

Yinka Shonibare (b.1962) Mr and Mrs Andrews Without their Heads



**Key facts:**

- **Date:** 1998
- **Size:** 165 x 570 x 254 cm
- **Materials:** Installation of two life-size fiberglass mannequins and dog, painted metal bench, gun, dog, Dutch wax printed cotton costumes on armatures
- **Location:** National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
- **Nationality:** British-Nigerian
- **Scope of work for Pearson A Level:** Art & Identity



Subject Matter: Yinka Shonibare restaged an iconic early masterpiece by English eighteenth century artist Thomas Gainsborough. Read the information on the National Gallery website to find out about the original small scale oil dynastic portrait c. 1750.  
<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/thomas-gainsborough-mr-and-mrs-andrews>.

Compare and contrast the two images:

**Gainsborough**

**Shonibare**


Which of the following did Gainsborough's painting celebrate? Give evidence

Commemoration of the couple's marriage and their hopes for a family	
Propaganda for their wealth, status, taste and power	
Acquisition of land after newly enclosed land (Enclosures Acts) on adjoining properties, and their interest in agricultural developments	
An upper middle-class couple with aspirations to be gentry	
An aristocratic couple with titles and a seat in the House of Lords	
A couple who made their money from trade at a time when Britain was the largest slave trading nation in the world	

By removing the landscape background what does Shonibare concentrate on?

Do you think it is significant that Shonibare is unable to include the unfinished section on Mrs Andrew's lap?

Fill in the gendered elements of the portrait to complete the grid:

Mr Andrews	Mrs Andrews
	Slim figure with pale complexion, delicate features and tiny feet
Standing, vertical pose	
Looking out confidently at the viewer	
	Fashionable - pannier skirt in blue silk following the French fashion
	Soft pastel colours and emphasis on textures

Why do you think Shonibare chose this painting, from this particular period of history, to appropriate and satirically restage?

Can you tell the colour of their skin in Shonibare's work?

Shonibare has removed the heads in his version of Mr and Mrs Andrews. What is the immediate impact of this?

How does it make you feel?

What is the head associated with (in contrast to the body)?

What event in European history does it remind you of?

The French Royal Family and many members of the aristocracy were guillotined in France after the French Revolution of 1789. The Andrews are not aristocratic as such. Why did Shonibare chose them to decapitate. What is he saying?

Style: Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* has figures painted in the rococo style, influenced by French art of the aristocracy, with a naturalistic landscape. Rococo is considered to be elegant, refined, delicate and decorative. This is particularly obvious in the complex design of the garden seat. How has Shonibare chosen to reinvent this style, which elements (composition, colour, light, form, line, space, scale, pattern and decoration) has he kept, and which has he changed?

What are the most decorative elements in the Gainsborough portrait? And Shonibare's version?



In 1553 Christ Church School in England was founded by King Edward VI with a distinctive uniform including yellow stockings (see below), and in 1555 the first enslaved Africans were brought to England. **Might this be why Shonibare has changed the colour scheme of Mr Andrews' stockings?**

### Biography

Yinka Shonibare MBE, who lives and works in London, calls himself a “*postcolonial hybrid*”. His nationality is British-Nigerian as he was born in London in 1962 to Nigerian parents, who returned to Lagos in 1965. He spoke Yoruba at home, and this is his ethnicity. Nigeria, in west Africa, was the creation of British imperialism but in 1960 it had become an independent country. Shonibare later returned to Britain to attend an exclusive boarding school, Wimbledon School of Art (briefly), Byam Shaw School of Art (now Central Saint Martin's College of Art & Design) and gained his MFA from Goldsmiths' College in 1991. His work is part of the European tradition. Yet he is part of the African diaspora, and hence according to Homi Bhabha's definition his work can be described as hybrid - it alludes to racial and cultural mixing as the legacy of imperialism, yet undermines the opposition of coloniser and colonised in the construction of identity.

Read this article on Shonibare's physical health: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/04/what-see-mirror-yinka-shonibare>

Does he identify as a differently-abled artist? Do you think there might be a biographical reason for his decision to make works where the head is removed at the neck? Give evidence.

Watch the *Brilliant Ideas* video (24:13), *Portraying the Sordid Shadow of Colonial History: Yinka Shonibare* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35aCFZW9cHo> for details of his life and work.

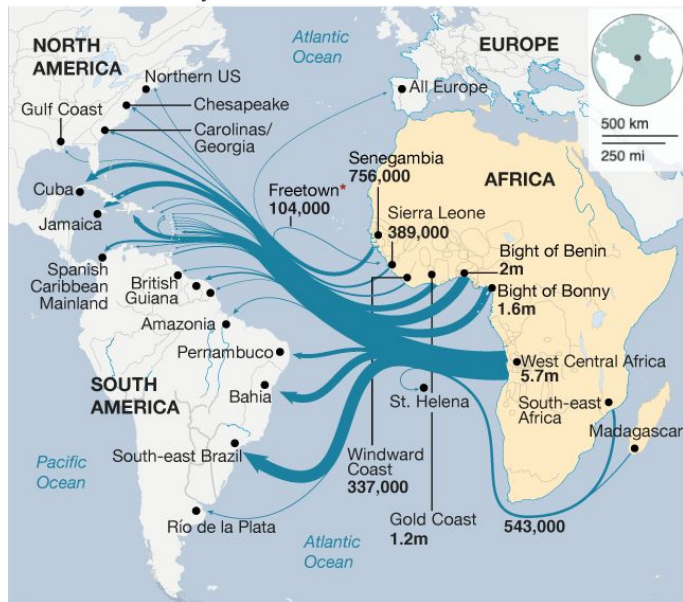
Shonibare has stated, “*My lineage within the Nigerian context is quite aristocratic. My great-great grandfather was a Nigerian chief; my father was a lawyer so I grew up in a fairly affluent situation. Because I didn't grow up feeling inferior to anyone, I couldn't really understand the hierarchy of race in this country, [England].*”

“*These members of aristocracy ... are objects of curiosity, in a kind of reverse way. So the fetish for me, as an African, is the eighteenth century European culture, whilst their fetish is the African mask!*”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Patton, Sharon F Foreword to *Yinka Shonibare MBE* by Rachel Kent, Robert Hobbs, Anthony Downey, and Yinka Shonibare MBE, 2008 p.14

## The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Captives taken from Africa to the Americas and Europe,  
16th-19th Century



\*Slaves recaptured and brought back to Africa

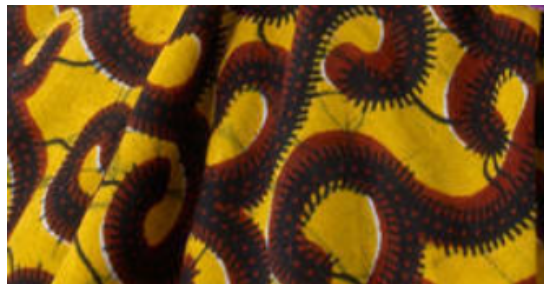
Boundaries as of 1750 shown

Source: Slave Voyages

BBC



## Materials, techniques and processes



This work is an installation, a large scale mixed-media construction. Shonibare has replicated Mr Andrews and his possessions, his wife, gun and faithful hunting dog, and an almost exact replica in metal of the impossibly carved Rococo style wooden original. Most significant is his use of cotton fabrics which he buys in Brixton market, to replicate eighteenth century fashions.

Read <https://smarthistory.org/yinka-shonibare-the-swing-after-fragonard-2/> and answer the following questions:

What textiles has he used since 1988?

What is batik?

How is the history of the fabric related to European imperialism?

Write down a quotation from Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019) about Shonibare's choice of fabrics?



Write a paragraph to outline how the history of these fabrics is enmeshed in the rise of the nation state, colonialism, and the darkest moments of history, to explain why they are Shonibare's signature element. (6 marks) Try use all these key terms - *nation state, nationality, ethnicity, colonialism, imperialism, empire, diaspora, trade, assimilation, cultural appropriation*.

### Historical Context of Global Post-Modern Culture

With late industrial capitalism, flexible specialisation in manufacturing, the world-wide web and increased speed of access to information, a new kind of globalisation started to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s which broke down old identities. Ideals within European culture, such as universal values, began to be regarded with suspicion and recognised as the views of a powerful white male elite; new voices emerged which were open to alternative points of view. This internationalism was a catalyst for the new diversity and eclecticism of Post-Modernist global culture. On the one hand it enabled artists to return to traditional art (after early 20th Modernism) - such as figuration and decoration, while at the same time deconstructing tradition. Post-Modern British artists include the Young British Artists (YBAs) and Shonibare's British-Nigerian contemporary Chris Ofili, who was the first African diasporic artist to win the Turner Prize, in 1998.

*'This has given the contemporary, post-1945 artist an inordinate, pluri-cultural range of styles, techniques and technologies, but has also created an uncertainty and indeterminacy about their use and their authority. Hence post-modernism is often associated with a revolt against authority and signification, and a tendency towards pastiche, parody, quotation, self-referentiality, and eclecticism.'*<sup>2</sup>.

**How does Shonibare fit into this view of a post-modern artist?**

He described his work as *'ethnicising the aristocracy - using those fabrics to produce aristocratic dress. I decided not to show the heads because I did not want my figures to have a fixed race, I wanted them to be metaphors rather than individuals.'*

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, in Bullock, Stallybrass and Trombley, The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought 1988 p. 671



For a more explicitly political work related to British imperialism see his *Scramble for Africa* 2003. The title alludes to the historical meeting in Berlin in 1884, at which the European powers attending divided up the “Dark Continent” among themselves. This meeting began the Scramble for Africa, under which Europe invaded and colonized Africa. There were no Africans present.

*“Basically, [the presentation of the figures] started as a joke, because I take working-class fabric from Africa and dress the aristocracy in those fabrics, then I take their heads off, but there is no blood or violence.”*

**WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES. Answer Yes/No to the following interpretations of *Mr and Mrs Andrews without their Heads* and give evidence for your view:**

Reflects Shonibare’s own ethnicity in a multi-racial, multi-cultural society	
Comments on the complexity of class distinctions in British society today and in the past	
Refers to the English taste for costume drama on the stage, on television and on film	
Mirrors the British love of nostalgia for the British Empire	

Tate website says: *‘the magpie-like creation of identity from various historical and cultural signifiers is a key theme in Shonibare’s work.’*

Yinka Shonibare is very successful. He was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2004, and in 2005 he was awarded the title Member of the British Empire (MBE) in recognition of his service to the nation. Only 6% of those nominated were from minority ethnic backgrounds in 2017, 4.2% were black in 2017. Famously John Lennon refused his MBE, as did Benjamin Zephaniah saying: *‘it reminds me of slavery, it reminds me of thousands of years of brutality’*. Why might Shonibare have not just accepted his, but have chosen to use it as a part of his full signature on his work?

*Mr and Mrs Andrews without their Heads* has been displayed at Victoria & Albert Museum in London. It has since been purchased by the National Gallery of Canada. How might the location of display affect the meaning of the work? (6 marks)

Compare this work with a second Shonibare: <https://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-yinka-shonibare-nelson%E2%80%99s-ship-bottle-2010>



Jean Honoré  
Fragonard *The  
Swing* 1769 oil  
on canvas 81 x  
64cm Wallace  
Collection

Yinka Shonibare  
MBE *The Swing*  
2001 Tate,  
London with  
life-size figures

