



An introduction to the exhibition for teachers



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**Hunterian
Museum**
at the
Royal College of Surgeons



About the exhibition

'A Visible Difference: skin, race and identity 1720-1820'

What do we see when we look at one another?

Curator's introduction



What do we see when we look at one another? What aspects of a person help us decide who they are? What assumptions do we make about identities based on colour and body image? This exhibition is about visible differences. It explores the representations of black African children and adults living with rare skin pigmentation conditions in the 18th and early 19th centuries. It uncovers their stories, looks at how their conditions were interpreted and the ways in which they were described and displayed.

Approaches to skin and body differences in the 18th century were varied. The medical community attempted to categorise people as specimens – examples of how human beings had deviated from what was considered normal. For the public, curiosity about body difference became a form of entertaining spectacle. People went to fairs and shows to view giants, dwarves, fat people, spotted children and black albinos, all of whom were considered wonders of nature.

How much of this has changed? Are we as curious about visible differences now as people were then? What is it like to live with similar conditions today? These are timely questions to ask in our diverse modern society, and the exhibition's themes offer young people an opportunity to develop new ways of looking at the past; to gain a better understanding of the power of imagery; and to critically address their own views about difference - acknowledging how these have been shaped by history. Engaging with these issues reveals the complexity of cultural identity yet enables us to make connections with our own experiences of living with a visible difference.

Temi Odumosu, Exhibition Curator

Key themes in the exhibition

Theme 1: Race and Difference

The exhibition explores a range of classification theories developed to explain the similarities and differences between Africans and Europeans. Carl Linnaeus believed that humans comprised of four distinct races - a theory known as polygenism – where Europeans and Africans were presented as extreme opposites. Petrus Camper believed that racial differences could be measured, for example, in the angle of the face. John Hunter also classified humans and animals. He devised his own system, known as 'animal oeconomy', for ordering the specimens in his collection.

Theme 2: The black and white African

Key questions raised in the exhibition are: What happened when views on racial distinctiveness were challenged? What happened when the body of the black African became white?

A number of abstract ideas were given as explanations for conditions such as piebaldism and albinism. Some thought that the white patches on piebald skin were a result of 'maternal impression' (e.g. that the mother of a child with piebaldism saw a spotted dog while pregnant), others suggested the skin was a result of relationships between black and white skinned

people. The exhibition examines representations of people with these skin pigment disorders, and the facts and myths that surround them, including:

- **George Alexander Gratton.** George was born with piebaldism on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent in 1808. At just 15 months old he was transported to Bristol and delivered into the care of travelling showman John Richardson. Described as 'the Beautiful Spotted Negro Boy' George was exhibited for show around England as a 'live curiosity piece' displayed in the intervals of plays and other entertainments. George died in 1813, aged just four years and nine months. When Richardson died 26 years later he was buried in the same vault as George.
- **Mary Sabina.** Mary was born to black African slaves on a Jesuit plantation in South America in 1736. Not much is known about her life. Although she never came to Britain paintings of her did and her image became iconic as an illustration of piebaldism.
- **John Bobey.** Known as the 'Spotted Indian', John exhibited himself at Bartholomew Fair in London in 1795. His parents were black African slaves in Jamaica. When he was 12 he was sent to Liverpool and was christened John Primrose Richardson Bobey. He was later bought and exhibited by a showman named Clarke. Bobey appears to have gained his freedom and married an Englishwoman.
- **Mrs Newsham.** An albino black African woman, Mrs Newsham also exhibited herself at Bartholomew Fair in 1795 and was known as the 'White Negress'. Born in Jamaica, she was sent as a gift from her owner to his son in London. She was sold on to two men who exhibited her across England. She continued to exhibit herself after she gained her freedom and met and married an Englishman, with whom she had six children.

Theme 3: Expeditions to new lands

The 18th century was an era of unprecedented travel and discovery. The paintings, stories and objects that were created and collected on these expeditions provided many Europeans with their first exposure to new cultures. Commerce also influenced perceptions of race. Sugar and tobacco were two lucrative commodities whose production was dependent on slaves, and the slave trade brought Europeans into closer contact with black Africans. The idea that Europeans and Africans were different was used by both proponents and opponents of slavery.

Creative partnerships projects

An important element of the exhibition is creative work made through artist partnerships with schools in West London. The results of these collaborations can be found both at the exhibition and on-line at: www.rcseng.ac.uk/museums/exhibitions/exhibiting_difference/schools



Creative responses to the exhibition created by year 8 pupils at Henry Compton Secondary School working with artist Gayna Pelham

Planning a Visible Difference project after December 2007

The exhibition runs until the end of December 2007. Beyond this the Hunterian Museum remains an excellent source for investigating race and difference. Key items, such as the portraits of Mary Sabina, 'a Malay Woman' and 'Mai' will remain on display in the Museum. Other exhibits will be accessible via the online catalogue 'Surgicat', or through the project website.