



PRESENTING THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE AND COLONIAL SLAVERY AT THE NANTES HISTORY MUSEUM

Krystel Gualdé

Many institutions house collections and commentary relating to the history of slavery and colonial slavery across the continents and countries affected, thereby illustrating a shared awareness of the need to know and take responsibility for this history.

Since the inauguration of the Nantes History Museum in February 2007, fourteen rooms, in whole or in part, have been devoted to this topic. Naturally, since that date, these exhibitions and/or displays have undergone various changes linked to the evolution of national and international academic research, as well as to the Museum's own acquisitions policy. The motivations for such changes run deep, based on a veritable paradigm shift.

A museum with objects evoking the slave trade and Nantes's former grandeur

To understand this, we need to focus on the history of this theme within Nantes's different museums. Many of the original collections, particularly those from the Salorges Museum, essentially came from economic and political actors who, between the 1910s and 1930s, maintained privileged relations with the descendants of several important families directly involved in the Atlantic slave trade. A nostalgic vision of 18th-century Nantes influenced their representations to the point of offering a positive image of this era: i.e., the century that had favoured the development of Nantes as a major colonial and industrial port. In the Salorges Museum, the display cases presenting models of ships, shackles, sales logs, and a copy of the Code noir (Black Code), were intended to demonstrate that the inhabitants of Nantes had been more successful than their competitors: in the 18th and 19th centuries, Nantes was France's primary



slave-trading port. The legacy of this was perceived at an economic level: the city became visibly wealthier and witnessed the development of many new amenities.

These collections arrived in 1955 at the Castle of the Dukes of Brittany, against the backdrop of French decolonization. Most of the collections, now municipal, were exhibited here until the late 1980s without any historical commentary dedicated to them. Such a presentation, without explanations, gave rise to various fantasies that have permanently marked the imagination of the people of Nantes: many believe(d) for example, that enslaved people were locked up in the cellars of the buildings on the Île Feydeau and within the Castle itself.

A new discourse on Nantes's history

Therefore, the creation of the Nantes History Museum in the early 2000s was an opportunity to alter this discourse. Indeed, if a seminal temporary exhibition entitled *The Chains of Memory*, supported by the municipality of Nantes and carried by several associations and academics, had already revealed this past in the early 1990s, the subject itself had, at that time, practically disappeared from the national narrative and school curricula. It was thus necessary, as a first step, to give this part of history its rightful place in a permanent museum and to reveal its existence to visitors who had, most often, never studied it. The scenography or layout of these early displays relied mostly on archival documents and objects that made it possible to explain the structure of this type of trade, to pose its economic stakes, and to consider the human consequences in a way that could not be disputed by those who had been, consciously or not, the actors of denial. Making this history and practice both real and comprehensible through the materiality of historical traces, was the first objective. This stage, which consisted in showing the factual workings of a slave-trading port, with a collection generated by the actors of said trade, was fundamental. It allowed the veil to be definitively lifted. It was considered a base by the museum team on which to build, in resonance with contemporary academic research and the actions carried out by various actors of civil society, including cultural and memorial associations.

Considering the humanity of the enslaved populations

In the 2010s, new themes appeared, highlighting the relationships of domination and violence that characterised the French colonial slave system. In 2015, the place occupied by people living in slavery on French soil was made particularly visible thanks to several recently acquired paintings, including that by Pierre Bernard-Morlot, showing Dominique Deurbroucq and a young boy living in slavery in Nantes, dating from 1753. New semantic approaches, influenced by the demands of associations of Afro-descendants, entered the Nantes History Museum in the early 2020s. The use of new terminologies (enslaved person vs slave, for example) was reflected in the Museum's



editorial publications, in the temporary and permanent exhibition spaces, as well as the internet portal of the collections. In the meantime, a biennial inaugurated in 2018, entitled Decolonial Expressions, inviting a historian and artist from the African continent to dialogue with the Museum's collections, in the form of specific cartels for the former and through the presentation of contemporary works for the latter, allowed the institution to position itself in a more political framework and more current context. Therefore, constantly rethought, rewritten, and transformed, the sections devoted to the history of the Atlantic slave trade at the Nantes History Museum testify, in their own way, to the proliferation of approaches and stakes with regards to this aspect of our history, allowing a reorientation of the subject, in order to illustrate, beyond the economic and technical aspects, what French society was like in the Age of Enlightenment and what it left us, as a legacy.

Translated by Emma Longwood





About the author

Krystel Gualdé is the Director of Research at the Nantes History Museum – Castle of the Dukes of Brittany, and of the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery. She is the curator of the exhibition The Abyss. Nantes’s Role in the Slave Trade and Colonial Slavery 1707-1830 and the Decolonial Expressions biennial.

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Les Anneaux de la Mémoire, Nantes-Europe - Afrique - Amériques: itinéraires de l’exposition, Centre international de la Mer-Corderie royale de Rochefort, 1992, p. 163

Erick Noël (ed.). Dictionnaire des gens de couleur dans la France moderne. Geneva: Droz, coll. “Bibliothèque des Lumières”, 3 vol, “Paris et son basin”, “Le Bretagne”, “Le Midi”, 2011-2017.

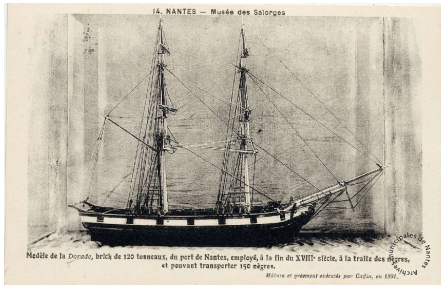
Further Information

The collections of the Nantes History Museum. Online portal of the collections: <https://collections.chateaunantes.fr/>

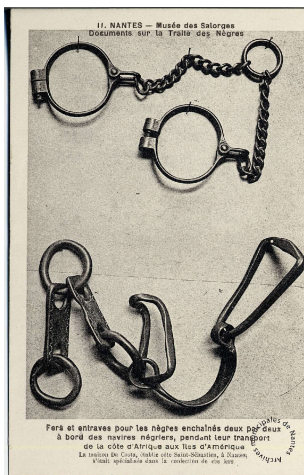
Virtual visit of the exhibition The Abyss. Nantes’s role in the slave trade and colonial slavery, 1707-1830, shown at the Castle of the Dukes of Brittany from 16 October 2021 to 19 June 2022: <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=nXfU1YmvPca>



Illustrations



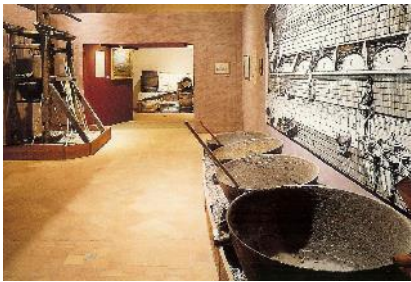
Model of the slave ship La Dorade, 18th century, Musée des Salorges, © Archives de Nantes.



Irons and shackles, 18th century, Musée des Salorges, © Archives de Nantes.



Collections from the Musée des Salorges in the buildings of today's Nantes History Museum. Figureheads sculpted from wood and various sailing tools, 1976, © Archives de Nantes.



Les Anneaux de la Mémoire exhibition spaces, Castle of the Dukes of Brittany, 1992-1994 © Les Anneaux de la Mémoire.

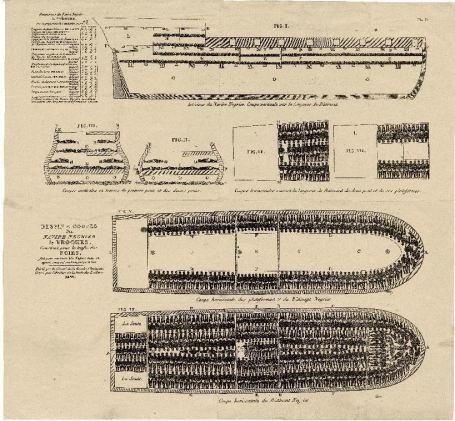
Tableau

de la Vente aux enchères de la cargaison de l'Esclave Père de Famille le 10 Novembre 1788.

Noms	Quantité	Prix	Observations
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Cargo sales log of the slave ship Père de Famille from Nantes. 10 November 1788, © Castle of the Dukes of Brittany - Nantes History Museum, Alain Guillard.

Drawing and cross sections of the slave ship The Brookes. Society of Christian Morals, 1822, © Castle of the Dukes of Brittany - Nantes History Museum.





Petitpierre printed fabric. Nantes, 18th century, © Antoine Violleau / Castle of the Dukes of Brittany – Nantes History Museum.

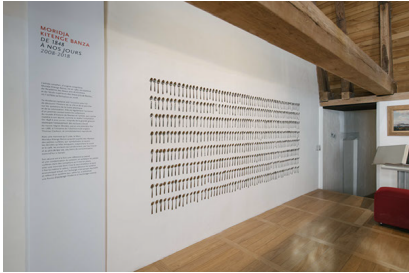


Neck shackles [reproduction], © François Lauginie / Castle of the Dukes of Brittany – Nantes History Museum.



Marguerite Deurbroucq and a young, enslaved woman living in Nantes. Pierre-Bernard Morlot, 1753, © André Bocquel / Castle of the Dukes of Brittany – Nantes History Museum.

Dominique Deurbroucq and a young, enslaved man living in Nantes. Pierre-Bernard Morlot, 1753, © André Bocquel / Castle of the Dukes of Brittany – Nantes History Museum.



De 1848 à nos jours [From 1848 to today] by Moidja Kitenge Banza, 2008-2018, Decolonial Expression(s) #1 Biennial, 2018, Nantes History Museum © David Gallard/LVAN.



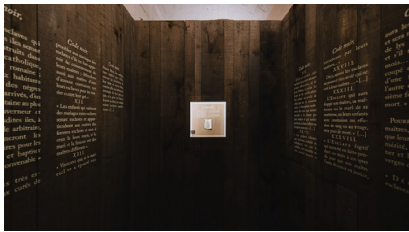
Osa-Nia, Romuald Hazoumè, 2021, Decolonial Expression(s) #2 Biennial, 2021, Nantes History Museum © David Gallard/LVAN.



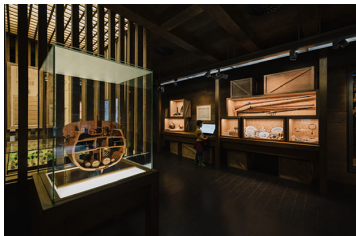
Tricky Dicey Die, Romuald Hazoumè, 2021, Decolonial Expression(s) #2 Biennial, 2021, Nantes History Museum © David Gallard/LVAN.



New scenography of room 11 of the permanent exhibition spaces. Castle of the Dukes of Brittany – Nantes History Museum, © Karine Garcia-Lebailly.



New scenography of room 12 of the permanent exhibition spaces, Castle of the Dukes of Brittany – Nantes History Museum, © David Gallard/LVAN.



New scenography of the rooms of the permanent exhibition spaces, Castle of the Dukes of Brittany – Nantes History Museum, © David Gallard/LVAN.