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Permanent Exhibition of the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool

The *International Slavery Museum* (ISM) occupies the third floor of the *Merseyside Maritime Museum* building located in the Albert Dock, Liverpool. It is one of eight public museums managed by *National Museums Liverpool* (the largest collection of national museums in Britain, outside of London). The ISM's opening on August 23rd 2007, coincided with commemorative anniversaries on three levels; August 23rd is the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, this is also recognised locally in Liverpool through the marking of Slavery Remembrance Day (since 1999) in which a libation ceremony (traditional African ceremony honouring the ancestors) takes place, and 2007 was the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade Act (marked nationally). The ISM also sits within a longer local museological context, and a permanent gallery (the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery) had been open in the basement of the Merseyside Maritime Museum since October 1994. The ISM's narrative, structure and content represent three major themes: (1) a focus on the experience of African people (including agency and resistance), (2) racism as a legacy of transatlantic slavery, and (3) a focus on global contemporary human rights abuses, issues and campaigns against them. Within this over-arching thematic structure, however, Liverpool itself has become somewhat lost – and within the rising prominence of the third theme, contemporary human rights issues have at points obscured links the museum otherwise makes quite strongly between historic slavery and contemporary racism.

The permanent galleries of the ISM are structured into three major chronological sections; »Life in West Africa«, »Enslavement and The Middle Passage«, and »Legacy«. Additionally, there is a new permanent room following the Legacy section called »The Campaign Zone«, a community space within this, and a separate education space called »The Anthony Walker Education Centre«, named after a black teenager from Liverpool who was murdered in a racist attack in 2005.

The use of Walker's name, and memory, encapsulates the links the museum makes between historic slavery and contemporary racism. Additionally, both – the latter end of the Legacy section and The Campaign Zone – host temporary exhibitions which foreground contemporary »slavery« and human rights abuses as a major theme of the museum.

The structure of the ISM creates a narrative which emphasises the experiences of Africans and people of African descent both historically, from the African continent prior to enslavement (»Life in West Africa«-gallery), the experience of enslavement in the Americas (»Enslavement and the Middle Passage«-gallery), and through to more recent historical experiences of African-descended people. This focus stands as a challenge to the ways in which this history has previously been represented in Britain, having overwhelmingly been dominated by themes concerning the largely dehumanized economic histories of trade, which focused more on numbers, profits and statistics than the experiences of African people, or the more comforting moral victories of white British abolitionists.

Visitors to the ISM enter either via the lift or stairs, immediatelty meeting with objects and designs that emphasise themes of African agency and legacies of transatlantic slavery. Between the lift and the »Life in West Africa«-gallery stands the »Freedom Wall«, a grey stone wall bearing quotes concerning slavery and freedom, including a quote from former slave William Prescott, »They will remember that we were sold, but not that we

were strong. They will remember that we were bought, but not that we were brave«, used in altered form in much of the ISM's publicity material. The wall has several TV screens which play videos of academics and public figures discussing their views on freedom and slavery. This creates lively multi-media partitions between exhibits, contrasting with the static silent atmosphere of more traditional museums. Before entering the Life in West Africa gallery, the visitor passes the »Freedom Sculpture«, made from recycled materials and flashing lights, and commissioned by the ISM and Christian Aid in the run up to the 2007 Bicentenary. The sculpture, created by Haitian artists, is a response to continuing inequalities experienced as a legacy of slavery in Haiti, the site of a successful slave revolt at the end of the eighteenth century.

The »Life in West Africa«-gallery is an intentionally quiet and calm space, the only noise here is the artificial relay of crickets, or the buzz of conversation from visitors. The gallery utilizes artefacts and simulacra to show the rich and diverse cultural life of the people of West Africa before the period of transatlantic slavery. The gallery seeks to counter previous representations which foreground the history of Africa as starting from the moment of European intervention. The sophistication of African societies is stressed, through political organization, technology and cultural life. The space includes a »hyper-real« mock-up of an Igbo compound, large enough (deliberately) for small school and community groups. This is a »useful« space within the museum, and is frequently a site for drumming sessions and classes, storytelling, or simply a space to sit and reflect.

However, whilst this gallery aims to highlight Africa before colonialism, the space, housed within a museum, an arguably »colonial« institution itself, carries its own historical baggage. The artefacts are displayed somewhat a-historically, cabinets *curiously* arranged based on the material available, largely already owned by National Museums Liverpool, itself having grown from Liverpool's Victorian museums and institutions. Further, the image of Africa presented is a generalized and simplified picture, decontextualised from broader histories of the continent, and indeed the long history and impact of European contact and trade. Whilst the involvement of African elites within the enslavement process is noted within the museum, this aspect does not receive sustained commentary. However, this is part of a broader complication in the study and representation of transatlantic slavery. Museums, and especially the ISM with its long institutional history and local awareness of debates over this subject in Liverpool, are well aware of the public responses to this history that seek to use the involvement of African people to *justify* or *excuse* European systems of transatlantic slavery within a bland fog of generalized blame. However, in glossing over such difficult points, African agency is itself diminished; African people are again passified through a dominant focus on what *Europeans* were doing. Crucially, within the overall narrative of the ISM, Africa is largely left at the beginning of the story. As the visitor moves throughout the rest of the museum, the ongoing impact of transatlantic slavery on the African continent, is not the focus. The story follows enslaved African people as they move across the Atlantic Ocean, Africa left behind for both them and the visitor as they move into the next gallery.

Upon entering the Enslavement and Middle Passage gallery, the visitor is met with far more raucous noise; a layering of voices from videos and »The Immersion«, a creative film representation of the Middle Passage, and of course, any further noise from engaged visitors. Actors tell stories as »slaves«, from narratives and first-hand accounts, injecting prominent visual and audio representations of the experience of enslaved Africans into the museum space. »The Immersion« dominates this gallery, in its central location (the film is projected inside

a circular walled enclosure which visitors can enter on either side, but equally could avoid entering altogether) and through the noise of the film. The film itself includes blurred and fractured images of black actors, bodily fluids; blood and vomit, jarring screeching sounds which through their ambiguity could be the screams of human beings, or the scraping mechanics of the slave ship on its voyage through the Middle Passage – the horrific journey from Africa to the Americas, and the symbolic site given central significance by this video, and by museum representations of the history of transatlantic slavery more generally. Outside the enclosure, the history of slavery continues. On one side a much calmer, more emotionally »neutral« depiction of a plantation is given through diorama, small toy-like slave quarters sit amongst the model landscape of the plantation fields, illuminated by spotlight to link the appropriate panel text with its respective section of the model. The other side of »The Immersion« has more traditional curatorial content; cabinets with artefacts (shackles and chains – the staple artefacts of so many slavery exhibitions), paintings owned by the museums (of slave traders and slave ships), and other items associated with the »practicalities« of the trade.

There are opportunities to engage with thematic contradictions of slavery; the meticulous documentation of slaves as cargo, against the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage, the dignified portraits of elite slave traders (»good Christian me«), against the human realities of their wealth; the mutilated, tortured bodies of the enslaved.

The narrative that is promoted in the next section of the museum is one of moral progress. The »Legacy«-gallery has on one side a timeline that maps significant moments from slavery to freedom: from early colonial conquests and transatlantic routes, through slave rebellions and the progress of the abolition movement. The chronology of the timeline marches forward, through racial discrimination and civil rights movements of the twentieth century. The focus of racial discrimination as a »legacy« of transatlantic slavery remains largely on American soil in this section of the ISM, an emphasis on the African American experience (videos of Martin Luther King and the display of a Ku Klux Klan outfit). Much of the »Legacy«-section of the gallery beyond the story of American civil rights appears as a work in progress; the end sections of this gallery are more sparsely occupied with content, and the impression is that this part of the museum will change over time. The »Black Achiever's Wall« is one example of this; photographs of black historical and contemporary figures of note are added regularly. The wall stands as a challenge to potential criticisms that the museum promotes negative black victimhood. In part this has also been challenged by the ISM's use of narratives of black agency; the importance placed on enslaved people within the abolition movement, in slave revolts and other forms of resistance. However, the »Black Achiever's Wall« brings positive representation up to the present day, beyond slavery and across a diverse range of occupations, skills, talents and achievements.

Through the »international« focus of the ISM, Liverpool itself becomes a little lost. There are small threads running through the museum about the city's part in transatlantic slavery (which was immense, the port came to dominate the trade by the end of the eighteenth century), and these are linked through colour – through red text panels. The most sustained discussion of Liverpool and slavery, however, is achieved through street signs in this last section of the main gallery. Most of these relate to streets in Liverpool named after slave traders and are interactive exhibits; visitors spin plastic cased street signs around to »discover« their connections to slavery. Following this there are a few panels outlining the histories of some Liverpool black families, some stretching back to transatlantic slavery directly, others linked to the city through on-going trade

with West Africa or the Americas. For a long time this was the only sustained link made in the ISM to the Liverpool-born black community (beyond the naming of the Anthony Walker Centre), the oldest settled black community in the country. However, there is currently a new exhibition, seven years after the opening of the museum, on the Liverpool black experience, though it is unclear whether this will be made permanent.

The ISM's narrative ends in the future. The recent addition of the »Campaign Zone«, an extra side room with a series of changing temporary exhibitions on human rights issues, exploitation and »contemporary slavery« emphasizes the museum itself as a »campaigning institution«. Like abolitionists gone by, the ISM seeks moral justice through visual campaigns and discursive rhetoric. These temporary exhibitions lead off the »Legacy«-section, suggesting that these very diverse forms of injustice in the present day can be understood as »legacies« of transatlantic slavery in the same way anti-black racism can. The potential problem with such an interpretation is that engagement with one can mean a side-stepping of engagement with the other. Whilst the museum has followed and emphasised the black experience as intimately connected to European oppression; from pre-colonial Africa, slavery and more recent experiences of discrimination, it is left in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and disjointed from these final »concluding« displays which focus on victims of sex-trafficking, child labour, and a varied array of »exploitation« around the world.

The ISM is perhaps reacting to criticisms surrounding progressive narratives of abolition which have otherwise dominated representations of slavery, and is trying not to historicise acts of atrocity to a sanitized »past« in favour of a seemingly better present. However, the visitor leaves the museum with morally comforting and largely de-racialised narratives of contemporary abolitionist rhetoric; that the fight against »slavery« continues. But »slavery« as a word here refers to any number of very varied human rights abuses across the globe. It has lost its specificity and connection to a transatlantic context, to specific legacies affecting people of African descent and, indeed, to Liverpool's own history.