

## The Black Image in the English Gaze: Depictions of Blackness in English Art

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### Abstract:

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This paper analyzes English art to view the black experience in the eighteenth-century. English painters placed black people into their portraits in various stations of life throughout the period. The fashioning and placement of black people in English art renders for the reader some interpretation how English artists used the black body in their paintings. These images of blacks emerged from the imaginations of white artists; thusly these portraits and prints are not from the black perspective of English society, but a reflection of white attitudes. Therefore, a certain caution exists in any interpretation of the paintings. The inference about the implications of the paintings develops from the gaze of white artists. This paper suggests that an interpretation through English art does reveal something about the status of black people and shed light on satirical explanations of race and sex in eighteenth-century England.

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**Keywords:** William Hogarth, Black British Art, George Moorland, Richard Cosway, British Painters, Frances Villiers

In the minds of many white Londoners of the eighteenth century, blacks were very present in society. White Londoners in fact constructed their own images of blacks, which in many ways related to social reality of the day. Nonetheless, white cultural construction of blacks in London has its own reality and is important in understanding the lives of the minority population. The visual culture and blackness evolved from the cultural viewpoint of white artists. For the viewer of these images, this depiction of black life found its conceptualization from a white framework. The depicted images of blacks in London were created in the imaginations of whites; thus, these portraits and prints are not the black point of view of English society, but a reflection of white attitudes expressed in visual depictions.

Journalists, essayists, playwrights, and artists all contributed to the cultural image of blacks in multiple ways in eighteenth-century London. White representations of blacks provide the opportunity to explore how English society sought to deal with the population of black people. Englishmen expressed a litany of concerns and beliefs about the blacks they saw in their surroundings. Not all images projected fear or alarm; artists sometimes depicted blacks in everyday life and imagined situations as peaceful and helpful, but subservient. Whites often used black images to boost their own status and privilege.

Black people arrived in eighteenth-century England from various points of the globe. Their origins included Africa, the West Indies, and North and South America. They entered English society under the status of slaves, servants, freeman and even as celebrated individuals. Although their status varied, the majority entering were slaves; property of the returning Englishman who came back to the metropole as government officials, ship captains, and planters. London, Bristol, and Liverpool in their roles as ports of calls for the Atlantic Slave Trade provided entry points for black bodies as the commodities produced by enslaved African labor arrived on the English shore. The estimated numbers of the black population in the period postulated that 30,000 black people lived in London in the late eighteenth-century. The reaction to the black people in the English mind through the medium of images represents a unique to vantage point to examine the black presence in England. The white visual response to black people illuminates perceptions about this small yet visible population in English life. (Walvin, 1973, p. 46-49.)

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In most paintings the black is at the edge of the painting, which signaled their divide spatially from the white aristocratic family. There is a clear determination that the servant was not truly part of the family but did belong to them in the economic sense. Further, in these paintings there existed a sense of loneliness and humiliation of blacks in white aristocratic company. Blacks were often as foils, one's tallness in relation to the smallness of blacks and dark skin serve as mere reliefs and contrasts for white privilege. These paintings serve to remind the reader of dominance and inferiority and the unequal relationship between the black servant and white owner.

### William Hogarth

The discussion black images in eighteenth-century English art must begin with William Hogarth (1697-1764); a prolific painter whom oftentimes utilized blacks in his paintings and engravings. His work in the earlier part of the eighteenth century influenced artists who followed him. Hogarth's artistic vision embodied empathy for the English common people and attempted to project what destiny lay ahead for them. He asserted that he cared about the "nobodies," as he termed them, which became a central focus of his art (Dabydeen, 1987, p.11). Moreover, Hogarth decried the commercialism of English society, and his paintings reflected his rejection of material wealth as the norm of society.

William Hogarth began in the 1730s to paint a series called *A Harlot's Progress Plate I* (Figure 1), becoming one of the earliest English artists who presented on canvas the lives of common people in a compassionate description.



Figure 1 William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress Plate 1* (1732). © Trustees of the British Museum

*A Harlot's Progress* is a morality tale about the life of harlot. Hogarth used each image in the series to convey how the young innocent girl arrived in London and died after a series of events. The series told the story of Mary (or Moll) Hackabout, a simple country girl who arrives in London, seeking work, perhaps as a servant, who was drawn to prostitution, arrested and later dies of syphilis. Championing common people, the series centralizes a theme of characters possessing life, sharing a capacity for tragedy, suffering and redemption, while also insisting they were subjects of worthy of painting.

In *A Harlot's Progress*, Plate II (Figure 2), Moll causes a distraction by knocking over a table of tea, and a young black servant, in feathered turban, tea kettle in one hand, feigns surprise at the scene. The artist clothed the servant in an oriental style of dress, including a turban, using a motif that remained common throughout the eighteenth century.



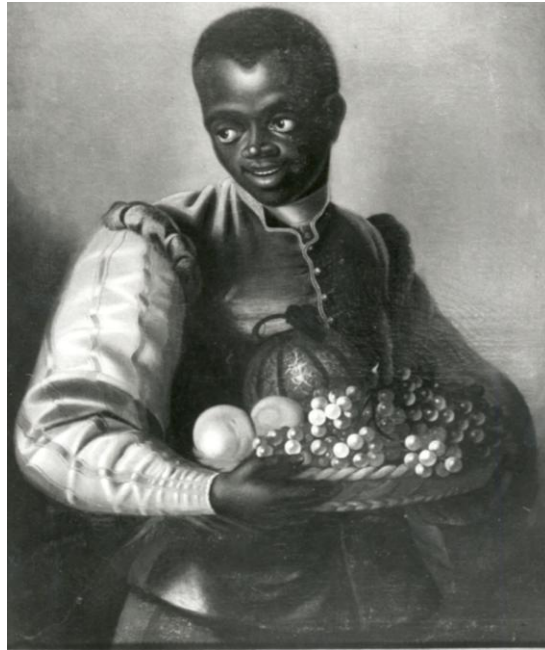
**Figure 2 William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress Plate II* (1732). © Trustees of the British Museum**

The popular trope of oriental dress placed upon black servants appears to have served a taste for the exotic for their English owners, while at the same time allowing them to control the black body by adorning their servants with whatever fashion they saw fit to dress them. Slave children often featured in his paintings were according to many a sense of indignation about the ownership of slave children. Many of the commodities that English people utilized, including tobacco, tea, coffee, and blacks from the Atlantic Slave Trade were on display in Hogarth's painting. While Hogarth represented the English poor with great sympathy, he depicted blacks as the exotic "other."

The expression of Hogarth's moralism was often on display in his art about the decadent consumption associated with Georgian life. Some scholars insist that Hogarth's art presented a critique about the culture, which included china teacups, imported tobacco, dressed up monkeys and foreign knickknacks. This possession of the black body and he sought to problematize the wealth, exoticism, uniqueness, and imperial themes were nothing more than empty examples of fashion and corruption of society. The outrage of moralism in Hogarth's paintings lessened with his consistent linking blacks with animals in placement of his paintings. (Stanton, K., & Chappell, J. (Eds.). 2011, p. 30-31).

### **Black Imagery in English Society**

English artists expressed in their paintings multiple themes related to black life. In 1764, William Jones an artist famous for paintings containing fruits created *A Black Boy* (Figure 3). In the image, a black pageboy is dressed in expensive livery with a slave collar attached to his neck. The black servant boy carrying the plate of fruits, which is meant to display the mark of servitude. The painting depicts the servitude of the black boy. The painting was undoubtedly created to promote, with intent or unconsciously, the master's position in English society.



**Figure 3 William Jones, *The Black Boy* (1764). © Trustees of the British Museum**

Family portraits, often included black page as an indicator of the status, added to aid in the displaying the affluence and importance of the family. In the portrait *Morning* (Figure 6) by Johann Miller, the black servant indicates the apparent prosperity and status of the family. While the children are playing in the center, this young page is not included in their activities. There is a place in the social order for a black as a servant, but not as an equal to the other subjects in the image.



**Figure 4 John Sebastian Muller, *Morning* (1766). © Trustees of the British Museum**

George Moorland was a British painter who enjoyed great recognition as an artist of landscape and family portraits. He produced between 1788 and 1789 three paintings that contained black servants: The paintings were *A Party Angling* (Figure 5), *Angler's Repast* (Figure 6), and *Fruits of Early Industry and Economy* (Figure 7). The angling portraits connote pastoral scenes of fishing. Moorland depicted social manners and tastes of the eighteenth century. The ladies in the work were his wife, Mrs. Moorland, and Mrs. William Ward, (the artist's sister, Maria). The men in picture were John Raphael Smith and William Ward (Baily, 1902, p. 212-213). The liveried black servant was an accessory to the party and an appendage to the prosperous group fishing. His presence with the fishing party conveyed that they had a black to serve them as they enjoyed their leisure activity. Their status was paramount in the picture.



**Figure 5 George Moorland, *A Party Angling* (1789). ©Trustees of the British Museum**

The individuals in the painting are participating in the activity of punt-fishing. Moorland captured punt-fishing in exquisite detail in his portraits. The punt was type of boat like a canoe used for fishing on rivers and ponds. The punt held much space, were stiff and safe from capsizing, and the occupants could sit comfortably, and move freely in the boat. This sporting activity became popular during this period in English history.

These paintings represent social manners and tastes in the eighteenth century including the buckskin breeches and top boots worn by the white men in the picture. The extravagance on display extends to the black liveried servants who are in the picture as mere accessories. Moorland and others of his age sought when capturing the wealthy in society often painted black footmen as appendages to the prosperous condition of whites. The black servant served as a symbol of high respectability and the opportunity to exhibit the fortunes of imperial acquisitions. (Baily, 1902, p. 213) In Figure 6, the angling party prepares to eat their meal and the black footmen performs his act of serving the party.



Figure 6 George Moorland, *The Anglers Repast* (1789). © Trustees of the British Museum

The last image of the series (Figure 7) depicts the interior of a rich merchant's residence, with the family living in opulence. The men discussed some issue very earnestly and the woman and child received a drink from the black servant. The servant remains at the edge of the picture and not the center, conveying that he is only an appendage. A child plays with her dog on the ground. This illustration communicates commercial interests, a rich family's inner sanctum, and the subjugation of black servitude in one image.



Figure 7 George Moorland, *Fruits of Early Industry and Economy* (1789). © Trustees of the British Museum



**Figure 8 William Redmore Bigg, *A Lady and Her Children Relieving a Cottager* (1784). © Trustees of the British Museum**

*A Lady and Her Children Relieving a Cottager* (1784) (Figure 8) by William Redmore Bigg depicts a mother teaching her children about charitable giving and sheds light on class relations. The mother steers her young daughter toward a poor woman holding her child. The young girl offers a coin to the woman. The black servant carrying an umbrella and a coat strolls along with the upper-class family. The theme focuses on the mother teaching her children about their duties and the black servant underscores the wealth and privilege of the family. The servant wears an expensive looking livery uniform and a turban, which exuded an exotic nature. He is clearly a small boy, and his distance connotes that the servant, while attached to the family, has a subservient position in the household.

### **SATIRE**

During the Georgian period, Frances Villiers, Countess of Jersey became famous as an English socialite. Her legendary affairs became hot topics of gossip circles. The Countess was a unique figure in the eighteenth-century Georgian world. Described by contemporaries as witty, devoted to seeking pleasure in all forms, a sophisticated socialite who adored Society's balls, assemblies, masquerades, concerts and operas. Other descriptions included an intelligent woman, clever, unprincipled, but beautiful and fascinating, kind, loyal, with a sharpness that drifted over time toward scorn and selfishness (Clarke, 2019, p. 26). Frances Villiers was a talented musician who played the harp very well, who possessed a charming personality with traits of haughtiness, manipulative scruples, malicious and cruel with a sharp tongue, who discarded friends and lovers with regularity. The Countess was a major figure in the "ton," which as a group represented the elite of the fashionable society in the late eighteenth-century (Clarke, 2019, pp. 26-27).

In 1793, the Countess began an affair with The Prince of Wales, later King George IV. Frances Villiers played a significant role in ending the first marriage of The Prince and Maria Fitzherbert. The Prince against the wishes of his father, married Fitzherbert in secret. In 1794, Frances Villiers got her young paramour to leave his wife and marry his first cousin, Caroline of Brunswick. Upon arrival to England, a week before her marriage Caroline first met Frances Villiers, who had been appointed Lady of the Bedchamber. Frances Villiers in her role as mistress, played a vital role in controlling and damaging the marriage of The Prince and Caroline. Her mistreatment of Caroline became a source public spectacle, with English society attacking her.

In the 1790s, she became the subject of ridicule from various satirical artists (Clarke, 2019, p. 170). Figure 9 fits seamlessly into the attack on Villiers but used racial imagery to fashion a caricature of Villiers as a blackamoor. The subject of the painting is the unsuccessful attempt to wash the blackness off her skin and make her white again. Thus far, this represents the only satirical painting in which race serves as metaphor to attack the Countess. Isaac Cruikshank's use of the fabled story of how to wash a blackamoor white represented racialized white imagery for jokes. The use of race to conceptualize the prank allowed blackness to serve as performance for the public to ridicule Frances Villiers. In other prints of the era, Villiers faced criticism, but the added dimensions of race, personified the continual white gaze and their notions of blackness. Black skin was performative for comic relief in English society.



**Figure 9 Isaac Cruikshank, *Washing the Blackamoor* (1795). © Trustees of the British Museum**

In *Washing the Blackamoor* (1795) (Figure 9) artist Isaac Cruikshank utilized race to satirize Frances Villiers, Countess of Jersey, the mistress of the Prince of Wales (the future King George IV). Lady Jersey sits in an arm-chair leaning back with a pained expression while two ladies wash her face which has the complexion of a mulatto. The Prince of Wales (left) crouches at her feet, holding out a basin in both hands. He says: "Another Scrub & then!! take more water." The lady in the middle says: "This stain will remain forever" and Frances Villiers says: "Does it look any whiter." The lady on the right holds a scrubbing-brush and puts a soap-ball to Lady Jersey's face, saying, "You may as well attempt to remove the Island of Jersey to the Highest Mountain in Wales." The other lady in the far-left side of the image smiles and says to Lady Jersey: "It vont do she must put on another face." She wears three feathers in her hair and on the extreme right is a dressing-table and beneath it sits a dog. Cruikshank, it appears, borrowed from the Aesop Fable "Washing the Ethiopian." This theme of this fable originated in a master's mistaken belief that he could make a black servant turn white, but he finally realizes that a person's basic nature does not change (Baldwin, 1856, p. 131-134). Cruikshank utilized this fable to satirize these individuals with a blackface comedy illustrating the continued usage of blacks as tools for English attitudes.

Richard Cosway, a noteworthy miniature artist of the eighteenth century painted a family portrait of himself, his wife, and their black servant. The painting titled *Mr. and Mrs. Cosway* (Figure 10) depicted the Cosways sitting in a decadent garden with the black servant pulling grapes from a tree and serving them to the couple. The servant's uniform was a display of wealth and grandiose that white owners often sought to present on the black body in the eighteenth-century.



The Cosways were famous in the late eighteenth century for their gaudy dress and well-decorated home that became celebrated for hosting the elite and royalty of British society. His success as a painter and his style of dress produced great jealousy amongst other artists of the period. The black servant dressed in crimson silk with elaborate lace and gold buttons, and sometime also in crimson Genoa velvet, which imitated the footmen at the Vatican. The lavish display on the body of the black servant caused great ridicule and scorn from other artists. (Williamson, 1905) also became a focal point of his critics. The identity of the black servant was Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, a famous Afro-Britain writer in the eighteenth century (Shyllon, 1977, p. 172).



**Figure 10 Richard Cosway, Mr. and Mrs. Cosway (1784). © Trustees of the British Museum**

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano was born in present-day Ghana. After being kidnapped at age 13 by African raiders and sold to European slave traders, subsequently he entered plantation slavery in the Caribbean island of Grenada. In 1772, after Cugoano had spent two years as a slave on the Caribbean island, his owner, Alexander Campbell, took him to England and in 1773, he was formally baptized as John Stuart in London's St. James's Church, after friends suggested he protect himself from re-enslavement. It remains unclear how Cugoano obtained his liberty, whether by running away, purchasing his freedom, or maybe being emancipated by Campbell, but Cugoano did perform the normal routine of most blacks who entered London. Cugoano mentioned in his narrative how the group of servants who advised him to receive a baptism were turned out by their masters (Cugoano, Quobna Ottobah. (1969), viii-ix). At some point in his journey, Cugoano later worked as a servant to the painter Richard Cosway in the mid-1780s. Cugoano became well-known in anti-slavery circles in London and published *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa* (1787). The book was the first written by an African to attack the pro-slavery arguments of slave traders. He joined with his friend and fellow African Olaudah Equiano to speak out against slavery and the slave trade. They were both instrumental in forming the Sons of Africa, a black anti-slavery lobby in late eighteenth-century London that fought on behalf of their fellow blacks to abolish the slave trade (*Diary or Woodfall's Register*, 1789 ; *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 1788). Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's anti-slavery tract was the most strident of the books written by former enslaved Africans in London. Cugoano's writing style was much more polemical and held more religious overtones than the narrative of Olaudah Equiano.

Another aspect of English painting found black depictions that delivered crude depictions of blacks laced with racism. Richard Cosway's black servant became subject of ridicule in a caricature painting by William Howitt. Howitt gained fame as a landscape painter but also helped his brother-in-law, Thomas Rowlandson, a famous satire artist of the same period with a variety of prints (Nevill, 1908, p. 30). Howitt undoubtedly joined other artists in their distaste for Cosway and lampooned him and his black servant with the painting known as *Richard Cosway's Servant* (Figure 11). The date is unknown for the painting, but it presumably had to take place after the 1784 Cosway family portrait. Howitt depicts a figure with a huge head, and big lips, holding all the tools of a painter. Howitt used a stylized, exaggerated feature to depict the black servant as a way of ridiculing Cosway.



Figure 11 William Samuel Howitt, *Richard Cosway's Servant*. © Trustees of the British Museum

### Interracial Satire

These types of caricatures are revealed in two other prints that are from two different periods but share a similar topic, which was the shocking nature of interracial unions between white men and black women. The first painting by William Hogarth, known as *Qui Color albus erat, nunc est contraries albo* ("What was once white is now the opposite"); or *The Discovery* (Figure 12), was originally created in 1743. Samuel Ireland published the piece again twenty-five years after the death of Hogarth in 1788. The painting depicts Mr. Highmore a former manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, whom infamously tried to seduce the wife of a friend. This indecency brought a great amount of ridicule after his failed attempt. The print is a recording of his failure as his friends find him a half-naked black woman. His friends had placed the black woman placed in the bed, so instead of the white wife of his friend, who was the object of his wishes (Ireland, 1794, pp. 111-112). The original print from its initial appearance faced suppression. Only about ten or twelve impressions were taken before it was destroyed (Ireland, 1794, p. 112). Perhaps the climate of the times did not support the imagery of the interracial union between a white man and a black woman. Nevertheless, the print did not receive a true public airing until the latter half of the eighteenth century.



**Figure 12 William Hogarth, *Qui Color albus erat, nunc est contraries albo* (“What was once white is now the opposite”) or *The Discovery* (1788). © Trustees of the British Museum**

Isaac Cruikshank created the second painting *A Morning Surprise* (Figure 13) around 1807. Both paintings depict a man startled to find in his bed a black woman. Cruikshank created a mocking picture of the black woman with protruding eyes, big lips, and other features designed to show a grotesque display of the black woman. The similarities between the two paintings are the feigned surprise of both white men to find black women in their bed. Both artists depicted interracial sex as either repulsive or deserving of ridicule. In contrast to the commentators who feared miscegenation and believed lower-class white women would succumb to black men, Hogarth and Cruikshank depicted the horror of well-to-do white men in the intimate company of black women. Interracial sex was a fear on many levels.

Roxann Wheeler notes that opponents of race mixing were in minority position in the eighteenth-century, rather than having broad support in of their position (Wheeler, 2000, p. 141). Wheeler argues that the criticism of interracial unions emerged from colonial constructions, not from the metropole. This framework falters in the face of satirical displays in prints about interracial sex. Wheeler further argues that proslavery observers particularly from the West Indies frequently implied that sexual relations between whites and blacks threatened Great Britain’s politically and imperiled the beauty of the English population. The lower orders of white women frequently had liaisons with black men in England. The most typical interracial union in eighteenth-century London was a black man and white woman (Wheeler, 2000, p. 142). The paintings provide a different interracial interpretation, whereby the implied unions existed between black woman and white men together. The artists depicted black women in caricature features that distorted their images. The paintings represent the white artist’s projections of blackness and to fashion and shape black women as symbols of race jokes. These prints reveal a much different climate that the customary portrayal of interracial sex through satire by the artists.



**Figure 13 George M. Woodward, A Morning Surprise (1807). © Trustees of the British Museum**

The introduction of caricature in satirical prints projected exaggerated and distorted physical differences that clearly signaled to white audiences, that blacks were the racialized other. Racially charged caricatures appeared in the following print (Figure 14) by James Gillray in *Philanthropic Consolations*, after the Loss of the Slave-Bill (1796). Gillray's painting included two half-dressed black women in a dalliance with the abolitionists William Wilberforce and Bishop Horsley Samuel Horsley, Bishop of Rochester, cavorting with black women while a slave boy brings glasses of wine. The satirical attack symbolized that the desire for the slave trade abolition was a disguise to hide white abolitionists desires for sexual favors of black women. (Rosenthal and Bindman, 2016, 83).



Figure 14 James Gillray *Philanthropic Consolations after the loss of the Slave Bill* © Trustees of the British Museum

Isaac Cruikshank caricatured white and black servants in his painting *Loo in the Kitchen or High Life Below Stairs* (1799) (Figure 15). The servants are playing a card game, loo, in the kitchen. Each person in Cruikshank's image has speaking parts, but it seems clear that the black servant is not taking part in the card game. He is still serving the servants. In multiple ways Cruikshank reminds the viewer that the black was indeed a servant, and Cruikshank utilized broken English to represent the black man's speech. The intent was clearly not a sympathetic depiction, but one intended to mock the black servant. These images ridiculed blacks and used their bodies as a source of satire.



Figure 15 George M. Woodward, *Loo in the Kitchen or High Life Below Stairs* (1799). © Trustees of the British Museum

## Conclusion

The representation of blacks in English art testified to their place in society. They were indeed part of the social fabric. The depictions of blacks included a variety of occupations including footmen, coachmen, pageboys, soldiers, sailors, musicians, prostitutes, beggars, and prisoners. English prints and portraits interpreted the experience of the blacks in both upper-class society and in contact with the lower orders. Numerous English paintings depicted the sense of otherness of blacks in the alien environment of the aristocratic and middle-class household. Blacks in the paintings of wealthy Britons typically remained mute in the background and received no acknowledgement. The blacks depicted in portraits often demonstrated no emotion and seemed devoid of personality or expression. Oftentimes these images of blacks served as tokens, reinforcing the affluence and the colonial business interests of their masters. The paintings did not represent blacks as individuals in English society, but rather as stereotypes. Some painters used black people as objects of scorn or contempt.

English attitudes toward blacks found expression through the written word, on stage, and on artist's canvasses. English ideas about blacks during the period reveal multiple themes. There were those Britons who held the extreme view of fearing the black presence. Others utilized black imagery to gain notoriety and fame from the stage. Some made blacks the objects of ridicule in order to promote their own status as humorists. In some instances, whites treated blacks with great hostility, but in other contexts, whites were sympathetic. The ambiguous status of blacks in Britain found reflection in the multiple images that whites constructed of them.

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Figure 2 *William Hogarth, A Harlot's Progress Plate II* (1732). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 3 *William Jones, The Black Boy* (1764). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 4 *John Sebastian Muller, Morning* (1766). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 5 *George Moorland, A Party Angling* (1789). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 6 *George Moorland, The Anglers Repast* (1789). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 7 *George Moorland, Fruits of Early Industry and Economy* (1789). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 8 *William Redmore Bigg, A Lady and Her Children Relieving a Cottager* (1784). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 9 *Isaac Cruikshank, Washing the Blackamoor* (1795). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 10 *Richard Cosway, Mr. and Mrs. Cosway* (1784). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 11 *William Samuel Howitt, Richard Cosway's Servant*. © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 12 *William Hogarth, Qui Color albus erat, nunc est contraries albo* ("What was once white is now the opposite") or *The Discovery* (1788). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 13 *George M. Woodward, A Morning Surprise* (1807). © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 14 *Philanthropic Consolations after the loss of the Slave Bill* © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 15 *Loo in the Kitchen or High Life Below Stairs* (1799) © Trustees of the British Museum

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