



(page 6) - Colossus of Woes (detail)  
 The Singh Twins, 2017  
 Mixed-medium collage (watercolour, and  
 gold paint and archival ink on archival paper)  
 46 x 35cm (full artwork: see p225)

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## CLOSING ESSAY - by Professor Kate Marsh

*Oriental Luxuries and Imperial Plunder: Hidden Histories and 'Slaves of Fashion'*

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## Introduction - by The Singh Twins

### THE SLAVES OF FASHION ARTWORKS: AN OVERVIEW

*Slaves of Fashion* is an award-winning body of work created by contemporary British artists The Singh Twins which explores empire, colonialism and their legacies through the history of Indian textiles as a global story of conflict, conquest and slavery connected to trade in luxury goods during an age of maritime exploration, colonisation and industrialisation – all driven largely by the commercial interests of competing and expanding European imperial powers at different times from the 15th to the mid-20th century. The artworks also reveal the ancient roots, pioneering craftsmanship, beauty and rich diversity of India's textiles; their desirability as material objects; their importance as a currency of exchange within a wider lifestyle commodities market; and their influence on global fashion and tastes. Alongside this they chronicle some of the cross-cultural influences (arising from the migration of people, ideas and culture) and key moments in world history intrinsically linked to the story of manufacture and trade in Indian textiles.

Reflecting The Twins' ongoing interest in the relationship between politics, culture and identity and in making connections between the past and present, some of the imagery within the artworks suggests how the history of empire and colonialism has impacted on and remains relevant to the contemporary world in terms of attitudes to race; cultural preconceptions; the politics of trade; and debates around decolonisation, cultural ownership, ethical business, responsible consumerism, and the environment. Within the range of multiple and interconnected themes explored, special focus is given to Britain's colonial links with India as a relationship that ties into The Twins' personal identity, experience and practice as artists of dual Indian and British heritage. The title for this body of artwork reflects the relationship that has historically existed between enslavement and the textile industry. But in an alternative, more generic interpretation it also denotes how, in an increasingly materialistic, commodity-dependent global society, we have all become slaves to the changing fashions of consumerism without thinking about the negative human and environmental cost.



(left) - *The Four Continents*

This copperplate engraving by Samuel Wale (1721-1786) depicts Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas personified as women – each symbolically representing their respective attributes and commercial wares. Produced as a frontispiece to Middleton's *A New and Complete System of Geography* (1777-80), the imagery and its inscription present a Eurocentric view of the world, offering a fascinating insight into colonial Europe's self-assured, superior image of itself; and the exploitative nature of its trade with and dominance over other nations.

Full image size: 22.5 x 16cm; page size 28.7 x 17.38cm  
The Singh Twins Historical Archive

(above) - *The Singh Twins* with some of the artworks from their 'Slaves of Fashion' series - as exhibited by Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery in 2022-23  
Photo credit: © Denisa Ilic

(immediately above, from left to right) - *Calico: Merchant Thieves*; *Colossus of Woes* (detail); and *Chintz: The Price of Luxury* - three artworks (in different media) from the *Slaves of Fashion* series

artworks' themes from multiple perspectives, to represent dialogues around them through a variety of creative mediums (involving painted and digital mixed-media contemporary artworks, alongside poetry and film), and to develop a range of exhibition interpretation that embraced both traditional elements (wall text panels, labels and printed handouts) and new technology (augmented-reality apps, and interactive touchscreens).

Our contact with the *Indiennes* at the Nantes History Museum had caused us to think much more deeply about the didactic function of physical objects from the past, and about their potential to encourage alternative ways of understanding history, of thinking about heritage and identity and of relating to the present. How to convey the important role played specifically by museum, gallery and archive collections in this respect, and how to create an exhibition which would enable others to experience the kind of illuminating encounter we had had with the collections in Nantes, became two underlying aims of *Slaves of Fashion*. Our answer to these questions was to draw on museum and archival collections for creative inspiration and to display selected items from these sources within the exhibition as part of a section dedicated to the making of the *Slaves of Fashion* artworks. As well as revealing how we are all connected through a colonial history which lives on in the present, our personal analysis of and artistic response to these historical sources, together with how we chose to juxtapose them within the exhibition (in relation both to each other and to the artworks), emphasised the darker side of colonial history, presenting narratives which sought specifically to question notions of empire as a benevolent force and even as a glorious chapter in history – a view still widely held in modern Britain. This emphasis served our additional aspiration to contribute to debates within the educational and cultural sectors on decolonising – aspects of which highlighted the need for academic research and curriculums to reflect a more honest and balanced assessment of history, and for curatorial practice to better acknowledge and represent the colonial and slavery associations of museum and gallery collections as well as archives, public works of art, and heritage sites.

In addition, the dialogue we created between the contemporary artworks and their historical sources of inspiration within the exhibition fulfilled a further aim: to assert the relevance of both historical and non-Western expressions of art and material culture to modern art practice. This aim may be traced back to the institutional prejudice we faced at university when art



(above) - Installation photographs exemplifying the range of content comprising the 'Slaves of Fashion' exhibition – as displayed at Firststate Gallery in 2022 (top and middle images); the Walker Art Gallery in 2018 (bottom-left image); and Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery in 2022-23 (bottom-right image)  
Photo credit: The Singh Twins

(right) - *Taste in High Life*  
Satirical print, after a painting by William Hogarth (1697–1764), 19.8 x 27cm (full page); 11.7 x 14.8cm (image)  
This print ridicules high living in 18th century England. Reinterpreted through modern eyes the image highlights the link between the enslavement of Africans and the consumption of commodities including 'exotic' goods from the East (such as textiles, tea and fine china) considered fashionable at the time. It also reveals how black slaves, treated as commodities, were considered status symbols alongside other objects of material wealth.  
The Singh Twins Historical Archive



tutors dismissed the particular style of work we had chosen to develop at that time as 'backward', 'outdated' and having 'no place in contemporary art' simply because it was rooted in the ancient tradition of Indian miniature painting. We were told instead to look for inspiration from artists such as Matisse, Gauguin and Picasso: artists who were presented to us as being the forefathers of Western art but who ironically had themselves been heavily influenced by traditional, non-European art forms. Our tutors' Eurocentric view of our art, the double standard implicit in their value judgement, and the pressure placed on us to comply with Western role models, were typical of the 'West is best' attitude that we had experienced as British Asians growing up within a predominantly white British society – a society in which traditional Indian culture was stereotyped as oppressive and antiquated, and which expected us to conform to a Western

lifestyle and values perceived as progressive, educated and modern. The attitude is an example of ingrained cultural bias which we attribute to a colonial mindset of Western superiority. Within this context, our decision to use the *Slaves of Fashion* exhibition to challenge how, in our experience, culture and contemporary art have come to be defined and evaluated from a narrow Eurocentric perspective informed by a colonial past may be seen as a direct response to debates around decolonisation and the legacies of empire.

As artists with a formal academic background (in ecclesiastical history, comparative religion, and art), we have always found that research and analytical thinking play an essential part in our creative process. This relationship between art and academia is something we were keen to express within the exhibition, both through the range of material dedicated to



**A**llegorical Portraits:  
Narratives of Empire & Colonialism  
Through the Story of Indian Textiles





left - Creative Processes  
 This imagery shows some of the preparatory drawings, paintings, digital art and techniques that were used to create the jewellery featured in Ancient Roots: The Wonder That Was India



*"Not a chest of Indigo reached England  
without being stained with human blood."*

E W L Tower, Indigo Commission Report, 1860

## Indigo: The Colour of India

A pair of blue Flemings jeans in the collection of National Museums Liverpool, led to the creation of this artwork which explores stories around indigo, the organic blue dye extracted from the leaves of the indigo plant species, *Indigofera tinctoria*. This plant, with its pink-coloured flowers, can be seen in the inner border of the artwork. It is believed that indigo originated in India. For thousands of years, it was a valuable commodity traditionally used for textile dyeing and printing. Indigo dye and textiles became highly desired across the globe – from the Far East and Africa, to Europe, North America and the West Indies. Determined to seize control of the market, European traders eagerly sought knowledge about how to cultivate the product.

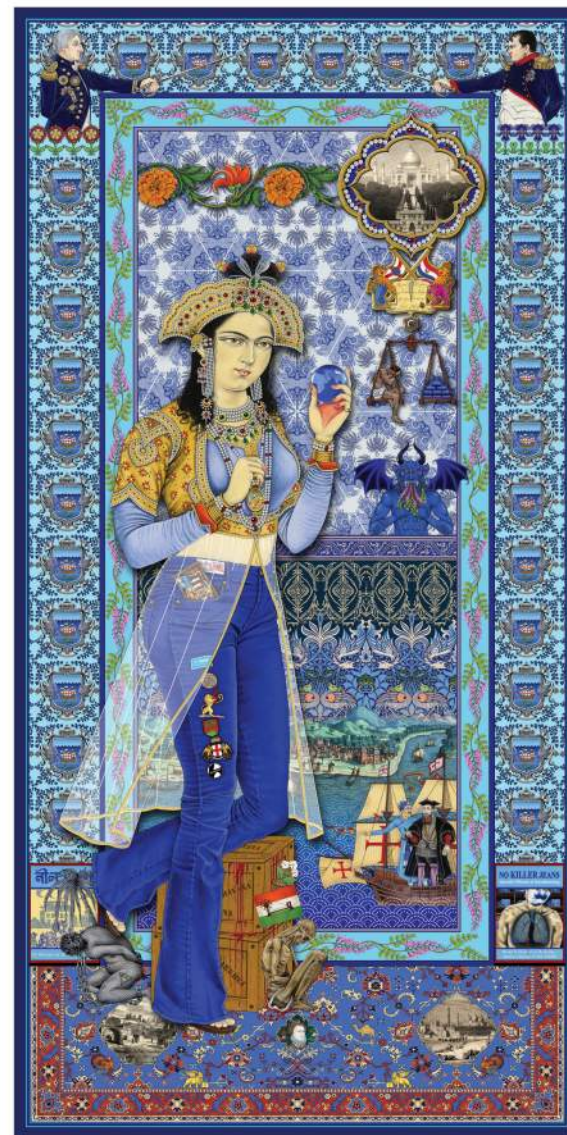
The main figure in the artwork is the 17th-century Indian queen, Mumtaz Mahal. Bedecked with jewels, she represents the fact that indigo dye was once rare and very expensive; a luxury commodity associated with royalty, political power, authority. Known as 'blue gold', it was so valuable that, when prices were high, European traders and plantation owners used it as currency to purchase African slaves who were worth their own weight in indigo. This fact is symbolised in the artwork by the set of scales with an enslaved African sitting

on one side and blue-coloured bars on the other (see p59). The scales themselves are based on a historical set (which was actually used to weigh slaves) on display at the Casa dos Contos Museum in Brazil. The African figure is inspired by one of the four chained figures seen on the Nelson Monument in Liverpool, UK, which some believe represent the city's historical connection with the transatlantic slave trade.

The magnificent Taj Mahal (depicted in the medallion, top right) was built in Mumtaz's memory at Agra. This city was a main centre for production in India of high-quality indigo known as 'Bayana' or 'Agra' indigo, which was most sought after in the West. Another high-quality indigo was 'Sarkhej', produced in the city of Ahmedabad, which is represented by the gateway to one of its famous landmarks ('Shah-e-Alam Roza') seen at the very bottom of the medallion (see p59). To the left, the marigold and flame of the forest flowers symbolise the Indian states of Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh in which Ahmedabad and Agra are situated respectively.



Indigo: The Colour of India  
The Singh Twins, 2017  
Digital mixed-medium  
225 x 112.5cm





War and conflict had a significant impact on the supply of and demand for Indian indigo. For example, during the Anglo-French wars of the early 19th century (represented by the figures of Napoleon and Nelson in the top corners) demand for indigo increased as it was needed for the uniforms of both the English and French troops. Conversely, in 1806, a British naval blockade caused a shortage of indigo, forcing Napoleon to order white coats for his infantry! Likewise, the Haitian Revolution of 1791 (denoted by the pattern in the background, inspired by a postage stamp issued 1892–1895, depicting the coat of arms of the Republic of Haiti) virtually ruined the lucrative indigo plantation industries established by the French and English colonies in the Caribbean. Consequently, this slave-led rebellion contributed to the rise of Bengal (by then an Indian territory governed by British merchants of the East India Company) as a major centre of indigo production.

Early Egyptians and ancient Greeks called the dye 'indikón' (meaning 'from India') and the Romans Latinised the word to 'indicum' before it finally passed into the English language as 'indigo'. Meanwhile, for many centuries in Japan, indigo has been used for dyeing traditional clothing – particularly summer kimonos which, because of the dye's insect-repellent properties, protected their wearers from insect bites. These kimonos were often decorated with patterns recalling the blue sea. This is represented in the artwork by the typical stylised Japanese wave pattern that decorates the sea.

Since the left side of the body is where the heart (the seat of emotion) resides, in ancient Egyptian culture the left-hand side was associated with positivity, light and life, whereas the right-hand side was associated with negativity, darkness, death and evil. As such, figures in Egyptian art are most often represented stepping out on their left foot, a gesture signifying the trampling on evil so that the heart could move forward into life. Inspired by this ancient symbolism (and following the logic that the absence of a left foot would indicate the absence of the left side of the body and, therefore, heart), Mumtaz has been depicted with two right feet to denote the heartlessness of the indigo trade, which – rather than stamping on evil and bringing life – instead brought the evil of slavery and death to millions.

The immense human suffering caused by global demand for indigo is symbolised by the two figures seen at the feet of Mumtaz. On the left, a cowering, shackled African woman symbolises the indigo plantations in the New World which relied on the labour of enslaved Africans. Slaves were often treated cruelly, and fermentation of the indigo plant's leaves, needed to extract the dye, produced nauseating, toxic fumes. According to the narrative of James Roberts, a soldier under General Washington in the American Revolution 'such [was] the effect of the indigo upon the lungs of the labourers, that they never [lived] over seven years'. The slave's thigh is branded with the initials 'E L P' which represent Eliza Lucas Pinckney (1722–1793), the American plantation manager who introduced indigo production to South Carolina in the mid-1700s when India was unable to meet increasing European demand. Having learned the secrets of successful indigo cultivation, Eliza shared her knowledge (and indigo seeds) with neighbouring plantations. Consequently, indigo became established as a major cash crop in South Carolina,



(above) - Creative Processes  
This imagery shows a section of the repeat-pattern background from indigo: The Colour of India, and an image of the postal stamp (issued 1892–1895) which inspired it.  
The Singh Twins Historical Archive



helping to boost and sustain its economy. Whilst South Carolina exports increased from 5,000 to 150,000 pounds of indigo in just one year (1746–47), India temporarily lost dominance of the market. On the right, a starving Indian figure (see p64) symbolises the suffering endured by Indian peasant indigo farmers under British rule. According to the terms of their lease, tenant peasant farmers ('ryots') were forbidden to grow food crops which, having a lucrative local market, were vital to their livelihood. Instead, they were forced to use the best part of their land to grow indigo for export to Europe. The farmers were given an advance to cover the cost of cultivation, but were then paid a pittance (just 2.5 per cent of the market value) for their indigo. Consequently, they were never able to repay this crippling loan (given its high interest), nor pay the high taxes imposed by greedy British indigo plantation managers (or planters, as they were known). Thus trapped in a cycle of debt, the peasant farmers were kept impoverished and in servitude. In addition, this system of exploitation – which left them without enough food crops to set aside surplus stock as a safety net during times of harvest failure – resulted in a famine that killed millions. Bengal, an important indigo-producing region of eastern India, was one of the worst to be hit. Hence, above the starving Indian (based on an actual photograph of a Bengali famine victim), a sprig of night-flowering jasmine, the state flower of West Bengal

## Riches to Rags and Rags to Riches (abridged version)

Incorporating both hand-painted and digitally created imagery with digitally scanned and reworked archive material, this triptych artwork is an abridged version of a 17-metre-long mural (see p192) commissioned for Manchester Museum's South Asia Gallery, a British Museum partnership, which is the first gallery in the UK to be dedicated to the stories of the South Asian diaspora. The artwork comprises three allegorical female portraits, each representing a different period in South Asia's (particularly Indo-British) history: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial.

Reading the triptych from left to right, the first panel represents India as the 'golden bird' (a name originating in ancient times and reflecting how the region was known as a fabled land of untold riches and prosperity) with the world at its feet vying for trade, eager to acquire its precious spices, gems, incense and textiles – various examples of which are represented by the attire, adornments and objects worn or held by the main figure, as well as other details in the artwork which immediately surround her.

The second panel explores the impoverishment and enslavement of India under Western colonial exploitation and in particular British rule, but also explores the oppressive character and negative impact of imperialism globally, driven by the competing commercial interests of Western nations and demand for consumer goods.

The third panel explores how South Asia and its diaspora communities have historically enriched, and continue to contribute to, countries across the world not only as an ongoing legacy of South Asia's colonial relationship with the West but also as a consequence of modern South Asia's emergence as an economic power which has invested in the development of scientific knowledge and advancements that benefit humankind. The composition centres on a portrait of Brit-Asia – an artistic reinterpretation of traditional figures of Britannia, symbolising how South Asia's influence on Britain has come to redefine notions of Britishness.



*"Nearly every kind of manufacture or product known to the civilized world,— nearly every kind of creation of man's brain and hand, existing anywhere, and prized either for its utility or beauty, had long, long been produced in India. [...] Such was the India which the British found when they came."*

Rev. Jabez Thomas Sunderland, 1928,  
human rights and anti-imperialism activist



*"We conquered India by the sword, and by the sword we should continue to hold it [...]. We went with a yard stick in one hand and a sword in the other, and with the latter we continue to hold them helpless while we force the former down their throats."*

Sir William Joynson-Hicks, as quoted in  
*British Rule in India; Condemned by The British Themselves*,  
published by The Indian National Party, 1915



*Riches to Rags and Rags to Riches (abridged version)*  
The Singh Twins, 2024  
Digital mixed-medium  
300 x 470cm

(page 192, right) - *Riches to Rags and Rags to Riches* (mural)  
The Singh Twins, installed 18 February 2023  
(at the South Asia Gallery, Manchester Museum)  
395 x 1700cm  
Digital mixed-medium  
Commissioned by Manchester Museum  
Photo credit: The Singh Twins





The original mural version of *Riches to Rags and Rags to Riches* (see above) contains imagery that reflects how the artists' identity and experience as British artists of dual Indian and English descent connects to some of the themes explored within the artwork. For example, incorporated just after the figure of Brit-Asia is a narrative portrait (see left) of the artists' father Dr Karnail Singh who as a small boy travelled to Britain in 1948 with his mother and younger brothers following the Partition of India. The portrait depicts his long journey by sea from Bombay (today's Mumbai) to Tilbury dock. To the left of the ship a sign reading 'Ancoats' points to the deprived area of Manchester where the family eventually settled and where during the early years of hardship the young Karnail Singh helped his father sell textile items and fancy goods door to door: a common occupation amongst the first-generation South Asian, Punjabi-Sikh migrant community to which he belonged. On the riverbank behind the ship are landmarks representing London and Liverpool – two cities associated with a later period of both self-taught skills and formal education which would enable him, against all the odds (given the family's social and economic circumstances, the language barrier, and the racial prejudice of the times), to fulfil his dream of attaining a medical degree and, with it, financial stability for his family. This achievement is symbolised within the same composition by a figure of Dr Singh in adult life, shown with a stethoscope around his neck, seated at his surgery desk, and holding an old family photograph (taken in Ancoats) – denoting pride in his Indian roots and humble beginnings.

Although a personal tribute to an individual whose extraordinary life was shaped by political events and racist attitudes arising from Britain's imperial relationship with India, the portrait represents the universal rags-to-riches,



migrant success story. This is highlighted by the words which are enclosed within an Indian-style design just below the portrait. These extol the characteristics shared by so many individuals within the first-generation South Asian diaspora who rose to the significant challenges they faced as strangers in a new land, and laid the foundations for a better life for future generations.

(above) - Creative Processes  
This imagery shows some of the preparatory art relating to the figure of 'Asia' in *Riches to Rags and Rags to Riches*, alongside the antique engraving of 'Asia' (top-left corner), which inspired the same figure.

The engraving (after Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder), dated c. 1590–1600, published by Philips Galle (Netherlandish, Haarlem 1537–1612 Antwerp), is from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, collections.  
Title and size: *Allégorie of Asia*, from "The Four Continents"; 20.8 x 14.3 cm  
Accession Number: 59.654.54.  
Gift of the Estate of James Hazen Hyde, 1959  
Photo credit: Public domain, courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



# Alternative A-Z of Empire



As you read this A to Zee  
 You may choose to disagree  
 It's odd your voice to what's been said  
 And help more slaves to be freed  
 Because this artwork has an aim -  
 Not to lay the guilt or blame  
 But both to challenge and reveal  
 How different people think and feel  
 About a past - which, if it could  
 Be much more widely understood  
 Would help to pave a better way  
 Of living in the world today.

**A** A map of the British Empire at its greatest extent, 1913, with a small inset showing the British flag.

**B** A large sailing ship on the sea, with a small inset showing a person on a beach.

**C** A landscape with a person on a horse and a person on foot.

**D** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a green coat.

**E** A person in a pink coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**F** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**G** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**H** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**I** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**J** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**K** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**L** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**M** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**N** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**O** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**P** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**Q** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**R** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**S** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**T** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**U** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**V** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**W** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**X** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

**Y** A person in a blue coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a red coat.

**Z** A person in a red coat holding a document, with a small inset showing a person in a blue coat.

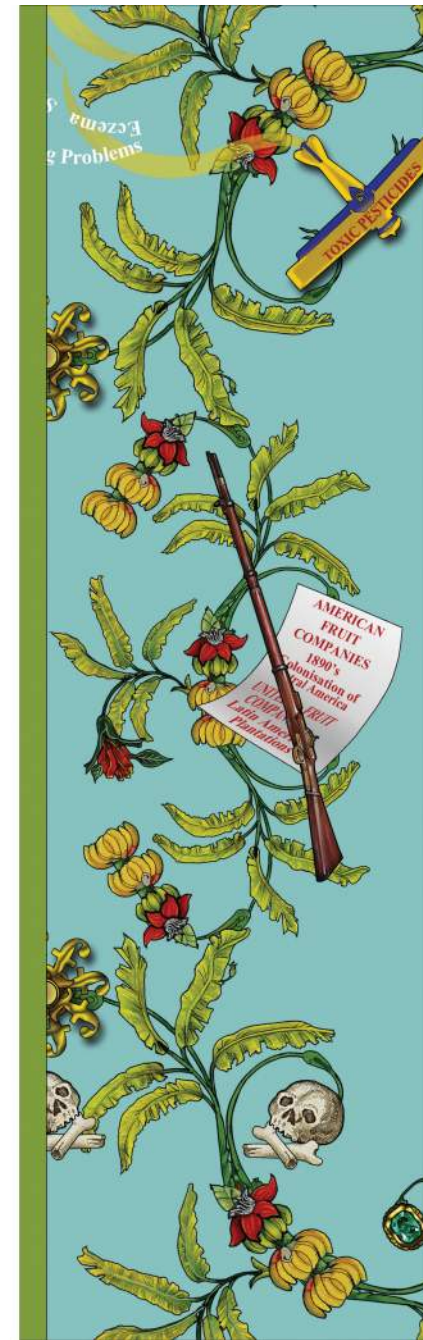


only the growing call for more responsible and sustainable consumerism but also how such campaigns highlight the fact that making informed choices about what to put in the shopping basket can help to secure better working conditions, rights and wages for those at the bottom of the supply chain.

Other details (see the full artwork on p203, and detail, right) in the artwork reveal how the history of large-scale corporate and government control of the banana industry – through land grabbing, labour exploitation and the abuse of human rights – dates back to colonial times. Extending from the ends of the banana plants around the outer border are flower heads and buds comprising pearls and golden pound-signs (denoting wealth), and emeralds (symbols of greed).



(above) - Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I  
 Attributed to Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1575  
 Oil paint on wood  
 78.7 x 61 cm; framed: 89.6 x 72.2 x 6.6cm  
 Courtesy of National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery  
 Museum No. WAG 2994  
 Photo credit: The Singh Twins



The artwork incorporates three details of enslaved Africans (see right) based on historical representations: the hanging, tortured figure of an enslaved African from an 18th-century illustrated account of slavery in the Dutch plantation of Surinam; the figure of a shackled African woman from a 19th-century engraving of slavery in the Caribbean; and the figure of an enslaved African kneeling on bales of Indian cotton, based on an iconic anti-slavery propaganda image originally produced for the British abolition movement. The cotton shown in the third image would have been produced by Indian craftspeople impoverished under British rule; it would have been destined for British mills whose markets included British plantations and colonies across the globe. Indian raw cotton was to become a lifeline for British mills when imports from southern plantations in America were interrupted by the American Civil War. Collectively, these details represent how the story of slavery in America is part of a wider history of empire and colonialism: one which was not confined to the transatlantic slave trade alone but which was connected to a commercial exploitation of people and countries that spanned East and West. Further details in the artwork represent two cash crops (cotton and tobacco) which were widely cultivated using slave labour on American-owned plantations. These symbolise the commercial foundations of a slave trade built on the demand for consumer goods.

The idea of slavery being the scourge of humanity is symbolised by another plant depicted in the inner border of the artwork: the convolvulus, popularly regarded as a destructive, parasitic weed that devastates crops – just as the institution of slavery devastated and continues to devastate lives.

The artwork celebrates several African-American abolitionists and civil rights activists. One of them, Carrie W Clifford, is represented by her poem (depicted in the left-hand border) as a written response to the murder of Wilbur Little: an African-American soldier of the First World War who was lynched for refusing to remove his uniform after returning home from the war. It reveals the 'lynching' mentality which many identify with repeated incidents of racist, unlawful and extrajudicial killing of African Americans like George Floyd in America today. The poem resonates with another artwork in the *Slaves of Fashion* series (*Jallianwala: Repression and Retribution*), which highlights the experience of Indian soldiers in the army of the British Empire who fought in the First World War and who fully expected their sacrifices for the cause of liberty in Europe to be rewarded by greater freedoms and respect for all Indians as equals under British rule in India. Instead,



A poem about the lynching of WWI Veteran, Wilbur Little, in April 1919. By African American Activist, Carrie Williams Clifford, 1922.

"When the looting starts, the shooting starts." "[Protestors] would have been greeted with the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons." (Donald J. Trump) 2020

GEORGE WASHINGTON  
THOMAS JEFFERSON  
JAMES MADISON  
JAMES MONROE  
ANDREW JACKSON  
JOHN TYLER  
JAMES K. POLK  
ZACHARY TAYLOR

GEORGE FLOYD  
ERIC GARNER  
(MURDERED BY POLICE, 2014 AND 2020)  
"I CAN'T BREATHE"  
TAMIR RICE  
(SHOT 2014 WHILE PLAYING WITH TOY GUN, AGE-12)  
GEORGE STINNEY, JR.  
(EXECUTED 1944-AGE 14)

BLACK LIVES MATTER

KILL

MARTIN ROBINSON KEENEY (1817-1888)

"NEITHER SLAVERY NOR INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE, (exploited loophole) EXCEPT AS A PUNISHMENT FOR CRIME... SHALL EXIST WITHIN THE UNITED STATES" (13TH AMENDMENT - 1865)

MARTIN L. KING JR.

"THE GREATEST COUNTRY

IN THE WORLD?"

MALCOLM X

ROSA PARKS

"This is history again, and again and again... This is the thing: the killing of black bodies, that is what this country is built upon."  
Film maker Spike Lee, CNN, 1 June, 2020





Since the film and television adaptations of Jane Austen's novels in the 1990s, the muslin dress, for example, has been associated with the elegance of early-nineteenth-century British society – a society that was dependent on, and shaped by, Britain's trading empire and interaction with other cultures. How far viewers of the productions that filled our television screens in the 1990s were aware of this, and production companies wanted us to see it, is debatable; but Jane Austen's characters did hint at it. In her novel *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Henry Tilney praises 'true Indian muslin'. In doing so, he is talking not only of fabric but also of British exploitation and appropriation.

The history of the paisley shawl is another example of a history of influences from the East 'hidden in plain sight'. The paisley design became popular in Britain during the mid-eighteenth century when the East India Company began to import soft shawls made from the wool of Kashmir goats. Intricately patterned and warm, the shawls, which were given as prestigious gifts and worn by Persian men around the waist and Indian men across the shoulder, were brought back by travellers and merchants and epitomised Oriental luxury. The opulent hand-woven textile reached France following Napoleon's Egyptian campaigns, when his generals and officers brought back Kashmir shawls among other Oriental

goods and trophies – a fact evoked in *The Twins' Kashmiri Shawls: From Punjab to Paisley*, with portraits of Josephine and Napoleon almost forming a diptych at the top of the work. Having taken the Kashmiri shawls from the soldiers of the Egyptian army, French soldiers wrapped their plunder around their waists as belts. Napoleon presented Josephine with several Kashmiri shawls. Initially she was unenthused, but subsequently built up a collection of shawls and sent regularly to Constantinople for new designs; the famous 1801 painting of her at Malmaison by François Gerard shows her with the opulent fabrics. The shawls were in fashion for almost a hundred years in Europe, between the 1780s and the 1870s, when the Franco-Prussian war 1870–71 prevented exports from Kashmir and the popularity of the design began to wane.

By 1800 demand for shawls was such that imports could not keep pace. European manufacturers, anxious to exploit the market, began to imitate the designs in Edinburgh (1790), Norwich (1792) and Paisley (1805). The shawls were made on handlooms; initially the imitations were of poor quality, consisting of only two colours. In 1812 in Paisley, an attachment was added to the handloom which meant that five different colours of yarn could be used, and the resulting fabric imitated more closely the Kashmiri shawls.

(far left) - *L'Impératrice Joséphine Dans Le Parc De La Malmaison: (Tableau de Pierre Prud'hon - Musée Du Louvre)*  
Chromolithograph (detail) published by E. Didot & Cie, Paris, 19th century  
18 x 13 cm (full image); 28.2 x 18.7 cm (full page)  
The Singh Twins Historical Archive

(left) - *Costume Parisien*  
Detail from a French fashion plate, titled *Costume Parisien*, depicting a European woman wearing a Kashmiri-style shawl.  
Hand-coloured engraving, 1822  
12.2 x 20 cm  
The Singh Twins Historical Archive

(right) - A detail of the paisley-inspired pattern from an English imitation Kashmiri-style shawl, dated c. 1860, which was worn large enough to fit over a Victorian crinoline skirt.  
346 x 152.5 cm (full shawl size)  
The Singh Twins Historical Archive  
Photo credit: The Singh Twins

(far right) - *Cashemire de l'Inde drapé*  
This engraving, taken from the French fashion journal *La Mode Illustrée* (3 August 1884), shows how Kashmiri-style shawls were adapted for European fashion during Victorian times.  
37.5 x 27.5 cm (full page)  
The Singh Twins Historical Archive



With the introduction to Britain in the 1820s of the Jacquard loom (invented in France in 1804), allowing the creation of complex patterns in fabric, Paisley became an important centre of production. The name of the town became the English word for the intricately patterned fabric that had its origins in India and Persia and relied on traditions of block printing and weaving by hand.

The domestication of goods, exemplified by the Kashmiri shawl becoming known as the *Paisley* shawl, is only one way in which a history of plunder and exploitation might be hidden. As Nehru remarked in 1946, 'History is almost always written by the victors and conquerors and gives their view. Or, at any rate, the victors' version is given prominence and holds the field'. All dominant histories hide other stories that, uncovered, can challenge and unsettle any simple narrative. For British people, particularly those of us who remember the 1980s – the period which Salman Rushdie scathingly referred to as that of the 'Raj revival' and which saw the release of Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), David Lean's adaptation of E M Forster's *A Passage to India* (1984), and the television of Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* as the Channel 4 series *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984) – the history of the Indian subcontinent before 1947 is a simple one: that of the British Raj.

British crown rule of India had been established in 1858, ending almost a century of rule by the East India Company and ushering in a period that would be known as the British Raj (coined from the word for 'rule' in Hindustani). The British Raj lasted until the creation of the two independent states of Pakistan (14 August 1947) and India (15 August 1947); for seven decades, India was the 'jewel in the crown' of the British Empire. A small number of British officials and troops (20,000) ruled over 300 million Indians, a disparity frequently viewed as evidence that Indians were content with British rule.



(above, left) - A detail from a 19th-century print (12 x 11.5 cm), showing Indian handloom weavers.  
(above, right) - A detail from a 1909, Liebig trade card (7.2 x 10.5 cm), depicting a Jacquard loom.  
The Singh Twins Historical Archive



(above, top) - The Singh Twins with their father, on the occasion of receiving their MBEs in 2011.  
Photo credit: courtesy The Singh Twins

(above, bottom) - *Arts Matters: The Pool of Life*  
The Singh Twins, 2008  
Watercolour and gold paint on archival paper  
124 x 93cm  
Commissioned to celebrate Liverpool's status as the UK's European Capital of Culture in 2008, currently on long-term loan to National Museums Liverpool, for display at the Museum of Liverpool.  
© The Singh Twins

## ABOUT THE SINGH TWINS

The Singh Twins are award-winning contemporary British artists with an international reputation, known for their highly detailed, narrative, symbolic and eclectic style which is rooted in Indian miniature painting aesthetics but also draws on the stylistic conventions and symbolic language of other artistic traditions from across the centuries. Describing their art as Past-Modern, the twin sisters combine hand-painted techniques with modern digital creative technologies to create works in different mediums that explore both historical and current themes around society, politics and culture; demonstrate the contemporary relevance of history and tradition; and challenge Eurocentrism in the artworld and in wider society. Inspired by their own identity and experience as British Asians, they are especially interested in dialogues around empire, colonialism and the legacies of colonialism. In 2010 they were made Honorary Citizens of Liverpool. In 2011 they each received an MBE from Queen Elizabeth II for 'services to the Indian miniature tradition of contemporary art' and, in 2015, were awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Art from the University of Chester for their 'outstanding contribution to British art'. In 2019 they received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Liverpool and in 2020 were awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Art by the University of Wolverhampton for their contribution to diversity in the arts. Their hugely successful exhibition *Slaves of Fashion* at Firstsite Gallery in 2022 led to their being put forward by public curator nomination to be considered by the jury to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2024.

The Twins' works are in private and public collections worldwide – including the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; National Museums Liverpool; National Museums Scotland; Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam; the National Heritage Board, Singapore; the Manchester Museum; and the Government Art Collection, UK. Amongst some of their best-known public commissions are two paintings celebrating Liverpool's 800th birthday and status as European Capital of Culture in 2008; a symbolic portrait of Maharaja Duleep Singh (created for National Museums Scotland); and *EnTWINed* (commissioned by the Museum of London) – their contemporary response to the Indian 'Mutiny'.



Past exhibitions include solo shows at London's National Portrait Gallery, National Museums Liverpool, National Museums Scotland, the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, and the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi, when, in 2002, they became the only British artists (besides Henry Moore) to have been offered a solo show at this, one of India's foremost venues for contemporary art. The Twins have also exhibited individual works by special invitation at the Royal Academy, and at Tate Britain.

Media coverage includes interviews for BBC *HARDtalk*, *Women's Hour*, *Midweek*, *Front Row* and *Belief*; features on the *One Show* and *Inside Out*, and on CBC Radio's *Here and Now*; the Granada TV documentary *Singh Out Sisters*; and appearances in two BBC art series (*The Face of Britain* and *Civilisations*). An independent Arts Council film about The Twins, titled *Alone Together*, received 'The Best Film on Art' prize at the 2001 Asolo International Film Festival. In 2021, The Singh Twins appeared as guest artists on Channel 4's

*Grayson's Art Club*, discussing one of their latest works, titled *NHS v Covid-19: Fighting on Two Fronts*, in conversation with Grayson Perry.

For more about The Singh Twins (including full listings of reviews, awards, exhibitions, and other projects), and to view their online gallery of further artworks, visit:

Website: [www.singhtwins.co.uk](http://www.singhtwins.co.uk)

Instagram: [@thesinghtwins\\_art](https://www.instagram.com/thesinghtwins_art)

Facebook page: The Singh Twins

(right) - The Singh Twins standing in front of their digital mixed-medium, triptych lightbox artwork *Rule Britannia: Legacies of Exchange from the Slaves of Fashion series*, at Firstsite Gallery, Colchester in 2022.  
Photo credit: Bahinder Singh