

THE LOST AFRICAN SLAVERY AND PORTRAITURE IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

There are very few portraits of 18th-century black people in Britain. Rarer still is the high quality of this celebrated painting in Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum, but who is the sitter – and who is the artist? **John Madin** argues that it is a portrait of the great anti-slavery writer Ignatius Sancho, by Allan Ramsay.

In 2007 we will commemorate a human tragedy on a massive transcontinental scale. Britain's abolition of its slave trade in 1807 brought to an end an enterprise that had inflicted unimaginable suffering upon millions of Africans. By the 18th century, Britain had become the most successful slave-trading nation in Europe. Thousands of slaves were brought into the country as cheap domestic labour, but despite the recent achievements of historians the vast majority of these people will not be remembered as individuals. In the households of the wealthy, black slaves or indentured servants, displaced and renamed, were granted few privileges. They were, however, highly fashionable and appeared in numerous portraits as anonymous exotica. In 18th-century imagery of this type, the inclusion of a black domestic served to reinforce the status of the owner or employer (Fig. 2).

By contrast, the *Portrait of an African*, usually identified as Olaudah Equiano, in the collection of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, is of an entirely different category (Fig. 1). Leaving aside the identity of the sitter, the rarity and quality of this painting are self-evident. Widely reproduced in recent decades, it has acquired something of an iconic status around the world. Our knowledge of the times and circumstances in which this man lived now lend his image an added potency – for some, he symbolises a triumph of enlightenment over inhumanity. Here represented as an individual gentleman, the sitter had attained a status denied to virtually all other Africans in 18th-century Britain. The very few comparable portraits that have come down to us, or are known

through engravings, include those of William Anshah Sessarakoo and Job Ben Solomon, both by William Hoare; Francis Williams, by an unknown artist; and Ignatius Sancho, by Gainsborough.¹

When given to the museum by Percy Moore Turner in 1943, the painting, then identified as 'Black Boy by Joshua Reynolds' generated little attention.² Turner, a London-based art dealer and adviser to Samuel Courtauld, had made his gift presumably because of Reynolds's family and early career connections with Devon.³ All this was to change some 20 years later, when, in 1961, William Fagg, a curator at the British Museum, suggested that the sitter was Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745-97), the Nigerian writer and abolitionist campaigner.⁴ This identification was based on a resemblance to the portrait engraving (Fig. 3) that forms the frontispiece of Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, published in 1789.

This book is a key source for historians of slavery, and Olaudah Equiano is now a central figure in black history. His early story is one of childhood enslavement and plantation life in Virginia, followed by service in the Royal Navy and his eventual purchase of his freedom. In later life, he campaigned against slavery and promoted his book, which became a minor best-seller. By the 1790s, Equiano was the most famous African in Britain, but after the abolition of British and American slavery, he was largely forgotten.

Since the 1960s, Equiano has been propelled back to fame by renewed scholarly and public interest in

1 *Portrait, here identified as Ignatius Sancho and attributed to Allan Ramsay (1713-84), c. 1759. Oil on canvas, 61.8 x 51.5 cm. Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter*

1 *William Anshah Sessarakoo*, mezzotint by Faber Jr. after Gabriel Mathias, c. 1750 (National Portrait Gallery, London, no. D9199). *Job, son of Salliman Dgiallo/William Anshah Sessarakoo*, engraving after William Hoare, 1750 (private collection; see Bridgeman Art Library MGS 188113). *Francis Williams*, oil on canvas, c. 1745 (V&A, London). *Ignatius Sancho*, oil on canvas by Thomas Gainsborough, c. 1768. (National Gallery of Canada).

2 Original title when acquired.

3 Born Plympton, Devon, 1723.

4 Personal communication from William Fagg, subsequently Keeper of Ethnography at the British Museum.

5 Reyhan King, *Ignatius Sancho: An African Man of Letters*, exh. cat., National Portrait Gallery, London 1997, p. 35.

6 See Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, reprinted, Oxford, 1969, pp. 43-62; e.g. Equiano travelled to the West Indies (1762-67).

7 Christopher Fyfe at a verbal address, 1994, as recorded by Reyhan King in R. King (ed.), *Ignatius Sancho an African Man of Letters*, National Portrait Gallery, London, 1997, p. 35. Apart from Cugoana's incorrect age, the painting is clearly not in Cosway's distinctive hand.

8 *William Anshah Sessarakoo*, mezzotint by Faber Jr., as in n. 1 above.





the history and literature of Africa, and his name continues to be linked with the Exeter portrait. Most researchers agree that the painting cannot be the source for the frontispiece engraving (by Daniel Orme after W. Denton), as both composition and dress are quite different. In the frontispiece, Equiano is shown in middle age and dressed in a style contemporary with the first edition of his book. Could the painting depict Equiano as a younger man? Even if we allow for ageing and the difference between a painting and a reproductive engraving, the facial likeness is unconvincing. As others have also pointed out, Equiano's jaw-line is much narrower than that of the jowled individual in the painting.⁵ The clothes of the sitter in the Exeter painting are datable to the late 1750s or early 1760s. Equiano would then have been about 15, and unlikely to have been living in appropriate circumstances, since he did not buy his freedom until 1766. Moreover, as a younger adult he was mostly at sea or out of the country.⁶ Nor does he mention the portrait in his autobiography. As the painting depicts a fashionable young man in his 20s, or perhaps early 30s, it must be concluded that he cannot therefore be Equiano.

Widespread interest in the identity of the sitter has prompted alternative solutions. For example, Christopher Fyfe, amongst others, has suggested that he may be Ottobah Cugoano, another African writer (and a friend of Equiano), who in 1787 published his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Commerce of the Human Species*.⁷ Although Cugoano worked as a servant to the artist Richard Cosway during the 1780s, no portrait of him by Cosway has come to light. Cugoano, however, was, like Equiano, too young for the portrait, as he was not born until

the 1750s, nor enslaved until around 1770. More recently, a private researcher suggested to the museum that William Ansah Sessarakoo might be the sitter. Ansah, an African prince, came to England to be educated, apparently with the agreement of his family. Having sailed out from the Anomabu coast he was tricked into slavery but later came under the protection of the Earl of Halifax, a first Commissioner of Trade and Plantations. During his stay, he and his companion became celebrities, were introduced to George II and were painted by William Hoare and Gabriel Mathias (Fig. 4).⁸ Although Ansah and his companion were older than Equiano or Cugoano, they too can be discounted, as they returned to West Africa in a British warship in 1750.⁹

The painting's early attribution to Joshua Reynolds provided two more potential sitters, either the artist's personal black servant or Samuel Johnson's servant Francis Barber. Another portrait, certainly by Reynolds and possibly of his black servant, is clearly not of the same man and is also too late (c. 1770).¹⁰ However, the Exeter painting's attribution to Reynolds was dismissed by Ellis Waterhouse in 1969. No credible alternative artist has been proposed.¹¹ This is perhaps surprising given the quality of the work, but the explanation may be that the artist is a major figure who until quite recently had been widely ignored by art historians.

As Equiano's writings were fading into obscurity in the early part of the 19th century so too was the reputation of Allan Ramsay. Yet half a century before, he was widely regarded as one of the two greatest living British portrait painters. Part of the reason for this neglect is the fact that even today a



2 *Paul Henry Ourry and a Black Servant* by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), c. 1748. Oil on canvas, 127 x 102 cm. The National Trust, Saltram (Morely Collection). © NTPL/ Rob Matheson

3 *Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa* (detail) by Daniel Orme (1766-c. 1832), after W. Denton, first published 1789. Stipple engraving, 15.6 x 9.5 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London

- 9 J. Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750-54*, edited by B. Martin and M. Spurrell, London, 1962, p. 19.
 10 David Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, London and New Haven, 2000, no. 2003.
 11 Ramm archive: letter from Ellis Waterhouse to Patrick Boylan, 17 February 1969. Waterhouse tentatively suggested Mason Chamberlin, an attribution which is not supported by date or close examination of handling.
 12 Alastair Smart, *The Life and Art of Allan Ramsay*, London, 1952.
 13 *The Walpole Society*, vol. XXII, *Vertue* III, p. 157.
 14 Private collection and Bute House (National Trust for Scotland). Alastair Smart and John Ingamells, *Allan Ramsay: A complete Catalogue of his Paintings*, London and New Haven, 1999, nos. 191 and 69.
 15 W.S. Lewis, Charles H. Bennett and Andrew G. Hoover (eds.), *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence with Sir David Dalrymple*, London and New Haven, 1952, p. 46: Walpole to Dalrymple, 25 February 1759.
 16 Smart and Ingamells, op. cit., no. 159.
 17 *Hew Dalrymple, Lord Drummore*, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. *Marescoe Frederick*, Sotheby's, London, 23 November 2004, lot 14. Smart and Ingamells, op. cit., nos. 159 and 183.
 18 A. Smart, *Allan Ramsay: Painter, Essayist and Man of the Enlightenment*, London and New Haven, 1992, p. 138.
 19 James Walvin, *Britain's Slave Empire*, Stroud, 2000, chapter 11.
 20 Smart, op. cit. in n. 18 above, p. 281.
 21 J. Nichols, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African. In Two Volumes. To Which Are Prefixed, Memoirs of His Life*, London, 1782 (first ed.). Introduction (*Memoirs*) by Joseph Jekyll MP.
 22 Northampton County Record Office (NCR0); The Duke of



substantial proportion of his output is in private collections. In 1952 Ramsay's principal biographer, Alastair Smart, bemoaned his lack of representation in public collections: the Tate Gallery then possessed only one minor work.¹² Understandably, many of his portraits have escaped attribution or have been confused with those of Reynolds and others.

Ramsay's mature portraits combine his unique penetration of character with extreme delicacy of form and colour. By 1751 George Vertue had proclaimed them 'much superior in merit' to those of other painters,¹³ but the most successful phase of his career followed his return from Italy in 1757. Despite formidable competition from Reynolds, he secured commissions for full-lengths of the Prince of Wales and the 3rd Earl of Bute and in 1761 was appointed Painter in Ordinary to George III.¹⁴ During this period Ramsay also produced a series of female portraits, which in 1759 drew special praise from Horace Walpole.¹⁵ *Lady Janet Erskine* (Fig. 5), painted in that year, is exactly the type of portrait that Walpole had in mind.¹⁶ It demonstrates the principal elements of Ramsay's 'second style', which he perfected whilst in Italy: refined observation, a heightened sense of naturalism, exquisite colour and extreme delicacy of touch. Ramsay's by then utterly distinctive handling may have been, as Smart has suggested, influenced by La Tour's crayon technique – in particular, his

4 William Ansbah Sessarakoo (detail) by John Faber Jr. (1684-1756) after Gabriel Mathias (1719-1804), c. 1750. Mezzotint, 32.6 x 22.5 cm. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Montagu's Private Account Books 1753-1776, also contain several references to Sancho's employment.
 23 *Ibid.*, 10 June 1760; 2 November 1760; 23 Jan 1761; 20 November 1762.
 24 The inscription was lost by relining in the late 19th century. See King, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
 25 NCRG; Duke of Montagu, Private Account Books 1753-1776, 26 April-28 May and 6 December 1768.
 26 William Stevenson of Norwich, sold on his son Henry's death in 1889 and after several London sales acquired by the National Gallery of Canada.
 27 Attribution to Reynolds and lack of a consistent title are major obstacles to tracing the work's provenance.
 28 To Anne Osborne on 17 December 1758 at St. Margaret's Church, Westminster.
 29 His annuity and, for example, payment for the christening of his eldest daughter (NCRG; *Duke of Montagu Private Account Books 1753-1776*, 23 January 1761).

application of finely divided brushstrokes to suggest modulations of form. This technique has been employed to render the forehead areas of the Exeter portrait and *Lady Janet Erskine*. Although Ramsay is known to have employed drapery painters, those areas reproduced here from these paintings (Figs. 7 and 8) appear to be his own work, since the same hand can be traced in his portraits of Marescoe Frederick (1742) and Hew Dalrymple, Lord Drummore (1754).¹⁷

Allowing for an adaptation of technique for a sitter with dark skin, I would argue that all the visual evidence indicates that the Exeter portrait is, like *Lady Janet Erskine*, a painting by Ramsay of the late 1750s. A date of c. 1758-59 is also supported by the evidence of the sitter's dress and hair style. For example, the 3rd Earl of Bute, as painted by Ramsay in 1758, wears a matching pattern of wig (Fig. 6). If the painting is by Ramsay, its style allows us to date it more precisely. His so-called 'second style' is readily distinguishable from his first and since he is known not to have returned to London from Italy before August 1757, the Exeter portrait cannot have been painted before the autumn of that year.¹⁸

In the late 1750s Ramsay was at the peak of success and at the height of his creative powers. He was sought after by the highest in the land, wealthy, and able to choose his sitters. Why then would he have agreed to portray an African at this time? Surely, on the social scale of the late 1750s, Africans stood at the opposite end to Ramsay's select clientele? Yet James Walvin and others have in recent years provided a less polarised picture of African communities in 18th-century Britain.¹⁹ In the late 1790s only about 0.55% of the population of London was black, and most were male and poor. Some Africans had nevertheless improved their circumstances through personal enterprise. Equiano was the most famous of these, but there were doubtless others who obtained freedom and were able to carve out a tolerable living. High-status society portraiture, however, remained beyond the reach of all but the truly wealthy. In 1759, Ramsay was charging in the region of 15 guineas for a bust-length portrait – roughly a full year's pay for a senior male servant.²⁰ Those very few mid-18th-century Africans who were portrayed in this manner, and consequently are not lost to history, such as William Ansbah and Job Ben Solomon, enjoyed the protection of high society and a degree of celebrity. But even they were not painted by an artist of Ramsay's stature.

The sitter in the Exeter portrait must therefore have been a person of some status and repute – his self-assurance alone tells us as much. None of the candidates so far suggested is credible, given the date of the portrait and the likely artist responsible. Yet were it not for the painting's long-standing association



with Equiano the true identity of the sitter might well have been established some time ago. In retrospect the solution appears perhaps too obvious, as the most likely candidate, Ignatius Sancho (1729-80), is today almost as famous as Equiano. By the late 1750s he was probably better connected than any other African in the country and, crucially, of the correct age for the portrait. His circle is known to have included the literary and artistic élite of London and he was employed and supported by one of the wealthiest aristocratic families in England.

Sancho's early life is documented only by Joseph Jekyll's sketchy introduction to his published letters.²¹ As a young man he transformed his prospects through personal charisma and good fortune. Born on a slave ship, he was in one sense fortunate from the beginning, as he would not have remembered the horrors of the Atlantic crossing nor the deaths of his parents. As a child he was brought to England and served three unmarried sisters at Greenwich. There by chance he attracted the interest of John, 2nd Duke of Montagu, who encouraged him in reading and writing, and he was later employed as a butler by the widowed Duchess. Clearly Sancho made the most of his opportunities, since the Duchess in 1751 bequeathed him a lump sum of £70 and an annuity of £30. During the early 1750s, he squandered his fortune on gambling and women but probably also established some of his friendships with writers, artists and actors.

Jekyll's biography records that Sancho was back in the service of the Montagu family by the time of his marriage, in 1758.²² His employer was now George Brudenell, 4th Earl of Cardigan and later Duke of Montagu of the second creation. According to Jekyll, Brudenell 'soon placed him about his person', and

entries in the duke's accounts suggest that Sancho was a valet.²³ In this capacity, Sancho, intelligent, witty and cultured, would have acted in the manner of a gentleman and was probably regarded as an exotic curiosity. His master was an avid art collector, who at this time was purchasing works by Leonardo, El Greco, Rubens and Rembrandt; he was also a significant patron of contemporary artists. Having become an early member of the Society of Arts in 1755, he had his portrait painted by Reynolds (1756), Gainsborough (1768) and Beechey (1789). As a highly placed royal courtier and Knight of the Garter, he was appointed a guardian to the Prince of Wales, and Captain of Windsor Castle. Like the previous duke, Brudenell evidently held liberal views regarding the treatment of Africans. His social connections must also have been of great value to Sancho, who remained forever grateful to the Montagu family.

Some 10 years after the portrait under discussion here, in 1768, Sancho sat to Gainsborough. This outstanding painting (Fig. 9) has received much attention, having been at the centre of an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in 1997. Its very existence has not encouraged the search for another portrait of Sancho. Moreover, as depicted in the Exeter portrait, Sancho is not instantly recognisable when compared to Gainsborough's image. Apart from the obvious variations of handling and colour, the sitter is portrayed from different viewpoints, each with distinctive directional lighting. A further barrier to recognition is Sancho's change in appearance over 10 years. We can deduce from several of his letters and from Gainsborough's image that his health deteriorated as he approached middle age. Gout, asthma and corpulence took hold to the extent that he was forced to retire from service by 1773.

There is nevertheless sufficient visible evidence to confirm Sancho's identity, although the facial match is more obvious when the faces are seen in monochrome (Figs. 10 and 11). All the primary features are consistent with the sitter in the Exeter portrait having been the same as Gainsborough's, but younger. The mouths for example are not only identical in shape and expression but also highly distinctive. On another level of detail, Sancho, as depicted by Gainsborough, is noticeably marked along his bottom lip and similar marks are detectable in the Exeter portrait. A further distinctive feature of both faces is the jowls extending above the corners of the mouth and alongside the nostrils.

Gainsborough's painting is believed to have been once inscribed on its reverse: 'This sketch by Mr. Gainsborough, of Bath, was done in one hour and forty minutes, November 29th, 1768.'²⁴ This is all that is known of its early history. Researchers have assumed that the inscription was accurate, as the



Left
5 *Lady Janet Erskine* (detail) by Allan Ramsay (1713-84), 1759. Oil on canvas, 79.2 x 63.5 cm. Private collection

6 *John, 3rd Earl of Bute* (detail) by Allan Ramsay (1713-84). Oil on canvas, 236.2 x 147.3 cm. The National Trust for Scotland

7, 8 Details of Figure 1 and Figure 5

30 Paul Edwards first re-issued the fifth edition of the *Letters* in 1968 (London, 1968).

31 Sancho's *Letters*, 1782 edition, vol. II, letter XXXVII, 7 September 1779.



Duchess of Montagu also sat to Gainsborough at that time. The Duke had commissioned a portrait of himself by Gainsborough earlier that year and payments to the artist for the two portraits are recorded in his personal accounts.²⁵ No payment for a portrait of Sancho is recorded, but the relevant accounts for the Duchess have not come to light and it is possible that she may have made a gift of the portrait to Sancho – a strong possibility, as she had also been responsible for the payment of Sancho's annuity since the death of her mother, the 2nd Duchess, in 1751.

Gainsborough's portrait was later given by Sancho's daughter, Elizabeth, to William Stevenson,²⁶ whereas no provenance is recorded for the Exeter painting.²⁷ The exact circumstances of both commissions may never be known but there is a possible explanation for the earlier portrait. English 18th-century society portraits were often commissioned to commemorate major personal events, such as coming of age, inheritance or marriage. In Sancho's case, his marriage in December 1758 may well have been the catalyst, and, as we have seen, this portrait can be dated with some precision to 1758-59.²⁸ Such an explanation would be appropriate, given the Montagus' support of Sancho throughout his adult life.²⁹

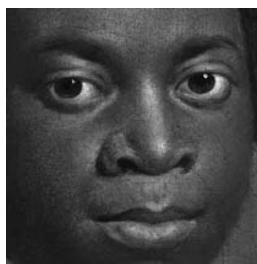
In 1758 Sancho's greater celebrity as an 'extraordinary negro' lay ahead and he could not have foreseen the political and social changes of the 1780s and 90s. For modern historians, his famous letter to Laurence Sterne of 1766 is a milestone on the road to abolition, but for Sancho himself it was more of a desperate plea on behalf of his race: 'Of all my favourite authors, not one has drawn a tear in favour of my miserable black brethren – excepting yourself, and the humane author of *Sir George Ellison*.' When published posthumously in 1782, his letters provided abolitionists with proof that Africans were capable of the highest refinement and sensibility. Thereafter, like Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, they were largely forgotten until the new interest in black history in the 1960s.³⁰

The rediscovery of Sancho has no doubt been assisted by the public exposure of Gainsborough's painting. In the guise of 'Equiano' he has attracted even greater publicity. The Exeter portrait's perceptive, engrossing image of the confident and accomplished young man can now be viewed alongside Gainsborough's animated portrayal of the 'African man of letters'. Whilst both can be counted amongst the more remarkable survivals of 18th-century portraiture, they also symbolise one of the darkest episodes in British history. Sancho's story encompasses the best and the worst in human nature. He lived in the so-called 'Age of Enlightenment', of outstanding achievement in art and science, yet one



9 *Ignatius Sancho* by Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88), 1768. Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 62.2 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

10, 11 Details of Figure 9 (reversed) and Figure 1



which perfected a commercial system of inhumanity. Through strength of character and good fortune, he avoided the fate of countless enslaved Africans. However, although this remarkable man was able to escape slavery he could not altogether avoid racism. Despite his privileged situation, patriotism and self-effacing humour, he remained a displaced 'Negroe' within a predominantly white community. From time to time in his letters the all-too resonant feelings of alienation rise to the surface: 'For my part, it's nothing to me – as I am only a lodger and hardly that'.³¹ One compensation was to have been portrayed, as I have argued, by two of the greatest painters of the 18th century, Allan Ramsay and Thomas Gainsborough.

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The portrait will be shown in the exhibition 'Eye to Eye: Discovering People in Portraits' at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, 16 September 2006-6 January 2007, +44 (0) 1392 665858, www.exeter.gov.uk/ramm