

The Wedgwood Slave Medallion

Values in Eighteenth-century Design

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Although the ceramic 'slave medallion' made by Wedgwood for the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 may be said to be well known—by virtue of its wide distribution and its prominence in museum collections—there is in fact only a small body of literature relating to it. This paper, centred on the medallion, raises issues concerning the object's emotive imagery, its appropriation by individuals and the nature of Josiah Wedgwood's personal involvement in its production and distribution. It also examines the existing literature on the history of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and late eighteenth-century fashionability in order to contextualize this object and attempt to explain why it has never received more than cursory attention.

Keywords: abolitionists—Africa—ceramics—cultural interaction—Great Britain—Wedgwood

Introduction

Some had them inlaid in gold in the lids of their snuff-boxes. Of the ladies, some wore them in bracelets, and others had them fitted up in an ornamental manner as pins for their hair. At length the taste for wearing them became general, and thus a fashion, which usually confines itself to worthless things, was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity and freedom.¹

The above words refer to the 'slave medallion' produced in 1787 by one of the most famous of British potters and businessmen, Josiah Wedgwood (1730–95), as his very personal contribution to the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade [1]. Originally intended to be worn by abolitionists as a means of identifying them with the cause, the medallion was essentially a ceramic cameo depicting a black male in chains below the words 'AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?' [2]. Given the popularity of neo-classical decoration at the time, ceramic cameos of numerous designs were familiar decorative items, based on the carved gemstone miniatures of antiquity. These ceramics, frequently set into furniture and jewellery, were also a product particularly associated with the Wedgwood firm,



Fig 1. Portrait of Josiah Wedgwood in 1783. Engraved by S. W. Reynolds after a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds



Fig 2. The Wedgwood slave medallion of 1787. Actual height approximately 35 mm

made possible by their development of a requisite pure-white 'jasper' clay in the early 1770s [3]. By the end of that decade, their customers could choose

from a total of 1,735 different cameos, depicting everyone and everything from Oliver Cromwell to a mad, drunken fawn.² But whilst some members of this enormous group of ceramic goods have since disappeared into obscurity, the slave medallion is now firmly established as a 'museum piece'—considered by Wedgwood experts and biographers as a technically brilliant piece of jewellery representative of the man's magnanimity, and by historians of the abolition movement as a piece of propaganda central to the impassioned campaign for the ending of the transatlantic slave trade in the closing decades of the eighteenth century.

Despite the fact that it has been an object discussed readily by the above parties, the slave medallion has so far received inadequate coverage: presented as either a piece of jewellery or as a piece of propaganda, rarely has it been discussed in both contexts at once. This is something reflected in the opposing ways in which the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum have displayed their respective examples: whilst the slave medallion belonging to the former institution is almost lost amongst an array of stylistically related Wedgwood miniatures, the British Museum's version is displayed in a thematic case housing a collection of eighteenth-century political ephemera.³ In fact, the opening description, taken from the 1808 memoirs of Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), a leading abolitionist of the period [4], is the



Fig 3. Wedgwood jasper set into cut steel belt buckles, a hair comb and a clock pendulum, 1785–90



Fig 4. Portrait of Thomas Clarkson. Engraved by C. Turner after a painting by Chalon

sole attempt yet made to contextualize the medallion in terms of both its status as fashionable jewellery and influential political tool. Though in part this may be explained by the object's pertinence to two distinct and polarized fields, it has without a doubt been compounded by the long-standing and lamentable disinterest in non-white subjects that existed in historical discourse prior to the relatively recent advent of post-colonial criticism and the reassessments which this has produced.⁴

The first aim is, therefore, to place the medallion right at the centre of the discussion, drawing from and expanding upon a body of literature which includes Robin Blackburn's exhaustive study, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*;⁵ Linda Colley's *Britons*, an investigation of British national identity in the eighteenth century;⁶ the various essays that make up *Ignatius Sancho: An African Man of Letters*, a book written to accompany the loan of Thomas Gainsborough's *Portrait of Ignatius Sancho* to the National Portrait Gallery in 1997;⁷ and, not least, Robin Reilly's recent biography, *Josiah Wedgwood*.⁸ Not only will this approach provide us with a better

understanding of the medallion's contribution to the British abolition movement, but it will also enable us to reassess Wedgwood's role in the story and to explore more fully the object itself.

The second aim of this paper is to situate the discussion alongside the recent literature that has examined the relationship between visual and material culture and the historical encounters of people of different races and religions. Such titles include David Dabydeen's *Hogarth's Blacks*, an art-historical analysis of the representation of blacks in William Hogarth's studies of eighteenth-century British society; Annie Coombes' *Reinventing Africa*, a history of the display and interpretation of African culture in Britain during the period 1890–1918;⁹ and most recent of all, *Colonialism and the Object*, a collection of essays edited by Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn that uncovers the effects of imperial expansion on cultural production through a range of material examples.¹⁰ Though these studies may concentrate on different periods and different types of objects, by adopting their shared conceptual framework we may begin to appreciate the value of the Wedgwood slave medallion as a device through which to explore the nature of late eighteenth-century cross-cultural contact.

The abolition movement in late eighteenth-century Britain

If eighteenth-century Britain is to be viewed as an age of tea-sipping politeness it should also be seen as a time of extreme cruelty and barbarity, as slave-traders, slave-owners and the consuming public all benefited, either financially or materially, from the exploitation of over eleven million African lives. Arguments in favour of what now seems such an obscene practice ranged from the theory espoused by plantation owners and slave-traders that blacks were an entirely separate species, to the assumption that the British economy was dependent on colonial trade and the slave labour that that entailed. Both science and theology were used to support these views.¹¹

However, by the second half of the century slavery was beginning to be questioned by a vociferous minority.¹² The impetus appears to have come from moves in Enlightenment philosophy away from the above modes of thinking and towards a pervasive sense of man as a social being whose own happiness

would ultimately depend on his living in a thriving community, a state which in turn depended on the liberty of all its members, whatever their class, creed or colour.¹³ Though not all contemporaries had access to the learned writings of men such as Montesquieu, Hutcheson and Smith, anti-slavery sentiment was also to be heard at the pulpit.¹⁴ It was members of the non-conformist churches who particularly concerned themselves with abolition, that is, Quakers, Baptists, Methodists and Unitarians.¹⁵ Nor should the individual's ability to be moved against the slave trade by events quite outside the arena of religious rhetoric be underestimated—reading Thomas Day's epic *The Dying Negro*, or through seeing Aphra Behn's dramatic romance *Oroonoko*, for instance.¹⁶ And whilst only travellers might have observed the horrors of the slave trade at first hand, shackles and thumbscrews used for restraining slaves were openly displayed for sale in Liverpool shop windows.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, people were also troubled by inconsistencies in the English law. In 1772, for example, Somerset, a Virginian slave who had run away from his master in London, was freed by the courts on the basis that once on English soil there was no law that entitled one man to own another. Clearly, this exposed monumental national hypocrisy, for the country was 'freeing Negro slaves in England while producing new ones on the African coast'.¹⁸ Meanwhile, as late as 1783, large numbers of the public followed the details of a court case brought by an insurance company against the owners of the *Zong*, a slave-ship, who had demanded recompense for the profit lost when their captain threw 132 slaves overboard when the vessel ran out of drinking water. During the hearing it was argued that 'the case of slaves was the same as if horses had been thrown overboard' and to hear humans being equated with horses must have sickened many.¹⁹

Josiah Wedgwood's personal contribution to the anti-slavery cause

As a result of these various currents, anti-slavery, formally manifested in the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, was a popular cause by the late 1780s.²⁰ As a Unitarian acquainted with other leading abolitionists and as a businessman with contacts in Liverpool (the foremost slave port of the day), it was

not surprising that Josiah Wedgwood should have been one of the thousands to join the Society at its inauguration in 1787. Presumably because his name carried much weight, within months he was invited to join the Society's Committee.

Having accepted the appointment, the time Wedgwood committed to the affairs of the Committee was limited to the short periods he spent in the capital each year.²¹ Instead, and perhaps more appropriately, his major contribution to promoting the cause was a material one, in the form of the slave medallion. The existing literature indicates that the sculptor Henry Webber drafted the figure and that his design was subsequently modelled at the Wedgwood factory at Etruria, Staffordshire by the jasper specialist William Hackwood. However, given Josiah Wedgwood's very personal involvement in the project, it is fair to suggest that he would have had some influence over the eventual design. In any case, since he is popularly credited as the originator of the motto 'Am I not a man and a brother?', the piece is now firmly established as a Wedgwood 'original'.²² Although the medallion is never referred to directly in the Committee minutes, it is clear from the way that they illustrated the Society's publications with the now famous plan of the *Brookes*, a grossly overcrowded slave-ship, that they appreciated the necessity of finding suitably emotive images to further their cause [5].²³ As a consequence, for the purposes of this paper we shall speak of the medallion as a product both of the abolition movement in general and of Josiah Wedgwood in particular.

Precisely how many medallions were produced is unknown, nor how many variants there were. But basing our figures on the level of demand indicated by the 15,050 copies of Clarkson's pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Slave Trade*, distributed to supporters in the Society's first fifteen months, it can be presumed that demand for the medallion was of a comparable scale.²⁴ Meeting this demand would certainly have been feasible given the simple and familiar production techniques involved and the existing scale of operation at the Etruria factory [6]. Despite the existence of larger and coloured medallions, the monochrome form illustrated in [2] is the standard type.

It may be assumed that the medallions were distributed through the Society network, as it is recorded that Wedgwood sent parcels to both Clark-

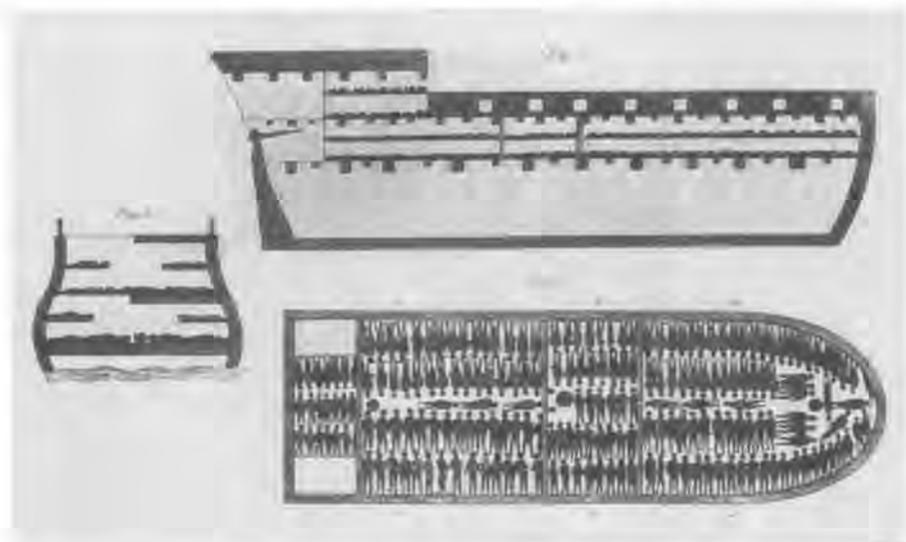


Fig 5. Plan and sections of the *Brookes* slave-ship. These were used in the publicity material produced by the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade

son and Benjamin Franklin, then President of the Philadelphia Society for the Abolition of Slavery.²⁵ It is generally accepted that Wedgwood himself bore the production and distribution costs, and of these it can only be said that medallions of a similar size were commercially retailing at three guineas each.²⁶ Certainly the Committee minutes do not record any payment being made to Wedgwood and the source which claims that the medallions were 'distributed gratuitously as well as sold' should be ignored, as this comment probably arises from a confusion between Wedgwood's free slave medallions and the copies made for retail by the Staffordshire pottery, T. & J. Hollins [7].²⁷ It is clear from Clarkson's opening comment that following their launch in 1787 the medallions were soon in general circulation.

Wearing the slave medallion

Though it is no longer possible to identify the individuals who received the medallions, it is apparent from Clarkson's account that they were worn by both sexes. He also describes how both men and women took it upon themselves to customize the piece at their own expense, with men setting theirs in plain metal mounts or snuff-boxes, and with women having theirs inlaid in hair-pins and bracelets. Although it may at first seem startling that such an image of human suffering was used to decorate a lady's hair ornament or bracelet, Clarkson's descrip-

tion does in fact show a mutually advantageous reciprocity between two objects of unequal moral worth: frivolous jewellery was lent moral value by the incorporation of an image associated with a popular and honourable cause, whilst the rather stark medallion was made more accessible to women by its transformation into a recognizably feminine decorative luxury. And perhaps because the image itself is unashamedly masculine, the process of feminization would have also helped to lessen the potential embarrassment experienced by women wearing images of semi-naked black males.²⁸ This is not to deny that the romantic exoticism contained in such an image could be part of the attraction for women wearers (something that will be discussed further on): rather that the slave's masculinity had to be correctly 'dressed up', not only by drapery but also through the addition of further ornamentation.

Male wearers, meanwhile, would not have encountered such problems. The simple mount into which the medallions were usually set [2] was already a recognizably 'male' ornament, derived from the Renaissance medal. Despite literature suggesting that 'male abolitionists were generally agreed that the petitioning of Parliament was the province of adult males',²⁹ and although his company had long been manufacturing products aimed specifically at the female market (e.g. the hair comb illustrated in [3]),³⁰ there is no sense that Wedgwood only intended men to make use of the medallion. On the contrary, he



Fig 6. A modern photograph showing a craftsman at the Wedgwood factory applying jasper relief figures to a pot. The process has not changed since the 1770s

considered his female acquaintances perfectly worthy converts to the abolitionist cause.³¹ Therefore, it seems that the customization described by Clarkson was simply a result of the fact that the medallion was a non-commercial piece which wearers of both sexes could choose to mount as they wished.

Despite the implicit need to express one's support for abolition in correctly gendered terms, there was a general willingness to 'show one's colours' in eighteenth-century British society. According to Leora Auslander's theory that personal possessions took on a more expressive function in periods characterized by newly won political emancipation, ever since the Restoration an abundance of material wares had been made for individuals keen to communicate their allegiance with a particular politician or membership of a private club [8].³² As well as demonstrating that the slave medallion was by no means an entirely novel type of object, this also suggests that wearing it was possibly less inflammatory than we might have imagined. In any case, the basic effectiveness of any



Fig 7. Medallion made by T. & J. Hollins in the 1790s

medallion as a form of propaganda must be that it communicates on dual levels. Put simply, that a medallion is worn by an individual shows the degree of support for an organization, whilst the image used shows what the organization stands for. Both have the power to recruit new members.

If donning the slave medallion signified a voluntary decision, partly expressing a belief in the power of the individual abolitionist's voice, we must now begin to examine the image itself; an examination that will in course reveal the breadth of the abolitionists' aims, the devices they employed to meet these aims, and crucially, how they chose to perceive the black race.

Reading the medallion

The Africa that existed in the popular imagination was an ideological space . . . inhabited by a population assigned a . . . disparate and ultimately contradictory range of racial traits. Representations of the African were, and are, evidently not 'fixed' but eminently recoupable and variable, depending on the political exigencies of any specific his-



Fig 8. Badge worn by members of the Anti-Gallican Society, 1756–70

torical conjuncture. As such, they necessarily tell us more about the nexus of European interests in African affairs . . . than they do about Africa and the African.³³

Though it may seem an obvious point, it is important to stress that the slave featured on the medallion was not the only motif the abolitionists could have used to promote their cause. It therefore follows that in settling upon this one design, they either failed to conceive of, or actively dismissed, an alternative. And assuming that the slave was the design that best expressed their impassioned aims via a visual vocabulary that could be understood easily by a European audience, the above extract from Annie Coombes' *Reinventing Africa* reminds us that in adopting this existing vocabulary, the abolitionists, whatever their ultimate aims, were also likely to be reinforcing popular racial myths—a point that will become increasingly apparent in the following discussion.

At first glance, the figure on the medallion is a simple depiction of human suffering designed to communicate the abolitionists' humanitarian concerns. An immediacy of understanding is facilitated both by the moulded motto 'AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?', and the fact that the figure is shown shackled hand and foot. In terms of communicating its subject, the designer's eventual decision to use a black relief on a white ground was particularly successful in that it preserved the slave 'in his own native colour',³⁴ whilst at the same time drawing out his characteristically African features—two things that enabled the viewer to grasp in an instant that the figure portrayed was an African slave.³⁵ More subtly, the silhouette-effect heightened the slave's shadow-like existence and depersonalized him to the extent that he could represent his entire race and thus remind the audience of the scale of the 'crime' abolitionists felt slavery to be.³⁶

Reflecting the fact that several centuries of captivity had left many slaves speaking European languages and worshipping as Christians, the slave depicted on the Wedgwood medallion shares characteristics with his audience in that he is clearly a Westernized figure: as well as speaking their language, the words he utters are themselves strangely reminiscent of the language of scripture. Indeed, given the fact that Clarkson described the slave as 'kneeling with one knee upon the ground, and with both hands lifted up to Heaven',³⁷ it seems probable that the designer intended him to resemble supplicating figures from Christian iconography. After all, 'when the Negro was categorized simply as a black, a heathen, or a savage, he could be no more than an impersonal object that men manipulated for certain purposes.'³⁸

Yet as we study the medallion more deeply, it becomes increasingly clear that the abolitionists held confused and sometimes contradictory ideas about the intended recipients of their humanitarian work. If at a certain level they aimed to present the slave as someone who shared everything in common with them except for the colour of his skin, on another level they clearly meant to keep their distance: not only is the slave depicted in a weak posture, supplicating on bended knees and emasculated by his chains, but it is implicit that his appeal is addressed to white society as well as to Heaven.³⁹ And since supplication demands that a hierarchy of power is established, the slave is clearly the submissive party, a non-threatening object whose purpose is to arouse

pity in the hearts of potential converts to the abolitionists' cause. Indeed, Wedgwood, when suggesting that a woodcut of the same slave be used to introduce a Society pamphlet, described him as a 'pathetic figure' which would 'increase its effect somewhat'.⁴⁰ Writing in a similar tone, the potter's friend, Erasmus Darwin, pitied the 'Poor fetter'd slave on bended knee, From Britain's sons imploring to be free.'⁴¹ But even though this unsophisticated mode of representation was designed to gain the viewer's sympathy, that the slave is depicted surrendering to the white man's will also suggests a condescending attitude towards him and his kind, a difficulty that Linda Colley highlights in her recent study, *Britons*:

Although anti-slavery propaganda relayed a great many anecdotes of suffering blacks, it was not concerned with realism. The dominant image continued to be that of Josiah Wedgwood's famous ceramic badge: a black man crying out, 'Am I not a man and a brother?', but doing so from the safe position of his knees. Slaves, in short did not threaten . . . bestowing freedom upon them seemed therefore purely an act of humanity and will.⁴²

If, on the one hand, the slave was to be pitied, it also appears that the abolitionists wished to present him as an eminently dignified figure: rather than breaking out of his chains through his own brute force, he is shown patiently waiting for his white master to liberate him via an act of Parliament. Paradoxically, then, though a victim, the slave is elevated to the status of a hero. This reading is substantiated both by the fact that the slave on the medallion takes his place in a line of eminent contemporaries and past heroes whom the Wedgwood company had been depicting in commercially sold miniatures since the 1770s, and also by the enormous presence of the 'noble savage' in contemporary art and literature.⁴³

Essentially a fictional entity held up to white society as a model of innocence, happiness and virtue, the noble savage was a stock character who first appeared in European literature in the seventeenth century. Wearing a range of racial guises from the African to the Polynesian, over the following century the savage was to appear in writings as far apart as Rousseau's *Origins of Inequality* of 1761 and Thomas Day's sentimental poem, *The Dying Negro*, before being adopted by the abolition movement as an appropriately sympathetic figure to be featured in their propaganda.⁴⁴ However, if this explains the likely influence of the noble savage

on the Wedgwood slave medallion, it is important to stress that the eighteenth century also fostered a savage of another temperament entirely—this second character a 'terrifying avenger . . . demanding as many drops of blood as he had shed through centuries of oppression'.⁴⁵ And in spite of the obvious inconsistency, this belligerent savage could also be a hero, 'for this would be how the European should want to act if he were a slave'.⁴⁶ In terms of abolitionist propaganda, this second figure only began to appear once it became clear that slaves could assert their rights to freedom, for instance after the 1791 slave revolt at St. Domingue. Henry Fuseli's painting, *The Negro Revenged*, executed in 1807 (perhaps significantly, this was also the year the slave trade was finally abolished), is one such piece [9]. Interestingly, this image is also important in that it

The Negro revenged.



*Mark, no more, cold venoms
Steering gales, seas with winds
Hasting Lewis plantations westward
See the cross with which he speaks*

Fig 9. *The Negro Revenged*. Engraved by Rambach after a painting by Henry Fuseli, 1807

shows that white Europeans had already begun to mythologize the supposed virility of the black male, something that would explain why our slave is such a graceful figure.⁴⁷

In attempting to understand why the abolitionists used images of blacks derived from these two stereotypical extremes, it is important to remember that political propaganda has never been known for employing moderate images.⁴⁸ Furthermore, as the European country most deeply embroiled in the transatlantic slave trade, British guilt was such that as the abolition movement gained ground, witnesses for the cause were claiming that Africans were 'really all born Heroes . . . there never was a rascal or coward of that nation.'⁴⁹ In fact, so great was the tendency to apologize that even such rational thinkers as Adam Smith were drawn into describing slaves in unreservedly favourable terms:

There is not a Negro from the coast of Africa who does not . . . possess a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is too often scarce capable of receiving. Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the goals of Europe.⁵⁰

In summary, the slave's confused depiction was a reflection of the conflicting demands the medallion had to meet, namely, the need to communicate its subject speedily and positively, whilst simultaneously gaining the viewer's sympathy and arousing his or her admiration. In doing so the designers could use only the conceptual framework they had before them, a framework so informed by established racial stereotypes that it was perfectly permissible to present the slave as a man like themselves one moment, and as a hero or a victim the next. And if the above discussion suggests the underlying reasons why the slave medallion takes the form it does, it ought also to be apparent that the abolition movement was less straightforward than might previously have been imagined. In the light of these findings, it is necessary to reassess Wedgwood's role in the project from a similarly critical perspective.

Philanthropist or opportunist?

Through Neil McKendrick's analysis of Wedgwood's marketing strategies, the latter has come to be known as a notoriously subtle and expert self-publicist,

reputedly using all available means to advertise his firm and increase its profits.⁵¹ Even the slave medallion is identified as just another manifestation of the ongoing campaign against the 'helpless' consumer:

No public event . . . lacked its commercial opportunities for Wedgwood . . . the rise of Methodism, the Slave Trade controversy, and the Peace with France were all given ceramic expression: Wesley, printed in black by Sadler and Green, on a Wedgwood teapot; slavery on the famous jasper medallion of the kneeling slave, asking 'Am I not a man and a brother?'⁵²

Although the detail of the above extract is vitiated by McKendrick's misconception that the medallion was sold for profit, the argument contained therein—that Wedgwood would sink to any depths in the pursuit of commercial gain—is not necessarily weakened. For it could be argued that by producing the medallion for free, Wedgwood both gained publicity and enhanced his reputation as a philanthropist. In view of the great range of marketing tools used by his company, it might be fair to say that he was perfectly capable of such a subtle publicity device. In fact, the entire abolition movement has been seen as a convenient 'emblem of national virtue',⁵³ appropriated by middle-class businessmen like Wedgwood as a means of securing moral authority as a substitute for the titles they were born without:

Anti-slavery was an extension of the noble philanthropic tradition . . . the new ideal of individual responsibility appealed particularly to the merchant elite who, though lacking inherited status, could at least prove their moral worth by increasing the security of the less fortunate.⁵⁴

Such an appraisal of Wedgwood's motivation is, however, questionable; not only is it inconceivable that anyone would immerse themselves in a cause to such depths simply in order to enhance their status, but because abolition was still a minority cause even in the 1790s, the medallion may have actually lost him customers, especially those at the upper end of the market who relied on slavery to maintain their overseas interests.

Commerce and consistency

Although there is little doubt that Wedgwood engaged in the anti-slavery movement for genuine moral reasons, the man's biographical notes remain interesting in that they reveal the early abolitionists'

inability to campaign on a scale necessary to ensure permanent political support or to affect the individual's actions.⁵⁵ In the 1760s, for instance, Wedgwood sold out-of-date stock to suppliers in the West Indies, whilst in 1775 he accepted a commission to make a 'nest of baths' for an African king, a man who was in all likelihood a slave-trader.⁵⁶ This commission was communicated to him in a letter from his agent, Thomas Bentley, who was then responsible for the export wares leaving Liverpool:

The above are to please the fancy of a black king of Africa to wash himself out of. They scoop the water upon them and like to have room and plenty of water—pray do this if you can and as soon as you can—and be moderate in the charge for if the above should please his majesty perhaps his subjects may fancy the same kind—which will be no bad thing for the pot trade.⁵⁷

At first it may seem highly fanciful, not to say unjust, to imagine that this king was a slave-trader. But the circumstantial evidence in favour of such a reading is inescapable. First, statistical research into shipping records reveals that around this period over ninety-five per cent of ships travelling from Liverpool to Africa were slave-trading vessels.⁵⁸ This makes it extremely likely that the order, as well as the basins themselves, were carried between the two continents aboard a slave-ship. Second, when European slave-ships moored along the coast of West Africa there was a 'stock' of slaves ready and waiting for them, captured and held in specially built forts by fellow Africans. Of these African slave-traders most were tribal leaders or their intermediaries, precisely because power was needed to sustain such a constant supply of human captives. Nor were their requirements modest:

Iron, copper and brass were used as currency, silks from India, refined metalware and textiles from England . . . all these and more besides were disgorged from the slave ships into the maw of the African slave-trading systems, quickly spreading throughout the interior . . . Europeans had to provide African traders with what they required for their slaves.⁵⁹

From this extract, it is clear that African slave-traders had expensive taste, and, what is more, specific requirements. One anonymous contemporary source bemoaned: 'if your warehouses are not kept constantly supplied with all sorts of goods, your presents and power are to no consequence.'⁶⁰ And if we find it difficult to picture a set of Wedgwood

basins sitting comfortably in an African interior, it may be learnt that 'African slave dealers, whether traditional chiefs or private traders, were often highly Europeanised . . . Isert [a contemporary commentator] was much impressed by the three storey mansions of some of the rich slave dealers of Little Popo.'⁶¹ Given what has been said of the social status of Africans involved in the slave trade, their taste for European luxuries and Liverpool's economic dependency on slave trading, it seems perfectly tenable that Wedgwood's customer was a slave-trader who would ultimately pay for the goods with human capital.

And whilst these inconsistencies partly reflected the lack of public awareness before the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was established in 1787, they may also be seen as symptoms of a wider disregard for the now much-debated 'conflict' between philanthropy and commerce. For instance, in the same way that the freed slave Ignatius Sancho marketed his London grocery with a trade-card portraying black slaves gathering in tobacco, during the mass boycott of West Indian sugar in the early 1790s, Wedgwood as an individual helped to promote the campaign, whilst Wedgwood 'the businessman' continued to produce copious numbers of sugar bowls.⁶²

Conclusion

Though the abolition of the slave trade was not carried through Parliament until 1807 (with slavery itself remaining lawful in the British colonies until 1833), the medallion formed an integral part of the Society's publicity material throughout this twenty-year campaign, and in these modest terms it was an extremely successful object. As we recall, Clarkson claimed the medallions were so widely distributed that 'the taste for wearing them became general', so much so in fact that he credited them with having been instrumental in 'turning the attention of our countrymen to the case of the injured Africans, and of procuring a warm interest in their favour.'⁶³ Whilst it might usually be sensible to treat such memoirs with caution, in this case the material evidence is sufficient to trust Clarkson's words. The medallions were still being worn in 1791 when Erasmus Darwin used the image of the slave to illustrate his *Botanic Garden*,⁶⁴ whilst T. J. Hollins & Sons plagiarized the design for commercial ends

[7] and yet another manufacturer produced a brass medal of a similar design [10]. Some time later, both the image and wording appeared again in a somewhat corrupted guise: on a medallion produced for the women's abolition movement that flourished in Britain in the 1830s [11]; on a version made by Sèvres for the French market which read 'Ne suis je pas un homme, un frère?'; and yet more recently, on a modern version worn by participants in the American Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950s. Less seriously, the image was also satirized by an anonymous caricaturist in the 1790s [12] and again by George Cruikshank in the 1820s.⁶⁵ Though it is not possible to discuss this material in more detail here, that there was such an extensive range of related, derivative objects proves that the medallion's visual penetration went deep, and that it was never *simply* a fashion item. On the contrary, as one recent historian has noted, it may fairly be described as one of the lingering images of the abolition movement:

Abolition was driven forward by massive public agitation, in print, in crowded local meetings and through a visual and material culture of anti-slavery; in pictures, prints, plaques, medallions and pottery. Some of that material left a permanent mark on the collective British memory,



Fig 10. Brass medal of the 1790s



Fig 11. Women's medallion of the 1830s



Fig 12. *The Rabbits*. An anonymous print of 1792

notably the plan of the Liverpool slave ship . . . and Wedgwood's medallion of the kneeling slave—'Am I not a Man and a Brother?'⁶⁶

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Notes

Abbreviations: British Library Manuscripts Collection: BLM; Josiah Wedgwood. JW; Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade Committee Minutes: Committee Minutes

- 1 T. Clarkson, *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Frank Cass, 1968 (first published 1808), pp. 191–2.
- 2 From a transcript of the 1779 Wedgwood and Bentley catalogue reproduced in W. Mankowitz, *Wedgwood*, Barrie & Jenkins, 1980.
- 3 Although neither treatment presents the object in the broadest possible terms, the latter certainly achieves a more thought-provoking display. Reflecting this, the Ceramics and Glass Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum is currently reconsidering the display of its slave medallion.
- 4 David Dabydeen terms this neglect a 'pervasive colour blindness'. See D. Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art*, Manchester University Press, 1987, p. 9.
- 5 R. Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776–1848*, Verso, 1988.
- 6 L. Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, Vintage, 1996.
- 7 C. Phillips (ed.), *Ignatius Sancho: An African Man of Letters*, National Portrait Gallery, 1997.
- 8 R. Reilly, *Josiah Wedgwood*, Macmillan, 1992.
- 9 A. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination*, Yale University Press, 1994.
- 10 T. Barringer & T. Flynn (eds.), *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, Routledge, 1998.
- 11 See R. Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, Verso, 1997.
- 12 For an extensive discussion of anti-slavery and the British abolition movement, see R. Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760–1810*, Macmillan, 1975 and Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, op. cit., chs. I and IV.
- 13 For instance, in the first half of the eighteenth century Hutcheson wrote: 'Permanent power assumed over the fortunes of others must generally tend to the misery of the whole . . . we must therefore conclude that no endowments, natural or acquired, can give a perfect right to assume power over others, without their consent' (Francis Hutcheson, *System of Moral Philosophy*, 1755, quoted in Anstey, op. cit., p. 100).
- 14 Anstey, op. cit., p. 139.
- 15 For an analysis of why non-conformists were particularly active in the abolition movement, Anstey, op. cit.; Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, op. cit.; and D. B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, Cornell, 1966.
- 16 First published in 1773, *The Dying Negro* was based on the true story of a London slave who ran away to marry a white woman, but was recaptured and imprisoned in a ship on the Thames, whereupon he committed suicide. Meanwhile, *Oroonoko*, a play first performed in 1688, told the story of an enslaved African prince. Towards the end of the eighteenth century the script was revised to communicate a more explicitly anti-slavery message.
- 17 T. Clarkson, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 375–7.
- 18 S. Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977, p. 33.
- 19 Lord Mansfield quoted in J. Walvin, 'Ignatius Sancho: the man and his times', in C. Phillips, op. cit.
- 20 Having established an exclusively Quaker pressure-group in 1782, by 1787 this was incorporated in the non-sectarian Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. From this point on the organization will be referred to simply as 'the Society'.
- 21 Of the generally fortnightly, and sometimes weekly, meetings held over a four-year period between 1787 and 1791, Wedgwood attended only seventeen meetings, apparently contributing no more than one letter written on behalf of the Committee, and engaging a printer on one occasion (BLM, Add MS 21254–6, Committee Minutes). This is not to deny that he was campaigning on a local level, as his personal correspondence with Thomas Clarkson and Gustavus Vassa (also known as Olaudah Equiano), a freed slave, reveal.
- 22 *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 1979.
- 23 The medallion itself may have eluded discussion, but in October 1787 the Committee commented upon the design to be used on the Society's seal. This is described as being 'expressive of an African in chains in a supplicating Posture, with the Motto "Am I not a man and a Brother"?' Clearly this is the same design as the Wedgwood ceramic slave medallion, and it seems likely, therefore, that the Wedgwood firm was ultimately responsible for both pieces.
- 24 The following authors put it at 'many hundred', 'large quantities' and 'thousands' respectively: L. Jewitt, *Life of Josiah Wedgwood*, 1865, E. Meteyard, *Life of Wedgwood*, 1865; G. Blake Roberts, 'Josiah Wedgwood and his connections with Liverpool', *Proceedings of the Wedgwood Society*, 1982.
- 25 Reilly, op. cit., p. 287; Blake Roberts, op. cit., p. 130
- 26 Wedgwood Catalogue, 1787, p. 29.
- 27 Meteyard, op. cit. Two other sources to presume that the medallion was sold are: N. McKendrick, 'The commercialisation of the Potteries', in McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb (eds.), *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, Europa, 1982; and J. Walvin, *Fruits of Empire*, Macmillan, 1997.
- 28 For a discussion of the contemporary reception of images of male nudity, see McKendrick, op. cit., p. 113.
- 29 See C. Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870*, Routledge, 1992.
- 30 McKendrick, op. cit., p. 142.
- 31 In Robin Reilly's recent biography, the author details the correspondence that passed between Wedgwood and the anti-abolitionist, Anna Seward, as the one attempted to persuade the other of the evils of the slave trade. For a detailed discussion of Wedgwood's attitude to women, see S. Gater, 'Women and Wedgwood', *Women in Industry and Technology*, Museum of London, 1994, pp. 171–8.
- 32 Though Auslander argues that in post-revolutionary France it was the private interior that emerged as the principal means of

- communicating an individual's political sympathies and social standing (L. Auslander, *Taste and Power*, University of California, 1996), British examples range from the badge worn by members of the Anti-Gallican Society [8] to the ceramics produced to celebrate John Wilkes's various political campaigns. See J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 163–200.
- 33 Coombes, op. cit., p. 3.
- 34 Clarkson, op. cit., p. 191.
- 35 Since the slave medallion appears to be the only Wedgwood miniature to be modelled in monochrome, there is little doubt that this was a conscious decision on the part of the designer.
- 36 For this reason, I argue that the Wedgwood slave should not be considered as an example of the 'grotesque approximation of a formulaic ape', which Annie Coombes identifies as the more typical representation of the black in British art during the colonial period. See Coombes, op. cit., p. 21.
- 37 Clarkson, op. cit., p. 450. Though this comment was made with reference to the Society's Seal, it is clear that this object utilized the same design as the medallion. See note 23
- 38 Davis, op. cit., p. 473.
- 39 Interestingly, the overall composition follows the existing convention established in group portraits depicting both black and white figures. See, for example, Dabydeen, op. cit. In his analysis of some dozen group portraits painted during this period, the author demonstrates how the black slave or servant was invariably placed at the edge of the canvas, looking up to the white master or mistress.
- 40 *Letters of Josiah Wedgwood 1781–1794*, Morten, 1906, JW to T. Clarkson, 18 January 1792.
- 41 E. Darwin, *The Botanic Garden*, Scholar Press, 1973, lines 315–16.
- 42 Colley, op. cit., p. 376.
- 43 Whether intentionally or not, this reading has been preserved by the curators at the Victoria and Albert Museum, who have their slave rubbing shoulders with such notables as Frederick the Great, William Shakespeare and George Washington.
- 44 For a greater discussion on the noble savage, see P. A. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Actions 1780–1850*, Macmillan, 1965.
- 45 Davis, op. cit., pp. 480–1.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 For a fuller discussion of physio-racial stereotypes formulated by the British, see Coombes, op. cit., Ch. V
- 48 Whilst portrayals of the British African élite, such as Thomas Gainsborough's *Portrait of Ignatius Sancho*, might have provided an excellent model for the abolitionists in terms of showing the potential contribution of freed slaves to polite society, such an approach was apparently too subtle to be used for the purposes of propaganda.
- 49 Anonymous source quoted in David, op. cit., p. 477.
- 50 Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759, quoted in Anstey, op. cit., p. 118.
- 51 McKendrick, op. cit., pp. 100–45.
- 52 Ibid, p. 122.
- 53 Colley, op. cit., p. 375.
- 54 Davis, op. cit., p. 333.
- 55 For instance, even in the 1770s and early 1780s, slavery merited detailed press coverage only after the Somerset case of 1772 or the *Zong* case of 1783. Interestingly, the importance of publicity was something Wedgwood himself recognized when he stressed his confidence 'that this trade needs only be known to inspire an universal detestation of its cruelty & conviction of its injustice' (*Letters of Josiah Wedgwood 1781–1794*, op. cit., JW to Rev'd Plymley, 2 July 1791).
- 56 *Letters of Josiah Wedgwood 1762–1770*, Morten, 1903, JW to T. Bentley, 18 July 1766.
- 57 J. Wedgwood to T. Bentley, quoted in Blake Roberts, op. cit., p. 127.
- 58 Drescher, op. cit., p. 209.
- 59 J. Walvin, *Black Ivory*, Fontana, 1993, pp. 30–1.
- 60 Anonymous source quoted in Walvin, *ibid*, p. 31.
- 61 A. van Danzig, 'The effects of the Atlantic slave trade in some West African societies', *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1976, p. 264.
- 62 The sugar boycott referred to here was popularized by the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade after April 1791 on the basis that 'the luxuries of Rum and Sugar can only be obtained by tearing asunder those ties of affection which unite our species and exalt our nature' (BLM, Add.MS 21256, Committee Minutes, 26 April 1791). According to his personal correspondence, Wedgwood helped to distribute pamphlets in support of the boycott in the Staffordshire locality.
- 63 Clarkson, op. cit., p. 45.
- 64 Darwin, op. cit., facing p. 87; *Letters of Josiah Wedgwood 1781–1794*, op. cit., JW to E. Darwin, July 1789.
- 65 M. Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture 1790–1822*, Clarendon, 1994, pp. 211–13.
- 66 J. Walvin, 'The man and his times', in Phillips, op. cit., p. 109.

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