

Race, Class, & Wealth:

Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (1750) and Yinka Shonibare's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads* (1998)

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This paper will explore colonialism and identity through the creative lens of British artist, Yinka Shonibare MBE. Through his installations, Shonibare challenges the role of history and positions of power from the colonial period to the present. In 1998, he created *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads*, a satirical rendition of Thomas Gainsborough's painting, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, from 1750. The original work was created to serve as a conversation piece (a term that I will explore later), for guests of the Andrews estate. The double portrait features newlyweds, Robert and Frances Andrews, situated on their land and has become an iconic symbol of European gentry.

Thomas Gainsborough was born in 1727 in Sudbury, Suffolk, England. As a boy, he spent hours drawing the land that he was surrounded by.¹ As stated by an obituarist, 'Nature was his teacher and the woods of Suffolk his academy; here he would pass in solitude his moments in making a sketch of an antiquated tree, a marshy brook, a few cattle, a shepherd and his flock, or any other accidental objects that were present.'² Gainsborough often complained about the pressures of society portraiture, yet it was in doing this particular work that he earned a living. His skills as an artist afforded him the attention of the well-established English gentry, although he came from a modest family.

Thomas Gainsborough's, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (figure 1) acts as both portrait of a newly-wed couple and as landscape painting. The sitters are Robert Andrews of the Auberries (1726-1806) and Frances of the Ballingdon House (1723-80), with whom Gainsborough would have become acquainted years before the commissioning of this painting.³ Mr. and Mrs.

¹ Malcom Cormack, *The Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough*, (Cambridge-New York-Port Chester-Melbourne-Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4.

² Reverend Sir Henry Bate-Dudley, *Morning Herald*, 8 August 1788

³ Hugh Belsey, *Thomas Gainsborough: A Country Life* (Munich-Berlin-London-New York: Prestel, 2002), 41.

Andrews pose on the left half of the canvas, rather than directly in the middle as was typical in a portrait of that time period. To the right of the couple lies a detailed rendering of the Auberries grounds. In the 18th century, it was common practice for an artist to paint a married couple in the midst of a luxurious landscape; however, this painting marks the first time in history an artist gives equal attention to a landscape and couple in a single painting.

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews was created as a momento to celebrate the acquisition of land.

The Auberries, which historians believe was part of her Frances' dowry, had become the property of her husband, Robert Andrews upon their marriage in November of 1748.⁴ The land bordered the bride's father's estate, known as Ballingdon. Upon Frances' father, William Carter's death in December 1748, a half-share of the Auberries estate was to be left to Robert Andrews.

Robert's father, also called Robert had acquired the other half-share in legacy in 1717. Robert Sr., a silversmith, died in 1735 and left the share to his son, but left his widow a life interest. She died in 1749, so it was not until 1750 that Robert Andrews Jr. gained full access to both halves of the property.⁵

Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews can be understood as a joining of marriage and property. The estate shown in the painting, serves as demonstration of the couple's wealth. The church where the couple made their vows is visible in the background. The cultivated lands nod to orderliness and privacy.⁶ This painting would have served as a conversation piece, a usually informal group portrait that became popular in the 18th century.

According to art historian, Kate Retford:

⁴ Malcom Cormack, *The Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough*, (Cambridge-New York-Port Chester-Melbourne-Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46.

⁵ Hugh Belsey, *Thomas Gainsborough: A Country Life* (Munich-Berlin-London-New York: Prestel, 2002), 41.

⁶ Malcom Cormack, *The Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough*, (Cambridge-New York-Port Chester-Melbourne-Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46.

The conversation piece was above all, a study of ‘mode and manner of a time and habits.’ Thanks to its emphasis on detailing the material world, it was able to capture the postures and gestures, the costumes and possessions, and the location and activities characteristic of particular moments and regions.⁷

Fitting the true nature of a conversation piece, the painting’s dimensions suggest that it was to be displayed over a mantle for visitors of the estate to see. Strangely, the couple is dressed in a casual contemporary fashion. This might be due to the informal nature of Mr. Andrews’ childhood friendship with Thomas Gainsborough. The sitter’s relaxed nature suggests the portrait is a depiction of the couple after one of Mr. Andrews’ hunts. Mr. Andrews is dressed in a cream colored hunter-style jacket with his gun resting under one arm and is accompanied by a faithful canine companion. Mr. Andrews shows he has the right to hunt on his own land. In the portrait, Mrs. Andrews’ lap appears to be unfinished. It is said that the space on her blue silk skirt was left blank to hold space for a game bird that Mr. Andrews would have shot.⁸ Others believe the space was reserved for a future child for Mrs. Andrew to hold. There is still no clear answer as to why the spot on Mrs. Andrew’s skirt is bare; yet, other details or rather lack thereof, allude to Robert Andrew’s declaration of ownership. It is certain that Mr. and Mrs. Andrew had indeed purchased the work as it was.

The portrait, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* was virtually unknown before 1927, when it was put on public display for the first time, in Gainsborough’s bicentenary exhibition at Ipswich.⁹ Having remained in the ownership of the sitters’ family for more than two centuries, it was finally put up for sale in 1960 and subsequently purchased by the National Gallery, where it is currently displayed. It has since been regarded as a key work in Gainsborough’s oeuvre. Today,

⁷ Kate Retford, *The Small Domestic and Conversation Style: David Allan and Scottish portraiture in the Late Eighteenth Century*, *Visual Culture in Britain* 15, no.1, 2014), 18.

⁸ Martin Postle, *Thomas Gainsborough (British Artists)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 16.

⁹ Malcom Cormack, *The Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough*, (Cambridge-New York-Port Chester-Melbourne-Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46.

Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* is considered one of the most recognizable 18th century works of art from England.

British-Nigerian artist, Yinka Shonibare looks back to art history in his adoption of Gainsborough's original painting. In Shonibare's installation, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads* (figure 2), like many of his other works, visual templates and histories of colonial culture are reworked with content and references that reveal another side of the story. He states, "These members of aristocracy ... are objects of curiosity, in a kind of reverse way. So the fetish for me, as an African, is the eighteenth century European culture, whilst their fetish is the African mask!"¹⁰ His work questions British colonialism in Africa. Having split his time in England and Nigeria, he considers himself a hybrid of two cultures. He grew up where his family spoke Yoruba in private and he had to speak English in public. He recalls seeing his father dress in European-style clothing to go to work, but lounging in traditional Yoruba attire the private sphere of the home.¹¹ Yinka Shonibare stated, "My lineage within the Nigerian context is quite aristocratic. My great-great grandfather was a Nigerian chief; my father was a lawyer so I grew up in a fairly affluent situation. Because I didn't grow up feeling inferior to anyone, I couldn't really understand the hierarchy of race in this country, [England]."¹² Yinka Shonibare was born to an affluent family in London in 1962 and moved to Lagos, Nigeria as a

¹⁰ Sharon F. Patton, foreword to *Yinka Shonibare MBE/Rachel Kent*, by Rachel Kent, Robert Hobbs, Anthony Downey, and Yinka Shonibare MBE, 1st ed. (Munich-Berlin-London-New York: Prestel, 2008), 14.

¹¹Robert Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation" in *Yinka Shonibare MBE/Rachel Kent*, by Rachel Kent, Robert Hobbs, Anthony Downey, and Yinka Shonibare MBE, 1st ed. (Munich-Berlin-London-New York: Prestel, 2008), 25.

¹² Yinka Shonibare MBE, "Transformation" from *Art in the Twenty-first century Season 5* (2009) PBS

boy, where he attended primary school.¹³ The postcolonial Africa he grew up in was characterized by a wave of new aspirations and intellectualism.

After finishing his first degree at Byam Shaw, Shonibare completed an M.A. at Goldsmiths College, London University. While at Goldsmiths he read Foucault and Derrida. This, he insists, was very important for his work. Their approach to the deconstruction of categories, the structural problem of signifier and signified, and the idea of a power structure created through various systems of signification gave Shonibare a powerful framework for his personal experiences.¹⁴ This background led him to a visual practice that deliberately incorporated common signifiers of "African-ness" in order to deconstruct them. One of these signifiers, as Shonibare notes in an interview conducted in 1996, is cloth.¹⁵

Yinka Shonibare three-dimensional version of *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads* features two headless mannequins dressed in Victorian style West African batik fabric costumes. The artist uses this cloth in his response to modern day issues of global identity and challenges stereotypes about authenticity in African art. His work demonstrates the complexities of Europe and its colonies over the centuries and Shonibare draws on episodes of post-Renaissance, European art—especially classicism, Rococo and Romanticism—for his elegant, theatrical, and sometimes darkly humorous, headless characters whose activities conflate history and fantasy, but also the comedic dimensions and tragic outcomes of human action.

¹³ Nancy Hines, "Yinka Shonibare Redressing History", by Nancy Hynes & John Picton, *African Arts* 34, no. 3(2001), 61.

¹⁴ Robert Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE/Rachel Kent*, by Rachel Kent, Robert Hobbs, Anthony Downey, and Yinka Shonibare MBE, 1st ed. (Munich-Berlin-London-New York: Prestel, 2008), 24.

¹⁵ Nancy Hines, "Yinka Shonibare Redressing History", by Nancy Hynes & John Picton, *African Arts* 34, no. 3(2001), 60.

In *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads*, Shonibare claims to appropriate a degree of the power of the original painting as well as offering a critique of it. He proclaims in today's terms, Gainsborough's version (fig. 1) is read as a man placed next to his belongings-his wife, dog and gun.¹⁶ Yinka Shonibare's installation (fig. 2) juxtaposes a moment of frivolity and seriousness. The result challenges the roles of history and positions of power then and now. According to Shonibare, "Basically, [the presentation of the figures] started as a joke, because I take working-class fabric from Africa and dress the aristocracy in those fabrics, then I take their heads off, but there is no blood or violence."¹⁷ For Shonibare it is more about parody than hard edged politics. To add to the irony, Shonibare purchased the wax cloth from London markets.¹⁸

Ironically, the cloth is not, in fact, African; it originated in Indonesia.¹⁹ Dutch colonialists, hoping to make a profit by selling it, had set out to manufacture the cloth commercially in the Netherlands. When their venture failed, they sold the surplus in West African markets. Over time, it became a costume for millions of Africans. In the 20th century, it became a symbol of their post-colonial independence. Today the cloth is designed and manufactured in Manchester, England, exported to Africa, then sent to England. Authentic Dutch wax cloth is highly regarded among contemporary West Africans as a symbol of status. Post-colonial Africans appropriated wax cloth as a symbol of their African-ness, though the history of the fabric's production shows otherwise.

¹⁶ "Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE/Rachel Kent*, by Rachel Kent, Robert Hobbs, Anthony Downey, and Yinka Shonibare MBE, 1st ed. (Munich-Berlin-London-New York: Prestel, 2008), 40.

¹⁷ Yomi Ola, *Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture*, 209.

¹⁸ Robert Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE/Rachel Kent*, by Rachel Kent, Robert Hobbs, Anthony Downey, and Yinka Shonibare MBE, 1st ed. (Munich-Berlin-London-New York: Prestel, 2008), 30.

¹⁹ "Yinka Shonibare's Message in a Bottle," last accessed November 16, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/may/16/yinka-shonibare-fourth-plinth-traffic>

Shonibare's installation, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads*, is set against a white backdrop. He chose not to include the landscape, which in turn denies the viewer of reference to a specific location. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews have traded their local, 18th century attire for expressively colored African textiles. The Rococo style bench is an almost exact replica of the original from the portrait, but in three-dimensions. Mr. Andrews' dog and gun are still by his side. The figures are headless, which adds emphasis to lack of identity. An important point to mention is that in Yoruba culture the head is considered to be the most important part of the body. Interestingly, the figures have a skin tone orangey in color. This ambiguity of their race adds another layer of parody and an unexpected playfulness that is commonly characteristic of Shonibare's work.

As noted by scholar, William Vaughan, "It is the paradoxical nature of the [the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews] picture that gives it its extraordinary conviction."²⁰ In Gainsborough's portrait, the couple is placed in front of an oak tree (which still stands) as an attest to longevity. It is this very idea that Shonibare's work seeks to address. Long term socio-political effects of European-ness are present today in Africa and the world, thus Shonibare believes there is no such thing as autonomous culture. One of Shonibare's ongoing strengths is his ability to suggest narrative and characters without containing them. Although often linked to colonialism and identity, his pieces are not defined by this connection. "I hate conclusive things," he insists. "I think once a piece is conclusive, it's dead. The mind should be allowed to travel and have fantasy and imagination. People's minds need to wander."²¹ A recipient, of the title Member of the British Empire by the Queen of England, Yinka Shonibare, MBE offers a play on the irony of

²⁰ William Vaughan, *Gainsborough (World of Art)*, (London-New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 56.

²¹ Nancy Hines, "Yinka Shonibare Redressing History", by Nancy Hynes & John Picton, *African Arts* 34, no. 3(2001), 64.

his given name and subsequent title as well as issues surrounding imperialism and its subsequent effects. In using a material that is often associated with ideas of African authenticity, Shonibare tackles the complicated relationship between Africa and Europe, in addition to the issues of race, class, and wealth.



Thomas Gainsborough
Mr. and Mrs. Andrews
1750
Oil on canvas
69.8 x 119.4cm
National Gallery London



Yinka Shonibare
Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads
1998
Two life-size fiberglass mannequins, bench, gun, dog, Dutch wax printed cotton costumes on armatures
165 x 570 x 254cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1999.