

# Transcript: The Black Magus Power and Magnificence in Renaissance Europe with Michael Ohajuru

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**Marie-Anne McQuay:** I'm Marie-Anne, Head of Programme at Bluecoat and were welcoming you to our very seasonal event, The Black Magus Power and Magnificence in Renaissance Europe with Michael Ohajuru.

But before I introduce Michael, who you will be eagerly waiting to meet, I'll just say that the inspiration for this event tonight comes from one of our current exhibitions, *Practice Makes Perfect*, a solo show by Rosa Johan Uddoh developed by Focal Point Gallery in Essex with the Bluecoat and Practice Makes Perfect has been described by the artist as a kind of wish fulfillment in which Black history takes centre stage in the curriculum and the gallery.

We'll find out more about Rosa's project through Michael Ohajuru's responses, and I'm going to introduce him now. And so I think he will appear quite soon. Michael is a senior fellow. He is a senior fellow of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. He blogs, writes and speaks regularly on the Black presence in Renaissance Europe and has spoken at the National Gallery, Tate Britain, British Library, National Archives and the Victoria & Albert Museum. That's the abridged version of his biography, but we're really delighted that you joined us tonight, Michael. Welcome.

**Michael Ohajuru:** Thank you, Marie-Anne, this is really a thrill. It's a privilege to share my passion because this is my subject and the challenge is to shut me up on this. I'm sorry because I just love the Black Magus and what it means, what it means today and what it meant then. Looking forward to sharing ideas with you.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Thank you. My role is to keep it moving through that. I'm really, really excited. And I just wanted to ask you just by way of introduction, what your particular journey to art history is because it's a slightly more unusual journey, perhaps than a conventional art historian.

**Michael Ohajuru:** Well, let me tell, it's quite simple. My ex-wife brought me a book which had Botticelli, just pictures of Botticelli, a Renaissance artist. I just loved those pictures. They enthralled me. I just loved them. And as I was nearing retirement, I was looking for something to do in the in the so-called third Age, and I did an Open University Art History degree. And my final year essay, I had to do a piece that I'd seen, that connected with me and a piece that entertained you.

And I found this Black Magus, this Black king in 16th century Devon. Just extraordinary. A Black king in 16th century Devon. I wrote about him. And this is 2008, and I haven't looked back since. I've been writing, ranting and raving about the Black king ever since then. Now, so that was my introduction, that preparing for my kind of retirement. I wanted to get into art, and the Black king was my way in.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** That's so inspirational, and it's hard to believe you're in that third age category, either. Thank you. I do want to ask because you were recommended to me by Professor Dorothy Price at the Courtauld Institute. And she said, 'I think Michael might be from Liverpool'. And then, when we spoke, I was like 'Damn right he's from Liverpool'. You're in London now, but what era were you around?

**Michael Ohajuru:** I say this. I graduated in 1974. Now, the room usually goes quiet and goes, that's another planet. I left Liverpool to go to Leeds University in 1970 to study physics. And let me say this. All of my family, all of them, this is three generations, are still in Liverpool. I'm the only one that's outside Liverpool. They're all there, and it's a Liverpool fashion. It's a lovely closed and wonderful community. And when I go back, they say, you talk posh, I lost my accent, but in London, they're like, you talk like Liverpool, I'm kind of trapped in this kind of no man's land between Liverpool and London. But that's my home.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** We're glad to kind of bring you back tonight and although you're in London, you've been actually up to see Rosa Johan Uddoh's show that we mentioned at the start. So you've been back for many reasons, but one of them is for this exhibition, and I was thinking, if you would start your PowerPoint, we will jump straight into the subject at hand.

**Michael Ohajuru:** Before we do that, I just just think this is really unusual for me because normally I do my Black king presentation and I've got a PowerPoint and I do one thing I've noticed, and I'm so looking forward to sharing this with you, Marie-Anne, in terms of a conversation, because the nucleus of this is Rosa's work, and Rosa's work is very special to me because when I first saw it, I thought, Wow, so many friends, and I'll explain what that means when you see it, because I've studied the Black Magus in Renaissance Europe for the last 10-15 years, and I know most of these pieces, but there was some I didn't know.

So let me share my screen now. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You can see that. Yeah. So we should probably start by explaining.

Well, the Black Magus plays a pivotal role in Rosa's work, and there's around 150 Black Magus out of thousands possibly existing in art history that she has assembled with her research collaborator Nasra Abdullahi. But what we're looking at here is a little cross-section of some of the Black kings that you've studied over the years, and I wonder if it's possible to just start by explaining what Magus is or what this title means. Well, the Black Magus is like the Black king. That's the singular. Magi is the plural, Magus is the individual.

What we're looking at here, these are some of the 13 Magus' in the National Gallery's collection. The National Gallery has got about 24 adoration scenes and we'll talk about the adoration in a moment. But over half of them, 13 of them, have a Black magus, and there they are. And for me, they represent the quintessential presentation of the power and magnificence of Renaissance Europe, not just Black, the Black king, Renaissance Europe with the Medici's, the Strozzi's. All those great families of Italy those big Florentines of Italy, that funded the the Michelangelo's, the Leonardo's, that funded the work, that created that fabulous period of the Renaissance. And The Black Magus is part of that development.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Shall we move to the first images of Rosa's work? Not everyone watching might have seen her show as yet.

**Michael Ohajuru:** This is in the gallery currently, eight meters long to give you a sense of scale. And this is a huge piece. It's huge. And when I saw this, I was just knocked out. I was knocked out for two reasons. One: I know most of these guys, I've studied them for the last 10 - 15 years. I will share many of them with you over the next 40 minutes or so, but also its size. Because size matters. We're talking about a period when paint in human history, in the renaissance, when when the ordinary person. Well, let me throw it another way. We see more images in one day than they would see an entire life. Images were important, and those images were saying big things about the two power bases in the day, and it was essentially two power bases. One was the church. And the other was the king. In the Magus, the Black Magus, the two come together.

In the adoration scene: you got the church, baby Jesus and you got the kings representing, the Earthly kings coming together, and what Rosa's done here in this way. She's captured the magnificence, the presence, the power of the Black Magus' part of the adoration scene in a big way, as it would have been seen in the day. It would have seen with a little bit of awe, because these were all big pictures making big statements.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** We've called him the Black Magus but would it be accurate to call him Balthasar? Is that the other name that we should call him?

**Michael Ohajuru:** Well, the short answer is yes and no. Let me say this because the three kings are a fabrication, and I'll take you through that process and to understand that I will look at two guys in particular, almost at the center of the piece here. So we just got these two guys here, these two Black Magus' here.

Now I can tell you I'm going to share where they come from because they have a history, as does the Black king. And it related to this painting here. And this is quite a seminal painting for the Black Magus because here we have all the elements of the adoration scene brought together. We've got the three kings. We've got the baby Jesus. We've got Mary, Joseph. We've got the lambs, the sheep and the ox looking on, and we've got the star. What's missing from this one is the shepherds. Let me put in perspective, this is a fabricated image. If you look at the text, the Bible, this is just Matthew and Matthew talks about the star. He obviously talks about the baby Jesus and Mary. He talks about

Joseph, and he talks about the star and he talks about wise men. We'll talk about those wise men in a minute. But the shepherds in Luke.

That's important because the Luke Gospel was really aimed when he wrote his gospel, his gospel was aimed at Jewish people. So the first Jews to visit the baby Jesus with these shepherds, they were called by angels, they would call to look at the baby Jesus. Here is Matthew. He had a much bigger audience. These are the first non-Jews, the first non-Jews to visit the baby Jesus. And these were wise men from the East. Following a star. So the metaphor here is that wise men follow Jesus.

What's fascinating about this is that the text talks about wise men. In fact, if you look at the original Greek or the Hebrew, we're not clear on the gender or number. There are, in fact, I've seen some adoration scenes with Black queens. And it'd be totally in keeping with the text because we don't know the number. But what happened over time? You know, people Bible study. They wanted to make the Old Testament predict the New Testament. The Old Testament prophesies the New Testament. So they were looking for ways that one would predict the other because if this was really the king of the Jews, the Messiah, then he's predicted in the Old Testament, and one of the signs would be these kings visiting him because kings visited Solomon. They visited David, so would expect kings to visit him. So it seems natural that those wise men would be king. It validates or gives a sense of importance to their story... It validates that this is the king. These are wise men or kings... Jewish Kings in the past, David and Solomon. So this is the Messiah.

These are people who aren't Jews coming to pay homage, and these are signs and wonders. You've got the star they follow that star to find him. And the fact that there was three of them just seemed natural from the frankincense gold in there. So there was three. And to your point, Marie-Anne, about the names, they were given names Balthazar, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar and Caspar kind of oscillates, move about. Balthazar is traditionally associated with the Black king, but equally can be Caspar. Because in Bible study, the Bible's goes back to 60 A.D.

Probably 200 A.D., we actually put together the the three kings together and then by 1000 years or so later, they became 3 people, three kings with names, and they were given this idea of the concept of an old king, a middle aged king and a young king. And you see here you've got the older king with the white hair, the middle aged king and the younger king on the edge. We're talking about around the 13/14th century. The image really came together. And that painting captures, which Rosa's collage also does, the the earlier stage where Balthazar, including this man Banza, is a white king. And there's a shift in his representation, which then makes him a Black or an African king.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** And Rosa's talking about it in her wider project around Black curriculum in history and what we don't learn: that actually Balthazar is maybe the first and only figure you encounter in primary school because the way in the Nativity has been sort of set in stone at a certain point. To reflect this kind of scene means that you do have the presence of a Black king. But at what stage does that shift happen in his representation?

**Michael Ohajuru:** Well, this piece here, I'll give you some idea of the size, it's quite a big piece. When you look at this piece, this is an old piece in Cologne Germany that was quite a seminal work. It's based on 1455 by van der Weyden and in terms of seminal because his students took this guy, this image, this guy on the edge here. This young king. Keep your eye these two young kings.

You can see how they're similar, but there's one telling difference the Black and the position is quite different, and we'll look at that in the moment. But what happened was round the middle of the 15th century, a prophecy - because the Bible talks about the end times being the whole world will come together to praise Jesus and the whole world as they knew it included Africa. So it would be natural for them to include Africans in that sense of the whole world coming together to pay homage to the baby Jesus. This is quite exceptional.

No African king visited Jesus visited that time. You're not aware of African kings. So this image was a fabricated image. When I say fabricated, the three kings didn't exist. They were put together in terms of this idea of wise men. or wise gender neutral persons, But they produced this three because of the three kings. So the came the three kings and then of the Kings became Black as a fulfilling of the prophecy, backfilling to make to make the prophecy work. So we have these two figures here. I see them was very important for my race, the Black person race, because these were the images that inspired other artists.

But up until now, this is in Cologne in Germany. Germany can be seen in the whole. Literally the shrine in the three Kings is in Cologne Cathedral, one of the biggest Gothic cathedral in Europe, tens of thousands of people visit daily, and it's dedicated to the three kings. But these pieces, these are the two works that those works come from. Along the right hand side, you can see, this piece, we don't know who did this. We believe it's a student of van der Weyden, and this one is the done with Hans Memling who we know was a student of van der Weyden. But you can see how the white king is being changed into this Black king. Same position. They're in the same line in the composition, He's on the edge. He's peripheral. We've got that flamboyant pose. He's got his gift ready to give. His hand is raised, his cap off and he's ready to enter the scene.

They've taken that and they've made him Black, you know? And what they're doing here is making the whole story complete now in terms of that prophecy that one of the kings will be Black. But as a keep in mind, there's no model for this. So these days of fabricated images in terms of what they saw locally, in terms of what they saw Black people locally. So these two figures here, these two faces here, let me just go a bit further. You can see now, you may say differently. But I think these look like real people. So I sense that both these artists had some sense of a Black figure because there are images with, you know, they've just painted a European face Black. But we have some sense of the Black figure here and in them you get one of the four attributes because this black figure has four attributes and four signifiers of who he is. And this is one of them you can see very clearly here. But no, the none of the other kings of the White kings have the earring. He has an earring. Both of them have an earring and the gold earring.

There's two things going on there. The first is gold. These people come from Africa, and Africans were known for being naked and wearing gold. So this would be a signifier of being African, and the pierced ears, the text in the Bible talks about the pierced ears with someone who wanted to be a servant who wanted to be in allegiance to a master. So this is a signifier of being subservient, in paying homage. And this case, in terms of the baby Jesus. But the earring being a symbol of his Africanness. And as I say, no king, no white king I've seen as ever had a gold earring.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Obviously different painters paint this king in different era's, but what are the other attributes as well as the gold that stay constant for Balthazar over those centuries?

**Michael Ohajuru:** This is what I loved. I loved Rosa's work because it's all there. It's all there. I know many of these Black Magus', but I want to look at this one here.

This is a piece from the National Gallery's collection. Gossaert's Magus, a really brilliant work, everybody. And it's in wonderful condition. It's quite a big work, as you can see. And it's in magnificent condition and you can see he's got the earring there. He's wearing the earring. And I like to see this piece. Remember I told you the Black king is last in line, but he's not the last in line here because we've got a kind of triangular composition here, but it's two in one. We've got the Black king, he's on the edge. You've got the two white kings here and the Black king here. And I go a little bit further with this, this Black king here,

We know he's the Balthazar because it says on his crown and the artist says, this round this crown, he says Gossaert made this. And you see here, this is one of his assistants here. He's got what might be seen as a slave collar, but this is just a silver collar. Again, it says Gossaert made this and here is Gossaert using the Black figures as kind of signposts. And it goes a little further here. In this little shawl, this is where Balthazar has his gift, there's a cloth and there's a hymn to Mary, and so he's actually using the Black figures as a kind of a signpost in some ways. Now, I've always thought about this. Is this a pejorative saying? I don't know. Is he using the figure?

I'd like to believe not because there's no record of him doing this elsewhere. So maybe it was just convenient for him as an artist to use the Black figure just to signify Gossaert made this. And to celebrate that the Black king. But he certainly is using the black king differently from how he uses the other figures in the painting. And specifically this figure, this this this figure talks of the power that we talk about in the presentation, because what we're looking at here, he is the patron. He's the Bishop, the archbishop of the church that this painting was part of. So he literally paints himself in to the scene, and not just any part of the scene is central to the scene. He's giving his gift of gold. Gold is usually the first gift given to the two to the baby Jesus. He's given that to him, and he himself is painted as one of the kings.

This is quite common, I'll give you some examples later on where people painted themselves in because this is a time when you could have people believe you could be prayed in to heaven. So if you paid people to pray for you, they could exalt you into heaven so that he wanted to be remembered. The archbishop wanted to be remembered. It's for people to pray to him. And it's the kind of immortality being in the painting as well. Yeah. Exactly. All the great families, they had adoration scenes and many

of them had themselves or their family painted into the sea painted in this kings. So remember, we as ordinary people would look into these pictures. We would know our place. We'd be literally looking up to two kings: the heavenly King Jesus, King of Heaven on Earth and our king, paying homage to that king. There's a kind of a power structure at play. And we know our place.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** And Balthazar has this interesting presence that you've picked up on, that he's often on the edge. He has gold, the costumes, what people are wearing, the fashion of the time. But he's very flamboyantly dressed and he is often depicted in a different kind of attitude to the other figures. Are these the other consistent aspects of his representation?

**Michael Ohajuru:** Exactly. This talk about the Edge. In this particular piece, and this is one I didn't know, I was aware of this piece before, but thank you, Rosa, for bringing to my attention.

This Magus here, he doesn't have an earring, which was a bit of a shock to me. But then again, they don't always have earrings. And if you look at the original piece it came from, we can see here she's twisted, she's flipped his image because she's got the more looking to the left. But in the actual image, she's looking to the right. And what's so extraordinary about this image here?

You can see the Black figure. The Black king is totally marginalised. You know you've got the two white kings here paying homage, and the Black king doesn't make it into the image. He's literally on the edge. Now there was room for him here. It could have fitted in here, but the artist chose to put him on the edge and equally, we have Joseph, his father. He wasn't his father because this is the virgin birth. He's married to Mary. So what are we saying here? Well, what the artist is saying here is the Black king is part of the scene. But he's not quite part of the scene. Now, some historians argue that this is the development of racism in terms of difference. I argue quite different.

This is exoticism. Not one of us. We're not saying anything pejorative about not putting a negative response. But what we're saying here is not quite one of us. He should not be here. You know, we put them outside, we will put them further away, just as Joseph is seen on another panel here. He's not quite part of the scene and he's not part of the baby Jesus. He's not part of the Jesus's life. He's is marginal. So the black king is marginal. So as I say, it's not racist. But it's racist in terms of using his race or color to differentiate him, but not in a pejorative way. He's saying he is not one of us. And just in passing, you see, this is a panel here, and these were closed and they were literally opened on high days and holidays because the epiphany, the sixth of January was the holiday of the year.

This was the greatest Christian holiday, and it still is in some parts of Europe. You go to Spain, Poland, Italy, where the elites or the king the confraternity, that's the Catholic community of of the Magi would have a parade of the three kings and they give sweets to the children. But back in the day, they would give parties, pageants, they would look after people. This is part of renaissance magnificence. You would give back to the people and they were hidden behind these screens and come out on those big days. Such was the importance of the image.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** There are a couple of people in the chat wondering if this one Balthazar could be a woman, partly on the molding on the chest and partly without the earring? There's just an interest in the delicate features, but there's an interest in gender coming in.

**Michael Ohajuru:** The short answer is I don't believe this is a woman. But having said that, there were female Black kings. I'm not going to show you today. It's for another talk, but it could well have been because keep in mind, the Black Magus or the three kings is an idea.

It's a fabricated image from biblical study. People took those three gifts, the frankincense and created the three kings. There was a group of people. Some people have come and we don't know their gender, but they were Zoroastrian, part of the Persian tradition and where we got the word Magi, or magicians. These were people who looked at signs and wonders, looked at the stars so they could well have been a woman. But in this case, I don't believe it is, but it could have been a woman.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Thank you, we've got observant viewers. And so we got this sense of Balthazar having dignity, but otherness. It's not like ...

**Michael Ohajuru:** I like that, I'm going to borrow that word, dignity. You're right, He had a presence. As I said, there was no model for him. No African king visited. But they were taking the attributes of a king and putting them on what they understood the king to be. And what with the other attributes that you might see? Well, look at this difference. Look at this.

This is one of my favourite. This king? This is Durer's King. This is Durer's African prince. Let me see where it comes from this. This is the painting it comes from. And again, when you look at the look is on the edge, he's third in line. He's at the back of the painting. He's got the earring and he's dressed very differently. He's not as flamboyant as other kings as we see, but he's dressed differently. And you can see he's not part of the scene. If you look at the other two kings with their long flowing gowns, they're very different from this guy. And you can see here it's almost there's a physical separation between him and them going back to creating this sense of difference. But we've got the baby Jesus with the Mary, with just a few remarks on the blue, and he's sitting there on this Mary and blue.

Two things, black was a really expensive colour at the time. So here is God sitting on a throne, and you can see the image is almost throne like. If I just go back a bit, let me show what they mean by that. You can see the baby Jesus sitting on Mary like a throne, and they're coming to pay homage to the baby Jesus. But keep in mind, this is the 12th Night. The baby is born on the 25th of December. This is the sixth of January. This is the middle of winter. Mary has just given birth, and I mean, my wife was given twelve days after giving birth to my son, Ben. She was not ready to have three kings visit her and equally, she would not have been naked in the middle of winter.

So we can see how this image is being manipulated and we accept it now. But in reality, it couldn't have been like that. It couldn't have been like that because it wasn't practical. And as you say, it's the composite of a couple of gospels as well to even get to this scenario. So, yeah, exactly. And what I love is, we have this idea that God made man, and that was always the challenge for the artist. How do I



paint a baby as a God made man? This is the rule of the heavens. A magnificent person. How can you get that into a baby? That was always the challenge. And you can see some artists.... see here: this is supposed to be a twelve year old baby standing up Now how practical is that, you know? He's trying to make that connection with the man. The baby. God made flesh as human being. It was very challenging. And some of them even little baby Jesus with beards and crowns on just trying to emphasise the point, because you remember many people couldn't read at this stage. So these paintings were important for them to understand who Jesus was in terms of how they fit into the Catholic Church, into the church. And the priest explained the pictures, explain their position using pictures.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** And what is really beautiful about Rosa's work I think, is Balthazars are on their own journey and it's kind of a coming together of friends from across the centuries, but incredible flamboyance of these different hypotheses. It's really kind of pleasurable and really each one of you could spend kind of hours looking at but together you get the different styles of flamboyance that go through the work.

**Michael Ohajuru:** Exactly. You know, and I look back on. This one. This was new to me, this character here. But in some ways, he kind of sums up that haughtiness, he's got his nose in the air, he's got his hand on his hip and he's covered in all this gold jewelry and finery. This is a man I would say full of himself But the painter who did this, Hieronymus Bosch here. Bosch is a bit of an eccentric himself, is a bit of a weird kind of person, but it creates a kind of odd characters and you can get some sense of his weirdness in the kind of spatial separation of people in this image. But particularly, you can see the Black king has a haughtiness, a proud, and to use your word, a kind of a dignity that the other kings don't have. And he's got his earring, signifying his Africanness.

This is wholly exotic. This is Bosch creating that difference. But as I say, it's not difference in the sense of a negative thing. It's an exotic. It's kind of an interesting, kind of different, but not one of us, not on the racist term. Racism was to come much later in terms of racist response to the Black image. When we look at the Enlightenment and the things that that brought up with slavery and other things. So what you've been talking about, what the title, I suppose, the title talks about power and magnificence and this kind of magnificence of Balthazar, but he's not holding the kind of power in this and the most dominant way in these paintings is he? There's different power plays happening across the paintings. No, no. You're right. I'll just go back to this one, the Durer one. Just an example.

You know, Durer was a very egotistical artist, and this is in bits and pieces. He paints himself as one of the kings. Here is a self-portrait, you can see him there, but the Black king is never painted as anybody. The Black king is a kind of a model, a metaphor, an idea. Whereas the white kings - there were white nobles, white principals, white artists who painted themselves into the scene as was seen here. They wanted to be part of wants to show themselves to be part of the adoration scene visiting the baby Jesus. Part of the first group to pay homage to him was the Black king. The Black figure was, in some ways, a solitary, isolated figure. He was there, no question. But he was not quite part. You know, I like to use the expression a part, but apart. In the sense there, but not quite parts of the scene in

terms of that sense of difference. Because remember, we're talking about these three people, they're not Christians. These are barbarians. These are heathens.

So it's a sense of, this is a real barbarian, these two kings are barbarian, but this black King, he's real, he's more barbarian than the other two white kings. We were talking a bit about the way that he is presented and this is a very particular time in art history, because it's got some medieval renaissance and then a bit further through time, but you came up with what I thought was a really brilliant slide that showed this period against the period that comes after the Enlightenment and how depictions shift, taking us out of this period, and just provided us with a really interesting context. Yeah. This is something I wanted to work out in my own mind because my Black king, I say my Black king because I'm passionate about him. I love all these various representations of him in the study, But if you look, there was a time when the image became corrupted. What I mean by that? Let me explain this. This is my thinking. I'll share this with you. I argue that, slavery had a really profound effect on the Black image. No question. And I think if you look, slavery started around the 15th century and went on to the 19th century, and this graph shows the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, the transatlantic slave trade and enslaved people.

Twelve and a half million people were transported across the 10% who lost their lives. 1.2 million. That's a city perhaps the size of Birmingham died on the basis. Just the brutality of it. You know, it's hard to put into words. But the age of enslavement coincided with the age of enlightenment. This is when man woke up, the European man woke up and moved away from the church One of my favorite quotes is from Diderot. He talks about "Man shall not be free until the last king is hung on the entrails of the last priest." So we'll move away from the Renaissance Renaissance here with the church was in power. So man wants to be in power and power over himself and they rationalise the position. But what they did?

They saw themselves as white men, saw themselves at the top of the tree. This is Hume. He talks about, "I'm apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites." This is Hume put in some structure organising humanity with Negroes, and we'll come back to that with Negroes. He saw himself, as whites, as the top of the tree. Jefferson, the second president of the United States, he talks, he says, and a slave owner "never seen an elementary trait of a painting or sculpture from a black." They had no culture. You look at Kant, one of the greatest philosophers of all European philosophers of all time. A racist, I do say a racist when you look at his writings is all about white people being superior to black people. And this is one of his sentences. He says "This fella was black... Clear proof he was stupid." So this is Kant, one of our greatest philosophers, couldn't see intelligence in the Black person and Hegel talks about "Africa, is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit." This is Africa has no history. So we have the Enlightenment in action here, which invented the Negro, which created whites at the top, superior and black people at the bottom, inferior with no history. And they invented this, this Negro. They invented the Negro. This is what Cedric Robinson talks about the Negro "The Negro has no civilization, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place, and finally no humanity that might command consideration."

So this was, if we go back a few, a couple of centuries, it was a Black king. It was part of the filling the prophecies of the Bible. He was an integral part of the world moving together. But in the Enlightenment, they they created this negro, this Black person as a Negro, which they would no culture, no history, no religion. So if we look at the Black image, what we're talking about tonight before enslavement, we literally were kings, depicted as Black kings.

What happens in the Enlightenment, the Black image becomes demonised and becomes marginalised, becomes this grotesque Black figure here, the servile figure serving coffee, coca, a grotesque figure supporting the white figure. In no way a king, a servant, a slave, a captive. And what we're doing now, exciting things we're doing now, now that slavery has been abolished for over a century, a century and a half, we're recovering that image and this is Amber Akaunu's work and there's many artists, as many Black artists, women and men artists are reclaiming the image and recovering the image to have that sense of dignity, that sense of pride, that sense of ownership without all the all the negativity that came from the Enlightenment, which rationalised the fact that white people at the top, they have the structures of society, which is complete nonsense. A complete fabrication.

They made it up. So here we are, we're recovering that image, and it's happening over time, We're accused of copying and all that nonsense. But no, we're just using the images to reflect who we are Black people are today. So that's how I see the Black image. We were literally kings before slavery and slavery is something we have to get over and move on and take ourselves forward. And they are artists are doing that today, the taking the Black image and the Black figure forward. And what's really important for me: this is all in our imagination. These ideas of who we are, who Black people are things have been put into people's minds. And the reality is seen on the walls of our galleries today. So this is where I really urge folks to come and visit the galleries and to reclaim both the sense of it and the things that Sumuyya and Rosa are doing in terms of owning the space.

But they told us to go and visit these galleries, to take ownership, to be part of and to understand these images, how they relate to us, to who we are today. Sorry for going on a bit there.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Thank you so much.

**Michael Ohajuru:** This is something I'm passionate about.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Yeah, when we were planning this talk, it just felt important to give the after, the sense of the continuum of what happens within art , history and culture. So it was really important and one of hope as well towards the end. But I'm just going to see if we've got any questions from the chat or if anyone wants to ask one. I definitely have a couple more questions, one of which is: one of the things you do as not-a-historian is. take people on tours of major galleries and reveal where there are Black people in the paintings. And this is an endeavor that you've been doing for quite a while. Could you tell us a little bit more about this and how figures become invisible or how you reveal who is actually sitting there in the painting?

**Michael Ohajuru:** It is an extension of my work for the OU, when I did my OU Art History Open University course, and I did that first, my first Black Magus. I remember, my mum used to say 'It's good to see your face', and I set myself a mission to find Black people on the wall in paintings. And that passion turned into a, not a look alike business, but I take people on tours of the National Gallery, Tate Britain, Wallace Collection and we find the Black presence in the collections because we are there because, there's a glib expression that you cannot not communicate. Artists cannot not communicate. So art is portrayed, rightfully so. And Black people have always been there, or thereabouts.

So the challenge is to find them, and we're there. So that's part of the fun exposing, extracting, finding the Black presence. But we still got one of these one we've seen today, the Black king. But there's often the Black figures hidden in plain sight, and it's fun just bringing that out and contextualising it and put in the positi of that journey from before enslavement and enslavement and then after, because it's important to realise the slave was just one little piece of history. There's much more, there's much more to the black presence, and I look like I start my tour in Tate Britain with the quote from Peter Fry's book *Staying Power*. "There were Black Africans in Britain before the English." A lot of Daily Mail readers get excited about that, get upset. But it's a fact. There were. The angles came later because the African's came with the Romans.

So then we look for what traces that they leave, how can we find them, the evidence that they were there and did it, and we discussed that a little. So that's what inspires me to talk about the Black presence in galleries in London.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** I just got a couple of questions coming in from a chat, so I'm going to go through. One is asking, will you be resuming the tours that you've been doing? Is it possible to book? Because obviously in Covid times...

**Michael Ohajuru:** That's a great question. The short answer is I booked my first tour, the King's Tour, the Black King's Tour, at the National Gallery on the sixth of January. Right now that that was going to be my first in-person tool for almost two years. However, since what's happened over the last couple of days, you know, watch this space? Yeah, if it happens, it's going to happen. Death is going to happen. Ideally, I'd love it to be in and face to face, but if it doesn't happen, it will be online.

Definitely. It's the sixth of January. If you Google Image of the Black Magus, you'll find it. You'll find that probably doing that in the National Gallery because we've got some great works, great beautiful works of art . So magnificent, and I was just going to cover just one small criticism of Rosa's work here.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** No, you can't criticise Rosa's work...!

My very favorite one.... She's got everybody else, which is fantastic, but my own special. But she's got lots of other things. Rosa, good on you but you could have had Veronese in there for me, just one for me.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Well, I like the fact she's introduced you to some, so give and take on the Balthazar's. Someone is actually saying, so, we've established the Kings become part of a story from the Gospels. Is there any evidence of someone called Balthazar, or is it just a name that's come through this kind of story?

**Michael Ohajuru:** I hate to say this. This is fabricated. There's no Caspar, Balthazar... They're just names that they put on people and stuck over over 1000 years. There's no quintessential Balthazar, Melchior or Caspar, but just names that have been given to them. There's a text called the John of Hildesheim's Story of the Three Kings from the 13th century, and I'm going to wear two hats here. In its day it was a bestseller because it explained the three Kings. In reality, it's a complete nonsense.

This is completely fabricated, made up stuff. As you know, many of the texts we have the three kings. And so you're going to wear those two hats. So sorry, there's no quintessential, but I'd love it if there was. Yeah. Don't be nice.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** They find Balthazar's tomb or something... I've got a question, I realise your specialism in Renaissance, but someone's just saying a reference to the Enlightenment period, which came first enslavement or enlightenment? Did the philosophy come about to justify the practice of vice versa? But I imagine that kind of intertwined?

**Michael Ohajuru:** Exactly, intertwined. In fact, the Enlightenment really starts in the 18th century, it really takes off in terms of philosophers. In terms of writing, Diderot, the encyclopedia, but slavery started probably a century before that in the 16th... OK, it really started in the 15th century, really as an industrial resource in the 16th - 17th century.

So the Enlightenment, as an intellectual thought process happened after the black, the black presence in the organising humanity in terms of white men at the top and Black men and the bottom with something that happened later in the 17th, 18th century. So what I'm trying to say here, it happened afterwards, happened later that they rationalised it into account in terms of a philosophy. In terms of written organisation and process. Did that make sense?

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Totally that makes sense. There's a really good question from someone who's doing their dissertation about decolonising museums, and they're saying the the modern museum and art galleries are a European Enlightenment invention and it has the spoils of empire. What's your opinion on it? Do you think we can reclaim the narrative within these institutions? So Black presence within the institutions? Or do you believe that you need to create your own spaces in order to erase the colonial narratives? So how do you deal with what you inherit from colonialism?

**Michael Ohajuru:** That's a great question, and I'm gonna give you a very long answer now. So I'm going to lock the room. No one's leading to the next hour. A second lecture. Seriously, I have two views, two flows. The first.

You cannot rewrite history. It is what it is. These works are what they are. We're not going to take them down and put something up instead. What we can do is we can position them. What do you mean by that? Well, there's an exhibition opening, Kehinde Wiley at the National Gallery. Where he's responding to the European landscape tradition. And he's using the Black figure to position it. In the past, they used the white figure to position the European landscape. But he's taken over and he's using the Black figure. So that's the first part where we take those metaphors, where we've been denied a presence and we put ourselves, Black people back in the news, that vocabulary, those ideas to present Black people.

So that on the one hand there's a white figure in there expressing the sense of sublime, the sense of awe. Well equally a black figure can do that. So we get that normalising of the figure, the black figure with the white figure, there's no difference. The both having the same hue and aspiration in the sense of something just awesome. Just something wonderful, the black figure. So we normalised the black figure using, for want of a better word, white artistic vocabulary.

So when you see the National Gallery, you see that impression. So going forward in terms of decolonisation, we respond and this is what I look at Tate Britain. When you look at how a Black artists respond to the Western European canon and develop their own canon. So you look at work like Ronald Moody, he's created these monumental figures with its own aesthetic, at first as an artist and then Ok, he's a Black person and that comes second own in the space. We're owning the space as a Black person owning an aesthetic that responds to something within us. We say there's something going on in that work and then we go forward. We come forward in time. We look at Bowling. Bowling is looking at the Abstract Expressionism, the work of Bacon, the work of Rothko. But doing his response to it, he's owning that work in his way.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Frank Bowling

**Michael Ohajuru:** So then we move forward into the Black Art Movement with these Black artists creating their own work, responding, using some of the metaphors from the European canon, canonical work, for use in their own work. So it's that, and I'm going to use Obama's word here, messy. We interact with it. We kind of layer on we we kind of own it or disown it. And that's decolonisation to me in the sense that it's not apartheid. I'm not into this, this is Black art is white art. But the fact that we were they're coming back to what Fryer said. There were Black Africans in in Britain before the English, we were there. So it's just using the vocabulary to express the work. So I'm not for decolonisation of the sense of a line, but I'm talking about owning it.

And bringing it right up to date, there's a piece in Tate Britain called In Pursuit of Rare Meats, a Rex Whistler mural, which has some really horrible pictures of young Black kids being dragged along behind the chariots. And they're really quite horrible. But the argument goes, this is a mural from the 1920 - 1930s British Imperial heights. That's how they saw the Black figure then. So how do we respond to that work? Do we kind of, you know, let's close the gap and let's close that restaurant route because the mural in the restaurant shut it down and whitewash it out. And my argument?

I've got two arguments to one. No, I'm not saying we celebrate it, but we respond to it. Now we could equally Tate could do a work in response, of equal size that reflected that, because what we're trying to say, that was then, this is now, this is who we are now. And that decolonisation with different people know when we decolonised, So we could do a different work. Equally, and the one I like, this is suggesting to you that there is that every night or every once a week, that could be a different artistic response. I dunno, poetry and dance, drama and picture, response in the restaurant with a mural is the work on the wall. So we don't forget, but we respond to it. So I've given you a very long answer to a very simple question. So in terms of decolonisation, I think it's interaction. We take it, we own it and we move on into who we are today.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Thank you. I can tell the person who has asked it has really appreciated that. And it's a complex issue, it's so complex. It's a brilliant and compassionate answer. I'm going to regretfully do this to a close, even though we could go on and I'm going to disappoint a few questioners. But if people want to track you down in a way and follow what you're doing, you are present on Twitter and you also have your own kind of project website, don't you? If you say very briefly about that one.

**Michael Ohajuru:** Okay, there's three projects I've got. One is @Michael1952 on Twitter, not others.

But there's two projects. one is *Image of the Black* If you Google that you'll see it was tours and talks and rants about that I've got a blog dedicated to the Black presence, and my big opus is John Blanke.

John Blanke is the first person of African descent to have an image on a record of, Some exciting are happening. We're opening a plaque to him in Greenwich in January. It's going to be an exhibition next year. So if you check out who is John Blanke,

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** He's in Tudor times, isn't he?

**Michael Ohajuru:** Yeah, it was a trumpeter to Henry VII and VIII So if you look out, if you check out John Blanke or *Image of the Black* and you'll find that all the things I'm into.

**Marie-Anne McQuay:** Fantastic. Thank you so much. And Michael, there's a big appreciation for me and from the chat. And a big thanks also to Rosa Johan Uddoh. who joined us and was watching and her exhibition, along with Sumuyya Khader from Liverpool and Deborah Roberts, who showing from Texas are all on to the 23rd of January 2022. So if you're in the area or you want to visit again, we're open. And yeah, thank you, Michael. Thank you all sort of Focal Point Gallery, Bookworks and the Bower for making Rosa's project possible and for all her collaborators.