

“The Sitter” by Laura

Alienated? Resigned? Upset? Angry? Denigrated? All of them perhaps at once? Every time I look at the sitter’s facial expression, I can’t help but feeling a bit puzzled by it. What is she trying to tell us? Or rather what is the artist trying to tell us about her? Many interpretations are possible, and one could argue that the sketchy character and fast execution may contribute to its ambiguity. But I know from research that the artist Phil May had the ability to convey complex emotions in a few lines and in a matter of seconds and I’m pretty convinced that he had rehearsed every stroke of the sketch repeatedly until he got the results he wanted as he usually did with other types of work. So, for me, every inclusion and every omission in this portrait is deliberate.

I’ve spent many hours trying to shed light on the sitter’s identity. But sadly, none of my lines of enquiry have been conclusive. I thought perhaps the different elements of the costume could offer some clues but following extensive consultation with costume curators at both LMG and V&A and several Music Hall and seaside entertainment experts, it seems unlikely she was a clown because of the hat, nor a cakewalk or minstrelsy performer because of the ruff. Perhaps a theatrical performer? The research I’ve done on the line-up of artists who performed the same day the drawing was made in Mr Hugo Gorlitz’s ‘Popular London Ballad Concert Party’ as it was called suggests they were all white and the idea that she may have been a member of the public Phil May could have selected on the day also seems unlikely given that, black people were generally unwelcome in these types of events which were very much designed for white audiences.

Could she have simply been someone the artist saw in the street passing either in the UK, America, Australia or the Netherlands and whose features have been exaggerated for satirical purposes? We know, for instance, that wide brimmed hats didn’t become fashionable in Britain until a few years later during the Edwardian period. This leads me to another question: Is she even real? Or the product of Phil May’s imagination designed to fulfil a narrative?

I stayed with this idea for a while but decided that regardless, it’ll be interesting to consider who she could have been and more importantly what could have been her experience as a black woman in late 19th- early 20th century. Also, I’m particularly interested in exploring what this portrait means in its socio-historical context from a racial point of view. It’s not trivial that she is black and it was done in a very particular point in time and context and in front of a very particular audience, which allows us to raise issues of racism and prejudice and political imperialist agendas.

Firstly, to me, even if the concert in which this work was produced was a charity event it was very much in the context of music hall and minstrelsy shows at the time. As a case in point, the programme of the *Popular London Ballad Concert*

Party started with some opera-type music but included a song called *My Juliet: A Shakespearean Coon Song* which was very much in the tradition of minstrel songs.

Blackface minstrelsy first came to Britain in the 1830s and remained part of British stage culture up to the 1980s. This is the culture that made not just acceptable for most people but very common and part of everyday life to listen to overtly racist songs and view offensive cartoons and performances of black people, but also even setting up human zoos in Great Exhibitions - all of which stereotyped, ridiculed, denigrated and offered offensive grotesque caricatures of black people during the Victorian period and beyond.

Africa was also linked to spectacle on various levels and attracted much attention in the media and as a theme in various forms of entertainment because of its perceived exoticism. But this interest should also be read in the context of scientific racism which believed in the hierarchies of races which alongside the stereotypes fuelled by the media and the mentioned popular forms of entertainment presented black people as stupid, lazy, childish, savage, greedy, superstitious, happy-go-lucky and especially inferior. It was all part of a powerful imperialist propaganda which legitimised the exploitation and colonisation of the continent and its people as it happened in 1884 at the Berlin Conference, also known as The Scramble of Africa in which European powers distributed the control over the vast majority of the continent.

Paradoxically, despite black people being quite present in everyday culture, many British people at the time would have not met a black individual in person. Unlike during the trade in enslaved people of the 17th and 18th centuries when the numbers of black people were quite large, the black population in Victorian & Edwardian Britain was relatively small and mainly concentrated in London and a handful of port towns. Black communities were largely made up of people from the West Indies, North America or Sierra Leone. Most were ordinary people (like seamen or servants) that lived very hard lives, although some managed to overcome prevalent socio-cultural barriers and succeeded within certain British institutions like the Church, university, or the army, or in the performing arts sector, to mention just a few.

What many members of these communities also had in common is that inevitably, they had to endure and challenge Empire to thrive and their contributions to the political tradition known as Pan-Africanism which would later inspire freedom movements all over Africa & the Caribbean were huge. Interestingly, the first Pan-African conference was held in London in 1900, just a year before this drawing was made.

But what was life like for a black woman in Britain at the beginning of the century? Sadly, it's very difficult to answer this question as there are very few studies with a focus on black women in late Victorian England. But we can be certain of one thing, it must have been tough.

It is true that black history in Britain is shaped by migration and the vast majority of those who migrated at that time were men, but of course black women had to fight a double battle not to be forgotten and to make their way in the world, that of race and that of gender. However, research shows that a significant number of black women arrived in Britain during that period and several of them were active in society.

As for our sitter, it's highly likely she had no agency at all in this portrait.

Whether she was a real person or not, for me she epitomises what many other black women who did exist experienced for centuries, the pain of witnessing and enduring racial injustice and prejudice. Right in front of them, sometimes even whilst white people were having a good time and feeling good about themselves in charity events.

Laughs and sorrow. Two sides of the same story.

Hopefully never again.