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Yale Center for British Art redisplay controversial painting of Elihu Yale and enslaved child

The Yale Center for British Art has redisplayed a painting of the University's namesake after investigating the identity of an enslaved Black child depicted in the portrait.

TAMAKI KUNO & GAMZE KAZAKOGLU | 2:22 AM, OCT 27, 2021

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Courtesy of YCBA

After a year-long investigation, the Yale Center for British Art has put the controversial 18th-century group painting of Elihu Yale — an early benefactor and namesake of the University — back up on its walls.

Completed around 1719 and believed to have been painted at Yale's house in London, the painting portrays Yale alongside members of his family and an enslaved Black boy with a silver collar and padlock around his neck. The painting was removed from the gallery a year ago following feedback from visitors and staff on the distressing depiction of an enslaved child, according to the Elihu Yale Portrait Research Team. It was replaced with a work by Titus Kaphar, a New Haven-based African American sculptor and painter. Kaphar's piece reframed the painting, focusing solely on the child as an individual, and removing the collar present in the original painting.

Since the painting was removed from the gallery's walls, the YCBA has conducted an [investigation](#) on its history and the individuals within its frame. Researchers have discovered the painting dates between 1719 and 1721. The child it depicts was likely born around 1712, and brought to England around the age of five. The researchers [searched](#) baptism, marriage and burial records, but were unable to recover the child's name. Still, the painting, with additional context and a new [name](#) that highlights the enslaved child, was put back on display earlier this month.

"The painting [of Yale] is ugly both in meaning and aesthetics and deserves the same treatment as the stained-glass window [smashed by Corey Menafee](#)," said Sean O'Brien, visiting fellow at the Information Society Project at Yale Law School. "I echo the sentiment of Titus Kaphar in his piece 'Enough About You' — perhaps if the original portrait were transformed to honor the enslaved child in it, there might be some good to come from that."

Kaphar [told Artnet](#) in 2019 that his aim behind the piece was to "imagine a life" for the child, with "desires, dreams, family, thoughts, hopes" that the original 18th-century artist — thought to be a Dutchman active in Britain named John Verelst — was likely indifferent to. "Enough About You" parodies the original painting of Elihu Yale by crumpling up the depictions of Yale and his family and putting a frame around the enslaved child's face. For six months, Kaphar's painting hung in the exact spot the group portrait previously hung, but as of May it has been returned to its owners.

In August 2020, two months before the Yale painting was removed from the gallery wall and replaced with Kaphar's, museum Director Courtney J. Martin formed the Elihu Yale Portrait Research Team to identify the enslaved boy of African descent depicted in the work. The Team consists of YCBA staff members Eric James, Abigail Lamphier, Lori Misura, David K. Thompson and Edward Town.

"The recovery of someone's name is a basic step in any attempt to work against the dehumanizing acts of marginalization and enslavement," the team told the News. "Hopefully this work will spark more conversations about what institutions can do to reckon with these types of objects and inspire more close looking at collections in an effort to contextualize and better understand these paintings."

According to the team, the research entailed establishing the painting's date of creation, author and subjects. A significant breakthrough was made through scientific analysis of the painting undertaken by members of the Center's Painting Conservation team and colleagues from the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at Yale.

Together, they narrowed down the painting's date of creation and aided in the identification of other subjects in its frame. The identification of Dudley North — an English merchant, politician and economist who married Yale's daughter and is also depicted in the painting — also allowed the Center to embark on a search through his personal papers, which have survived in a manuscript archive in Britain.

The team consulted with a pediatrician and discovered that the enslaved boy appears to be about 10 years old. The curatorial investigators noted that records from the

early 18th-century demonstrate the recurring pattern of shipping boys of African descent below 10 years of age to Britain for them to serve as domestic servants in affluent households.

Although slavery was not legal in Britain at the time of the painting's creation, many Black individuals were brought into the country in a similar servitude to slavery, given that the country had a significant investment in the transatlantic slave trade. The child in the painting wears a silver collar on his neck, reflecting the [common practice](#) in British society of making captives wear either silver, steel or brass collars.

Despite some historical discoveries, the research process posed challenges for the team. Neither personal nor private papers of either Lord James Cavendish, who owned the painting, or Elihu Yale, who may have commissioned the painting, are in sufficient shape to reconstruct the composition of their respective households. Records pertaining to enslaved people from this period are scant, if existent at all, which adds to the difficulty of tracing the child's life.

In part because of the loss of his personal papers, it is not clear to what extent Yale profited directly from involvement in the Indian or Atlantic slave trades, according to [research](#) done by Teanu Reid GRD '23 and Town as part of Yale's broader study into its ties to slavery.

"While it remains unclear if Yale owned this enslaved child, Yale's status and wealth were nonetheless reinforced by his presence," Reid and Town [wrote](#). "Additionally, there is no doubt that Elihu Yale was comfortable having his portrait made alongside figures who were demonstrably enslaved. His relatives in New Haven were slave holders; the company he worked for oversaw slave-shipping in the Indian Ocean; and even in London, where the law did not make provision for existence of chattel slaves, Yale and his sons-in-laws chose to have their portrait made alongside an enslaved child over whom they would have claimed ownership."

According to the research team, the investigation into the painting's context is one of many similar initiatives across the cultural sector in which institutions allocate resources to better understand marginalized and neglected histories. Portraits in Western art that depict children of African or Indian heritage fall into this category, as "historically their presence has barely been acknowledged and rarely been the topic of scholarly enquiry," the team added.

"Emotional responses to the painting and what it depicts have certainly been a motivating force, and have added to the sense of urgency and importance of this research," the team said. "Individually and collectively, there is a feeling that the work undertaken thus far has been worthwhile but there is a strong acknowledgement that the work needs to be sustained and built upon by others."

For the Elihu Yale Portrait Research Team, the painting's public display raises awareness about the child and may encourage others to contribute to the search for his identity. The long-term plan for the display of this group portrait is still under discussion and will be shaped by the feedback that visitors can leave via the [Center's website](#).

Edward Rugemer, associate professor of African American studies and history, said the painting should remain on display to allow the University to reckon with its history, as opposed to hiding from it.

"The alternative is not to display the painting," Rugemer said. "And it seems to me that if the University decides not to display the painting, then the University is enchanting to its dimension of legacy. I think especially today, with race and racism playing such an important part in national discourse, Yale needs to come to terms with [the fact] that one of its founders was involved in slavery."

Rugemer also said that Elihu Yale is not the most obvious choice to be blamed for his involvement in slavery, as “there are many Yalies involved in gaining wealth from slavery.”

O’Brien, who previously penned an [opinion piece](#) entitled “Yale Must Change Its Name,” wrote in an email to the News that “Elihu Yale’s legacy is a stark reminder of a horrific and traumatic past that should not be forgotten.”

“However, Elihu himself should never be honored or lend his namesake to any institution that values its community and abhors racism,” O’Brien added. “Though another year has passed, Yale has still not shed the name of Elihu the slavemaster.”

YCBA currently has a small display that presents some of the research undertaken alongside a selection of works. There is also a survey on the YCBA’s website to hear the public’s thoughts on the painting.



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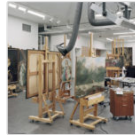
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