



THE POWER OF AN IMAGE: WEDGWOOD'S SLAVE CAMEO

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The Atlantic slave trade, which began as early as the mid 16th century, played a key role in the economic and social structure of both England and the Americas. Throughout the 17th and 18th century, almost twelve million Africans were uprooted from their homes and separated from their families, crammed on to slave ships, where the conditions were unimaginably horrendous, and shipped to the Americas and West Indies where they would be inspected, bought, sold, and traded (Walvin 273). The entire purpose of this trade was to supply free labor to the European colonies to mass produce goods such as sugar, tobacco, tea, and coffee, on which England depended.

Over time, some people came to realize the horrors of this practice and eventually an abolitionist movement began. One of the most successful movements was the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which was founded in 1787 by Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson. The Society's first success was in 1807, when the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed. After this, the society began to focus on the abolition of the slavery altogether and became the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery, until 1823, when it was renamed simply, the Anti-Slavery Society (*Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*). As the use of imagery was a very important propaganda tool for both pro-slavery movements and anti-slavery movements to convey their messages, one of the

successes of the Anti-Slavery Society was its seal and motto, which is accredited to Josiah Wedgwood, a master potter of that time.

Josiah Wedgwood was born in 1730 as the thirteenth child of Thomas and Mary Wedgwood. The family had a long history of potters, possibly tracing back to Josiah's great-great grandfather Gilbert Wedgwood. The family business had been passed down through the generations from father to eldest son (Kelly 11). When Josiah's father died in 1739, the family business, known as Churchyard Works, was passed onto Josiah's brother Thomas. At age fourteen Josiah became an apprentice to his brother, but his apprenticeship was delayed for a period of time because of problems with his right leg, which was a result of contracting smallpox at age twelve. During his time away from Churchyard Works, Josiah took the liberty to educate himself, and spent a lot of time reading. However, at the end of his apprenticeship in 1749, Thomas refused to accept Josiah as a partner (Kelly 14).

After being denied partnership by his brother, Josiah tried working with other partners, including John Harrison, in 1752, and Thomas Whieldon, from 1754 to 1759. During his partnership with Whieldon, Josiah kept a journal detailing all of his experiments, some of which would later become his most famous types of pottery, including black basalt, creamware, and jasperware (Kelly 15). In 1759 he started his own business at Ivy House Works, transferring to Brick House Works, which later became known as Bell Works, in 1762 (Kelly 17). In 1765 Josiah received his first order from the royal family, and a year later built a new factory, Etruria, which opened in 1769. Bell Works continued to make "useful" ware while Etruria made "ornamental" ware until 1773, when all production was transferred to Etruria (Kelly 28). A major landmark in Josiah's life was an accident in 1762 while visiting Liverpool, which caused to meet Thomas Bentley. The two immediately became great friends and were in constant communication with one another. In 1769, the two formed a business partnership (Kelly 25).

Josiah was always very involved in the community and in politics. In 1760, despite the fact that he was not very well off at the time, he donated £10 to build a second free school for the community, and again in 1792 he donated £250 to the people of Poland to help fight against the Russian invasion. Aside from monetary donations to various causes, Wedgwood was involved in transportation reform as well, partially because it served his best interest. Transporting supplies and goods was very difficult in the district in which he worked. In 1762, he, as well as others, was active in petitioning for a new turn-pike road through Burslem in order to connect Liverpool and London. Then again in 1765 he and Bentley, using tactics such as published pamphlets, solicited for a canal to connect the Trent and Mersey rivers. Their efforts for the canal were eventually successful, and the canal was finished in 1777, greatly decreasing shipping costs (Kelly 38).

Josiah Wedgwood also seemed to have a pattern of supporting the causes of freedom and emancipation. He attempted to help the Polish during the time of Russian invasion, he was a supporter of the French Revolution, despite the fact that the success of the revolution would be detrimental to his business, and he also supported the American cause at the height of the American War of Independence. In 1778, in a letter to Bentley, he wrote, “blessed his stars and Lord North that America is free” (Kelly 45). In context with this pattern, Josiah was also an abolitionist. He was a member of the Anti-Slavery Society, providing financial support for the society as well, and he was a good friend of Thomas Clarkson, a co-founder of the society. He also accepted the challenge of attempting to change the minds of those of his friends who did not view slavery as the evil it was. One successful example of this is his letter to Anna Seward in February 1778:

We are already possessed of a stock of negroes sufficient for every purpose of the cultivation and trade of our plantations; and consequently that our West India commerce could not be materially injured by prohibiting further importation; which prohibition appears to be the only prob-

able means of withholding the heavy hand of cruelty and oppression from those who now groan under it. And even if our commerce was likely to suffer from the abolition, I persuade myself that when this traffic comes to be discussed and fully known, there will be few advocates for the continuance of it. (*Josiah Wedgwood*)

Thomas Bentley, unlike the majority of Liverpool merchants who supported the slave trade due to the benefit they received from it, denounced it:

In respect to the abominable traffic in slavery, then so unblushingly avowed and carried on by the majority of the Liverpool merchants, his (Bentley's) continuous protest might have so far availed in influencing public opinion, as to have better prepared the way for the labors of the abolitionists twenty years later . . . Bentley's philanthropy would not have been always ridiculed, his persuasions to change this traffic in human beings for a legitimate and honest one . . . (Meteyard 117)

As a close friend of Josiah, Bentley served as a great influence to him. According to one of Wedgwood's descendents, "In politics Wedgwood was an extreme radical Dissenter. A Dissenter he was born; but that and his radicalism was at least fortified by his association with Bentley" (Wedgwood, Josiah M.P. 171). Josiah was deeply affected by Bentley's death in 1780 and he "subscribed to every pamphlet and scheme that Clarkson put before him" (Wedgwood, Josiah M.P. 172).

It was in 1787 that Wedgwood makes his greatest contribution to the anti-slavery cause through a very powerful and compelling image: the slave cameo (Figure 1). The cameo, which was adopted as the seal of the Anti-Slavery Society, was actually designed by William Hackwood, one of Wedgwood's best potters. It is an image of a black man, dressed in only a breechcloth, whose hands and feet are bound with heavy chains. He is kneeling on the ground with his arms raised and fingers interlocked in a pleading or praying fashion. The kneeling slave appears to be gazing upwards, as if toward his



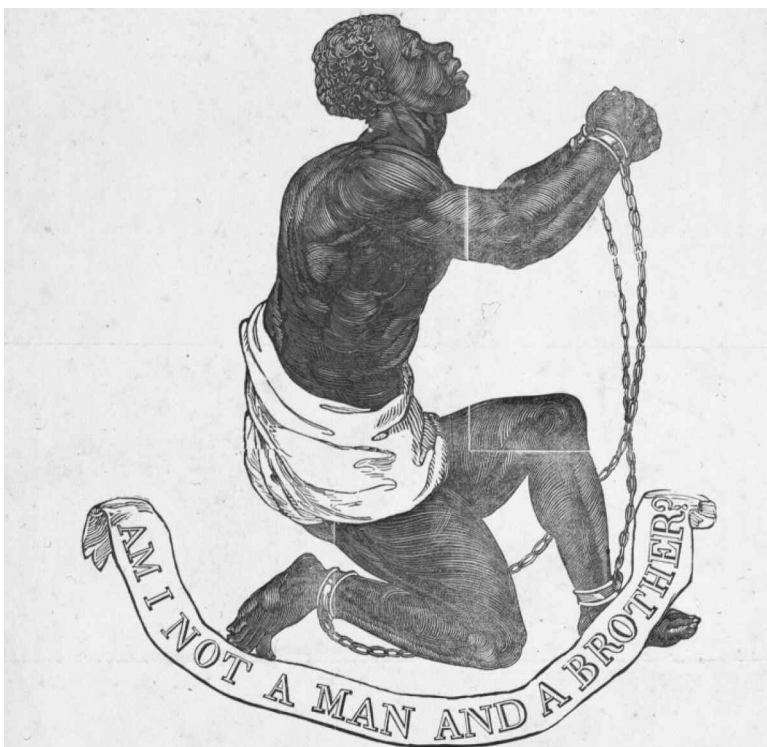
Figure 1, Anti-slavery medallion by Josiah Wedgwood, courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

oppressor. The image is surrounded by the phrase, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” The image was most commonly produced in black and white jasper, as the example shows. Thousands of these cameos were made and distributed freely to the supporters of the cause; in fact, Thomas Clarkson alone is accounted for having over 500 of them (Kelly 46). Some were also sent to Benjamin Franklin for distribution to supporters in the United States. Franklin believed that the medallion “may have an effect equal to that of the best written pamphlet in procuring honour to those oppressed people” (Birks).

This image was greatly reproduced and became quite popular among abolitionists. The cameo was set in items such as hatpins, buttons, snuffbox lids, and rings. The image was controversial in society; it was accepted by anti-slavery supporters and loathed by pro-slavery supporters. However, Clarkson went as far as to say that “the taste for wearing them became general, and thus fashion, which usually confines itself to worthless things, was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity, and freedom” (Kelly 46). While the reason that it was worn and amongst whom it was considered fashionable can be debated, anyone wearing the cameo, regardless of if they knew it or not, was spreading the anti-slavery message. This use of the cameo was great anti-slavery propaganda.

As the abolitionist movement gained in momentum, so did the popularity of the kneeling slave image. The image was replicated and reused in several anti-slavery works. It also appeared in pamphlets and newspapers, on other abolitionist ceramics, and even tapestry. One example of this is the use of the kneeling slave image in conjunction with the 1837 broadside publication of John Greenleaf Whittier’s antislavery poem, “Our Countrymen in Chains” (McElrath, Jessica). (See Figure 2)

Women played a significant, if central, role in the abolitionist movement given the restrictions forced upon them by law and convention. They found creative ways to raise money for the cause. For example, tapestries would be made by women supporters of the abolitionist movement and sold in



OUR COUNTRYMEN IN CHAINS:
By J. G. WHITTIER.

The *Importers* which our fathers could not bear in their native country is turning, and the *Exporters* of justice, as her infernal hands have applied the everlasting age to slavery. And the United States, the Free United States, which could not bear the burden of a king, made the nation which a king is carrying. 'Tis not a king, but a king, is too free than a *Monarch*! Shall we, in the name and history of our nation, be less courageous, at righteousness than a king is in it?—*Dr. Paine's Address.*

Chorus of *Voices*. *Sign of our nation—where are they? How art thou fallen, oh Father! son of the morning—how art thou fallen from heaven? Hail thee, however, to receive for thee, to meet thee at thy coming!—The king of the earth cry out to thee, Alas! Alas!—and your nation's name is—'Spoken of thee, O, J. G. Whittier.*

OUR FELLOW COUNTRYMEN IN CHAINS!

SLAVES—in a land of light and law—

SLAVES—crouching on the very plain

Where rolled the storm of Freedom's war!

A groan from Estlin's haunted wand—

A wail where Cauden's mummy lies—

By every shrine of patriot blood,

From Moultrie's wall and Jasper's well!

By stored hill and hallowed grove,

By sunny wood and marshy glen,

Where rang'd old the folk sing,

And hurrying shout of *Marion's* song—

'Tis groan of breaking hearts in there—

The falling into—the *father's* clank—

Sword—SLAVES are breathing in that air

Which old De Kalb and Sumpter drank!

What, ho!—our countrymen in chains—

The whip on *Worman's* shivering flesh!

Our soil yet reddening with the stain,

Caught from her scourging, warm and fresh!

What! modern from their children risen—

What! God's own image bought and sold—

At market—be market driven,

And battered on the brute for gold!

Speak!—shall their agony of prayer

Come thrilling to our hearts to hear?

To us—whose fathers sworn to bear

The palsy menace of a chain—

To us whose heart is loud and long

Of holy liberty and light—

See, shall these writhing slaves of Wrong

Find vainly for their plundered Right?

What!—shall we stand, with lavish breath,

Our sympathies across the wave,

Where crouched on the field of death

Strikes for his freedom, or a grave—

Shall prayers go up—and hymns be sung

For Greece, the *Madon* fetter against—

And millen hail with pen and tongue

Our light on all her altars burning!

Shall *Belgium* feel, and gallant France,

By Vendome's pile and Schomberg's wall,

And Poland, gazing on her slaves,

The impulse of our cheering call?

And shall the *ALAS*, beneath our eye,

Chink o'er our fields his hateful chain?

And see his fettered arm on high,

And groan for freedom's gift, in vain?

Oh say, shall *Prussia's* banner be

A refuge for the stricken slave—

And shall the Russian serf go free

By *Russia's* lake and *Nova's* wave—

And shall the wintry-battered Dane

Relax the iron hand of pride,

And bid his handman cast the chain

From fettered soul and limb, aside?

Shall every flap of England's flag

Proclaim that all around are free,

From farthest *Ind* to each blue crag

That borders o'er the Western Sea?

And shall we scoff at Europe's kings,

When Freedom's fire is dim with us,

And round our country's altar clings

The damning shade of Slavery's curse?

Go—let us ask of *Constantine*

To loose his grasp on *Poland's* throat—

And beg the lord of *Mahmoud's* line

To spare the struggling *Baltics*.

Will not the scorching summer sun

From *burned* Turk, and *fiery* *Rum*—

Go, bow your fettered slaves at home,

Then turn and ask the like of us!

Just God! and shall we calmly rest,

The Christian's ween—the heathen's worth—

Content to live the lingering pest

And by word of a mocking earth?

Shall our own glorious land retain

That curse which Europe seems to bear?

Shall our own brethren drag the chain

Which our own *Russia's* menials wear?

Up, then, in Freedom's manly part,

From gray-headed old to fiery youth,

And on the nation's naked breast

Scatter the living coals of Truth.

Up—while ye slumber, deeper yet

The shadow of our fate is growing—

Up—while ye pause, our sin may set

In blood, around our altars throng!

Oh raise ye—so the storm comes forth—

The gathered wrath of God and man—

Like that which smote Egypt's earth,

When hail and fire above it ran.

Hear ye no warnings in the air?

Feel ye no earthquake underneath?

Up—why will ye slumber where

The deeper only wakes in death?

Up now for Freedom!—not in strife

Like that your sterner fathers saw

The awful waste of human life—

The glory and the guilt of war!

But break the chain—the yoke remove

And smite to earth oppression's rod,

With those mild arms of Truth and Love,

Made mighty through the living God!

Press let the shrine of *Moloch* sink,

And leave no traces where it stood

Nor longer let its idol drink

His holy cup of human blood!

But our another altar there.

To truth and love and mercy given,

And Freedom's gift and Freedom's prayer

Shall call no answer down from Heaven!

He that swears a man and sells him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death. *Exod. xxi. 16.*
* ENGLAND has 700,000 Slaves, and she has made them FREE. AMERICA has 2,250,000—and she HOLDS THEM FAST!!
Sold at the Anti-Slavery Office, 145, NASSAU STREET. Price two cents. Single, or \$1.00 per hundred.

Figure 2: Broadside publication of John Whittier's *Our Countrymen in Chains*



Figure 3: An example of anti-slavery tapestry courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

order to raise money for the cause. The image, when used in tapestry, would often be paired with a poem, such as William Cowper's "A Negro's Complaint," as seen in Figure 3. Another example of the kneeling slave image is the "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?" token, which was sold at fundraising-fairs (Figure 4). It may have been one of the greatest sources of revenue for the anti-slavery movement in the U.S. (Katz-Hyman). These tokens depicted the familiar slave cameo image, but replaced the black man with a black woman, kneeling and bound by chains. A similar "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?" image (Figure 5)



Figure 4: “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?” Token, courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation



Figure 5: “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?” image used during campaign against apprenticeship system during 1830’s, courtesy of Anti-Slavery International

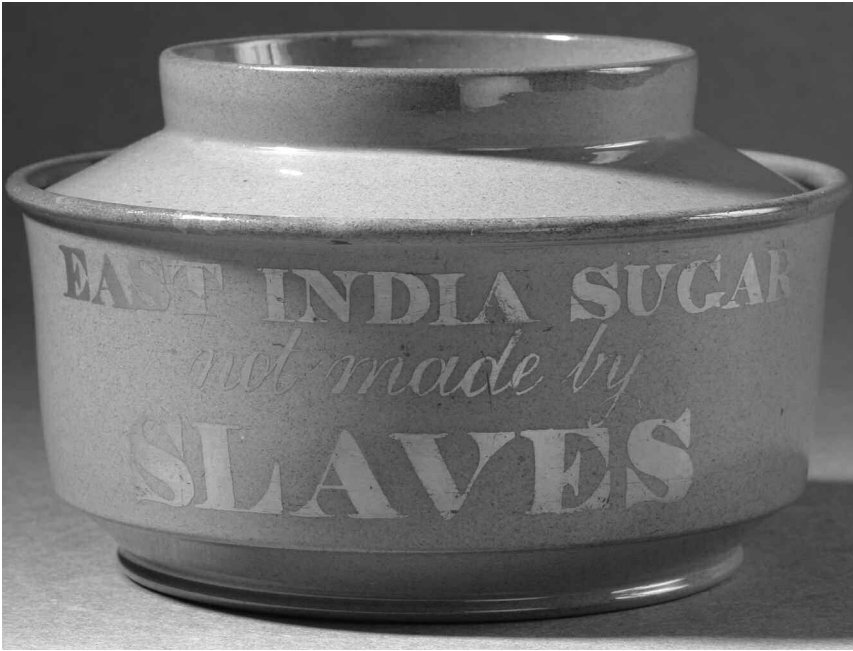


Figure 6: Abolitionist pottery boycotting West Indian sugar
courtesy of Norfolk Museums and Archeology Service

was used in the 1830's against the apprenticeship system that was in place, which up until 1838 forced blacks into unpaid apprenticeships even after emancipation in 1834 (*Black Presence: Abolition of the Slave Trade*). In the image used in this campaign, the woman has shackles around her neck and waist rather than around her wrists and ankles. The difference in the image can be interpreted as showing the trade of one form of slavery (pre-emancipation) for another form of slavery (forced post-emancipation apprenticeship). (See Figures 4 and 5)

Another tactic of the anti-slavery movement was to boycott sugar from the West Indies since slaves were used to produce it. This led to the creation of several versions of sugar bowls (like the one in Figure 6), which generally read, "East Indian Sugar NOT Made by Slaves." Women abolitionists were leaders of the sugar boycott (see Clare Midgley). These pieces



Figure 7: Kneeling slave sugar bowl, courtesy of the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum

were relatively blunt about the message they were conveying. However, several bowls actually used the image of the kneeling slave (such as Figures 7 and 8). These pieces show a West Indian female slave kneeling on the ground underneath a palm tree with a field in the background. Her wrists and ankles are chained. These images, a replica of the Wedgwood cameo, reinforced the reality that women as well as men were enslaved. At times the image was used on its own to convey the message, and at other times it was used in conjunction with the motto of the abstention of West Indian Sugar campaign, such as on the other side of the bowl shown in Figure 9, which reads “East



Figure 8: Kneeling slave sugar bowl, courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

India Sugar not made by Slaves. By Six families using East India, instead of West India Sugar, one Slave less is required” (Katz-Hyman). Caribbean sugar was used to sweeten the coffee and tea on which Europeans had become dependent. This is demonstrated in the 1760’s Liverpool coffee pot (Figure 9).

Ever since the image of the kneeling slave first made its debut in 1787, it played a huge role in abolitionist art. The image is both captivating and descriptive, attracting the atten-



Figure 9: Transfer printed coffee pot, Liverpool 1760–1765, courtesy of National Museums Liverpool

tion of people both in Europe and in the United States to the issue of slavery. As the movement gained momentum, the use of the image became widespread. The image was versatile, and thus able to be used in many different fashions. It was replicated and reused all throughout the abolitionist movement in several different ways, as demonstrated in the examples above and the images provided. One of the qualities of the image that allowed it to be used in such a variety of ways is that the image portrays in a simple fashion much of what poems, pamphlets, articles, and abolitionist phrases were trying to convey.

Thus, the image is used in conjunction with these other forms of propaganda and really provides a life to them. It is still one of the most widely recognized anti-slavery images. One of its most fascinating appropriations is the Aaron Douglas adaptation (see the cover of Carl Van Vechten's [1880–1964] *Nigger Heaven*). The image sparked one of the longest lived anti-slavery sayings, “Am I not a man and a brother?” which was further parodied by Charles Dickens in a chapter in *Hard Times* (1854), “Men and Brothers,” satirizing the brotherhood of unions. It can be considered paramount to the success of spreading the abolitionist sentiment both in England and the United States, and thus a legendary example of the power of an image.

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