A Digital Reading of the *Sengbe Pieh* Portrait in the Covid-19 Era

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**Preface**

When the Black Muslim Portraiture writing project first appeared on the horizon earlier this year, my work was planned as a rereading of the *Portrait of Sengbe Pieh*, in order to address and acknowledge the visual erasure of Muslim identity in the portrait. Instead, this essay took a different turn, conceived and written during a moment unlike any other. The last time humanity was suffering the world over from a pandemic illness was 102 years ago, during an outbreak of influenza. At the end of the “War to End All Wars,” the virus was twinned with the world’s first global militaristic conflagration. Now, in the midst of Covid-19, another social and economic global cataclysm, in which the world as we knew it at the end of last year no longer ceases to exist, we look again at things we thought we knew. Our homes certainly, and the perceived necessities of life take on immense importance. Stay-at-home orders and the loss of in-person communication is producing a new shared language built around “social distancing”—sure to be first on every “Word of the Year” dictionary list. Mourning is part of daily ritual, for those who are dying, for those treating the ailing, and for the losses which will undermine economic stability for a long time to come. Commemoration, likewise, is part of daily ritual, with people standing on balconies and stoops, banging pots, howling like wolves or singing in unison to remember those whose jobs have deemed them “essential,” often putting them in harm’s way. For many, with families and jobs to attend to, stay at home orders in many American states has meant a reliance on digital technologies to replace the platforms needed to work or study, to connect with family and friends, and to relieve boredom and anxiety. Public school students have been delivered of laptops, as well as school meals, and their studies, in some truncated form, continues. Museums, also a part of the fabric of society, have been scrambling to transform their in-person, object-based methodology of visual and textual interrogation and presentation to a digital one for their audiences. In the past five weeks, there has been a proliferation of lectures, tours, mini-exhibits, videos, children’s activities and more pouring out from museums across the world. Museums have been defined as many things, and though that definition evolves—see, for example, the recent controversy when a member of ICOM
introduced a new definition which included the wording “social justice” in 2019\(^1\)—at its core, most museums care for objects and use objects to share information. The Portrait of Sengbe Pieh is just such an object, one of the many hundreds of millions of objects whose home is a museum. A museum which today no one can enter.

Without being able to see the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh again in person, over the course of the past few months I found myself glued to the screen seven days a week. Every day, wading through the ever-growing accumulation of digital e-newsletters, links and postings, it became clear that in tandem with the proliferation of object-based studies produced by museums, universities, and libraries, works of visual art—paintings, sculpture, installation, murals and more—have become a tool through which the public is learning but is also entertaining itself. Due to this growth of museum exhibit work online, a veil on museology is somewhat lifted.

We see museum curators scrambling to rework their work for digital presentation. We see scholars struggling to learn to use digital technologies effectively. We also see the public using art for their own means and ends, often surpassing the creativity of museums themselves, and bringing attention to the types of question this special issue of Muslim World Journal is asking. Therefore, in light of the presence of Covid-19 and the practice of social distancing, this paper will look at the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh in the context of four digital presentations which purport to be about portraiture in the era of the transatlantic slave trade. In this renewed and productive digital context where scholarship and public production and consumption mingle, can viewers determine what being Black and Muslim meant in the Atlantic world of the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries from these new digital endeavors? How does the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh work with these new ways of viewing historic black portraiture made for the transatlantic world?

**Introduction: The Portrait of Sengbe Pieh from New Haven to Philadelphia and Beyond**

On its surface, a mixture of oil paints on canvas, is the figure of a black man wearing a white garment over his left shoulder [Image 1]. While his upper torso faces frontally outward towards the viewer, his eyes gaze to the right (the viewer’s left). Behind him is a golden glow of scenery of two low mountains, one pointed and one flat topped. Placed in front are two palm trees, and on each side of the figure is more greenery. Sengbe Pieh, or Cinqué, as he is commonly known in American art and history, holds a bamboo rod in his left hand, crossing the same shoulder on which the cloth is wrapped. His right side is completely bare, collarbone and musculature delineated by the artist Nathaniel Jocelyn. This is a portrait done from life in New Haven, Connecticut in December 1840 or January 1841, a few months before the final trial in which the “Amistad Captives”—named so for the small transport ship La Amistad carrying 53 enslaved people captured in West Africa to Caribbean plantations—were awarded freedom by the U.S. Supreme Court. While on board, Sengbe Pieh led a mutiny resulting in

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\(^1\) See Vince Noce, “Vote on ICOM’s new museum definition postponed,” *The Art Newspaper*, September 9, 2019, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/icom-kyoto [accessed April 28, 2020].
the loss of life for some of the enslaved and their enslavers. While on land, Sengbe Pieh would quickly become the “Brave Congolese Chief who Prefers death to Slavery and who now lies in Jail in Irons at New Haven, Conn. awaiting trial for his daring for freedom.”

2 Caption for the print of Joseph Cinquez by Isaac Sheffield (drawing) and Moses Beach (lithography), Joseph A. Arnold (printer), 1839. In the collection of the Library of Congress.
Haven Jail, the Amistad Africans were studied, informally when exercising on the New Haven Green as painted in a WPA mural in the New Haven Public Library, and formally by artists such as John Warner Barber, who created miniature profile studies and biographies for his publication *History of the Amistad Captives* in 1840, using not only his observation skills, but a pentagraph, measuring each person’s head and correlating size to actionable personality traits—as identified by the white artists and physicians schooled in the “science” of phrenology.

In the genre of historic portraits, the *Portrait of Sengbe Pieh* is small and almost square—measuring only 30 ¼” × 25 1/5.” Since 1898, the portrait has been part of the collection of the New Haven Museum (earlier, the New Haven Colony Historical Society), the only person of color represented in the museum’s collection before the end of the twentieth century.

Although painted in New Haven by a local artist, the portrait was not intended for the small city where Yale University is located, but for the home of abolitionist and cotton broker Robert Purvis on Jefferson Row in Philadelphia. Purvis was a colleague of the New York based Lewis and Arthur Tappan, abolitionist espousing brothers who became leaders of the Amistad Committee, along with lawyers who would help work the case through the courts. The *Portrait of Sengbe Pieh* was placed in Purvis’s study and hung there for many years, but not before a mezzotint print was made by English artist and anti-slavery advocate John Sartain, also living in Philadelphia [Image 2]. Through the print, sold in anti-slavery offices and storefronts on both sides of the Atlantic, the image of the man was disseminated with additional inscriptions across the bottom of the print, announcing Pieh as “The Chief of the Amistad Captives. After the Picture from Life by N. Jocelyn, New Haven, in the Possession of Robt. Purvis, Esq. Philadelphia” with a facsimile of his Ibero-Anglicized name, Cinque/Cingue (sometimes also spelled Cinquez).

Nathaniel Jocelyn’s choice in presenting the leader of the Amistad Captives—named in this essay as Sengbe Pieh, closer to the Mende spelling of his name—with Classical and Judeo-Christian overtones was prescriptive and conservative, a reflection of the artist’s upbringing in Connecticut, a New England Colony known for its Puritan and Congregationalist Christian heritage, of the City of New Haven, designed as a “New Jerusalem” in 1638/39 and of the use of Classical visual language by the transatlantic abolitionist movement. By the time Jocelyn began the oil on canvas portrait in the late months of 1840, there were already

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3 See *The New Haven Green in the Nineteenth Century* by Bancel LaFarge and Deane Keller, 1942, The Public Art Archive, https://locate.publicartarchive.org/art/New-Haven-Green-in-the-19th-Century?ib=ext [accessed April 28, 2020].

4 John Warner Barber, *A History of the Amistad Captives: Being a Circumstantial Account of the Capture of the Spanish Schooner Amistad, by the Africans on Board; Their Voyage, and Capture near Long Island, New York; with Biographical Sketches of Each of the Surviving Africans. Also, an Account of the Trials had on their Case, before the District and Circuit of the United States, for the District of Connecticut* (New Haven, CT: E.L. & J.W. Barber, Hitchcock & Stafford, Printer, 1840). Reprinted as *The Amistad Story* in the *Journal of the New Haven Colony Historical Society*, Volume 36, No. 2, Spring 1990: 32-64.

5 See the *Portrait of Cinque* in *The Painting Collection of The New Haven Colony Historical Society* (New Haven, CT: The New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1971), 51.
multiple print images in several categories the artist could have pulled from as inspiration. These images include the earliest: (1) Sengbe Pieh as Mende leader, shaped by Poro culture and follower of Islam [Image 3]; followed by (2) Sengbe Pieh wielding a sugar cane knife, in the action of mutiny which included the murder of his captors [Image 4] and finally (3) Sengbe Pieh as classical-styled orator after the mutiny, in “captivity” and spokesman for the Amistad Africans as well as the New York/New England-based abolitionist movement [Image 5]. Although the Amistad story as enacted on stage, in wax models on exhibit, and on a 135-foot long panoramic painting by Amasa Hewins of Boston, was focused on the graphic
Image 3. Illustration from A true history of the African chief Jingua and his comrades: with a description of the Kingdom of Mandingo, and of the manners and customs of the inhabitants, an account of King Sharka, of Gallinas: a sketch of the slave trade and horrors of the middle passage, with the proceedings on board the "long, low, black schooner," Amistad. Published at Hartford, New York, and Boston, for the booksellers, 1839. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University
action of mutiny, this was not the choice for Jocelyn, Purvis, and the Amistad Committee. Jocelyn followed the pattern established in the third category, the most common visual presentation of the Amistad story in print for antebellum America. In at least three different prints done by different artists, Pieh is shown calm, cerebral, and central to the presentation of the story to the viewing public and to the committee members, lawyers, and justices following the Amistad case. Jocelyn’s portrait and the Sartain prints were, in the words of art historian Richard J. Powell, “a metaphorical weapon, but a weapon nonetheless” for the abolitionist cause in the few months before the final trial when public interest in the Amistad case was high, nearing the final judgement of the Supreme Court in the United States v. Schooner Amistad case heard March 9, 1841.

No notes about the portrait from the artist survives. Sengbe Pieh himself is reported to have said the words “oh good, good” when he was shown the portrait. In this sense, Pieh may have been agreeable not because he “liked” the portrait, or thought it true to life, but because he navigated the Muslim/Christian divide by appeasing those working to help him—and this likely included studying the Bible. The Tappans were seemingly primarily concerned with the portrait as a means to an end, not an end in itself, writing about the need for “graphic reproduction.” Only Purvis, who kept the portrait for his whole life in his study, may have had a

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6 Richard J. Powell, “Cinqué: Antislavery Portraiture and Patronage in Jacksonian America,” American Art, v. 11, no. 3 (Fall 1997), 68.
7 Letter, Charlotte Cowles to Samuel Cowles, April 12, 1841, written in Farmington, Connecticut, where Sengbe Pieh and the Amistad Africans lived after being set free, and while waiting for the Amistad Committee to help raise funds for the return to Sierra Leone. Collection of the Connecticut Historical Society, https://collections.ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/40002%3A104744 [Accessed April 30, 2020].
8 Powell, 63.
Image 5. Joseph Cinquez, the Brave Congolese Chief who Prefers death to Slavery, and who Now Lies in Jail in Irons at New Haven, Conn. awaiting trial for his daring for freedom. Isaac Sheffield (drawing), Moses Yale Beach (lithography), Joseph A. Arnold (printer), 1839, 23.2 × 20.1 cm. Library of Congress
sentimental attachment to it.9 The return to Mendeland was the end goal for Sengbe Pieh, which he and several other Amistad Africans managed a few years after the end of the trial. Although the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh utilized easily recognizable symbols of Western art and culture—the use of the cloth over his shoulder is many things in one, alluding to Classicism, Christianity, and West Africa all at once. It is the most striking feature of the portrait, as the white plays against the color of Pieh’s skin—with small light areas, in the whites of his eyes, in the tooth showing through slightly parted lips—the viewer cannot help but be drawn to it. It is also, perhaps, the most problematic aspect of the painting and though it has been challenged by other works of art, its primacy remains: the last scene in the film Amistad (Steven Spielberg, director, 1997) puts the same voluminous white cloth on Sengbe Pieh, while everyone else returning to West Africa wears “regular” 19th century clothing.

Although known today to be a false view of Classical statuary since much of it was brightly painted,10 the choice of white reflects this deep and long-held view of the primacy of Classical and Neo-Classical white toga-wearing white marble statuary. In another sense, the use of white cloth is Christian in origin, connecting the plight of Sengbe Pieh and the Amistad Africans to Christ himself, whose body was wrapped in a white shroud after his trial and crucifixion. In this sense, the white cloth signifies purity, or, the righteousness of the abolitionist cause. A third reading of the white cloth is West African in perspective. Although seemingly bleached of the colors associated to Mendeland dress in the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh, for some scholars such as Marcus Rediker, the use of homespun or “country cloth,” usually with one of several colors such as indigo woven into linear patterns, is alluded to, in the way the cloth is wrapped around the shoulder.11 Late twentieth century depictions of Senbge Pieh and the Amistad story—sometimes with the La Amistad, and created by and for Sierra Leone, always show the use of patterned country cloth in works of public art.

The earliest visual depiction of Sengbe Pieh, where he is named the “African Chief Jingua,” shows us the other image as Jocelyn could have chosen. The anonymously made graphic is heavily loaded with examples of country cloth—wrapped around Pieh’s neck and the turban-like headdress, both of which feature linear bands of woven color and white. His loin cloth features an even more decorative pattern, pulled taut over his strong thighs, a curved sword with inscriptions hanging from his left shoulder, where later Jocelyn’s white toga would be. Despite the multiple allusions to the Ancient world and western Christianity, from the start the Amistad Committee and the portrait artist knew that Sengbe Pieh and the Amistad Africans were Muslim. And, so did everyone else. Less than two weeks after the discovery of La Amistad at Long Island, New Yorker Lewis Tappan went to the New Haven Jail to see the Amistad Africans for himself. He wrote a letter describing his visit to the New York Journal.

9 “A Priceless Picture,” Philadelphia Inquirer, December 26, 1889, 3.
10 See Margaret Talbot, “The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Statuary,” The New Yorker, October 22, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture [Accessed April 30, 2020].
11 Marcus Rediker, Outlaws of the Atlantic, Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014), 173.
of Commerce, published on September 9, 1839. The passage of interest to the subject of Black Muslim Portraiture and the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh is unobscured and direct:

I arrived here last Friday evening, with three men who are natives of Africa, and who were joined the next day by two others, to act as interpreters in conversing with Joseph Cinquez and his comrades…most of the prisoners told the interpreter that they are from Mandingo…The Mandingoes are the most numerous people of this region. These are partly Mahomedans and partly Pagans. Their original country is Manding, of which the Government is said to be a species of republicanism. Nearly all prisoners appear to be people of this description. The physician says they nearly have all been circumcised…We endeavored to ascertain what his ideas were about a Supreme Being, if he had any. He said “God is good.”

Clearly, although described in the earliest texts and observed from the start as Muslim, after the first visual depiction of Sengbe Pieh steering La Amistad and dressed in clothing of his culture and faith, Pieh’s Muslim identity is marginalized, or bleached, right out of existence. Dora Mekouar describes this process as a method through which slavers enacted “the…erasure of the black Muslim identity among the enslaved people in the United States [as] part of a strategy to strip enslaved Africans of their individual identities and reduce them to chattel both legally and in the public imagination.”12 But this erasure clearly went both ways, utilized...

12 Dora Mekour, “America’s First Muslims were Slaves,” Voice of America / VOA News, January 29, 2019, https://www.voanews.com/usa/all-about-america/americas-first-muslims-were-slaves [Accessed April 25, 2020].
by both the pro-slavery and pro-abolitionist causes. In the case of the *Portrait of Sengbe Pieh* and American print culture created by and for those with pro-abolitionist sympathies, the process of erasure of Muslim identity was a given in order to fit into an already established visual language to support the evangelical Christian based mission previously described by Rebecca Hankins. In the following four digital platforms, we see how well this erasure—enacted by both pro-slavery and pro-abolitionist proponents—was codified in works of portraiture of the transatlantic slave era, and in museum-based digital presentations about them.

Part 1: Colonial Virginia Portraits [Image 6: screen shot]  
https://colonialvirginiaportraits.org/

Earlier this year the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture launched a new digital database built around portraiture made for Virginia. Focusing on the 17th and 18th centuries, *Colonial Virginia Portraits* reflects to a great degree the types of portraits made for, and later collected in, the first English-speaking Colony in North America. In the content exposed by the chosen framework, a transatlantic narrative in which people of color, including indigenous people from differing tribes, Africans, and African Americans create a new world, reverts back to a one-dimensional view. Curated by Janine Yorimoto Boldt, the 2018-2020 Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow at the American Philosophical Society Library & Museum, the interactive database has approximately 350 images and 500 individual records of oil portraits. Boldt gathered her research from museums, libraries, archives and the personal records of families who still hold portraits. The portraits presented are all white sitters except one. In a blog post “Using Colonial Virginia Portraits: Exploring a Visual Archive with Students,” she introduces the uses of the database for online learning, but only towards the end does she reference the lack of black portraiture in the artificial portrait collection, writing,

> There are also methodological questions and questions about race that can be asked about the visual archive. Notably, who is not pictured? For example, all but one of the individual portrait entries feature white subjects. The only known portrait of a person of African descent was John “Jack” Custis and his portrait is now presumed lost. Three of the Virginia portraits feature enslaved attendants, though their names are unknown, they are not the primary subject, and they may not even be representations of real people at all, but instead may be copied from other visual sources.

She goes on to ask a series of questions, such as “What do these portraits tell us about whiteness?” but, in fact, the presentation of so much whiteness feels less an opportunity for probing questions, and more a throwback to see Early America through the perspective of a single lens.

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13 Janine Yorimoto Boldt, “Using Colonial Virginia Portraits: Exploring a Visual Archive with Students,” *Uncommon Sense—The Blog*, Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, April 2, 2020, https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/howtousecolonialvirginiaportraits/ [Accessed April 28, 2020].
These questions are, of course, the core questions teachers and museum educators ask their audiences today, but, *Colonial Virginia Portraits* does not introduce these questions on the database website, only addressing the question of blackness in Virginia, and by extension, in the American Colonies, in the blog post, which is secondary to the digital presentation. The presentation of information from the database undermines the work of historians, archaeologists and museum professionals who have made great strides in the past thirty years to overturn the hegemony of white supremacy embedded in the very places that hold many of these portraits, i.e., Virginia’s iconic historic house museums such as Mount Vernon, Monticello and Montpelier, all of which have exhibits on the enslaved communities and the interconnectedness of all people in Early America (see, for example, Montpelier’s award-winning “The Mere Distinction of Colour” exhibit, which features a contemporary commemorative portrait of a young enslaved man made from the red clay of the Piedmont landscape).

*Colonial Virginia Portraits* seems unaware of the recent effort over the course of 2019 to acknowledge and commemorate another group of Virginia’s founders: those brought to English-speaking North America in bondage within the first two decades of the Colony’s founding. The “Virginia to America, 1619-2019” Commemoration, sponsored by American Evolution, was an anniversary celebration marking 400 years of the Virginia Legislature and four hundred years since the first enslaved Africans were brought to Point Comfort (today Fort Monroe) in Virginia. The theme was picked up by *The New York Times Magazine* for a special magazine issue titled the “The 1619 Project” which received media attention in successive waves due to critical dialogue about the connections between history, the legacy of slavery, reparations, and social justice. Although these first “20 and odd” enslaved Africans were from West Central Africa—today Angola—and perhaps not Muslim, religion and faith beyond European Christianity was part and parcel of Early America. The *Portrait of Sengbe Pieh* would not be included in such a database. His story, had it happened in Virginia instead of New York and Connecticut, would likely have had a very different ending with no portrait painted, but the creation of the portrait, in an environment which embraced neither his color nor his religion and against the commonness of white portraits in both the North and the South, is not to be forgotten. *Colonial Virginia Portraits* reminds viewers of at least this much.

Part 2:

Breaking the Chains: Ceramics and the Abolition Movement [Image 7: screen shot]
https://exhibits-ucah.omeka.wlu.edu/exhibits/show/breaking-the-chains

The next digital platform considered is another product of Virginia. “Breaking the Chains: Ceramics and the Abolition Movement” is a digital exhibit created by Washington and Lee University in Lexington. Reeves Collection curator Ron Fuchs II and Museum Program Assistant Cassie Ivey first curated this object centered in-person exhibit for the museum in 2019, then used the Omeka platform to offer the exhibit online. The digital exhibit came to the greater public’s attention in March 2020 when *Digital Antiques Journal* published a

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14 See “The 1619 Project,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 2019—ongoing, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html [Accessed April 26, 2020].
photo essay titled “Antislavery Ceramics.” Often in the news due to the university’s close ties with the Confederacy through Robert E. Lee (he was college president and is buried here) and Stonewall Jackson (who taught at neighboring Virginia Military Institute, and who is also buried in Lexington, his house a museum), Washington and Lee recently hired its first Director of Institutional History to address the complexities and problems on campus, raised, for example by students protesting receiving their diplomas with Lee’s name inscribed. Off campus, Lexington is a microcosm of political and social divides and has been in national news for the past several years not only due to the protests by Washington & Lee students, but also due to the removal of Confederate battle flags along downtown street poles, and the refusal of the owner of the Red Hen restaurant to serve Trump Administration staffer Sarah Huckabee Sanders in 2018. In other words, Lexington—and Virginia for that matter—is not neutral territory.

Sixteen objects from the Washington and Lee collections were selected by the curatorial team and all but two are historic objects. They are part of the visual and material culture of abolitionists and anti-slavery supporters of the antebellum era, which is the context of the arrival of the Amistad Africans in Connecticut, and of the production of the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh. Witnessing these image-laden objects in the context of a southern town in the Blue Ridge Mountains—not in New York or New England—is a dissonance not addressed by the curators. In their work, the curators at Washington and Lee selected typical forms of ceramics to be found in upper-class households—tea pots, plates, mugs, jugs and a sugar bowl—and use a quote from Connecticut resident Harriet Beecher Stowe as an opening salvo: “there is no arguing with pictures and everybody is impressed with them, whether they mean
to be or not.” The sentiment is reinforcement for the primacy of images in the nineteenth century, coming from a woman whose book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was a best seller.

All of the images printed onto ceramics are derivatives of Josiah Wedgwood’s “Am I Not a Man, and a Brother?” meaning, individual portraits of enslaved men, women, and children are not of use here for these mass-produced English wares which were popular on both sides of the Atlantic. The human figures and the landscapes in which they are depicted are simplified down to basic format, form, and message: there are no individual or particular identities or places associated to the people represented. This is in contrast to portraits of enslaved men such as Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (1733) and Yarrow Mamout (1819), which retain Muslim identity through clothing or objects represented or the context of commissioning. While individualistic portraits could and did exist, Americans would have been much more familiar with the plethora of imagery of nameless enslaved Africans on their tea tables. Chains, broken chains, and Bibles were common symbols for these works, marginalizing Islam to non-existence in the world of the Christian American family. Echoes of Africa were romanticized with the symbols of bent palm trees and small huts. Biblical verses were intended to underscore the closeness of humanity, despite skin color. Koranic passages, unfamiliar, exotic, or worse, would have undermined the point of the images to elicit sympathy and empathy. The circa 1829-1845 portrait of a nameless but concerned enslaved woman holding a baby printed onto a bone china plate, surrounded by passages from the Bible, were serving up Victorian-era sentiments and idealizations about the sanctity of the family, and the role of all mothers.

In this sense, the *Portrait of Sengbe Pieh* is cut of the same cloth as these ceramics. His portrait replicates directly the same frontal figure with white cloth hanging over his shoulder as seen on the jug in the Washington and Lee digital exhibit. Like many ceramics which feature abolitionist images, they are accompanied by text either under or around the image, as Josiah Wedgwood’s question was, or on the reverse side, as the vase shows. And, here the image of Sengbe Pieh is similar—not in the oil on canvas portrait which is one of a kind, but, in the print image made of the painting made for wide circulation on both sides of the Atlantic. John Sartain’s mezzotint, titled *Cinque, The Chief of the Amistad Captives*, ensures that viewers know the identity of the man and that his fellows Africans were “captives.” He does not add anything to the print to highlight or suggest Muslim identity, relaying that the anti-slavery society stores and meetings where these prints were sold were comfortable with the image as it existed, and were not looking for anything more.

One of the strong points about “Breaking the Chains” exhibit at Washington and Lee University is the inclusion of two contemporary ceramic works, one featuring a portrait of Colin Kaepernick in the kneeling position due to his protest against racial injustice and systemic oppression of African Americans in the policing and legal system. In the context of the second decade of 21st century America, rumors that Kaepernick had converted to Islam arose in an environment of intolerance and racism espoused by those on the political right. Kaepernick, a quarterback who remains a “free agent” today, refused to cut his hair, and became the target of counter-protests. Occurring simultaneously with the initiation of the Black Lives Matter movement, artist Michelle Erickson of Hampton, Virginia, placed a well-known image of Kaerpneck on a mass-produced Starbucks mug, with bold black lettering
on the inside reading “Don’t Tread on Me.” On the reverse of the mug, is an image of a kneeling slave from the abolitionists’ visual image play book.

Washington and Lee’s “Breaking the Chains” digital exhibit includes high-resolution images of ceramics but also offers a six-minute video featuring three objects, and a longer thirty-minute presentation to give more context to the whole. Although the exhibit—both in the images presented and the textual information and context provided—is short, the transatlantic abolitionist message viewed through ceramics, prints, and the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh leaves little to no room for any connection to Muslim identity in art or visual culture in order to become a palatable avenue through which a Christianized identity could be consumed, for those with such sympathies.

Part 3:
Crossroads at the Metropolitan Museum of Art [Image 8: screen shot]
https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2020/crossroads

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, struggling to celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2020 during the pandemic, created a curator’s digital background tour of the new exhibit “Crossroads”—an installation almost completed by the time of the Museum’s closing due to Covid-19 on March 13, 2020. The modus operandi behind the “Crossroads” title is the ability of the museum’s curatorial teams to work with each other outside of departments, meeting, as it were, at the crossroads of the museum’s 19th century building: behind the Great Hall, the axis point where pathways through the first floor of the museum connect. A special platform
in the center of the Medieval Hall was constructed with different spaces and levels for the gathering of objects from the four corners of the museum.

The strength of this thematic based exhibit—which is considered a first for the museum—are the new relationships curators claimed brought new insights to their work. A European decorative arts curator working on the same exhibit with a curator of African art, for example. To group objects, the curatorial teams created a series of themes, of which “Power and Piety” is the first. In this presentation of material, works of art from the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Europe, offer comparative possibilities that seemingly never end. In their background digital tour video, available on the museum’s YouTube page, curators discussed the dual selection of objects of particular interest to this essay: two wooden sculptures, one a standing sculpture of an African Magus figure (one of the Three Kings from the Biblical story), and a Male Figure with Raised Arms, made by Mali’s Dogon culture. The concept of interest to the curators is the action of the artwork as “intermediary” between worlds. The Magus represents connections between Europe, Africa and the East, while the Dogon figure is a go-between the spiritual realm and the earthly one. The Magus figure is a large figure placed on a Christian altar, wearing Medieval-styled clothes of a courtier and pointed toe slouching boots, but also a head covering not unlike that worn by Ayuba Suleiman Diallo in his 1733 portrait. The color of his skin and the head covering denote his African and Islamic provenance and according to the museum, he represents “an imagined African ruler and a reverent, wise man from a distant world.”

Although no portraits are featured in “Power and Piety” consider the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh both as an intermediary object and a crossroads object in and of itself. The Portrait of Sengbe Pieh is the only American-made portrait of an enslaved African man to travel the transatlantic in two directions. The man himself was forced West and returned East, but the portrait, painted in the West also traveled East. First in the form of prints sold in England, and more than a century later, by becoming the inspiration and the source for numerous works of public art in Sierra Leone. In these many works of art, both old and new, the Portrait of Sengbe Pieh has always been less about his identity as a Muslim, and more as a popular heroic figure who threw off the chains of enslavement for a public already well-trained to accept specific types of abolitionist images. In the contemporary representations of Pieh—in murals, sculpture and on Sierra Leonean paper money—faith and Muslim identity, even for the capital city of Freetown, which is majority Muslim, is not what commissioning agents or artists were after.\(^\text{15}\) The Portrait of Sengbe Pieh is an intermediary for the Anglo-American transatlantic abolitionist world he was created for. The image of the portrait remains that more than 175 later. New Haven and Freetown created a “Sister City” relationship to highlight these “crossroads.”

Part 4:

@PeterBrathwaite [Image 9: screen shot]

\(\text{15}\) See, for example, Paul Basu, “Recasting the National Narrative, Postcolonial Pastiche and the New Sierra Leone Peace and Culture Monument,” *African Arts* 46, Number 3 (Autumn 2013): 10-23.

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What’s a British baritone doing in an essay about Black Muslim Portraiture of the transatlantic era? Brathwaite is just one of many people around the world who took the “Getty Challenge”—that is, at the end of March 2020, the Getty Museum “based in Los Angeles, working globally” asked their social distancing/homebound audiences to,

Choose your favorite artwork

Find three things lying around your house

Recreate the artwork with those items

That’s it. Of course, people needed to tag their recreated artworks with the hashtags #gettymuseumchallenge or #gettychallenge in order to connect to the Getty community of followers. The proposition went viral—the original Tweet liked 26,000 times—and anyone with access to the Internet and an imagination began living out these recreations in their domestic spaces. Every artwork is up for grabs, with many attracted to the work of Hieronymous Bosch—the stranger the better for the Covid-19 atmosphere, it seems. But some took the Getty Museum Challenge as an opportunity to address the lack of representation in art, society, and museums. Others worked outside of the Getty sphere, doing their own recreations, such as Maxine Heffman, whose “Historic Corrections” is a photographic series recreating Flemish portraits using contemporary women of color as the sitter. Peter Brathwaite, a baritone and an actor who sometimes writes for the Guardian and presents on BBC Radio 3, began a similar project, but of black men.
Since April 10, 2020 Brathwaite has been elaborately recreating #blackportraiture, with a focus on male subjects. Brathwaite says he began the project because he wasn’t seeing portraits with black sitters, but once he began searching for these portraits, he found the #gettychallenge the perfect way to introduce others to what he was finding—and that is, historic portraits in Britain of black people did not, in his words, “start with the Windrush era” but dated at least to the Tudor and Renaissance period, and in this, his viewers have been surprised. His recreations include Black Charley of Norwich by John Dempsey; Portrait of an African (historically thought to be Olaudah Equiano) by Allan Ramsey; Portrait of a Youth in an Embroidered Vest by Marie-Victoire Lemoine; Young Negro with a Bow by Hyacinth Rigaud; and Portrait of an African Man by Jan Mostaert. Although Brathwaite doesn’t go into art historical discourse for each painting—Twitter allows each post to number only 240 characters—he does provide enough information for viewers to do their own searches, and he finds that many do. Brathwaite does not make the distinction between black portraits and black Muslim portraits, but it is likely that many of his recreations are portraits of black Muslims during the long era of the transatlantic slave trade. That many of the subjects in the portraits have no longer have names attached—unlike the portraits featured in this special journal issue—adds another layer of provenance research and work that is akin to the archaeologists and historians working out the identities of the enslaved on Virginia plantations. In the past, the misconception about the lack of archival documentation available to consult gave permission for museums and historic houses to leave the stories of black identity out of interpretation and exhibition. That attitude has changed, but these portraits—both in the papers presented in this journal and in the selection made by @PeterBrathwaite—act as a foundation on to which to further build familiarity with the presence of Black Muslim Identity in the era of transatlantic slavery and well beyond.

Conclusion

Following Dora Mekouar’s assessment that “[The] narrow understanding of both Muslims and Africans led to the widespread belief that the two identities could not overlap and helped hasten the erasure of Muslim African slaves from the historical record,” it is possible to see this methodology applied equally to portraiture of the transatlantic slave era. Sengbe Pieh’s Muslim identity was not useful to the Amistad Committee, the trial, and the abolitionist missionary focused cause, so it was discarded in favor of a visual language espoused by a country not yet one hundred years old. That the United States was building Ancient Classical temples for their state houses—including New Haven’s (1827-1830)—in the same era should not be forgotten.

In a different light, Mekouar and many of the museums and scholars mentioned here do not give attention to the possibility of Black Muslim Portraiture of the free black community during the era of transatlantic slavery. Peter Brathwaite’s selections do include portraits of free blacks, but he does not differentiate between the enslaved and the free community in his choices, leaving viewers to try and discover this knowledge on their own. Drawing back the curtain to expose the complex history and differing uses of Black Muslim Portraiture of the transatlantic slave trade era helps illuminate the lives and communities of people of color, tens of thousands who remain nameless.