

Africana Andromeda:
Contemporary Painting and the Classical Black Figure

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When we look at a work of art, especially when “we” look at one in which Black Folk appear—or do not appear when they should—we should ask: What does it mean? What does it suggest? What impression is it likely to make on those who view it? What will be the effect on present-day problems, of its obvious and also of its insidious teachings? In short, we should endeavor to “interpret” it; and should try to interpret it from our own peculiar viewpoint.

—F. H. M. Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation* (1916)

In his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*, the anti-colonial activist, psychiatrist, and theorist Frantz Fanon made a startling critique of the racialization of Western culture, including its visual arts. According to Fanon, this racializing drive had produced a disorienting psychological assault on young African-Caribbean minds:

The black schoolboy in the Antilles who, in his lessons is forever talking about ‘our ancestors, the Gauls’, identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages—an all-white truth. (2008, 126)

Whilst the title phrase ‘white masks’ does not occur within the pages of Fanon’s seminal work, this passage seems emblematic of what it implies: a hegemonic demand that black or African diaspora people assimilate into a false, ‘all-white truth.’ However, although

Fanon's thesis was a galvanizing springboard, the research documented here might also represent just the kind of diversion he was thinking of when he wrote:

I should be very happy to know that a correspondence had flourished between a Negro philosopher and Plato. But I can absolutely not see how this fact would change anything in the lives of the eight-year-old children who labour in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe. (2008, 205)

As an artist working with the methodologies of Britain's Black Art Movement,¹ I have addressed directly the whitening phenomena critiqued by Fanon. Yet it is plausible to imagine the ardent revolutionary's irritation at this current focus on an entirely mythic black figure with a close cultural proximity to Plato—namely, Andromeda, who in the tales of classical Greece and Rome was the legendary queen of ancient Mycenae.

Before proceeding, I should clarify that, not being a classicist, I was in no position to discover Fanon's hypothetical 'black correspondent with Plato'—I cannot utter a sentence in Greek or Latin, and my practical archaeological experience is confined to the reading rooms of London's public art libraries. Instead, my research methodology approaches the classical world from the perspective of a contemporary artist and painter immersed in the disciplinary concerns of a studio practice. Consequently, what follows represents my artistically motivated endeavour to understand and re-imagine one specific 'white mask' embedded within Western culture in ways that the sociologist of taste Pierre Bourdieu (1984) might have called a kind of artistic 'habitus'.

As an interloper in classicist academia, I was at first uncertain about Andromeda's prominence within the field—with little grasp of whether my assertion that Andromeda is a 'black figure' might be deemed commonplace or controversial (or even irrelevant).

¹ See Jackson 2012; Chambers 2014; Kaisary 2014; Bernier 2017.

During the 1980s and 90s, whilst working with community-based, black-history discussion groups in London, I had read Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987) alongside other texts about the classical world's African embodiments—such as Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization* (1974). I therefore knew the study of antiquity was a field of racial controversy—but it was not from those sources that I first learnt of Andromeda. Instead, I had been aware more generally that the name recurred in both popular and artistic culture,² and it was through those avenues that I encountered hints of her many stories and eventually the intriguing question of her physical appearance.

In 2010 I began work on my practice-led doctoral thesis “Africana Unmasked: Fugitive Signs of Africa in Tate's British Collection” (2015a) by producing new artworks and writing that engaged critically with the national collection of British art at Tate Britain in London. The goal was to research creatively how African subjects, themes, and objects (‘Africana’) might function as unseen but important presences in the iconology of canonical British art, and so the art of Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones became an early focus—principally because in 1884 he had painted the Africa-themed *King Cophetua and The Beggar Maid*, which is often on display at the museum. The work's poetic legend provoked my curiosity about the Pre-Raphaelite artist's use of mythology—including for his 1888 painting *The Rock of Doom*, which depicts Andromeda. Preparatory works (1874–5) for the *Doom* series of paintings are held by Tate, and once sensitized to this mythography, I noticed that other references mentioned her Ethiopian heritage. For instance, Tate's online caption for Sir Edward Poynter's 1869 *Andromeda* painting

² As a child I had seen the 1971 science-fiction paranoia movie *The Andromeda Strain* and as an adult had also viewed episodes of the twenty-first century science-fiction television series *Andromeda*.

described her as ‘the daughter of an Ethiopian king’ (Tate 2007)—even though Poynter’s painting, just like Burne-Jones’s, proposed visually that Andromeda was white. This seeming contradiction between on the one hand captions contextualizing Andromeda and on the other hand the artworks themselves resonated with my interest in unmasking such fugitive instances of Africana. Further reading led to *The Black Andromeda*, a 1992 research paper by the white British art historian Elizabeth McGrath, who considered the role of race in early modern European imagery.

McGrath was not the first twentieth-century writer to consider Andromeda’s blackness—the subject was mentioned by the Jamaica-born, African American writer Joel Augustus Rogers in volume one of his 1940 survey of racial attitudes *Sex and Race* (Rogers 1970, 84) and in 1947 by the leading civil rights intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois in *The World and Africa* (1965). The subject was reprised in 1983 by the African American classicist F. M. Snowden in *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*. McGrath referenced Snowden, and later the literary historian Sujata Iyengar also revisited Andromeda’s blackness in her *Shades of Difference* (2005), whilst the classicist Daniel Ogden produced a commentary in his 2008 survey of the Perseus myth. More recently in 2014, US academic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. took up the theme in his African American focused online magazine *The Root*. However, McGrath was the first modern, professional art historian to analyse in depth the iconology of Andromeda’s African identity. And what she and other writers drew attention to was that from the early literary accounts of the myth in Euripides’ play *Andromeda* (composed in 412 BCE) until the 4th century CE, Andromeda was consistently (if not universally) identified as the daughter of King

Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia of Ethiopia.³ Her Ethiopian identity was so consistently mentioned that when the great Roman poet Ovid deviated from his own ascription and suggested an eastern rather than a southern origin, A. D. Melville in his 1986 translation was compelled to state:

Andromeda was *in fact* Ethiopian, but in Latin poetry ‘Indians’ and ‘Ethiopians’ are more or less interchangeable. (2008, 216; emphasis mine)

Melville’s assertion might stretch the boundaries of fiction by implying that Andromeda

³ In his 2001 survey of the origins of the term, David Adamo states that ‘the scholars’ consensus is that the word “Ethiopia” originated from the Greeks to designate African people both at home and abroad in terms of the color of their skins. This term, which Greek geographers generally used to refer to any member of the black people, derived from the words (burnt) and (face). Ethiopia, therefore literally means “burnt-faced person” of Africa and African diaspora. This term was probably chosen by the Greeks to describe the Africans according to their “environmental theory” that the dark color of their skins and the woolly or coiled hair of their heads were as a result of the intense heat of the sun’ (Adamo 2001, 29; see also Skinner 2012). Certainly, Ovid’s *princeps*, Augustus, had no doubt that ‘Aethiopia’ bordered his new Egyptian province in what we now refer to as continental Africa. The evidence for such clarity comes from the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, the 14 CE autobiographical list of the emperor’s deeds that was inscribed on monuments across the Roman world, some of which still exist. In his account Augustus specifically identified the cities of Napata and Meroë in relation to his Ethiopian campaigns. Napata was the ancient Egyptian term for the city now known as Karima in Sudan, Meroë was the ancient capital of the kingdoms of Meroë and Kush, both located in contemporary Sudan (Welsby 1998; Cooley 2009; Dueck 2012).

was any more subject to the dictates of ‘fact’ than the goddess Athena herself—because from a twenty-first-century, historical perspective, Andromeda appears to be a mythical character from the realms of belief, art, and fictional literature rather than a historical person. But, of course, Melville’s Andromeda ‘fact’ was not intended to convey information about an everyday, real-life person: he meant ‘fact’ in the specific sense of classical, literary continuity. Andromeda was Ethiopian ‘in fact’ because she was said to be so, not only in Ovid’s first century *Metamorphoses* but also in, for example, the fifth century BCE plays of Sophocles and Euripides (Wright 2005), in the first- second-century CE book *Bibliotheca*—a prose compilation of mythological narratives (Simpson 1976, 73)—and in the third-or fourth-century novel the *Ethiopian Story* by Heliodorus,⁴ as well as by many other leading mythographers of antiquity.⁵

⁴ The classical historian Daniel Ogden in his historiography of ancient Perseus mythology has written that Andromeda’s homeland was a significant ‘point of instability’ in the transmission of the narrative with texts naming sites from Joppa in the modern state of Israel to India (Ogden 2008, 82). However, he was also clear that from at least the 5th century BCE (when many of the major surviving classical texts were set to writing), ‘Ethiopia was to remain the favoured setting for literary accounts of the Andromeda episode’ (2008, 83). Subsequently, in his book *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds* (2013a), Ogden gives as a chapter heading: “The Sea Monster of Ethiopia, Slain by Perseus.”

⁵ One notably ironic exception to Melville’s assertion of ‘fact’ comes from Herodotus, the ‘father of history’, who in his *Histories* (440 BCE) named Cepheus, Andromeda, and Perseus’s son Perses as local and apparently factual ancestors of the Persian King Xerxes (2008; 429)

Thus, McGrath and others held it to be a significant artistic, aesthetic, national, and racial conundrum that for thousands of years, virtually all Western visual artists (beginning with sixth-century BCE Greek vase painters) had consistently depicted Andromeda as a pale-skinned, often blonde or auburn-haired white woman. And this despite the ‘fact’ that one of the principal classical sources, Ovid (who, according to McGrath [1992, 3], was ‘the greatest of all mythographers’) repeatedly described her as dark-skinned, black, or brown. Ovid’s intent is illustrated in a key passage from the *Heroides*, in which Sappho declares that:

Candida si non sum, placuit Cepheia Perseo

Andromede, patriae fusca colore suae,

Et variis albae iunguntur saepe columbae,

et niger a viridi turtur amatur ave.

(Ov. *Her.* 15.35–8)⁶

Correspondingly, Murgatroyd, Reeves, and Parker. in their 2017 translation render this as:

I’m not fair-skinned, but Perseus found Cepheus’ Andromeda

attractive, and she was dark (from darkest Ethiopia)

and white doves often have mates of a different colour,

And black turtle-doves are loved by green parrots.

I have already mentioned that initially I was unsure of Andromeda’s significance for classical academia. One gauge was proposed by the white cultural historian, Adrienne Munich in her book *Andromeda’s Chains*:

⁶ Text from Arthur Palmer’s definitive 1898 edition.

If one looks under the entry “Andromeda” in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, one is given the terse command: ‘See Perseus’. As if somehow incidental to Perseus’s story the maiden is an auxiliary, not doing anything in her own right. An object for someone else’s heroic rescue, she is doomed without even the dignity of having her fate a consequence of her own actions ...

Andromeda apparently deserves no special reference of her own. (1993, 24)

However, even though her feminist interpretation noted Andromeda’s academic subordination to a masculine hero, Munich’s critique of the racial implications of the mythography also seemed to elide the question of how Andromeda’s specifically black and female identities intersected to create a similarly insidious mode of racial invisibility.

In any event, to evaluate properly the historical and artistic significance of the Andromeda myth, I needed to consider closely its narrative content, and arguably perhaps the most direct method was to analyse one of the principal prose accounts—as found in the pseudo-Apollodorus’s *Bibliotheca* (c. 1–200 CE):

Arriving in Ethiopia, which was ruled by Cepheus, he found the king’s daughter Andromeda exposed as prey to a sea monster; for Cassiopeia, the wife of Cepheus, had claimed to [surpass] the Nereids in beauty ... The Nereids were enraged by this, and Poseidon, who shared their anger, sent a sea-flood and a monster against the land. Now Ammon had prophesied deliverance from this calamity if Cepheus’ daughter Andromeda were offered as prey to the monster, and compelled by the Ethiopians, Cepheus had done so and tied his daughter to a rock. As soon as Perseus saw her, he fell in love, and promised Cepheus that he would destroy the monster if he would give him the rescued girl as a wife ... Perseus confronted the monster and killed it, and set Andromeda free. Phineus, however, who was a

brother of Cepheus and had been promised Andromeda beforehand, plotted against Perseus; but when Perseus learned of the conspiracy, he showed the Gorgon to Phineus and his fellow plotters, turning them to stone on the spot. ... Perseus, accompanied by Danae [his mother] and Andromeda [became] king of Tiryns; and Perseus fortified Midea and Mycenae in addition. By Andromeda, Perseus had the following sons ... Perses ... and later, in Mycenae, Alcaios, Sthenelos, Heleios, Mestor, and Electryon; he also had a daughter, Gorgophone. (Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.4.3–5)⁷

In summary, then: Princess Andromeda of Ethiopia was—as appeasement for the blasphemous vanity of her mother the queen—to be sacrificed to a sea monster. Fortunately, she was betrothed to and then rescued by the Greek demi-god Perseus, whom she married and with whom she raised many children. Although, as Munich noted, Andromeda’s role might now seem passive, for writers in Classical Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman antiquity, her plight, survival, marriage, and motherhood were of enduring significance. Not only did her story form the centrepiece of both Sophocles’ and Euripides’ now lost or fragmentary plays titled *Andromeda*, but long before Ovid, she took poetic form in, for example, the *Phaenomena* by Aratus of Soli, who in the third century BCE recounted her divine transformation into a starry pattern of the night sky (Kidd 1997, 87). This catasterism (placing amongst the stars) eventually propelled her into the realm of science, as attested by the second-century CE Egyptian astronomer Claudius Ptolemy. In the *Almagest*—regarded as a founding document of astronomy (Evans, 1998)—Ptolemy listed Andromeda as one of 48 constellations fundamental to astronomical observation, designating its brightest star as Alpha Andromeda. In terms of

⁷ Translation from Hard 1997, 68.

their mythic significance for post-Hellenistic science, the only constellations with proper names were from the Andromeda myth cycle—including Cepheus, Perseus, and Cassiopeia. All other Ptolemaic constellations received more seemingly generic names, such as Centaurus (‘The Centaur’) or Aries (‘The Ram’). The partial exception to this nomenclature was ‘Heracles’, but arguably that served only to emphasise Andromeda’s centrality; according to the *Bibliotheca*, Heracles was her great-grandson (and the half-brother by Zeus to her husband Perseus).⁸

Alongside the realms of science, religion, literature, and art, Andromeda also gained political significance, with Alexander the Great among those rulers claiming descent from Heracles, Perseus, and (by logical extension) Andromeda, the mother of all Perseus’s children—as did the Seleucid dynasty which ruled Persia in the wake of the Macedonian’s fourth-century BCE conquests (Ogden 2008). Certainly, the *Alexander Mosaic* at Pompeii depicts the warrior king with a Gorgon inscribed on his breastplate (O’Brien 2003), suggesting kinship with Perseus, who slew the Gorgon Medusa. In his second-century eclectic dialogue *The Learned Banqueters*, Athenaeus quoted the chronicler Nicobule’s claim that so intense was Alexander’s devotion to his semi-divine ancestry, he could recite passages from Euripides’ *Andromeda*—and did so at his final,

⁸ One mytho-scientific consequence of Ptolemy’s adherence to the Andromeda nomenclature was that following the tenth-century identification of a ‘nebulous smear’ within the Andromeda constellation by the Iranian astronomer Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi, the same object was in the twentieth century deemed to be the nearest galaxy to our own and is now named the Andromeda (or M31) Galaxy (Hodge [1992] 2013, 2).

fatal feast (Young 1854, 860).

Andromeda was, then, a figure who made recurring, conspicuous appearances in high classical culture as a princess of Ethiopia, closely associated with other important mythical and historic figures either as muse, companion, or ancestor: from Perseus, Heracles, Medusa, and Zeus to Sophocles, Euripides, Ovid, Ptolemy, and Alexander. Whilst not necessarily as prominent as her (mostly) male associates, there was no denying her enduring and often central role. However, although her fame and to some extent her Ethiopian identity were relatively consistent, it was additionally true, as mentioned earlier, that her visual portrayal as ‘white’ was also notable for its consistency—even if that suggested a kind of geographic and narrative incongruity.

Amongst the most ancient signs of Andromeda’s whiteness, there is a sixth century BCE ceramic vase, held in Berlin’s Altes Museum (Ogden 2013b, 125). Fashioned anonymously in the Corinthian style, the amphora depicts a nude, black-skinned man labelled Perseus throwing rocks at the sea monster Ketos, whilst a white-skinned, clothed woman labelled Andromeda appears to hold more rocks in readiness. In considering this early evidence of a white Andromeda, it is worth noting that the classicist Mary Ann Eaverly recalls being taught that the Greek convention of depicting males as dark-skinned and females as light-skinned represented not racial difference but a naturalistic invocation of sun-bronzed, outdoor manliness in contrast to indoors, shaded femininity. However, her own 2013 study proposed that the male=dark/female=light convention in Greek ‘black figure’ pottery was probably derived from a comparable

colour/gender convention in prestigious Egyptian painting.⁹ Yet the question of race in Greek Andromeda painting has also been identified by commentators on red-figure pottery. A water vase in the British Museum from c. 440 BCE Attica prompted Cecil Smith to write in the *Catalogue of Vases* that ‘The Ethiopians throughout (except Kepheus and Andromeda) have woolly hair, flat nose and thick lips. Kepheus and Andromeda are of the usual Greek type’ (Smith 1896, 152). In fact, Smith could not use actual colour differences to determine whether or not Andromeda conformed to his crude, ethnocentric description of an Ethiopian—because every figure’s skin had the same reddish-brown glaze that defines red-figure pottery. Regardless of whether contemporary viewers agree with Smith’s analysis, it exemplifies how a white Victorian connoisseur of Greek art constructed Andromeda’s racial identity.¹⁰

It is a commonplace of art historical discourse that little survives of the once highly praised Greek mural tradition—even if the discovery of Macedonian royal tombs at Vergina and other finds have provided us with tantalizing examples (Franks 2012; Smith and Plantzos 2012; Pollitt 2015). Nevertheless, McGrath (1992) notes that commentators in antiquity reported artistic depictions of Andromeda as white despite her Ethiopian setting. And it was this curious circumstance that drove the narrative of Heliodorus’s epic romance the *Ethiopian Story*, which was written in the second or third

⁹ Although Eaverly (2013) warns sagely against projecting modern racial concerns mechanically onto ancient sensibilities, it tempting to speculate about the contemporary implications of a Greek culture constructed as supposedly ‘European’ opting to paint its male heroes black due to the influence of artists from a country we now consider African.

¹⁰ The British Museum website includes Smith’s racial analysis, but without his physiognomic descriptors.

Century CE. The heroine, Chariclea, is a white girl born incongruously to the black queen Persina, who had in the moment of conception been looking at a picture of her own white Ethiopian ancestor, Andromeda.

‘[I]f he had consulted the *Imagines* of Philostratus, Heliodorus would have been assured that Andromeda, though Ethiopian, was none the less depicted as white ... making a remarkable and attractive contrast to all the other natives who assembled to cheer her rescuer. Philostratus describes Andromeda as delightful or charming ... in her white beauty, but before making any simple assumption here about colour-prejudice it should be noted that the Ethiopian spectators are also [charming] for him in their exotic colouring’ (McGrath 1992, 3).

In fact, McGrath notes that Ovid’s several elaborations of Andromeda as black or dark-skinned in his *Heroides* and *Ars Amatoria* represented an exception both in classical

mythography as well as in art and art writing.¹¹ For instance, the poet Manilius (Ovid's near contemporary) wrote of Andromeda's 'snowy neck' (Sherburne 1675, 219), whilst a

¹¹ One ambiguity from Ovid arises because in the *Metamorphoses*, he describes Andromeda as like 'a marble statue'. Yet, as McGrath (1992) maintains, the poet could have meant black marble. Ovid uses marble in his description of Andromeda as a metaphor not so much for whiteness as for stillness: 'but for the light breeze stirring her hair and the warm tears coursing over her cheeks, he would have supposed she was merely a marble statue' (Ov. *Met.* 4.673–5; translation from Raeburn 2004). This usage is emphasised in Perseus's battle with his Ethiopian love-rival Phineus, in which the hero turns his enemies into marble by showing the head of Medusa. In terms of race, nationality, and ethnicity, the epic battle scene deploys fighters from across the known world—amongst them Bactrians, Libyans, Egyptians, Indians and Arabs, as well as Ethiopians. And in each case marble functioned as the literal material into which two hundred, multicultural warriors were transformed, suggesting again the stillness of death rather than a colour. Throughout Greek and Roman antiquity, marble statues were frequently, if not universally coloured, pigmented, and tinted by painters and gilders. According to Mark Abbe, 'Roman statuary was richly embellished with various forms of painting ... [which] belonged to the broader Mediterranean tradition of polychrome sculpture ... Flesh tones on marble sculpture challenge common modern assumptions about classical marble statuary' (2015, 173). Although Ovid sometimes associated white marble with feminine beauty (such as for Atalanta's rosy complexion), it cannot be assumed that his use of the stone to denote stillness automatically implies whiteness. Roman readers may well have understood his marble statues as a white or other substrate coloured by realistic painting.

10 BCE fresco preserved in the ashes of Vesuvius at the Villa of Agrippa Postumus is just one of several Roman examples illustrating a pale heroine. Thus the evidence pointed to ancient artistic conventions of describing and depicting Andromeda as both Ethiopian *and* white,¹² living amongst people usually classed as Ethiopian and sometimes depicted as black.

McGrath followed in detail how this seeming contradiction was discussed in early modern literature and art writing, citing the seventeenth-century artists Abraham van Diepenbeeck and Joachim von Sandrart as the only two major Western painters to depict black Andromedas. However, from the early Renaissance through to the twentieth century, the myth—and Andromeda’s assumed whiteness—continued to be a theme for many of Europe’s most prominent painters, including Piero di Cosimo (1510), Titian (1556), Georgio Vasari (1572), Veronese (1578), Rembrandt (1630), Rubens (1639), Ingres (1819), Delacroix (1852), Frederic Leighton (1891), Odil Redon (1912), and Tamara De Lempicka (1929). So extensive was this practice, it might almost seem plausible to construct a potted history of canonical Western art entirely through depictions of Andromeda.¹³

Perhaps, inevitably—given her longevity and prominence—the white Andromeda

¹² If as is suggested by Eaverly’s hypothesis of an Egyptian influence Andromeda’s early artistic ‘whiteness’ derived primarily from the Greek convention of painting women as pale, then the theory that this was itself the result of an African influence on Greek art would constitute yet another interesting irony.

¹³ Picasso’s 1930 etched illustration for Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, called *The Combat for Andromeda between Perseus and Phineus*, does not actually depict Andromeda.

migrated from aristocratic ‘high art’ into modern popular culture, with Kilinski (2012) amongst those noting speculatively that *King Kong*—with its 1933 theme of black people sacrificing white woman Ann Darrow to a monster—bore narrative kinship to classical antecedents.¹⁴ There were also much more unambiguous references for the characters named Andromeda in three later sword-and-sandal blockbuster films. First came MGM’s 1981 *Clash of the Titans*, in which she was played by white Briton Judi Bowker. Then in 2010, another *Clash of the Titans* was released by Warner Bros, with white American Alexa Davalos in the role, followed in 2012 by the *Wrath of The Titans* starring Rosamund Pike. With combined revenues of almost \$1.0 billion, and featuring Oscar winners and nominees Laurence Olivier, Maggie Smith, Liam Neeson, and Ralph Fiennes, these films positioned white Andromedas at the financial pinnacle of Western, mass consumer culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—but with no hint of the disruptive racial dilemma posed by the classical setting of Ethiopia.

Although overshadowed by the hegemony of cinema, a similar neo-Gothic/Romantic interest in Andromeda’s relationship to monsters, desire, and the supernatural also emerged in the Fantasy Art genre.¹⁵ And as with the 1988 painting *Andromeda* by Boris Vallejo, such figures invariably conform to the white trope established in fine art. Even so, it was as fantasy that perhaps for the first time in 350 years a black Andromeda emerged from the brushes of Romanian painter Corina Chirila, whose 2008 bikini-clad damsel seemed calm despite her golden chains and a pale dragon.

¹⁴ Ann Darrow is an obvious pun on *Andromeda*.

¹⁵ Video gaming, whilst not immune to Andromedas, has not yet produced any major work featuring the heroine—*Mass Effect: Andromeda*, released in 2017, references the nearby galaxy without Ovidian themes.

Consequently, apart from the obscure exceptions of Chirila and two seventeenth-century Dutchmen, the uniform visual representation¹⁶ of Andromeda as white constituted what Fanon identified ironically as an ‘all-white truth’—a hegemonic white visual space denying Ovid’s mythography of black beauty.

Such was the artistic and literary landscape surrounding Andromeda before and after 2010, when I began researching Tate’s collection of British art. Encouraged by the intrigue of her contested African and black identities, I scoured the museum’s database hoping to discover how British fine artists had addressed the heroine’s racial identity. I learnt that the institution held nine artworks in which ‘Andromeda’ formed part of the title or catalogue entry. They included: two 1798 colour studies on paper by Turner; a drawing and a gouache painting for *The Rock of Doom* by Burne-Jones; an 1843 woodcut engraving by John Linnell; an abstract 1962 painting *Andromeda* by Alexander Liberman; a 1937–8 painting *Neptune and Andromeda* by Alexandre Jacovleff; and a 1936 collage, *Perseus and Andromeda* by David Gascoyne—as well as the monumental 1893 bronze sculpture by Henry Fehr titled *The Rescue of Andromeda*. In addition, Poynter’s *Andromeda* had been on loan from a private collection following the 2001–2 exhibition *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*—although by 2011 it was no longer on display.

¹⁶ Wilk (2007, 198) recounts that by 1800 there were more than 25 operas about Perseus, Medusa, and Andromeda, including works by Vivaldi and Monteverdi—with Manelli’s spectacular Venetian production *Andromeda* posited by Parker (2001, 20) as arguably ‘where the history of opera begins’. Alongside opera itself, the heroine also inspired less grandiose work, such as Mozart’s concert aria *Ah lo Previdi* of 1777 but, in any case, the racial theatrics of opera and music are beyond the scope of this study.

Tate's Andromeda works thus ranged in method from Romantic to Pre-Raphaelite and from minimalism to surrealism—with the earliest produced in 1798 and the most recent in 1962. I also conducted additional searches for other elements relevant to the myth: Nereids, Perseus, Neptune/Poseidon, Medusa, Cetus, Gorgon, Jove/Jupiter/Zeus, Cassiopeia, Phineus, Atlas, and Cephus. I found more artworks but no identifiable Andromeda figures or references.

Some of Tate's Andromeda artworks were abstract and thereby devoid of any human figuration. Of the figurative works, though, all except one conformed to the pale-skinned trope, which suggested a question about methodology: how did British artists make decisions about Andromeda's appearance? According to art historian Nigel Llewellyn, for Western painters and sculptors from the Renaissance through to the Impressionists, 'a facility with Ovidian myth' was vital 'to achieve success in the higher genres' (quoted in Martindale 1990, 160). Indeed, as Charles Martindale (1990, 1) maintains, 'from the twelfth century onwards Ovid has had a more wide-ranging impact on the art and culture of the West than any other classical poet.'

And, similarly the classicist Denis Feeney asserts of the *Metamorphoses* that: 'The poem's impact on the visual arts is ... so pervasive as to be incalculable, with the names of Titian, Bernini and Rubens only the most obvious ones that first come to mind' (Ovid 2004, xxxiii). This consensus on Ovid's importance for visual artists was upheld on Tate's website caption for Henry Fehr's *Rescue of Andromeda*, in which art historian Heather Birchall cited Ovid as a principal source of the heroine's narrative (2003). And whilst artists' precise reading habits are not always easy to discern, we do know with certainty that one of nineteenth-century Britain's leading artists and teachers, Sir Frederick Leighton, introduced Ovid to his Royal Academy students as a specific source of classicist inspiration (1897, 152), at the same time also illustrating Andromedan myth

in his own highly successful work. If reading Ovid (and thereby his proposal of an Ethiopian setting for the tale) was such a key preparation, then, how plausible was it to assume that British depictions of Andromeda as white were artistic ‘accidents’—instead of deliberate choices to conform with the painterly Western tradition of whiteness? Even if an artist were to posit Cassiopeia as a white queen of black Ethiopia (just as Victoria was a white queen of predominantly black Jamaica), would that still not imply a process of artistic deliberation?

In at least one instance, this issue was partially sidestepped: prior to commencing his *Doom* series of paintings, Burne-Jones illustrated *The Earthly Paradise* by his friend William Morris ([1868] 2002; see also Burne-Jones and Burne-Jones 1906). That poem unambiguously placed Andromeda in Syria—and Burne-Jones may thus have avoided any Ethiopian blackness. Yet, as well as having Morris as a source, in 1875 Burne-Jones also visited the British Museum’s Attic vases for his research (Wildman and Christian 1998). Whether he saw the red-figured hydria of Andromeda (acquired in 1843) with its ethnographic Ethiopians is unclear but, in any event, he recruited Margaret Benson to sit as his white Andromeda (MacCarthy 2012). Morris, though, certainly used both Ovid and the late eighteenth-century classicist John Lempriere (1801, 91) as his sources (Boos 2002)—and each had affirmed Andromeda’s Ethiopian identity. Consequently, his own choice of a Syrian setting was deliberate and probably followed the example of William Caxton, whose translation of *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* by Raoul Lefèvre ([1475] 1894, 214) gave ‘palestyne’ as Andromeda’s fatherland.

Irrespective of what literary sources Fehr himself used for his Andromeda sculpture, what I did discover was that for British artists and specifically for nineteenth-century painters, the relation of complexion, skin colour, and race to classical antiquity was of definite significance. When Leighton painted an 1882 depiction of the historical

Greek courtesan Phryne, he was repeatedly criticised:

[His] 'Phryne' is a brown woman,—a colour for which we do not understand the reason, as Phryne was a Greek, and therefore a white woman. ('The Builder' 1882; quoted in Smith 1999, 43)

Apparently, Leighton intended Phryne to be an 'Aryan' woman with a suntan on account of the artist's purported interest in ancient, naked, sun worship (Smith 1999, 41), but such was the anxiety about white racial purity that even this deviation was met with resistance, and to this day the painting's whereabouts remains unknown.¹⁷ However, in 1891, Leighton, the long-serving President of the Royal Academy, painted his own *Perseus and Andromeda*, in which the heroine's mass of straight, orange hair left no doubt about the

¹⁷ Leighton's colour coding of skin complexions was highly deliberative and bore an insidious relationship to his racial opinions. At the Royal Academy Schools, he taught that race was the primary influence on art history (1897, 69), and that both Britons and Dorian Greeks belonged to a 'pure Aryan' race (89). In correspondence from his youthful travels in Africa, he repeatedly used the term 'Nigger' and compared dark-skinned residents to apes, describing one black female singer as a 'baboon' whose performance reminded him of 'the monkey-house in the Zoological Gardens' (Barrington [1906] 2009, L7277). This represented an element of a more complex picture, however. Leighton also described some black men as 'fine' in appearance and was particularly proud of his large watercolour *A Negro Dance*. Given his expressed views, it seems inconceivable to imagine Leighton painting a young black woman as though she were a paragon of desirable beauty, and accordingly his model for *Andromeda* was his longstanding muse, the white model and actress, Dorothy Dene (Munich 1993).

racial specificity of her North European pallor. His princess cowered under the dark wing of the monster Ketos, and as Birchall proposed in her caption for Henry Fehr's 1893 *Rescue of Andromeda*, it seemed likely that Fehr adopted this specific motif of vulnerability with the direct encouragement of his former teacher Leighton. Certainly, Leighton's influence on Fehr was noted by the leading British art critic Marion Spielmann, who had observed that the most senior of British artists 'took a kindly interest' in his putative protégé (1901, 138).

Because my study focused on how Britishness intersected with African identities through art, I limited my purview to Tate's National Collection, which provided an institutionally circumscribed and finite paradigm of artistic Britishness. This meant paintings not in the collection, such as Leighton's *Perseus and Andromeda* or Poynter's *Andromeda*, could not count as central research material. Unmasking Andromeda's Africana identity meant working with the museum's nine candidate artworks—and I decided that Fehr's sculpture, being the most substantial and prominent, would be the anchor point for my research.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Henry Fehr, *The Rescue of Andromeda*, 1893. Bronze. Photographs by Kimathi Donkor © 2011

The work, which is almost 3.0 meters high (excluding the 1.5m plinth), was purchased by the Chantrey Behest in 1894. Not only was it therefore one of the first artefacts that twenty-first-century visitors encountered near the museum's Millbank entrance, but it was also an instance of the institution's earliest constructions of British artistic identity.

And yet despite his work's proximity to the grandiose portico of such a prestigious institution, Fehr seemed comparatively little known to art history, with no published monographs or theses about him. A database search in the British Library Catalogue produced no results (either as the subject, title, or primary content of any document), and the National Art Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum held just three scant items of correspondence. However, his entry in the online database *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851–1951* ('Henry Charles Fehr' 2011) contained a bibliography of primary source materials, and he was briefly mentioned in some books and journals.

Fehr (1867–1940), the south-London born son of an immigrant Swiss merchant, was a prizewinning student at the Royal Academy Schools, who worked as a sculptor for almost 50 years until his retirement in 1937, producing memorials, reliefs, monuments, and portraits across the UK. His more prestigious commissions included statues and bas-reliefs decorating the facade of the Middlesex Guildhall on Parliament Square—which in the early twenty-first century housed Britain's Supreme Court. Spielmann was cautiously enthusiastic and in *British Sculpture and Sculptors of Today* (1901) described Fehr's art as 'clever' and displaying 'courage' but with a 'certain lack of depth in sentiment'. Since the artist's death, though, historical opinion has been mainly unfavourable. Writing about the late Victorian 'New Sculpture' movement with which he was associated, Susan Beattie felt Fehr's *St George and the Rescued Maiden* (1898) was:

A striking example of the abuse of the New Sculpture's delicate symbolist imagery and the misinterpretation of its motives ... a double parody of Mercié's Gloria Victis and Gilbert's contemplative St. George of 1896. (1983, 120)

Similarly, Dennis Farr in *English Art: 1870–1940* described the same work as 'coarse and banal, if not comic' (1978, 89). Ambiguity about Fehr seemed to have been shared by his

peers—his nominations for election to the Royal Academy in 1893 and 1920 both failed. Despite this, he fostered a minor international profile, showing work at Les Palais des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1900 and even exhibiting with European avant-garde artists of La Libre Esthétique in Brussels—alongside Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Camille Pissaro, Pierre Bonnard, and Claude Monet (Block 1994).

When he created *The Rescue of Andromeda*, it was as an ‘ideal’ sculpture—which was the late Victorian term for freestanding, figurative works expressing general noble ideals through mythological or allegorical figures as opposed to portrait works memorializing specific noble historical individuals or events. Produced in plaster and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1893 as *Perseus and Andromeda* (Spielmann 1901, 38), it was cast in bronze the following year when it was purchased ‘for the nation’. That the Perseus-Cetus-Andromeda myth is sometimes identified with the medieval romance of St. George and the Dragon (Collins 2000; Ogden 2008) and also that George is the patron saint of England¹⁸—opens the possibility that the sculpture was acquired as much for its potential as a symbol of Anglo-British nationalism as for its other qualities.¹⁹ Even so, the appeal was limited: Spielmann wrote that though ‘remarkable’ the sculpture had ‘certain faults’—particularly the ‘unfortunate superposition of Perseus on the dragon, and the dragon on Andromeda’. When the Tate Gallery opened in 1897, *The Rescue* was in

¹⁸ Two ironies worth noting here are that the earliest written account of St. George (composed in 300–600 CE) claims he was from the African state of Nabatia, whilst the most familiar story about George (the Perseus-like dragon/maiden legend) was located in an African city called Silena (Morgan 2017).

¹⁹ British Nationalism was explicitly mobilized in the campaign to found Tate Gallery (Spalding 1998).

the main sculpture galleries, but Fehr was upset when in 1911 it was displaced onto the exterior side balcony by the entrance. Writing to the Director Charles Aitken, the artist claimed that being ‘turned out of the inside collection’ would ‘ruin his reputation’ (Birchall 2003). That might well be true, but when I commenced my research his glossy black monument had been in place for almost 100 years and was one of only two works displayed in the same location for the entire period.

Re-imagining Andromeda

So far, I have considered prior artistic practice and discourse on the myth of Andromeda and its links to African identity. However, as stated at the outset, my research was a practice-led methodology focused on the production of new artworks. That meant artistically re-interpreting the Andromeda myth in ways that were critically aware of the existing iconography. What follows is an account of how this process unfolded through my studio practice in relation to Fehr’s work.

Central to the practice-led methodology was my identification of two artistic categories, which I called Masked Africana and Unmasked Africana. The term Masked Africana denotes artworks which embody a specific, constitutive connection to Africa or African people that is ‘fugitive’—meaning that this vital African connection is not visually apparent. Aside from their literal meanings, I wanted the terms ‘fugitive’ and ‘masked’ to signify artistic phenomena of visibility and invisibility by evoking key historical usages. In relation to masking, for example, many Africana artefacts have been stereotypically defined as ‘masks’, even when such a designation is unstable—as in the case of Tutankhamun’s desecrated golden *tep-en-seshta*, which is widely known as a ‘funeral mask’ (Taylor 2010, 109; Assmann 2015, 108). And whilst it is an unremarked upon fact that Frantz Fanon nowhere mentions white masks in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as

mentioned above, my practice-led research into the masking function of Western artworks helps materialize what was implicit in his title. Similarly, the term ‘fugitive’ evoked, not only the fading of certain painting pigments, but also the relationship between many Western artworks and those enslaved plantation workers whose oppression and resistance was embodied by questions of presence and absence. One spectacular example of such fugitive Africana was epitomized by the famous twin portraits of *Madame X* by John Singer Sargent (1884), which nowhere signified explicitly that his wealthy sitter, Madame Virginie Gautreau née Avegno, was heiress to two of Louisiana’s leading slave-holding and Confederate families (Mount 1955). Whilst the exploitation of African American slave labour was implicit in the biography of the sitter, the terrorized lives of those forgotten victims remained fugitive in the visual language of the painting, perhaps reflecting the imposition of social invisibility on both the enslaved and those literal fugitives from the law who fled plantation captivity. Thus ‘Masked Africana’ denoted a class of artworks (including Fehr and Sargent’s), whilst ‘Fugitive Africana’ described those specific hidden connections that the artwork embodied—such as the Ethiopian Andromeda or the enslaved workers who produced *Madame X*’s wealth.

In visually representing such fugitive artistic connections, I intended to produce new and experimental ‘Unmasked Africana’—which worked to undo (or ‘detourn’) the masking function of an old artwork by re-situating and re-interpreting its motifs. This methodology elaborated on two prior approaches: Detournement and Black Art. In the 1960s, Situationists like Guy Debord proposed that artistic detournements should appropriate imagery from ‘spectacular’ artworks to produce radical, oppositional meanings (Knabb 2007, 14). And in the 1980s, Black Art practitioners like Lubaina Himid, Rasheed Araeen, and Donald Rodney produced work to ‘assist us in our liberation’ by creating ‘an alternative set of values’ (Chambers 1981). In relation to these

methods, my strategy of making Unmasked Africana required four sequential phases, of which the first were my critical readings. Second, I made critical observations that were in turn (the third phase) followed by critical appropriation/synthesis. Finally, the fourth phase was critical evaluation.

Through artistic critical readings, I tried to identify fugitive Africana in Tate's collection of British art. This practice was analogous to the process of 'oppositional decoding' proposed by Stuart Hall in his essay 'Encoding/Decoding' ([1980] 2005). For Hall, a work is oppositionally decoded if the viewer interprets it in ways that directly counter the maker's intention. Whilst Leighton, Burne-Jones, or Fehr might have intended that viewers perceive their Andromedas as 'pure' white women, an oppositional decoding might read their artworks as instead a masking of the heroine's mythical Ethiopian identity. In my next phase, critical observation, I considered which methods of observation would identify a recognizable and representable element of the masking artwork (including its entire form) that might then be incorporated into the third phase. And it was only through the third phase—critical appropriation and synthesis—that I could discover in practice which methods of mimesis, abstraction, and making would critically translate visual elements of the old masking artwork, whilst ensuring that those elements remained recognizable in a new unmasking artwork. It was through critical reflection (such as in the present text), that I considered in what ways artistic criticality had been produced through the entire process.

My investigations into the black Andromeda constituted the critical reading that identified Henry Fehr's *The Rescue of Andromeda* as an instance of Masked Africana in Tate's collection—with Andromeda's invisible Ethiopian identity constituting the sculpture's specific and fugitive Africana element. Nevertheless, Fehr's *Andromeda* was unusual amongst historical depictions in that the entire bronze, including all four

mythological figures, has a jet-black patina (probably achieved using either liver of sulphur or ammonium sulphide). Ironically, this meant that in the translation from plaster to bronze, Fehr's *Andromeda* had metamorphosed literally from white to black. However, in terms of considering her physiognomy for conventional signifiers of perceived beauty or 'race' (both deemed significant by Ovid), it is only possible for the ordinary viewer to see Andromeda's face in profile—due to its relative position. That profile suggested Fehr intended his heroine to conform to a so-called Greek ideal.²⁰

²⁰ It is plausible that the visual prominence of Andromeda's facial profile in Fehr's work may be attributed to a nineteenth-century Western, white aesthetic obsession with the 'ideal Greek profile', a racialized signifier that privileged specific facial features in hierarchies of supposedly racial attributes. For example, the idealist German philosopher Hegel supported claims by the Dutch physiologist Pieter Camper that the Greek profile was the ideal of human beauty, and that in sculpture this was manifest in a straight line between the forehead and nose tip almost "without interruption", along with a supposed Greek "facial angle" (Tibebu 2011). In this stereotypical schema, 'negroes' (that is, 'black Africans', or 'Ethiopians') were considered aesthetically, intellectually, and spiritually inferior to 'Caucasians'. Similarly, Leighton, who was Fehr's teacher, believed Greek art of the 'Periclean Age' (fifth century BCE) produced an 'ideal of balanced form wholly Aryan' and shared only by some white British women (Leighton 1897, 89). My studies of Fehr's three human faces in his *Rescue of Andromeda* found that they all conformed to this supposed Greek ideal (see Fig. 1a, 1c above). Such ideas continue to inform popular western culture: in Ridley Scott's 2012 sci-fi hit *Prometheus*, the human protagonists encounter 'godlike' humanoid aliens. These digitally animated beings each had a pronounced 'Greek Profile' because, according to their designer

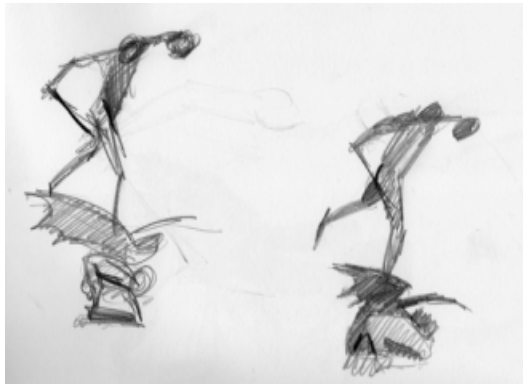
Having identified Fehr's work as an instance of masked Africana, I began my critical observations, hoping to discover more about its visual coding and seeking elements for appropriation through my unmasking process. This onsite study began with observational drawings, using graphite pencils and sketchpads, and it is only stating the obvious to note that the most prominent element of the sculpture is not Andromeda (as in Leighton's work) but the towering, naked, and entirely black young man, lithely muscular, who imposes a sense of hyper-masculine physical dominance—given that his giant stride places one firm foot on the back of a dragon. The huge blade in one hand and severed human head in the other evokes extreme violence, but also, Goethe's association of Medusa with desire (Goethe 1999, 235) and Freud's with castration (Freud 2006; see also Garber and Vickers 2003). Just above the viewer's eye level is the terrifying Cetus, part-reptile, part-bat, with predatory claws and outspread wings. Its jaws brimmed with crocodilian teeth, and it seemed to be both menacing and shielding the naked, slightly built Andromeda, whose gestures suggest terrified vulnerability. Chained by her ankles to the rock on which she squirms prostrate, her discarded robe is draped beneath her. She cannot see Perseus because the wing of the beast overshadows her while also shielding her gaze from beholding and thus succumbing to the Gorgon.

Every surface of Fehr's work is smooth, glossy, almost uniformly black, and crafted in just enough realistic anatomical detail to be plausible. Yet despite the athleticism and terror, there is not a single raised vein to indicate effort, which subtly heightens the supernatural status of the figures. Instead of the drawing-room restraint or courtly manners sometimes associated with Victorian sensibilities, the viewer is

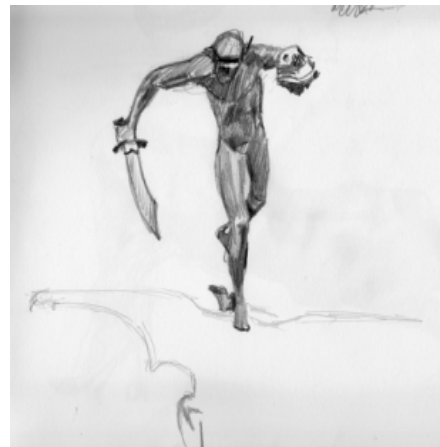
Neville Page, Scott wanted, 'an exercise in classic human beauty. Ridley was quite specific about his references of Roman and Grecian sculpture. "God like, classical"' (Page 2013).

confronted with a scene of rage, terror, desire, death, and a monstrous Other—all of which belong to the re-emergence through the Pre-Raphaelites and then the New Sculpture movement of that neo-Gothic sensibility which had previously found expression in British fine art of Henry Fuseli during the 1780s.

□



(i)



(ii)



(iv)



(iii)

Fig. 2 Kimathi Donkor, *Study of Fehr's Rescue of Andromeda* (nos I, II, III & IV), 2011. Graphite on paper

From a vantage point on the other side of the Millbank highway, my enquiry in the first two sketches (see Fig. 2a) created rapid, boldly marked studies designed to quickly understand the scale and proportions of the sculpture. The drawings revealed that one source of the work's physical aura lay in Fehr's dramatic scaling of his figures. Perseus was gigantic by comparison to Andromeda—perhaps a similar disparity in scale to that in Pierre Puget's 1684 marble sculpture of the pair. Her size was as a child to an adult, and the hero also dwarfed the monster Cetus—dominating the entire scene. To draw the sculpture from its front, I moved into the museum's front garden. From there Perseus's hunched stance appears more menacing, his sword aimed directly at Cetus's jaws. The hero's head leans and turns slightly as though giving himself time and space to apprehend his opponent (Fig. 2b). In this subtle gesture, I sensed that Fehr intended his hero to possess great confidence in his invincibility as the son of a god (Zeus), whereas Andromeda seems crushed beneath the expanse of Cetus wing. My drawn marks only discovered the wing in outline, as though I were resisting acknowledgement of the monstrous presence (Fig. 2c).

Cetus's surprise is evident because its head is rotated completely around, indicating the realization that Perseus has approached from behind. Perhaps it was this turning that gave the sculpture moral ambiguity: Perseus is to Cetus as Cetus is to Andromeda—a predator. Perseus does not play fair, so to speak, by the rules of chivalry, as none exist between demi-god and monster. What perhaps unites Perseus and

Andromeda is not morality in the Christian sense of selflessness, but race—in that they perceive themselves as an immanent primordial Same, whilst Cetus and Medusa are Other? Cetus, his interrupting presence acting as a barrier between them, resists the couple's desire to merge into a common identity. Yet in their motivations, all three seem partially interchangeable. Cetus desires to kill Andromeda, Andromeda and Perseus desire the death of Cetus. In moral terms, the Other is thus rendered Same. What counts, then, is not a struggle of Christian good with pagan evil, but rather that of a 'will to power', as formulated by Fehr's contemporary, Friedrich Nietzsche:

Let us admit to ourselves unflinchingly how every higher culture on earth has hitherto begun! [With men] of a still natural nature, barbarians in every fearful sense of the word, men of prey still in possession of an unbroken strength of will and lust for power [who] hurled themselves upon weaker ... races (2003, 192).

After having made my observational sketches and photographs, my next experimental proposal was to take the sculpture's narrative potential and—rather than consider it entirely on its own terms—attempt to integrate further enquiry into my critical practice. Prior to the *Africana Unmasked* project, I had begun a cycle of paintings called *Queens of the Undead* about historical black women regarded as national heroines. One eighteenth-century woman, 'Nanny of the Maroons', was remembered in Jamaica as a military and civic leader who led a rural community of former slaves in guerrilla resistance to British counterinsurgency operations (Sherlock 1998, 137; Gottlieb 2000). Thinking about how to challenge the complacently racialized all-white Andromedas, I considered critically unmasking the Andromeda myth by translating the narrative to the Caribbean and introducing Nanny as Andromeda's rescuer figure. This strategy was perhaps analogous to the transposition of classical themes found in Derek Walcott's 1992 epic poem

Omeros, which whilst set in the writer's Caribbean homeland also referenced Homer's *Iliad*. Similarly, for my proposed Andromeda artwork, colonial chattel slavery could be considered as the metaphorical 'dragon' that preyed upon the innocent. For this artistic experiment I used my photographic and drawn studies of Fehr's four sculptural figures to create computerized renditions in a virtual, three-dimensional digital space (Fig. 3), and these were then appropriated and synthesized into a new artwork *Andromeda, Nanny, Cetus and Medusa* (Fig. 4).

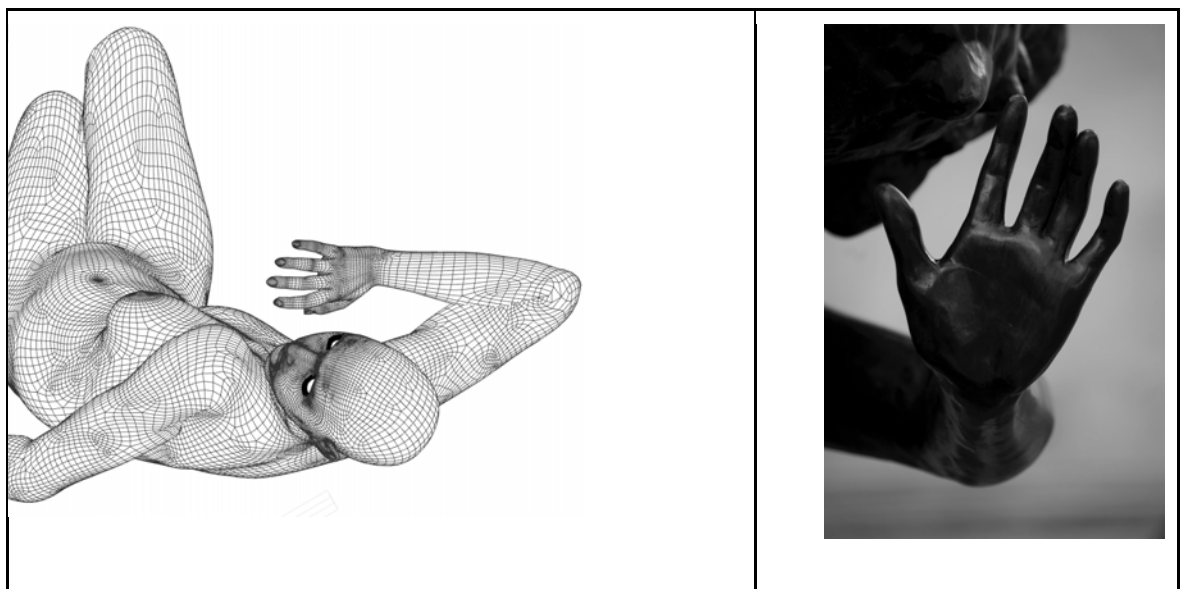


Fig. 3 (Left) Kimathi Donkor, *Andromeda*, © 2011. Digital 3D design. (Right) Detail of Fehr, *Rescue of Andromeda*, 1893. Photograph © Kimathi Donkor, 2011.



Fig. 4 Kimathi Donkor, *Andromeda, Nanny, Cetus and Medusa*, © 2011. (Digital painting;

to see this image in colour, visit www.kimathidonkor.net.

Each virtual three-dimensional figure had a role analogous to those in Fehr's statue, but with metamorphosed gender identities, species, dress, and spatial relationships—also translating the outdoor setting into an interior. I appropriated the gestures and postures of Fehr's sculpture to produce a sense of figurative genealogy—that is, my figures had clear visual resemblances to Fehr's prototypes. And I intended that these synthesized translations (or metamorphoses) could be read as both a response to and a break with the tradition of interpretations that had erased Andromeda's Ovidian and Ethiopian blackness. This new Andromeda was not based on a portrait but was an imaginary persona whose contemporary jeans, trainers, and hairstyle would situate the *mise en scène* within a moment that resisted the stylistic, cultural claims of both the ancient world and the colonial empire. Presenting her as dressed made her possibly the first clothed depiction of the character in British fine art and so resisted the patriarchal objectifying processes inherent in the traditional strategy by which Andromeda models were:

disrobed to be painted in that condition which we call art—but which is just another site of power where your human identity can be diminished by the exposure of your vulnerable body to a costumed and protected gaze. (Pollock 1999, 299)

With so much metamorphosis already in play, I succumbed to the temptation of representing Medusa as a black man adorned with the hairstyle I had worn for almost thirty years, and whose English name 'dreadlocks' seems to invoke the kind of terror inspired by the serpent-adorned Gorgon. It is an association often made, such as when reggae archivist Roger Steffens described Bob Marley as having 'Medusa locks spiralling

outward from his head in wild abandon' (1998, 253).²¹

My Cetus figure kept its overarching position in relation to Andromeda, but he was now humanized—a white man wearing a lounge suit, which in Western and colonized societies symbolized the conventional uniform of hegemonic, ordering power embodied by figures of commercial, political, and financial management. I intended his dress to function in a manner akin to the caustic, Weimar Republic images of George Grosz—that is, to associate Cetus with the same, predatory, commercial ethos that had also provoked the Maroon resistance of Nanny. Consequently, Fehr's sacrificial rock was metamorphosed into a bed, symbolic as a site of the countless rapes of enslaved African women by patriarchal 'masters' during the transatlantic slave era. The most complete account of such behaviour was documented in the 37-volume diaries of the eighteenth-century white English overseer, Thomas Thistlewood, who over a 40-year period meticulously documented the 3,852 rapes he inflicted on 138 female slave labourers (Hall 1999; Burnard 2004).

After several weeks of intensive work, I felt this initial experiment had successfully translated the melodramatic violence of Fehr's sculpture into new forms that critically addressed Andromeda's African identity. However, I also felt my representation of her as purely a victim did not do sufficient justice to her simultaneously elevated place in classical mythography. Even with the substitution of a black female rescuer for the Perseus figure, Andromeda's prone, cowering position intersected too closely with Fehr's patriarchal celebration of female submission, and so as a singular work I thought it did not fully invoke that sense of embattled dignity which her social status as a royal princess and consort to the son of Zeus/Jupiter might have implied.

²¹ See also Cashmore 1979; White 1983; Johnson 1992; Narain 2004.



Fig. 5 Kimathi Donkor, *The Rescue of Andromeda*, © 2011. Oil paints on canvas, 120 cm x 90 cm; to see colour image, visit www.kimathidonkor.net.

Consequently, I decided to free my next work from so close a dependence on Fehr's hierarchic priorities by developing a new line of research aligned with the less frenetic narrative conventions of portraiture. To accomplish this, I invited Risikat—a British woman of Nigerian heritage—to sit for a portrait that would again re-imagine the ancient figure's Ethiopian identity.²² This next experiment tried to project a contemporary historic subject's Africana heritage into the mythographic domain of Andromeda rather than simply trying to pull Fehr's sculpted postures into the realm of Africana. The triangulation of Britishness, Africana, and Mediterranean antiquity might also suggest parallels with Bernardine Evaristo's novel *The Emperor's Babe* (2001; see also Walters in this volume, pp. 223-239), which accomplished its own sense of contemporaneity through the studied London vernacular of its heroine. Just as the Ethiopian Andromeda was said to have voyaged with Perseus to reign over Mycenae in Greece, a key intention of my new unmasked image would be its portrayal of a woman whose own immediate heritage personified the diasporic, post-colonial settlement of African peoples in Europe—a portrayal that evoked her embodied subjectivity through details that were sympathetic rather than objectifying. Again unlike her artistic predecessors, this new Andromeda was neither disrobed nor chained, but nor was she any longer menaced by the immediate rapine of monstrous Otherness as had been the case in my earlier studio experiments.

For the portrait, my sitter assumed an upright, seated posture with her ankles crossed and a slight contrapposto—relaxing the strenuous contortions imposed by Fehr on his model. Thus, Andromeda's poise was intended to reveal a self-possessed woman resistant to the racialized male gaze of post-Renaissance mythographers, with their

²² Risikat Donkor, as well as being my sitter in 2011, was also my partner—we married in 2013.

demand for female nudity, victimhood, and the symbolic erasure of black identities. In the middle distance behind her, a clearly recognizable element of Fehr's sculptural torment and bestial hunger was depicted through the wings of Cetus spread out into the night sky. In this new work, the dais was symbolically situated on a representation of the ribbed dome at Millbank, which I had digitally flattened into a circular grid and painted as though illuminated by moonlight. Although it was possible to see dimly the bronze hand of Fehr's Andromeda making her plea, there was no Romantic superman—or superwoman—descending from heaven to reiterate the spectacle of victimhood.

Only the representation of a faint jet stream above the horizon of the Atlas Mountains served as a reminder that when the painting was underway, a new generation of flying warriors were tasked with supposedly rescuing Africans from 'monsters'.²³ But in the centre of a cloudless sky and appearing just above the queen's head, I also painted the galaxy named after her and making its nightly orbit. The painting, entitled *The Rescue of Andromeda* (Fig. 5), was first exhibited in the 2011 group exhibition *Precious Little* at the gallery of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London's Trafalgar Square, with Emeritus Professor Elizabeth McGrath amongst those who attended the opening preview.

When the tragically short-lived, African American, neo-fauvist painter Bob Thompson created two small gouaches called *Untitled (Perseus and Andromeda)* in 1964, he seemed to have revelled in audacious interpretations of Titian's grand 1554–6 commission for King Philip II of Spain. One of Thompson's Andromedas had a pale complexion with reddish hair, whilst the other was bright orange with blue hair. Thus,

23. I am here referring to the use of airpower by Britain and France in 2011 to attack the Libyan armed forces, which they accused of intending to commit massacres in Benghazi.

although colour conventions were evidently a theme for him, neither figure seemed definitively Ethiopian, which suggested them as plausible instances of a black artist producing masked Africana. And when the similarly ill-fated Jean-Michel Basquiat tackled the subject in 1988 with his large duo-tone *Pegasus*, he eschewed figuration almost entirely, opting instead to write ‘Andromeda’ repeatedly, along with the word ‘schwarz’, meaning ‘black’ in Germanic languages, (Heyd 1999). Therefore, whilst I cannot exclude the possibility that others have made contributions that antedate my own, it is feasible that my 2011 *Rescue of Andromeda* was the first depiction of a defiantly black ‘Andromeda’ by a black painter. And although Fanon might not have been at all impressed by this minor act of resistance to centuries of white masking, I do think his transatlantic Odyssey to rescue France from her Nazi nemesis and his subsequent marriage there to Josie Dublé—a woman from across the colour line—make it hard to imagine a real-life couple more likely to understand Ovid’s Perseus and Andromeda than Frantz and Josie.

CAPTION LIST

Fig. 1 Henry Fehr, *The rescue of Andromeda*, 1893. Bronze. Photographs © Kimathi Donkor, 2011

Fig. 2 Kimathi Donkor, *Study of Fehr’s Rescue of Andromeda (Nos I, II, III & V)*, © 2011. Graphite on paper

Fig. 3 (Left) Kimathi Donkor, *Andromeda*, © 2011. Digital 3D design. (Right) Detail of Fehr, *Rescue of Andromeda*, 1893. Photograph © Kimathi Donkor, 2011

Fig. 4 Kimathi Donkor, *Andromeda, Nanny, Cetus and Medusa*, © 2011. Digital painting; colour image can be viewed at www.kimathidonkor.net

Fig. 5 Kimathi Donkor, *The Rescue of Andromeda*, © 2011. Oil paints on canvas, 120 cm x 90 cm; colour image can be viewed at www.kimathidonkor.net

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