

# Approaching Race and Empire in collections of nineteenth-century art and design



A resource pack for museums and galleries



Produced by the Race, Empire & the Pre-Raphaelites research group, 2023  
Edited by Kate Nichols, Victoria Osborne and Sabrina Rahman  
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Designed by Sharonjit Kaur Sutton  
[www.designsloading.co.uk](http://www.designsloading.co.uk)

Printed by The Holodeck, Birmingham

Race, Empire and the Pre-Raphaelites is a research group of the British Art Network, a Subject Specialist Network led and supported by Tate and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, with public funding provided by the National Lottery through Arts Council England  
<https://britishartnetwork.org.uk/>

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# 2 Contemporary Artists' Approaches

## 2.1 Resonance and Reverberation in Maud Sulter's *MUSEUM*

Jennifer DeVere Brody and Deborah Cherry

***The Death of Cleopatra* (1890)  
by John Collier**

<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-death-of-cleopatra-90546>

**Maud Sulter's *MUSEUM* (1990) comprises three large square colour photographic prints, each of which extracts and enlarges a detail from John Collier's painting, *The Death of Cleopatra* (1890, Gallery Oldham). A quotation from Gertrude Stein is affixed to each frame.**

The gallery commissioned Sulter (1960-2008), a multidisciplinary Black woman artist, curator, poet and historian to create an artwork that would respond to the gallery's entire collection. Given free rein to explore the stores, she selected the pride of the gallery, Collier's massive painting measuring 3.95 x 3.15 metres (12'11" x 10'4"). Purchased from the artist in 1891, the work had returned from conservation to display in Oldham's capacious, high-ceilinged Victorian galleries. Sulter (who often wrote about herself in the third person) recounted:

*As a celebration of International Women's Day Helen Sloan at Oldham Art Gallery commissioned Maud Sulter to create a new work. She chose to critique Collier's *The Death of Cleopatra*, a key work from the gallery's collection which had been newly conserved and placed on permanent display.<sup>1</sup>*

***MUSEUM* (1990)  
by Maud Sulter**

<https://maudsulterpassion.wordpress.com/1107-2/>

Given this work's prominence of place—literally and symbolically—Sulter's decision to deconstruct its powerful centering with her own novel postcolonial approach challenged received ideas of history. Unlike Collier's singular grand narrative and Orientalist painting, Sulter's artwork is a 'minor,' disparate and collaged event, dispersed across a suite of three photographs each 76 x 76 cm. Although smaller in scale, *MUSEUM* succeeds by hacking the master narrative's superficial smoothness even to the point of including bits of unedited hair that cling to the photographic prints. Here, Sulter puts a Black female body back into the picture, so to speak. Sulter's approach seeks to re-distribute and literally reframe Victorian standards. *MUSEUM* provides a concrete example of how a contemporary artist worked with one specific Victorian art work and collection to offer new perspectives on that object. In doing so, the works become intertextually imbricated. Sharing the same museum space gives each work a new contextual relation such that Collier's work can no longer be imagined without Sulter's response.

Can women have wishes

*Sulter placed these words in a plaque on one of the frames of the *MUSEUM* series*

Sulter understood well the significance of her intervention and provided other material to make sense of her own work. For *MUSEUM*'s first exhibition in 1990 at Oldham Art Gallery, as it then was called, Sulter compiled a brochure with an artist statement, her poem 'Historical Objects' from her second collection, *Zabat: Poetics of a Family Tree* (1989), and on the cover a reproduction of her photograph of *Africa* (1878), one of the statues of the six continents now located in front of Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Ever the researcher and historian, Sulter consulted many sources and provided a reading list of writings by Gertrude Stein, Audre Lorde's essay, 'Uses of the erotic: the erotic as power' (*Sister Outsider*, 1984), and feminist studies on pornography. For the installation she created a soundscape that reiterated as an incantation one of her chosen quotations from Gertrude Stein, 'Can women have wishes', voiced over tracks from Ali Hassan Kuban's *From Nubia to Cairo*, the Nubian musician's vinyl album released by world music label, Piranha in 1989.<sup>2</sup>

In the brochure Sulter states *MUSEUM* 'creates an altered reading of notions of the great painting'. She continues, slyly mocking the Victorian painter,

*A great painting  
of a great subject  
of a great moment  
of European History*

*The shift from East  
to West  
Black  
to White  
Power to  
Powerlessness*

In these short phrases Sulter re-presents her critical reading of Collier's version of Cleopatra's herstory.

*Zabat*, commissioned by Jill Morgan at nearby Rochdale Art Gallery in 1989 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of photography, portrayed contemporary Black women creatives as ancient Muses. *MUSEUM* equally deploys colour photography on a grand scale: to cut up the great White patriarchal painting as a means of cutting it down to size; of slashing through its privileged presumptions and transmogrifying it, breaking it so that it 'no-longer no more'<sup>3</sup> repeats the pornographic spectacle of a dead Black queen and her attendants.

Rather than simply invert a binary system of power, Sulter refuses to reimagine this queen whose death has been fantasised by so many artists and writers. Helen Sloan recollected speculation that the artist might 'dress up as Cleopatra'.<sup>4</sup> Sulter countered that:

*In expressing the fracture of the expected reading of a multiple greatness the artist seeks to allow the viewer the space to negotiate the terrain. Reinvest terms with another meaning, resonance, reverberation.*<sup>5</sup>

Sulter's prescient work shifts our perspective by reviewing how we witness one of the most over-represented narratives in Western art. The 'Death of Cleopatra' is a generic title found throughout so many museums that identify Black female figures only in fragments that occlude more than they reveal. As a remedy, Sulter samples Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927), attaching to each frame a metal plaque engraved with a unique fragment from Stein's prose-poem to 'signify' on the heteropatriarchal language that distorts such Saintry subjects. Sulter's 'cut and mix' produces a queer work of art that juxtaposes temporalities, races and genres in making something new. The discontinuous Stein quotations do not serve as appropriate titles as much as bring into focus the arbitrary protocols of museum display that so frequently have mislabelled the Black

women in their midst. Robin Coste Lewis's 2015 collection of poems *Voyage of the Sable Venus* does something similar with its use of found poetry in the catalogue listings and titles of so many museum collections.

More importantly, Sulter's intervention in the museum with *MUSEUM* (and the title is telling) goes well beyond noting the Orientalism evident in Collier's work through its shattering of the framing of Oldham itself. Sulter's aesthetic approach to the painting performed a theoretical intervention that did more than replace the maker (White male subject with Black queer woman) but significantly the medium (photography, fragment, poetry) as well. By titling the piece, *MUSEUM*, Sulter implicated the entire practice of elevating art via its 'museumification' and placement in the Gallery.

The artist's address to the representation of Black women in art and museums underpinned her creative practice:

*This whole notion of the disappeared, I think, is something that runs through my work. I'm very interested in absence and presence in the way that particularly black women's experience and black women's contribution to culture is so often erased and marginalised. So that it's important for me as an individual, and obviously as a black woman artist, to put black women back in the centre of the frame - both literally within the photographic image, but also within the cultural institutions where our work operates.*<sup>6</sup>



The museum haunts Sulter's practice. In 1987 Sulter and Lubaina Himid investigated the historical collections at Rochdale, producing a display and brochure about the portrayal of Black people in western art, their marginalisation and over-painting.<sup>7</sup> *MUSEUM* declares Sulter's long-standing interrogation of art collections, their classifications and taxonomies. Her deep knowledge of the art of the past, her engagement with historical representation, and her challenges to art institutions run

through the reprises of *Zabat and Hysteria* (1991) to her reflections on African art in *Paris Noir* (1990), *Fetish* (1992) and *Syracas* (1994).


*MUSEUM* shatters Collier's over-sized painting into three fragments, all from its lower half; Sulter's slicing exposes and critiques its 'necrophilia, racism and overt sexism'.<sup>8</sup> The black frames sever the parts, destroying the over-familiar story. Produced at the height of British imperialism during a period of rapid British colonial expansion across the continent of Africa, Collier's fashionable Egyptology and his decorative Orientalism displace and deny the violence and brutality of that enactment, situating it on the dead bodies of the queen and her attendants. Sulter's extraction estranges: which figure is Cleopatra is not disclosed. *MUSEUM* dismisses the grandiose setting with its towering columns and massive statuary and excludes many of the exoticizing accessories. Sulter bleaches colour, intensifying Collier's insistence on the Egyptian queen as White. She dissolves painterly detail into soft focus photography, pulling and stretching, blurring and distancing. Photographing the series in 2023, artist Morwenna Kearsley commented on how Sulter's photographic surfaces and techniques shape the spectator's encounter:

*I could see some beautiful wee dust spots and hairs that I recognise from years of printing my own work ... Small hairs love to cling to negatives and, once enlarged, are visible. If this is what they are, I so appreciate that Sulter left them in and didn't retouch the print. To me, this creates a jolt, a recognition on the part of the spectator that we are looking at an object (the print). It makes the photograph visible and by extension, the act of looking.*<sup>9</sup>

Sulter stated passionately in 1991: 'the root of classical history lies in Egypt — part of our misunderstanding, part of our lack of a deeper reading of histories ... has been



the writing-out of the black contribution to history.<sup>10</sup> Sulter's early intervention in this history provides a cogent and clever response to the entire enterprise of the museum. She was in the vanguard of this on-going project. Oldham Art Gallery was one of many public art museums established across North-west England in the later nineteenth-century which are now examining their histories and reconfiguring their collections. Founded in 1883 Oldham was supported by local industrialist Charles Lees whose wealth came from textile manufacture reliant on raw cotton grown in the slavery states of the American South.<sup>11</sup> Sulter's choice of title for a series made specifically for Oldham signals her desire to take on the museum as a cultural institution that is complicit with colonial structures of domination and disappearance.





The metal plaques mimic informational labels that once graced ornate museum frames. Discontinuous, short phrases sliced from Stein's text make no sense, offer no explanations. They are all rendered without punctuation, making reading them ambiguous. There is no question mark on 'Can women have wishes.' 'Which is a fact' could be read as a statement or an interrogatory. 'One two three Saints' with its numbers aligned sequentially may be a declaration of 'addition', a spell, a description. These atemporal fragments do not serve as appropriate titles for the artworks as much as bring into focus the arbitrary protocols of museum display that so frequently have mislabelled the Black women in their midst (again, see Coste Lewis). Introducing an iconic moment in cultural history, Sulter casts Black history across centuries and geographies. Stein's text became the libretto for an opera with music by Virgil Thomson, first performed in 1934 with a Black cast, and a Black choral director, Eva Jessye, and her choir. Sulter's quotations acknowledge

the inspiration of Stein's variation, repetition, fragmentation, evident in her own writing as well as the inspiration of Stein's radical, queer, Parisian modernism. Sulter's 1990 text concludes:

*The sheen of the clean. Refreshed layers of paint over canvas. Creating a re-imaging of this representation. Figures prefigured by notions of necrophilia, racism and overt sexism. Expressed in the sexualisation of death. Of a moment in her story. Of a black queen. In a black country. Of a moment in her story. Of a black queen. In a black country.*<sup>12</sup>

Like Stein, she repeats what is central as a mantra, recalibrating the long 'debate' about Cleopatra's racial origins that coloured the queen's depiction on coins, statues, paintings, and numerous other portrayals.



Sulter deploys the Black aesthetic strategy of repetition with difference as a means of undermining the political authority of and in museums. She proceeds not through the more familiar strategies of re-interpretation or re-curating. Rather than affirming the authority of the institution to renegotiate its collections, Sulter assigns responsibility to its visitors, 'allow[ing] the viewer the space to negotiate the terrain'. She gifts resonance and reverberation, but declines explanation. As she once declared, 'If you don't know, why should I tell you'.<sup>13</sup> She resists definitive labelling and attacks the very premise of what it means to display 'difference'. She refuses to reveal or merely replace White-appearing objects with Black ones and instead, cuts through to the heart of the matter which questions how we come to view and value A (and resolutely not THE) Black story. With *MUSEUM*, Sulter reiterates and thereby reinstates, momentarily in (the) museum, the power of this 'black queen' who ruled a 'black country.'