in the UK that people just are not aware of; people think it's just something that happened in the US. We as a black community, we know the story, but other people don't, are not aware of all the things that we've done and had to go through in this country, just to be accepted.

I want to create a kind of dialogue between these paintings and black history in the UK. It's very hard for me to take the personal element out of it. I have to talk about it, although coming from a light skinned family, and I'm one of the lighter ones, and have seen all my life, the privilege I yield by being light skinned. That's not to say I don't get and hampered by racism, because I do. In the show I want to make the link between these paintings where they organise people into 'types' based on ethnic mixes and skin colour and make people think that we were different, or lazy, or violent. And I really want to make that link with what's happening now in UK society.

KN: These are such complicated images, and a standard gallery label is what – 120 words? What kind of curatorial decisions are you making about what to include for your visitors?

TM: So the first exhibition is going to have no text at all. There's going to be a really short video explaining the story of what's happened to the paintings while they've been in the museum, because I think that's really important too. They were in the stores for 170 years. They were given to students to learn how to do conservation training, there was no value put on these paintings at all.

KN: What about the second show?

TM: I want to get as much information from this first part as possible, to see where to go from there.

I have an idea to create the second show as an experience. We've got a massive space, and I really want to guide people through, starting off in Mexican streets, and navigating our way through time. There will be text in the main exhibition, and a timeline, there's a lot to explain.

It is hard; a lot of the stories behind these images are really unkind. The ethos of our company is that we promote black excellence. We have to have some fun with it as well. When I first started doing things like black history season, the conversations were heavily inspired by the stories of enslavement, and it just really frustrated me because that's not our only story, that is *a section* of our story, it's not our whole story. I've been in museums and I've heard white teachers saying to black children, 'who's that person in the picture' and they say 'oh that's a slave' and that breaks my heart, because it's all about visual representation, we need to see ourselves as prestigious people and for the quality and the brilliance that we've brought to the world and it shouldn't be hidden or covered up.

KN: That's one of the things with these images isn't it? Although they are embedded in a negative story, it's amazing to see mixed-race families from the past.

TM: They are paintings showing racist images to a certain extent, but I also see beauty in them, I'm fully aware that there is a very negative element to it that means that story needs to be told so it's how we are going to do that is the challenge. We're going to try and make it as interactive as possible so people can show their perspectives on what they've seen.

KN: Midlands Art Papers is really interested collections in the region; do you know how these paintings come to be part of Leicester's collections?

TM: We are still getting into how they got to Leicester. Rebecca Earle who is a Professor at Warwick University, has found out that there were five paintings that were auctioned I think in 1832 that could be these paintings, but we are not aware of where they came from before that. We don't know who the buyer was then, but we do know that when they came into New Walk Museum it was from a gentleman called Joseph Noble. They were donated to the Literature and Philosophical Society and were on display in a temporary museum before the Museum opened in 1849. They were the first artworks to be taken in by the museum service.

KN: So they're crucial to the museum's history as well. Do you know anything about their exhibition history – were they on show when the museum first opened?

TM: As far as we know, they have never been displayed at the museum. There is one other set of these paintings in the UK, in a private collection at Breamore House, where they are still on the walls. But this is the only the only public collection.

KN: It's mind boggling to think of the stories that can get buried in museum collections. That these paintings have been here right from the start of Leicester's museum, but never been shown! It's incredible – you've bought this whole story back together, and are showing the connections between historic art works and racism today – but also showing the long histories of mixed-race families. The story you've uncovered here is so much more than just five lost paintings.

TM: It's a story about the society we live in, and how we value people, and depictions of people.

KN: Before we finish, is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't talked about?

TM: Yes: this project has been completely supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. And that we are still looking for extra funding! If you would like to donate to support the project you can do so on our website: https://www.gofundme.com/f/save-our-casta-paintings

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Image Captions

Fig.1 Mexican School, *De español y negra se produce un mulato* (*From Spanish and Black mulatto is produced*) (c.1700-1800), oil on canvas, 104 x 145 cm ©Leicester Museum and Art Gallery/Opal 22 Arts and Edutainment.

Fig.2 Mexican School, *De negro y india se produce un lobo* (*From Black and Indian a wolf is produced*) (c.1700-1800), oil on canvas, 103 x147 cm ©Leicester Museum and Art Gallery/Opal 22 Arts and Edutainment.

Fig.3 Mexican School, *De indio y lobo se produce un grifio que es tente en el aire* (*From and Indian and a wolf a Grifio is produced that is hanging in the air*) (c.1700-1800), oil on canvas, 104 x 145 cm ©Leicester Museum and Art Gallery/Opal 22 Arts and Edutainment.

Fig.4 Mexican School, *Indios bárbaros* (*Barbarian Indians*) (c.1700-1800), oil on canvas, 104 x 145 cm ©Leicester Museum and Art Gallery/Opal 22 Arts and Edutainment.

Fig.5 Mexican School, *Indios otomíes que ban a la feria* (*Indigenous people of Mexico going to market*) (c.1700-1800), oil on canvas, 103 x 146 cm ©Leicester Museum and Art Gallery/Opal 22 Arts and Edutainment.