



**Hew Locke (b.1959)**

***Restoration (series of four) –***

***Edward Colston, 2006***

Date: 2006

Size: 121 x 181 x 15cm

Materials: C-type photograph on aluminium (2D) with attached mixed media

Patron: Spike Island Arts Centre, Bristol

Location: St Thomas the Martyr Church, Bristol

Nationality: British-Guyanese

Scope of work for Pearson Edexcel A Level: Identities in art and architecture

Digital image courtesy of Hew Locke. Photo: Indra Khanna

## **ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

Subject matter: Locke's work examines the display of public artworks commemorating and honouring influential historical figures, specifically in relation to British identity within a global context. It seeks to understand when and why these works were created and what they reveal about British culture. This is a photograph of the full-length three-dimensional commemorative portrait statue of Edward Colston (1636-1721) which was cast in bronze by Irish sculptor John Cassidy (1860-1939) in 1895, at the pinnacle of imperialism under Queen Victoria. The 2.64m Grade II listed sculpture on its 3.2m Portland stone plinth is located in The Centre – a public space in the city of Bristol which had been a major port and colonial trading hub since the fifteenth century. Edward Colston was born in Bristol. He became a prosperous merchant, shareholder and finally deputy governor of the Royal African Company, the '*most prolific slave-trading entity in British history*' (Olusoga), which transported 84,000 Africans across the Atlantic by sea in the 'middle passage'; 19,000 of their number died on route. Yet for centuries Colston was remembered in Bristol as a philanthropist and this statue was a form of propaganda to encourage others to emulate him. In the 1690s he founded and supported schools, alms houses, hospitals and the city's churches and cathedral and in 1790 he became Tory MP for Bristol. Several streets and a major concert hall were named after him. By covering the image of the sculpture in trinkets, Locke removes all specificity such as the unusual closed, contemplative pose – possibly influenced by Rodin – and downward

glance so that Colston becomes more obviously a symbol of the British Empire. Such homages to Empire are often ignored by the general population, but not by Black Bristolians whose ancestors were directly impacted by the horrors of slavery. As a British-Guyanese artist Locke found a way to make the true history visible again. His photograph points out how nationalist sculptures were designed to commemorate individuals as propaganda for the colonial project. Locke said *“those sculptures were serving a lie: they were bolstering up the ego of the Empire”* (Smarthistory), whereas *“I am not cowed down by history ... A lot of my work has to do with the burden of history and ... how history affects us today”* (Spike Island).

Formal qualities: The photograph, which is meant to be viewed from one perspective to be understood, is therefore a 2D image. It is formally composed to focus on the silhouette of Colston, with the central vertical axis on the inside of Colston’s right leg and further verticals of the buildings framing the lower half. The branches of the tree form both a segmental arch and, above that, a strong diagonal, such that he is at the centre of an equilateral triangle usually associated with images of deities. A series of horizontals lie below the central one that bisects his ankles to ground the image. Rather than take our eyes to the background, the roads on either side come towards the viewer to converge on the statue located within the spacious square. The subtle grey English light and monotone sky offer a plain background and initially make the photograph appear black and white despite the blue features on the buildings to the right. This muted light minimises the details of the plinth, commemorative plaque, narrative bronze reliefs and the dolphins.

All attention in terms of composition, space, colour and light is on the statue’s added decorations. The three-dimensional garlands weigh down the figure in relation to the delicate spidery branches behind. Within an interior exhibition space the light catches the surface of the cheap golden coloured items shrouding the head and shoulders and draw one’s eye to examine the details. Hence Colston the individual becomes background to the decorative elements associated with Empire, Africa and slavery. Hinduism is one of the dominant religions in Guyana where Locke spent his formative years, and initially the garlands are somewhat reminiscent of those used to decorate Hindu deities, such as flowers for Vishnu or skulls for Shiva. Locke has also spoken of his love of the hyper-decorative qualities of European Baroque and Rococo art. He understands art sometimes needs to be aesthetically pleasing in order to make serious points about history. His *“over ostentation is a strategy of irony”* (Smarthistory), an effective way of commenting on the existing iconography and immorality of colonial capitalism, allowing us to consider broad historical issues of slavery, global trade, migration and the diaspora from a post-colonial perspective.

## CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Locke was born in Edinburgh, UK in 1959 to Guyanese sculptor Donald Locke and British painter Leila Locke (nee Chaplin). He lived there until he was seven, when his family sailed to Georgetown, capital of the newly independent Guyana (previously British Guiana) on the north-east coast of South America. It is the only English-speaking country on the continent. He experienced the thrill of independence from Britain and having a Black president first hand. Apart from Indigenous peoples in the forested interior, Guyana's colonised



*Map of South America showing the location of Guyana.  
Digital image courtesy of BBC*

population was made up of descendants of enslaved Africans (emancipated in 1838) and indentured labourers from South Asia transported to work the sugar plantations. Dominant religions are still Christianity and Hinduism. In 1980 Locke returned to the UK, he received a BA in Fine Art at Falmouth in 1988, and an MA in Sculpture from the Royal College of Art in 1994. He is currently based in Brixton, south London. His work directly engages with his personal experiences of racism at school in Scotland, a new sense of identity in Guyana, and later in the UK as a Black British artist.

Spike Island art space in Bristol commissioned Locke to make a series of works for their 'British Art Show 6' in 2006. The four photographs (Colston, Burke, Edward VII and Morley) were exhibited in the church of St Thomas the Martyr in the heart of a district where sailors engaged in the slave trade had lived. Their testimonies contributed to Wilberforce's campaign, and the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1833.

In 1555, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the first enslaved Africans were brought to Bristol. By 1698 the British government had legalised the slave trade and by 1730 Britain was the largest slave-trading nation. Yet in 1996 Bristol celebrated its 'key explorers' without mentioning the slave trade or its impact on the social and cultural life of contemporary Bristol. Finally in 1999 it held an exhibition 'Bristol and the Slave Trade', and in 2002 opened a British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (closed in 2008), slowly realising that being Black in Bristol/UK involves a lot of 'baggage'.



*F*Statue of slave trader Edward Colston, erected in 1895, formerly in Bristol city centre, toppled in 2020. Digital image courtesy of Tim Green

Locke's work in 2006 explicitly addresses this by focusing on the significance of the Colston statue for contemporary Bristol. He has covered the sculpture but one cannot cover up or eradicate history. The surface glitter might be appealing but there is darkness beneath. In apparently obscuring the sculpture his photograph has illuminated its meaning. In the same year the Racial and Religious Hatred Act made it illegal to stir up hatred against someone because of their race or religion.

*"Hew Locke's embellishment, directly on to the photographic print, interrupts our expectation that the surface should be left pristine. We can only guess at what lies beneath the layers of gilt and glitter, of cheap toys and plastic ornament that now encrust the area of the image where the statues are. The inscription engraved into the stones upon which the statues stand indicate the identity of the individual commemorated, yet their new attire seems to shift their identity into a more exotic culture"* (Spike Island).

## DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Hew Locke is best known for his sculptures using a wide range of everyday materials; his use of photography in this series is unusual. Unable to intervene and dress the original Victorian bronze statue on public display in multiple layers of what first appears as celebratory regalia, he chose to take a colour photograph of it and add an assemblage of cheap objects bought from pound shops. The digital C-type photographic print exposed using digital not analogue techniques is an artwork that presents an existing work of art. The C-type is mounted on expensive aluminium, into which holes have been drilled to hang a multitude of cheap golden items, initially looking like jewellery. In fact these specifically relate to Colston's wealth accumulated through the slave trade – *"the slaver's ill-gotten gains"* (Price) and the cheap baubles colonisers exchanged for valuable commodities not available in Europe. Careful inspection reveals them to be not just gold-coloured medallions, coins and jewellery but also small-scale replicas of skeletons, skulls and slave ships. There are also cowrie shells, traditionally used throughout Africa as currency, and taken up by European traders too. The surface of the flat two-dimensional photograph is therefore physically *"vandalised ... it is about attacking the preciousness of the photograph as well as the preciousness of the object that I'm actually proposing to cover"*. The original statue of Colston by John Cassidy was cast in expensive bronze with a Portland limestone plinth.

*“So it’s got to a stage now where the work has become about several things: it’s become about the statue, it’s become about covering the statue, but it’s also become about the photograph of the statue, covering that, and about the relationship between a flat two-dimensional photograph and a relief fixed onto that photograph. It’s about pushing the boundaries between sculpture and photography and trying to see how the two can mix together, how they fit together and do not fit together. It’s a bit like magnets which repel each other: asking what do you have to do to get this balance where they don’t repel each other but they work in harmony?”* (Edited extract of Hew Locke in conversation with Dr Jon Wood of the Henry Moore Institute, from *Drawing on Sculpture – Graphic Interventions on the Photographic Surface*, Sculpture Journal volume 15.2, 2006)



*Digital image  
courtesy of Hew  
Locke. Photo: Indra  
Khanna*

## **WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES**

The 2006 Spike Island exhibition fed into ongoing debates in Bristol about connections between the past and the present, and about memorials and the legacy of Empire. Locke noted he was *“vaccinating myself against this stuff so I am not cowed down by history”* hence his *“over ostentation is a strategy of irony”* (Smarthistory), an effective way of commenting on the existing iconography. In 2018, the Bristol city council agreed a new plaque was required and in 2019 new wording included a reference to slavery.

On Sunday 7th June 2020 Black Lives Matter protesters took direct action and toppled the Colston statue – a watershed moment which marked a shift in attitudes towards the problematic representation of colonial history. They located and identified Colston as a racist figure, at the root of racist policies and culture. Hew Locke’s work gained a new audience as it had already connected the past with the present, and had contributed to changing values and public perception.

As Ekow Eshun asked in *Toppled Monuments and Hidden Histories* (2022): *“Who is this person? Does he belong in our world right now? Or should we be asking questions about his status and his raising up? ... There is no time limit on asking questions about the moral culpability of those figures ... on our memory and our relationship to the abuse and the killings of tens of thousands of people.”* When historian David Olusoga gave evidence in defence of the so-called Colston Four on trial, he summed up: *“the real offenders were the city of Bristol and those who had done everything in their power to burnish the reputation of a mass murderer. The keepers of Colston’s legacy had rendered his historic crimes live and present through the erection of a statue to him. By allowing that edifice to stand for 125 years, even as Bristol became home to thousands of black people whose ancestors had been*

victims of the trade that the Royal African Company had pioneered, they had ... permitted the statue to become an 'indecent display'." Locke's Restoration: Colston was a catalyst to bring about a re-writing of British history.

## FURTHER READING AND LINKS

- Eshun, Ekow *The Black Atlantic Episode 3* <https://smarthistory.org/the-black-atlantic-toppled-monuments-and-hidden-histories/>
- Price, Dorothy with Sarah Lea catalogue for *Entangled Pasts, 1768-Now Art Colonialism and Change* Royal Academy of Arts 2024
- <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/pushed-off-the-pedestal-who-was-the-slave-trader-edward-colston>
- 'Race and our Public Space' 8 July 2020, BBC Radio 4  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000kvmd>
- <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/colston-bristol-statue-slavery/>
- <https://archiveofdestruction.com/artwork/restoration/>
- <https://www.spikeisland.org.uk/programme/exhibitions/hew-locke-restoration/>
- <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2017/11/01/the-newly-empty-plinths-are-all-potential-fourth-plinths>
- <http://johncassidy.org.uk/cassidy2b.html> - for details of original sculpture