

“The Curator” by Laura

The first time I encountered this drawing was by pure chance whilst I was doing an audit in one of the gallery's stores. I was struck by its impressive presence, her look... but mainly I remember feeling really uncomfortable when I read the title on the label at the back: 'A Negress'. Lots of questions came to mind and I wondered whether I'd ever be happy to display this work under that offensive title, what implications it could have, who gave it that title, how people would feel about it in the 21st century, how the drawing came to be in our collection.

This project gave me the opportunity to explore some of those issues and try and answer some of those questions with a view to identify and deal with any previous racist curatorial practices.

My research evidenced that the drawing came to the collection as part of a much larger gift donated by the Phil May Memorial Committee in 1913. Truth is that the treatment this drawing received from a curatorial point of view didn't differ much from the rest of the donation, especially other similar lightening sketches in terms of research, collection management and care or exhibition history (they were often displayed in bulk and none had been particularly well studied). However, unlike other pieces whose titles have not changed, there has been several versions to the title of our portrait and interestingly it is the most racist one that has prevailed.

As I mention in another audio, I believe that this lightening sketch was made by Phil May as a part of a fundraising event in Leeds in 1901. The event was supported and attended by the Lord Mayor of Leeds, Frederick W. Lawson. We don't know whether Lawson bought the drawings at the end of the event (plausible given that it was a charity concert and that we have found other examples of lightening sketches bought by members of the audience directly from the artist straight after being drawn) or that the artist himself in his usual generosity gave them to the Mayor. But we do know that the Mayor offered them to the Committee as a gift for the gallery.

The Phil May Memorial Committee was established in October 1909 with a view to ensure that the artist's legacy was commemorated in his home city and that a representative sample of his work became part of the permanent collection of Leeds Art Gallery. Prior to its official creation and right after the artist's death, efforts had started to organise an exhibition of his work in the gallery, and private collectors owning works by Phil May were sought after through newspaper announcements, which quite possibly was the foundation for the large donation that would finally take place in 1913 after being exhibited in the gallery.

What I infer from this history is that it's highly unlikely Phil May would have given the portrait a title at all. And actually, from what one can see (as sadly its back is completely glued to a backboard), the work is not inscribed. Of course, he may have referred to the woman as a negress in his performance and he did use similar offensive terms when entitling other drawings, albeit quite rarely. But in this case, it

seems that the title was either given by the Committee itself or the gallery curators, although documentation regarding the specific presentation which could have shed more light into this has not been found.

What is interesting to note too is that although some of the members of the committee were fellow artists and historians, there was representation of some of the most influential and wealthiest figures in Leeds at the time. Fortunes that in some cases had colonial links. This is for instance the case of Sydney Kitson, whose father's business supplied engines to countries in the British empire.

In terms of the title's history... In the original 1913 exhibition, the portrait was mentioned as: 'A Negress' only. When the work was finally and officially documented in the collection's registers in 1927, it was written down as: "Sketch in colour: A Negress". This title was kept by 1936 when another big exhibition of May's work took place, but changed to its original shorter form in 1964. But in 1975, the work is referred to in a catalogue as "Woman in large hat and striped dress (A Negress)". However, all the first bits were eventually dropped and the work ended up just being known as "A Negress" which is what appears currently in our collections database.

In any case, the reality is that, for most people, it was a completely acceptable term at the time and for many decades later.

I think it's about time we address this racist title once and for all, but choosing a new one is of course no small feat and this is something the project participants have discussed at length and considered from many different and valid perspectives (including even leaving it "untitled" as the artist probably intended). However, the main question for me is: how can we come up with a title that gives enough information about the work without being banal or meaningless, without losing the weight of its painful history and context?

We're currently reviewing its title and we are truly interested in hearing your opinion too, so if you have any ideas or suggestions, please submit them below.