Framing the past, imagining the future:

Adjusting Material Legacies

> "Demands for change are ringing in our ears and will not be silenced."
> -   Dr Alberta Whittle, 2022

Context

 This two-part forum offers a research-driven curatorial response to a report that was commissioned to address the legacies of transatlantic slavery at Aberdeen (2024). This conversation arrives at a topical moment when other Scottish universities are reflecting on their collections, displays and estates. Recollecting Empire (University of St Andrews, 2022) and 40 George Square (University of Edinburgh, 2020) have been two such responses, driven by student leadership. In Old Aberdeen, institution-led responses to date include the Legacies of Slavery exhibition (2023) and interventions at the Powis Gateway (2022).

Gilbert Ramsay (1658-1728) was an Aberdonian slaver in the Caribbean and alumnus who offered foundational bursaries to the University in support of the disciplines now encompassed by the School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History. His portrait is curated by University Collections and currently hangs above the mantlepiece (traditionally a position of esteem for this genre) in one of the School's primary meeting and teaching spaces (CB009, 50-52 College Bounds), accompanied by a short, frank interpretation panel.

Mindful of the importance that we "distinguish between studying an individual and venerating [them]" (Waldmann, 2020, on David Hume), this two-part forum refers to the Ramsay portrait as a potent conversation starter within our School in collaboration with University Collections. It is intended as an opportunity to open a discussion around a collaborative, reflective response to what should be done with such material legacies by way of curatorial response, which encompasses provenance and interpretative decision-making as well as commissioning. Through exploring the issues raised by this portrait, and in seeking to hear diverse voices, the School of DHPA and University Collections acknowledge their shared historical foundations whilst looking towards more equitable presents and futures that reflect our values. We welcome this opportunity and invite guest perspectives and descendant experience.

Part One: Research Forum 1.30pm-5pm, Thursday 3 July (CB009)

Welcome to DHPA (10 mins): Professor Beth Lord (Head of School, DHPA)
and Professor Siladitya Bhattacharya (VP Global Engagement)

Opening Remarks (10 mins): Neil Curtis (Head of University Collections)

Things Left Unsaid (20 mins): Vanessa Mabonso Nzolo (PhD Candidate & Former Student President)

Objectionable Artefacts and Moral Duties (20 mins): Dr Eilidh Beaton (Philosophy)

Short Tea Break 2.30pm-3pm

A Portrait of Gilbert Ramsay (20 mins): Dr Emma Percy (Divinity)

Artist's Talk (20 mins): Ade Adesina RSA

Possible Futures (1 hour): Discussion chaired by Professor Beth Lord

Part Two: Keynote and Public In-Conversation 5.30pm (NK1)

Zandra Yeaman (Hunterian, University of Glasgow) in-conversation with Professor Emma Bond (University of Oxford). 50 mins + 20 mins for audience questions

Reception 7pm

Miscellaneous

An electronic feedback loop via the digital noticeboard Figma will be shared and carefully monitored for participants to express views and questions throughout the entire discussion event and afterwards.

References

Anderson, Richard. 'Legacies of Slavery Report,' University of Aberdeen, 2024.

Curtis, Neil. 'Repatriation: Motivation Matters,' *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 36 (2023): 1-14.

Greenwood, M. and Z. Yeaman, 'Curating the legacies of Empire with a large dose of discomfort,' *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 35 (2022): 1-5.

Waldmann, Felix. 'David Hume was a brilliant philosopher but also a racist involved in slavery' in *The Scotsman* (17 July 2020): Accessed 18 December 2024

Whittle, Alberta. 'Fostering Recognition under the Luxury of Amnesia' in *Scotland's Transnational Heritage: Legacies of Empire and Slavery*, edited by Emma Bond and Michael Morris, xv-xvi. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022.