

Two Men, Two Worlds, One Goal: how Josiah Wedgwood and Olaudah Equiano progressed the abolitionist cause

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***Abstract:** In the eighteenth century, two men rose from their very different worlds to fight for the anti-slavery cause. Josiah Wedgwood, a potter from Burslem, a man famed for his enterprise, curiosity and Unitarian religious beliefs, took the emblem of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade and turned it into an iconic jasperware cameo medallion. Olaudah Equiano, an African from Benin, who was sold into slavery, triumphed over such adversity to write his memoirs, outlining his life from slavery to becoming a successful author of *The Interesting Narrative*. In this study, I compare Wedgwood's anti-slavery medallion produced in 1787 and Equiano's memoirs published in 1789 and explore the different ways they supported and promoted the anti-slavery movement and show how they both cleverly harnessed the power of contemporary fashion to deliver their message in a way very difficult to ignore.*

By the mid-eighteenth century, the triangular slave trade between Britain, Africa and the West Indies was flourishing, primarily but not exclusively driven by the British obsession for sugar. The growing and processing of sugarcane was a very labour-intensive business, and there came the point when there was not sufficient convict labour to fulfil the expanding demand. The British became the dominant force behind the triangular slave trade, overtaking other nations such as the Dutch, who were the first to introduce the practice of transporting captured Africans to the West Indies to work as slaves on the sugar plantations.¹ In this essay, I look at how Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) and Olaudah Equiano (c.1745-1797), used their respective talents to bring the horror

¹ The National Archives, 'Britain and The Slave Trade', <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/slavery/pdf/britain-and-the-trade.pdf>> [accessed 22 January 2022].

of this trade to the attention of the wider British public and thus to promote the abolitionist cause. Wedgwood, by his anti-slavery medallion and Equiano, through his book *The Interesting Narrative*, used the prevailing fashions of the eighteenth century to bring the plight of millions into the public eye. Despite not much in the way of a formal or coordinated link between the two men, their works beautifully complement each other. Taken together, they describe the continuum from the image of a helpless suppliant on the Wedgwood medallion to Equiano's book, showing via the engraving on the frontispiece a man who has triumphed over the unimaginable ordeal of slavery. This correspondence between the two artefacts shows the progression of the anti-slavery campaign in the second half of the eighteenth century and led to a personal connection between Wedgwood and Equiano.



Figure 1. *Am I not a man and a brother*; (c. 1787), Josiah Wedgwood (1730- 1795), ceramic medallion. Wedgwood Museum, Stoke-on-Trent, UK., © The Wedgwood Museum. Courtesy Menil Foundation / Hickey & Robertson, Houston.

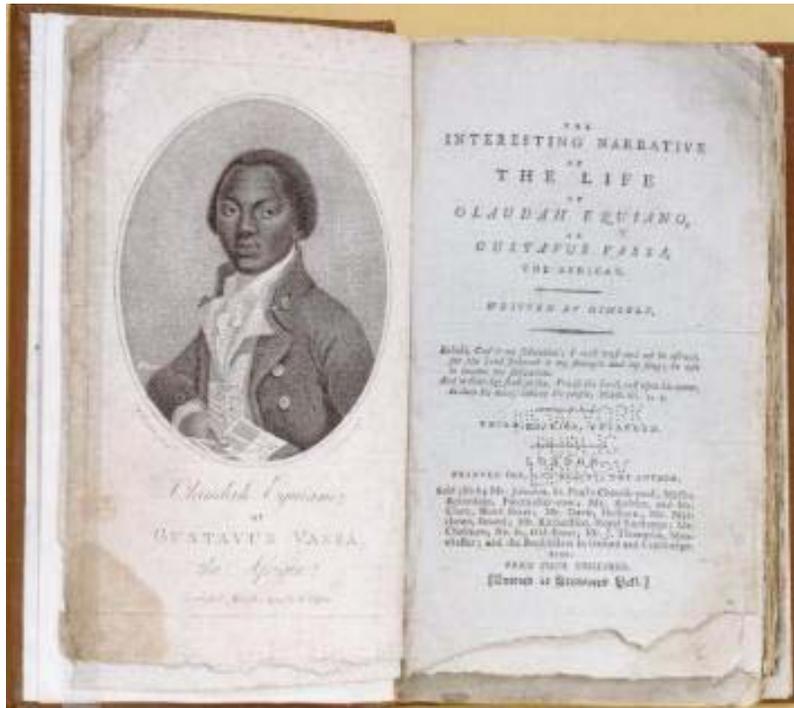


Figure 2. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 1790. Image reproduced by Artstor.

The Society for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in May 1787 in London. Its aim was to campaign to end the British slave trade. Membership consisted of predominantly middle-class idealists, some radical in their opinions, many of whom were Quakers or held non-conformist religious beliefs.²

Wedgwood was an enthusiastic supporter of the cause, which may have seemed odd at the time. Although politically and spiritually opposed to the Atlantic slave trade, Wedgwood as a businessman benefitted, albeit indirectly, from this trade. Wedgwood's pottery sales to customers, whose wealth was based on markets that used slave labour, brought him significant business. Not only was there substantial trade between the Potteries of North Staffordshire and plantation estates in cities such as Bridgetown and Kingston in the Caribbean, but Wedgwood also took a specific commission from a slave trader to supply, 'a nest of baths... to please the fancy of a black king of Africa to

²G. M. Ditchfield, 'Society for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade', <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-92867>> [accessed 29 January 2022].

wash himself out of'.³ In addition, the growth of tea and coffee drinking and sugar consumption in Britain made the UK sales of his tea services very profitable. Therefore, it might seem like a risky business decision on his part to attack slavery since this could adversely affect his business profits. To call for the abolition of a trade, which he did not deal in directly but from which he did benefit, could be seen as an act of hypocrisy. Indeed, many of Wedgwood's customers made their money from the slave trade, and he sold his tableware and other items to the owners of slave plantations. As Tristram Hunt says of Wedgwood in *The Radical Potter*, 'His messy array of ideologies also had to encompass his proud patriotic sensibilities and at times would place his commercial interests above philosophical purity'.⁴ However, in eighteenth century Britain, choosing not to trade with anyone with connections to the slave trade would not have been a commercial option. The reach of this trade was so pervasive it would have been almost impossible to run a business without selling to customers with slaving links. According to Andrew Marr's article in *The New Statesman*, 'By 1778, it was said that there were scarcely ten miles throughout England where house and estate of a rich West Indian could not be seen'.⁵ As the Society began a public campaign to garner support of the British people to put pressure on the Government to act, they needed some method of attracting public attention, which is where Wedgwood was able to contribute to the cause. He had proven to be a great arbiter of taste, responding to the latest fashions through his ceramic wares. Influenced by the hugely popular neoclassical designs seen in all manner of art and architecture, he pioneered a new form of portraiture by producing jasperware cameos of famous leaders, men of science and royalty, and by 1788 he had catalogued 857 portrait medallions.⁶ These cameos captivated the market and became a great fashion accessory. Wedgwood harnessed the success of these cameos by creating a round ceramic medallion set in gilt metal as a tangible symbol of the anti-slavery cause. Wedgwood's design takes the printed seal commissioned by the Committee for the Abolition

³ Tristram Hunt, *The Radical Potter*, (UK: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 223.

⁴ Hunt, p. 206.

⁵ Andrew Marr, 'Josiah Wedgwood: The Radical Potter who shaped our politics', *The New Statesman* (15 Sept. 2021) <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2021/09/the-potter-who-shaped-our-politics>> [accessed 4 January 2022].

⁶ National Museums Liverpool, 'Cameo of Queen Anne', <<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/artifact/cameo-of-queen-anne>> [accessed 30 January 2022].

of the Slave Trade on 5 July 1787 and transforms it into a piece of material art.⁷ In 1787, the first medallions were produced showing a man in the lowest state possible: the abject shackled slave, with the motto ‘AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?’ In the eighteenth century, it served as a provocative statement to draw attention to the real cost of the consumer boom in luxury goods such as sugar and what was being condoned and considered the acceptable norm by Britons. The almost naked man, a suppliant in chains, genuflecting before an unseen master, is very expressive, as the words speak for him out of the ceramic cameo. The matt black figure against the white background is no coincidence, and the contrasting colours add to the story. The ground-breaking development of jasperware created the perfect material to enhance the message, with the matt figure standing out from the shiny glazed background. The image represents the stark horror of ‘*man’s inhumanity to man*’ and, as such, marks a powerful starting place for the anti-slavery narrative to enter the world of upper and middle-class drawing rooms.⁸ This adaptation from a printed image to a piece of high-quality ceramic art was an instant success, especially among the gentry, due to the highly fashionable and desirable kudos of the Wedgwood brand. They were worn in the tens of thousands first across Britain and then America.⁹ The incredible power of these cameo medallions was their quality, adaptability, visual and socially superior appeal. They were widely worn as jewellery and appeared set into lids of snuff boxes, and as Burton says, ‘in short they became fashionable, thus helping to make the cause fashionable’.¹⁰ The medallions were produced at Wedgwood’s own expense and distributed free of charge at the abolitionist meetings. As the medallions were given as gifts, they had a value beyond a monetary figure and so became more valuable and openly confirmed that the wearer supported the anti-slavery cause. They were not intended for mass-market appeal but cleverly targeted at the gentry, the people who would most readily have the greatest effect

⁷ ‘The Wedgwood Anti-Slavery Cameo’, V&A <<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-wedgwood-anti-slavery-medallion>> [accessed 13 February 2022].

⁸ *Man’s inhumanity to man* is first documented in the Robert Burns poem titled ‘Man was made to mourn: A Dirge’, 1784.

⁹ Hunt, p.206.

¹⁰ Anthony Burton, *Josiah Wedgwood A New Biography* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books, 2019), p. 180.

in promoting the cause. In a letter from Thomas Clarkson, a great abolitionist activist, written to Wedgwood's agent, it becomes clear just how vital these cameo medallions were to the campaign;

My friend Mr Wedgwood was so good as to furnish me, during the Last Session of Parliament with several Cameos for Distribution. Tomorrow I enter upon a Tour through the Southern Counties of the Kingdom on the subject of the Slave Trade, and some of these will again have their use.¹¹

In reproducing this image as a tangible piece of art, Wedgwood created a 'badge' that gave anti-slavery supporters a group identity. This visible cohesion would help them organise and assert political pressure. Wedgwood could be said to have invented the concept that subsequent campaign badges have followed.

There is no sign of rebellion or resistance by the oppressed enslaved masses depicted on the medallion, despite these being the very qualities Wedgwood admired in the uprisings of the American and French revolutions. However, this could be explained when we consider Wedgwood was using a known image, which today we might call 'virtue signalling', to support the cause for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade rather than to incite an uprising. He would have no desire to indicate his support for a British revolution that would undoubtedly impact his own business interests. He was a member of the Society for moral reasons, and he always remained a British patriot. Wedgwood also believed that the British involvement in the Transatlantic slave trade not only ruined lives and damaged individuals but it was also a stain on the nation itself. He writes, 'the people will show clearly they interest themselves in this cause and will not be satisfied whilst the national character is stigmatised by injustice and murder'.¹² The image on the campaign medallion today presents a controversial view; that of the humble, grateful, respectful African who suffered passively until a principled minority took up his cause in Britain. In the Institute of Historical

¹¹ Burton, p.180.

¹² Hunt, p. 226.

Research archives, we are told, ‘it is an image that does not depict the resistance and revolutions instigated by enslaved peoples’.¹³ When viewed through the twenty-first century lens, the image is uncomfortable as it can readily be interpreted as showing the African figure as stereotypically inferior. An article produced by the University of York and the Institute of Historical Research argues that depicting the enslaved African as,

begging for their freedom, pleading for the kindness and generosity of others so that they might be set free from bondage, is considered at best to be unhelpful and at worst continuing the very prejudice and discrimination which enslavement installed.¹⁴

However, contemporary correspondence between Wedgwood and Equiano, over several years, the prominent black abolitionist and writer, reflect some of the challenges for black people, but there is no evidence that Equiano found any fault with the image or the medallions.¹⁵ It may also be seen as a visible political statement that created interest for Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative*, which was first published just two years after the first medallion was produced.

Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative* is an autobiographical book that furthers the anti-slavery cause. Its publication ‘was a deliberate and timely political act’.¹⁶ It came out in the Spring of 1789, two weeks before the British Parliament opened the debate into the future of the slave trade. The text approaches the anti-slavery cause from a very different angle to Wedgwood and delivers a highly personal appeal for abolition based on the author’s own experiences. By telling his own story of life as a freeborn child who was sold into slavery and how by his own endeavours and supportive friends, he can regain his freedom, he reveals a realistic rather than stylised account of

¹³ ‘The image of the supplicant slave: advert or advocate?’ <https://archives.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/discussion/supplicant_slave.html> [accessed 4 February 2022].

¹⁴ Ibid., <https://archives.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/discussion/supplicant_slave.html> [accessed 22 January 2022].

¹⁵ ‘Wedgwood Anti-Slavery Cameo’, V & A [accessed 13 February 2022].

¹⁶ Brycchan Carey, *Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. ix.

the slave trade. Shortly after the book was published, there was a debate over whether he was born in Africa or Santa Cruz in the Caribbean. The motive behind raising doubts over his African origins was political. Brycchan Carey states, 'These claims were spurious and false, issued by pro-slavery campaigners eager to discredit both Equiano and the abolitionist cause'.¹⁷ This action shows how worried the pro-slavery supporters were by the political potential of this book. Equiano both saw and suffered atrocities borne of the Triangular Slave Trade and became one of the first black African authors in Europe. The telling of his lived experiences gave more weight to the anti-slavery cause.

The image of Equiano featured on the frontispiece of his book was commissioned by Equiano himself for *The Interesting Narrative*, and for this reason, we can be sure that it is a reasonable likeness of the author (although, no doubt, it is a flattering likeness). It was painted by William Denton and engraved by Daniel Orme.¹⁸ This representation shows the author wearing fine British Victorian clothing and wearing his hair in a contemporary European style. He looks directly at his audience, unlike the slave on the medallion whose gaze is fixed, pleading on the face of his master. Equiano's confidence is clear to see and represents a man who has bought his freedom through his endeavours and skill in trading; he has survived and prospered. This is a clear demonstration to Victorians of the great possibilities for an ex-slave and clearly proves that when slavery is ended, Africans can enjoy the same success and wealth as any middle-class Englishman.

The Interesting Narrative was also fashionable in its own way. The genre of autobiography was undergoing a renaissance in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ It was also written in an age where his readers were well used to sentimentality and sensibility in their reading matter. In his *The Interesting Narrative*, we can see that Equiano juxtaposes elements of wonder with gruesome passages to emphasise the horror. When describing an incident shortly after his kidnapping, he describes his experience with his first master while still in Africa, 'I got into the hands of a chieftain, in a very

¹⁷ Brycchan, p. xx.

¹⁸ Brycchan Carey, 'The Equiano Portraits' <<https://brycchancarey.com/equiano/portrait.htm>> [accessed 13 February 2022].

¹⁹ Brycchan, *Olaudah Equiano*, p. xvii.

pleasant country... and they all used me extremely well'.²⁰ His experiences of slavery, being sold on many times before he reaches the coast, are described in detail, with examples of kindness. All this changes when he sees the sea and a slave ship for the first time, 'these filled me with astonishment which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board'.²¹ His adventures take him to the West Indies, America, and England, showing clear links to another fashionable genre: travel writing.

Despite differences in their theological beliefs, both Equiano and Wedgwood both agree on the detrimental effect slavery has on the enslaved and the enslaver. The idea of slaves being treated no better than animals was a theme expressed by eighteenth century Romantic poets such as Barbauld and Burns,²² and this ideology is made manifest in the harsh realities Equiano saw and endured.²³ In an age when the philosopher David Hume was putting forward views against theistic belief, Equiano makes it plain his conversion to Christianity was fundamental to him, and he is appalled that men who call themselves Christian could behave inhumanly. When talking of some Indians who looked after him, Equiano states, 'They acted towards me more like Christians than those whites I was among last night though they had been baptised'.²⁴ In this way, Equiano is bringing his views into the eighteenth-century debate about the importance of God.

In a century of growing commerce, Equiano's ability to benefit from the money he made by trading small items and building up his own wealth would appeal to his readers but also send a stark rebuttal to anyone in the pro-slavery faction who believed Africans were less intellectually and commercially skilled than their white counterparts. Equiano is very clear about his aim in writing his story when he says in a letter to the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain, 'the chief design ... is to excite in your august assemblies a sense

²⁰ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²² Anna Barbauld, 'The Mouse's Petition', 1773 in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry, An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 3rd edn (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2015), pp. 592-593.

²³ Robert Burns, 'To a Mouse' (1785) in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry, An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 3rd edn (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2015), p. 567.

²⁴ Equiano, p. 176.

of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen'.²⁵ Equiano uses his hard-hitting memoirs to appeal directly to Parliament in a very difficult way to ignore.

In his *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano introduces his readers to the concept of slavery as he had seen it before he was kidnapped. His family owned slaves, 'my father, besides many slaves, had a numerous family'.²⁶ It was seen as part of the usual way of life. However, the difference he states between this and the slavery he suffered in the Caribbean is how slaves were treated. At home, the slaves, who were most likely convicted criminals and lost their freedom, as a result, were treated fairly. It is the brutality of the slavers, whom Equiano describes as 'bad spirits and that they were going to kill me'.²⁷ The horror of the stench of the slave ship and Equiano's flogging for refusing food drove him to prefer death. He describes 'a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow'.²⁸ Equiano tells of the importance of immediate family and the devastation caused by forced separation from loved ones; 'there were several brothers who ... were sold in different lots and it was very moving ... to see and hear their cries at parting'.²⁹ and the pain of this is all the more horrifying as the reason he gives for it is down to the avarice of the slave owners. Equiano makes the campaign motto painfully personal by explaining it is not just a brother who suffers as a generic representation of all humanity, but parents lose their children, brothers lose sisters, and husbands lose wives, which 'adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery'.³⁰

One way to get a book published in the eighteenth century was to arrange a pool of subscribers to pledge to fund the book by paying the first half in advance and the second on receipt of the finished book. The higher the author's status, the easier it would be to gain higher status subscribers, whose

²⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁹ Equiano, p. 44.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

names were printed in order of rank at the front. It is, therefore, of note that the first name on the list of subscribers to Equiano's book is none other than His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales. Wedgwood was also one of the subscribers, linking the two men in their support of the cause.

The link between the motto on the medallion and Equiano's experiences also extended to a private connection between the two men themselves. Equiano wrote a message to Wedgwood in his personal copy of the book, asking him to help ensure his safety on a trip to speak in Bristol, where there was a lot of opposition to the anti-slavery movement. Wedgwood replied, offering support, which in the end was not needed as there was no trouble on the visit.

This was a century of Enlightenment when it was possible for a potter from meagre beginnings and an African who endured, survived, and bought his freedom from slavery to have close links with the Royal Family. It was a time of change that made challenging the acceptance of slavery by Wedgwood and Equiano possible. It is interesting to consider how successful these two different pieces, one a ceramic medallion and the other an autobiographical text, were in achieving their aim of promoting the abolitionist cause and if there were similarities in the additional benefits to the manufacturer and author beyond political lobbying. As we have seen, the medallion was hugely sought after and must have been the topic of conversation in many homes and coffee shops. While it would undoubtedly spark debate over the rights and wrongs of the Atlantic slave trade, as a branding exercise, it would not have done Wedgwood's business any harm since his would be the brand on show to his potential customers. Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* was reprinted nine times in his lifetime and earned him sufficient money to live very comfortably for the rest of his life. Therefore, both these pieces have a value to their originator beyond their primary role; the successful promotion of the anti-slavery cause. The buying and selling of slaves was outlawed in 1807, and finally, owning slaves was made illegal in 1833. We might argue that twenty years is a long time from the first medallion being produced and eighteen years after the first print run of *The Interesting Narrative* to an act of Parliament being passed. Still, we may wonder how long this

may have taken without the determination of men like Wedgwood and Equiano and their insightful utilisation of the fashions of the day.

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