



A gallery featuring 17th-century Dutch and Flemish art at the Harvard Art Museums.

In April 2021, the Harvard Art Museums co-presented the four-part virtual program *Art Museums and the Legacies of the Dutch Slave Trade: Curating Histories, Envisioning Futures*.

Presented along with the Center for Netherlandish Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harvard University’s Department of History of Art and Architecture, the program considered how museums and their collections—themselves so often enmeshed with histories of slavery, colonization, and white supremacy—can be mobilized to achieve racial justice.

Between the 16th and the late 19th century, Europeans and Americans enslaved an estimated 18 million African men, women, and children, forcing their migration across the globe. Although the Dutch were formative in this system, their involvement in the slave trade has been minimized in art historical scholarship and in art museums. As more individuals and institutions seek to put forward more complete narratives of this past, the voices and accomplishments of the enslaved, formerly enslaved, and their descendants have complicated and challenged conventional colonial histories. To help amplify these efforts, the Art Museums and the Legacies of the Dutch Slave Trade conference brought together museum professionals, academics, activists, and artists to discuss the possibilities for deploying—and reimagining—art museums as a space to grapple with the past and its reverberations in the present.

As a group of emerging art historians with research interests in 17th-century Dutch art, 19th-century American art, and contemporary Black feminist art—fields connected to one another by the transatlantic slave trade—we, the program organizers, had long been conscious of the need to address the histories of slavery and colonization that afforded the creation and collecting of much of the art we study today. The idea for the program, however, arose in 2019, when the Amsterdam Museum [announced](#) that it would no longer use the term “golden age” to characterize 17th-century Dutch history, in recognition of the injustices of the period, slavery chief among them.

While this announcement was met with varied responses within and beyond the field of Dutch art studies, a number of museums had already mounted or were actively planning exhibitions that dealt directly with connections between Dutch art and the slave trade. Among these exhibitions were the Mauritshuis’s *Shifting Image—In Search of Johan Maurits* (2019), the Rembrandt House Museum’s *Here: Black in Rembrandt’s Time* (2020), and the Rijksmuseum’s *Slavery* (2021). Our program sought to bring together the individuals involved in these efforts, and in yet other undertakings at Dutch and American institutions, for conversation and to share their work with an international audience.

Then came the spring and summer of 2020, when the global pandemic closed borders and institutions, and the murders of [Breonna Taylor](#), [George Floyd](#), and [so many other Black women and men](#) brought into sharp focus the long history of racial violence and systemic racism in, and beyond, the United States. While a conference cannot heal such wounds, we felt a new sense of urgency to address the omissions and the white supremacist narratives within museums and art history by creating a platform for international and interdisciplinary exchange focused on slavery’s ever-present legacies.

To foster dialogue across traditional scholarly boundaries, we made a point of gathering individuals who might not regularly converse and collaborate but whose work shares a focus on chattel slavery: a contemporary artist, a writer, and various specialists of European, American, and African art and history, among them museum professionals and those who carry out their work beyond museum walls. These speakers offered their perspectives on a wide range of topics, from the limitations of material and textual sources to the very real experience of racism in art museums and other predominantly white spaces.

We are pleased to share video recordings of the program’s four sessions, not only to archive and increase access to the proceedings, but also to advance and broaden the discourse—incorporating ever more voices and perspectives—on legacies of the slave trade and on possibilities for creating a just future.

The recordings are available on Vimeo at the links below:

[Part 1: Exhibiting Slavery and Representing Black Lives](#)

[Part 2: De-centering/Re-centering: Forging New Museological and Historical Narratives](#)

[Part 3: History, Memory, and Legacy: Jamaica Kincaid, Rosana Paulino, and Cheryl Finley in Conversation](#)

[Part 4: The Work of Objects: Interpretation Within and Beyond Museum Walls](#)

Art Museums and the Legacies of the Dutch Slave Trade organizers:

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