

The transatlantic slave trade and other key

[Design](#), [Architecture](#)



The International Slavery Museum aimed to present Transatlantic Slave Trade and other key issues.

Its purpose was 'to promote the understanding of transatlantic slavery and its enduring impact.'¹ When considering the importance of the museums it is important to understand that the museum presents some fundamental key issues. This focuses on the presentation of both native Africans and Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and this essay will focus on examining each of these aspects. The museum itself aimed to provide the audience with an insight into 'the understanding of transatlantic slavery'². It focused on providing the audience with an experience for the lives of the 'enslaved' and the tough experiences they had faced. The museum is divided into themes in which are separated into: Life in West Africa, Enslavement and the Middle Passage and finally Legacy. The museum allows a greater understanding into the greater depth of the stories and experiences of the 'enslaved'. Arguably, there are some limitations of the museum an example being the idea of 'commemoration not celebration', so the museum focuses on commemorating the past events in particular the lives of the native Africans as well as the presentation of the transatlantic slave trade throughout the museum.

Furthermore, the museum allows the audience to gain an experience in understanding the message in which the museum was trying to convey for each of the key issues. The presentation of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade within the museum was a key issue when examining the display on 'Enslavement and The Middle Passage'. This particular exhibition used the technique of the surrounding to shed a light particularly on the experiences

of the enslaved especially on their voyage trips. The museum focused both on colour and sound to reflect the experiences of the enslaved and the dark colours within the displays created alone that which allowed the audience to gain a first-hand experience. The colour and sound created a combination as the mood of the colours reflected the screaming and pain of the enslaved during the voyages to the Americas. Walvin (2013) argues that many of the enslaved were 'viewed merely as victims, with little role or agency in the entire story of enslavement and freedom' 3.

It can be argued that the exhibition to some extent creates the enslaved as 'victims' with the sound reflecting the pain as the screaming suggests a lack of freedom. The harsh conditions as well as the unsanitary surroundings often led to the 'death of many millions'. 4 Furthermore, it was also evidently clear that 'Liverpool came to dominate the British Slave Trade' 5 and the exhibition reflected much on the role of Transatlantic Slave Trade within Britain during the 18th century. The museum presented the journey of many of the enslaved from Africa to the America as one which was regarded to be a negative experience and the struggles in which many had faced. The presentation of Olaudah Equiano (a former slave) within the museum gave an insight into the first-hand account and experience on life on the ships. Equiano (1789) states 'This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable...' 6 This account allows an insight into the first-hand experience of a former slave who had experienced the hardship that had come with the trade ships. When examining the International Slavery Museum and an important factor to consider is the way in which Trans-Atlantic Slavery was presented within the museum.

It can be regarded as an exhibition which heightens the treatment of the enslaved with the objects that are included within the gallery. The 'Shackles' are a symbolic object as it presents the enslaved as having no 'freedom' (see in Appendix 1). The shackles themselves were 'rustic' looking and looked rotten many of the enslaved were chained with one on their hand and the other on their feet this was because there was a fear of the enslaved escaping and so the shackles signified that the enslaved were 'trapped'. The exhibition on 'Enslavement and the Middle Passage' included many shackles throughout there was one figure in particular of an 'Enslaved African breaking free of his chains' (see in Appendix 2).

The judgment which can be formed from this figure is that this is often seen to be rather symbolic. The 'shackles' were presented throughout the museum this could instigate that the enslaved were not in fact treated in a fair manner and the Africans were seen to be of an inferior status. Almost, as though the shackles had removed their identity and more importantly their freedom and the museum did well in presenting this within the displays. Another interpretation is argued by Walvin (2013) states 'Restraining the growing ranks of Africans by manacles and chains was the only way in which small bands of sailors could hope to maintain any semblance of control' it suggests that in order for the ships to be running Africans needed to be 'chained' for many it created the atmosphere of a prison and within the museum the videos explicitly show the Africans in pain as they try to break free from the violence similar to the figure that had been shown. The display on 'Life in West Africa' within the International Slavery Museum presents the cultural life of the Africans before slavery.

The museum presents the contrast of the two galleries with a difference in colour. The 'Life in West Africa' display includes colourful colours which creates an uplifting atmosphere and it unveils the 'African cultural achievements before the arrival of Europeans and the start of the transatlantic slave trade.'⁹ The Museum allows the recognition of the lives of Africans before slavery and how their lives were lived so freely. This gallery further emphasised the power and wealth of the West Africans and they also were popular with trade as there was 'strong trade bonds between Europeans and Africans'¹⁰ (Emmer 2014; 2009). This was ironic as not long after the Europeans began to kidnap the Africans and their culture as well as identity was proven to have been left behind. Many of the Europeans saw the Africans as uncivilised', however the Igbo domestic architecture proves that they were in fact 'sophisticated'. The museum presents the Igbo architecture (see in appendix 3) as portraying the 'wealth' of the Africans as well as reflecting the views that during the early modern period the Africans were living in a free society and the museum allows the understanding of a family unit of a titled Igbo man.

The display allows the audience into a greater understanding of the lives of West Africans before slavery and the impact in which many of the 'enslaved' face and how their lives changed from the West African society to the 'plantations' in Americas. The Africa exhibition was split into two with the lives before slavery and after the museum in fact distinguished the two. The 'plantation' display had focused on portraying the audience with a dark atmosphere and this helped with gaining an insight into the struggles in which many had faced. For many Africans the 'Plantation owners wanted

labour and justified the barbarity of their treatment by using biblical arguments that Africans were less than human' 11 as this was reflected through the series of images which presented the condition of the enslaved. Blassingame (1979) argues that many were ' Captured and brought to America under the most painful and bewildering conditions...' 12 this suggests that many of the Africans were kidnapped and sent to America to work on ' the plantations' and many faced hardship in comparison to their lives in West Africa. As, they went from living a free life to becoming ' enslaved' and their freedom had been removed from them.

The image of the Africans working on plantations (see in appendix 4) allows the audience of the museum to understand the power of their masters and as Olaudah Equiano quoted ' the slaves to be branded with the initial letters of their masters name; and a load of heavy iron hooks hung about their necks' this is in fact reflected throughout the exhibition. The image presents the master with ultimate control as the gesture of his hand could be understood to be an ' order' and the overall message in which the museum conveys is the change the Africans had faced and ironically the exhibition reflects the reading in which I have read about the lives of the enslaved. The museum has used the technique of colour to create a differentiation with the ' positive' life they once lived to now working on plantations with the dark atmosphere that creates negative connotations. During this period the ' British American colonies demanded African slaves, the role of the African companies changed to supply them' 13 many of the Africans were sent to the Americas to work on either plantation or factories and they were used as a source of labour. For many there is a loss of identity and culture are left behind as in the Americas

they are identified with another name and overtime their identity is completely removed. To conclude, the International Slavery Museum presented the Native Americans as well as Trans-Atlantic slave trade as a key issue within the museum. The exhibitions of the museum allow a differentiation when understanding the lives of the African before and after slavery as well as the significant changes in which they had faced.

The museum uses the technique of colour throughout to enhance the experiences as well as creating an atmosphere within the museum itself. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade display further emphasises the lives of the 'enslaved' with the objects that signify the each sector of their lives from trade to the shackles. The International Slavery Museum effectively uses sound and interactive videos to create an understanding for the first-hand accounts of the 'enslaved' as well as creating an atmosphere that helps the audience to gain a deeper understanding into the experiences. The displays also signify important themes one of which is identity and the museum allows you to experience the culture and identity of the enslaved to have been removed and how their lives had transformed since moving to the Americas. For many this was in fact a period of struggle and many were not in fact able to adjust to this lifestyle.

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