

Sharing a research project: A Boy in Seville



The Marriage at Cana by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617 - 1682), about 1672, oil on canvas, 179 x 235 cm. © The Henry Barber Trust, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham (No. 47.9).

Introduction

Welcome back to the Barber Institute's online Tuesday Talks, now in its fourth series. Today, the talk will be given by me, Helen Cobby, Assistant Curator at the Barber, and my colleague Becca Randle, Learning & Engagement Coordinator. We'll be sharing with you some of the recent research we've carried out into the painting called *The Marriage at Cana*, made by Sevillian artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617 - 1682) in about 1672.

Murillo's painting is extremely large, stretching to 179cm high by 235cm wide, making the figures in the foreground more or less life size. It makes an imposing impression upon the viewer in the Barber's Baroque Gallery, accompanied mainly by other European works from the same century. The table is heavily laden with bread, apples, chicken, and a cake decorated with small white and orange flowers. Large plates of food are being passed overhead and the table has been adorned with gold and red fabric, on top of which are white tablecloths decoratively edged with lace. Fine silks and glittering tableware add to the abundant scene.

The only figures to sit in front of the table are Mary and Christ himself. At the far left of the composition Mary, Christ's mother, is dressed in plain, earthy colours and looks intently towards Christ, who has his back to her. He is barefoot, and wears a simple dark tunic over which is draped an equally dark blue robe. The figures that Christ gestures towards are in a prominent position to the right of the scene, and are in the process of filling numerous Sevillian water pots. This is one of the indicators that the scene is from the tale of Christ's first miracle, where he transforms water into wine, thereby revealing his divine identity and, crucially, inspiring faith in the witnesses. It is also important to note that the presence of the Sevillian water pots help suggest that this Biblical scene is set in a hybrid world that is at least partly of the artist and patron's own time.

The figures are largely white Europeans, but one exception is the young boy prominently positioned towards the centre right, who is shown as Black African or Afro-Hispanic. The boy, who seems to be about 10 or 11 years old, is situated just off centre of the composition, looking upwards towards the three older servants providing and pouring the water. His hands fold around one of the water pot's rim and handle, perhaps indicating his eagerness to be part of the action. His key position at the heart of the miracle, as well as his individualised features and transfixed expression, suggest he is fundamental to Murillo's portrayal of the Biblical story, the Marriage Feast at Cana.

This painting is one of the few known works from early modern Spain to depict a Black figure. Yet, the boy's presence has hardly been discussed in previous art historical and gallery-related material, either at the Barber or beyond. Instead the identities of the bride and groom, who sit at the centre of the composition, have been energetically debated. Some scholars suggest they are the artist's patrons, the Flemish silk merchant Nicolás Omazur (c.1630-1698) and his wife Isabel Malcampo. The painting was commissioned by Omazur, who, with 31 paintings, owned more works by Murillo than any other 17th-century collector and was his most important private patron.

Since March 2020, Becca and I have been addressing the representation, possible identities, lived experiences, and reasons for inclusion of the Black boy within Murillo's painting at the

Barber. In attempting to name him, and sharing what we can of his story, we hope to make steps towards better recognition and sharing of Black histories in Barber's Collection.

Was the boy a servant or domestically enslaved?: Exploring Seville and the slave trade

To try to find out who the boy may have been and what his inclusion in the painting may have meant, our first step was to consider how he is currently described in the interpretative label displayed next to the painting at the Barber. As with many labels referencing people in conditions of domestic servitude, the boy is referred to as a servant. We questioned if it is accurate to describe the boy as working consensually (with the choice to leave), or if it is more likely that he was in fact domestically enslaved.

When *The Marriage at Cana* was painted, Seville was a main centre for the slave trade in the Iberian Peninsula, which bolstered the wealth of the Spanish Empire.¹ A high percentage of Seville's population were people of colour. The height of the Spanish slave trade was in the mid-1500s, when up to 2,000 enslaved people were forcibly brought from Africa to Spain each year. By 1600, the enslaved population of Spain is estimated to have been 100,000,² the largest enslaved population in Europe outside of Lisbon.³

It is important to note that the liberation of enslaved people was possible at this time, and that as the 1600s progressed, the number of enslaved people being brought to Spain dwindled due to both the competing demand for labour in the new world and a decrease in the overall Spanish population after the plague of 1640. However, academics have pointed out that the number of previously enslaved Africans or Afro-hispanics in Spain was much smaller than the overall enslaved population.⁴ Therefore, the inclusion of the boy who may have modelled for Murillo's painting should be considered in the context of a city highly populated by enslaved Black Africans and Afro-Hispanics.

Looking at the boy's dress could provide further clues to his identity and status. The boy is shown wearing a red tunic, with intricate gold stitching and fastenings, and a white scarf and a blue bow around his neck. This is in contrast to the water carriers, who are wearing much simpler clothing, or are even partially unclothed. Slave owners enslaved people (and had this documented in paintings) partly to signify their wealth and, as such, enslaved people would often be depicted wearing expensive clothes that had been bought by their slave 'owners' to

¹ Fracchia, Carmen. '(Lack of) visual representation of black slaves in Spanish golden age Painting' in *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 10:1, 2004, pp. 23-34.

² Earle, T. F. *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 70.

³ Fracchia, Carmen. 'The Urban Slave in Spain and New Spain' in *The Slave in European Art: From Renaissance Trophy to Abolitionist Emblem*, The Warburg Colloquia Series, Vol. 20, London, 2012, p.195.

⁴ Fracchia, Carmen. '(Lack of) visual representation of black slaves in Spanish golden age Painting' in *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 10:1, 2004, pp. 23-34. See also Dominguez Ortiz in Morales et al (eds) II (1999, pp. 20-21) Further research is needed to explore the possible relevance of the 1640 plague to Murillo's work, and its impact on Africans and Afro-Hispanics.

add to this display of wealth.⁵ Murillo may also have conveyed the boy's identity through his activity, as enslaved men in Spain were often water carriers, so the boy's hands on the water pot could indicate the typical tasks awaiting him in adult life.⁶

The description of the boy as a servant may have come about due to his domestic setting, with ideas of enslavement perhaps being tied to plantations. However, a servant or an enslaved domestic worker references two distinctly different social and legal positions. The gap between the role of a butler, for example, and that of an enslaved worker has been described by experts, such as Carmen Fracchia, as being 'insurmountable'.⁷ The term 'servant' may suggest that the work being carried out is consensual; servants were not abducted or horrifically mistreated and subjected to violence in the way that enslaved people were, nor were they sold at auction.

Searching for an individual identity

After investigating how to accurately describe the boy's status in the painting, we looked for an individual that may have been the artist's model. The boy certainly seems to have been painted sympathetically as an individual, with convincing and expressive facial features, rather than as a stereotype. It is likely Murillo would have chosen a model to whom he had easy access. Could the boy have been an enslaved domestic worker in the household of the patron Omazur, or perhaps in the studio of the artist himself?

Unfortunately, we were unable to find any records of Omazur's household, or details of any enslaved Africans or Afro-Hispanic people who may have lived there. Murillo did, however, have enslaved workers in his studio. They mainly carried out menial work such as crushing and mixing pigments; this was a common practice for Sevillian painters at the time, and enslaved people could be sold on to make money for the artist if commissions became scarce.⁸ With this in mind, could any of the enslaved people within Murillo's household be represented here as the boy in *The Marriage at Cana*?

⁵ Titian created the earliest known freestanding portrait of an identifiable European individual with an attendant black African figure in his portrait of Laura Dianti (about 1523-29) now in a private collection. This became a prolific and extensive motif, common not just throughout Italy but also in the Low Countries, Great Britain, France and Germany. See David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (eds). *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Volume III: From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition, Part 1: Artists of the Renaissance and Baroque*. Harvard University Press, 2010.

⁶ Fracchia, Carmen. 'The Urban Slave in Spain and New Spain' in *The Slave in European Art: From Renaissance Trophy to Abolitionist Emblem*, The Warburg Colloquia Series, Vol. 20, London, 2012, p. 202.

⁷ Ibid. '(Lack of) Visual representation of Black slaves in Spanish Golden Age Painting' in *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, Vol.10. No.1, June 2004, p. 28.

⁸ Fracchia, Carmen and Macartney, Hilary, 'The Fall into Oblivion of the Works of the Slave Painter Juan de Pareja', *Art In Translation*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, (2012), pp. 163-184.

The records show that there were at least five people of colour enslaved by Murillo over the whole of his career.⁹ A boy named Thomas was born into Murillo's household in 1656, to an enslaved woman, probably originally from North Africa. Until recently, Thomas seemed like the best candidate for the model for another work by Murillo that features a young Black boy, called *Three Boys*, painted in about 1670, now at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London.¹⁰ As this work was painted around the same time as *The Marriage at Cana*, it is possible Murillo may have used the same model for both pictures.¹¹ However, a recent discovery has given us an account of what Thomas looked like, which does not match the figures in either of these two works. In the documentation for his release from slavery or manumission in 1676, Thomas is described as 'white of good body and curly hair'.¹²

The second candidate was Sebastien Gomez (born 1646), who worked in Murillo's household at the time the painting was made. As Sebastien would have been 26 years old at the time, he is an unlikely candidate for the artist's model. Gomez was eventually granted freedom from the household, and became an artist in his own right. Although this story is largely thought to be highly fictional, dramatised by later writers such as Hans Christian Anderson, there are similar accounts of the relationship between the two artists Velázquez and his formerly enslaved assistant, Juan de Pareja (1606 – 1670).¹³ Both stories bring an awareness to the history of enslaved workers in artist studios, even if focusing on, and even romanticising, the rare cases of manumission.

Possible religious symbolism at play

If the boy in Murillo's painting was indeed enslaved by the patron, Omazur, then his depiction and centrality within the composition would serve to demonstrate Omazur's piety and righteousness for giving the boy his religious education and saving his soul - as he appears as a key witness in the revelation of Christ's true identity. Equally, this means we are being offered an image of the Christianisation of the boy; he is in the process of becoming a 'New Christian'. This emphasises his identity as an enslaved person because white Spanish Christian viewers in 17th-century Seville would have regarded the boy's soul

⁹ The documents relating to Murillo's life and work transcribed and published by Corpus Murillo: biografía y documentos P Hereza - 2017 - Sevilla, Ayuntamiento de Sevilla.

¹⁰ With thanks to Xanthe Brooke for interpreting and detailing *Corpus Murillo: biografía y documentos* P Hereza - 2017 - Sevilla, Ayuntamiento de Sevilla with regards to enslaved workers in Murillo's studio and household. Email to Robert Wenley, 24 July 2020.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Thomas's manumission document is contained in the folio of documents relating to Murillo's life and work, *ibid*.

¹³ *Transgressive Romanticism*, Larry H. Peer. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018. p,135.. Juan de Pareja's notable works include a self portrait, 1650, now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York and *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1661, Museo Del Prado. See Fracchia's analysis of how Pareja wrestled with his own race and religion in his art to transform his identity and social standing in 'Metamorphosis of the Self in Early Modern Spain: Slave Portraiture and the Case of Juan de Pareja', in Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (eds.), *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 146-69.

as innately 'evil', 'sinful' and Godless, but ultimately a soul that could be saved and made civilised by conversion to Christianity.

From what we know from the contents of his art collection, Omazur was a devout Catholic fascinated by religious art. In his collection, the largest subject category was saints and about 60% of his paintings by Murillo were religious works; his two largest works (and among his most expensive commissions) were *The Marriage at Cana* and the *Inmaculada*.¹⁴ Both depict religious subject matter, the latter is an example of Murillo's best loved images, which present the Catholic dogma that Mary was conceived without sin. It is interesting that both of these grand paintings by Murillo are concerned with a main subject being pardoned from sin. This may suggest an emphasis on the pure foundations, the righteousness and the redemptive possibilities of the Christian faith, as well as an assertion of disciples' places within it - the very things with which Omazur's Sevillian society was so concerned. If so, these works act as a clear declaration of Omazur's faith and a testament of his commitment to Seville's socio-religious values. Did the fact that he was Flemish and not native to Seville fuel this possible desire to reflect and build upon such values, himself perhaps anxious not to be seen in any way as 'other'? After all, the earliest reference to Omazur in Seville is a document from 2nd July 1669 (only about three years before Murillo painted *The Marriage at Cana*), which identifies him as a 'residente', a term which indicates a recent arrival in the city.

We have also considered the motif of water to be extremely significant within the context of conversion of Afro-Hispanics to Christianity throughout Early Modern Seville, because of societal obsession with baptism. Water is clearly extremely significant to the Biblical story of the Marriage at Cana; Christ is able to bring those around him to Christian faith through the use of water. When describing the stone water jars that Christ used for the miracle, John the Evangelist states they are 'the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing' (John 2:6). This includes the cleaning of guests' feet and is a type of purification ritual, prescribed so a person is considered to be free of uncleanness, especially prior to worship. These purification rituals are linked to the Christian ritual of baptism, where someone is bathed in water for symbolic cleansing from sin and guilt so they can pass into a new life as a Christian, transforming their identity.

In Murillo's painting, a silver flash of water is, albeit subtly, a point of focus in the scene. The diagonal lines running through the composition - created by the clustered formation of the water pots, and Christ's focused gaze and that of the servants - point towards the water being poured from one pot to another. The way that both servants holding water pots seem to caress tenderly their curved sides heightens this sense of the importance and significance of their task. Murillo shows us water being poured alongside the bare arm of a servant. Both these details could further hint at the conditions required for baptism, where water needs

¹⁴ Kinkead, Duncan. 'The Picture Collection of Don Nicolas Omazur' in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 128, No. 995, Feb. 1986, p. 135.

to be moving, and poured, over exposed flesh in order to serve the purpose of ritually carrying away one's 'impurities'.

These are some of the ways in which it is possible to explore how race, social standing and religion were inextricably linked in the Spanish early modern social consciousness. Does the boy's inclusion reflect the historic Spanish preoccupation with enforced conversion of Africans and Afro-Hispanics to Christianity? If so, is the boy used to emphasise the story of conversion and belief at the heart of the Biblical story of the Marriage at Cana?

Conclusion

This short talk gives a summary of our ongoing research which aims to explore, critique and subsequently lead us away from inherited knowledge, or gaps in knowledge, that are centred around dominant white patriarchal experiences or world views. We hope this talk has illustrated that Blackness was highly charged in Spanish society in the Early Modern period, with race and religion being tightly interconnected.

We set out to question received knowledge by making a case that there may be more to the boy's inclusion within the composition than simply his signification of the groom's or patron's wealth and status. Indeed, by including the boy in *The Marriage at Cana* and making him a central part of the primary subject of the painting, we argue that Murillo builds an image of the 'other' under various forms of social control, while simultaneously and necessarily creating a picture of what white Spanish Christians would perceive as 'the self' or 'in-group'. In this way, *The Marriage at Cana* is as much about constructing whiteness as it is about the history of Black representation.

Thank you very much for listening, and thank you to Jack Davies for composing and playing the guitar music that introduces and ends these weekly talks. There will be another talk in two weeks' time by one of our colleagues, so please do come back then if you would like to hear more.

Select further reading

Bindman, David. 'Subjectivity and Slavery in Portraiture: from courtly to commercial societies', Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (eds.), *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, (Cambridge, 2013).

Bindman, David, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (eds.), *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Volume III: From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition*, (Harvard, 2010).

Duncan, Carol. 'Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship', Susan M. Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, (London, 1995).

Fracchia, Carmen. '(Lack of) visual representation of black slaves in Spanish golden age Painting', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 2004, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 23-34.

Ibid. 'The place of African slaves in early modern Spain', A. Spicer and Stevens Crawshaw (eds.), *The Problem and Place of the Social Margins*, (Oxford, 2016).

Ibid. 'Metamorphoses of the self in early-modern Spain: Slave portraiture and the case of Juan de Pareja', Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (eds.), *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, (Cambridge and New York, 2013).

Ibid. 'Picturing the Afro-Hispanic struggle for freedom in early modern Spain', J. Branche (ed.), *Post/Colonialism and the Pursuit of freedom in the black Atlantic*, Routledge studies on African and Black diaspora, (Abington, 2018).

Ibid. 'The place of African slaves in early modern Spain', Spicer, A. and Stevens Crawshaw, J. (eds.), *The Problem and Place of the Social Margins*, Routledge Studies in Cultural History. (Oxford, 2016).

Ibid. 'Constructing the Black Slave in Early Modern Spanish Painting', Tom Nichols (ed.), *Others and Outcasts in Early Modern Europe: Picturing the Social Margins*, (Aldershot, 2007).

Ibid. 'The Urban Slave in Spain and New Spain', *The Slave in European Art: From Renaissance Trophy to Abolitionist Emblem*, The Warburg Colloquia Series, Vol. 20 (London, 2012).

Ibid. *Black but Human: Slavery and Visual Arts in Hapsburg Spain, 1480-1700*, (Oxford, 2019).

Hereza, Pablo. *Corpus Murillo: biografía y documentos*, (Seville, 2017).

Kinkead, Duncan. 'The Picture Collection of Don Nicolas Omazur', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 128, No. 995 (Feb., 1986), pp.132-144.

Massing, Jean Michel. 'From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert: Washing the Ethiopian', *Journal of the Warburg and the Courtauld Institutes*, No. 58 (1995).

Verdi, Richard. *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts*, Sarah Beattie, Jonathan Jarrett, Nicola Kalinsky and Robert Wenley (eds.), (London, 2017), p. 63.

Wenley, Robert, in Ignacio Cano Rivero and María del Valme Muñoz Rubio (eds), *Murillo IV Centenario*, exh. cat., Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla (29.11.2018-17.03.2019), Seville (Junta de Andalucía), 2018, pp. 273-77, 483-84 [English], no.36.

Speaker bios

Becca Randle

Becca Randle joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as Learning and Engagement Coordinator in 2016. She works on a variety of projects including contributing to the teaching of modules for University of Birmingham undergraduate courses, the production of learning resources, workshops, research and public events. She also programmes and delivers on the Barber's Families and Schools programmes. Having recently completed a postgraduate degree in Museum and Gallery Education at University College London, Becca's research interests include the pedagogical and social function of the museum and art gallery, particularly, foregrounding hidden histories. Becca is also a West Midlands Area Representative for Engage, the National Association of Gallery Education. Prior to the Barber, Becca worked at Ikon gallery, Birmingham, as well as in community arts and alternative educational provision for young people.

Helen Cobby

Helen joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on diverse projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director Nicola Kalinsky, and assisted with the curation of the Spring 2020 exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets. Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography (the subject of her MA dissertation at the University of London), JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and 20th-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was awarded a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City. Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as the research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of Turner's early architectural work, called 'The Young Turner'.

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.