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The Visual Culture of Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario, Memory, and Forgetting in the Circum-Atlantic World

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Available online at www.yale.edu/glc/publichistory/forrester.pdf

To commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade, the Yale Center for British Art is organizing an exhibition entitled *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and his Worlds*, to be shown at the Center from September 27 to December 30, 2007; the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol, England, from February to June, 2008; and (to be confirmed) at the National Gallery of Jamaica, Kingston. The curators of the exhibition and editors of the accompanying publication are Gillian Forrester (Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings, Yale Center for British Art), Tim Barringer (Paul Mellon Professor of Art History, Yale University), and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz (Assistant Professor, Department of Art and Art History, Stanford University). This will be the first exhibition ever to focus exclusively on the visual and material culture of slavery and emancipation in Jamaica, and will include works produced in both the Caribbean and Britain, a number drawn from collections in Jamaica which have been either rarely or never exhibited.

Featuring a diverse range of objects, from both high art and popular culture, including maps, printed books, broadsides, manuscripts, prints, drawings, paintings, costumes, textiles, and musical instruments, the exhibition will chronicle the iconography of sugar, slavery and the topography of Jamaica, from the inception of British rule there in 1655 to the aftermath of emancipation in the 1840s, but the focus will be on the years preceding and immediately following emancipation.

At the center of the exhibition is the remarkable series of lithographs, *Sketches of Character, In Illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica*, made by the Jewish Jamaican-born artist, Isaac Mendes Belisario. Published in Jamaica in 1837-8, *Sketches of Character* provides the first detailed visual representation of Jonkonnu (or John Canoe), the celebrated Afro-Jamaican masquerade performed by the enslaved during the Christmas and New Year holidays. Tracing the West African roots of Jonkonnu, its evolution in Jamaica, and continuing transformation into the twenty-first century, the exhibition will feature Jamaican and West African costumes and musical instruments, accompanied by video footage of historic and contemporary performance, as well as a specially-commissioned sound-track. The exhibition will conclude with works by contemporary Jamaican and Afro-Caribbean artists which speak directly to the unfinished legacy of slavery. Though emphatically not a celebration of emancipation, the exhibition nonetheless does celebrate the remarkable survival and continuing transformation of the Jonkonnu form (though the question of Jonkonnu's significance for contemporary Jamaicans is complex, and as has emerged as a key issue for the conception of the exhibition).

The distinctive contribution which the exhibition and publication will make to the field is the presentation and scrutiny of visual culture. As Jerome S. Handler and Annis Steiner noted in their recent article, “Identifying Pictorial Images of Atlantic Slavery: Three Case Studies,” “It is almost axiomatic that images do not ‘speak for themselves’”. Many of the works in the exhibition will be familiar to participants in this conference through reproductions in scholarly books and articles, but the images are almost invariably presented as unmediated “illustrations”, devoid of contextual underpinning. The exhibition’s core curatorial team of art historians have undertaken to interrogate these images by researching the historical circumstances and artistic conventions within which they were produced. A crucial element of this investigation of visual material has been the collaboration with a larger group of scholars working across a wide range of disciplines, including history, musicology, anthropology, and performance studies, whose work has provided a rich contextual matrix as well as offering new methodologies for examining visual culture. In particular, Stuart Hall’s exploration of issues of identity and ethnicity, and Joseph Roach’s formulation of the concept of a circum-Atlantic (rather than trans-Atlantic) world have provided a critical framework for the project, as has Roach’s discussion of how performance enacts “the social processes of memory and forgetting” in circum-Atlantic societies.

My paper will outline the genesis and evolution of the exhibition, focusing on key methodological, logistical, and ethical issues encountered during the planning process.