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'The perfection of his taste': Ralph Bernal, collecting and slave-ownership in nineteenth-century Britain

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ABSTRACT

Ralph Bernal was one of the most eminent collectors of his age, distinguished 'by the perfection of his taste, as well as the extent of his knowledge'. He also owned three Jamaican plantations and enslaved over 500 people. This article will interrogate the complex ways that enslavement, race, culture and taste were intertwined in nineteenth-century Britain. It will argue that we should not uncritically celebrate 'the connoisseur' without interrogating the power relations that shaped how their collections, and reputations, were constructed. We cannot understand Bernal's collection, or the 'perfection' of his taste, without acknowledging the violence embedded within it.

KEYWORDS

Slavery; slave-ownership; collecting; taste; decorative arts

In 1855, James Robinson Planché, fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, noted that collector Ralph Bernal was 'distinguished among English Antiquarians by the perfection of his taste, as well as the extent of his knowledge'.¹ Constituted largely of medieval and Renaissance artefacts, Bernal's extensive collection certainly had a distinct antiquarian flavour. Augustus Franks, curator in the department of Antiquities at the British Museum, noted that Bernal was not just interested in objects that possessed aesthetic value or that were exemplars of their type 'but which have on them a date, the name of the artist or some interesting historical association'.² In 1853, Bernal was appointed president of the British Archaeological Association, one of the most prominent of the numerous popular antiquarian societies of the early nineteenth century.³ Through association with such societies members reinforced their own identities as men of rationality and reason, celebrating the achievements both of historic civilisations and, implicitly, themselves. In his inaugural address Bernal expressed a hope that he would not be found wanting either in his dedication to 'archaeological pursuits' or, perhaps more importantly, 'in that sincerity and community of feeling which ... cements the bonds of any association, and adds grace and strength to every part of its structure'.⁴

Bernal displayed his collection at his home in Belgravia's Eaton Square. He was one of many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century collectors who adorned their homes with arts and antiquities from the medieval and Renaissance periods. Stained glass, armour and furniture were used to furnish rooms, evoking a sense of age, status and tradition.⁵ In looking back to a mythical past, these men worked to construct a vision of

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an illustrious national history, enabling them to present themselves as the torchbearers of both a European, and also distinctly British, civilisation.⁶ Bernal's Georgian townhouse was 'crowded by the choicest specimens' and the over 4,000 items in his collection must have dominated the space and transformed the experiences of those who inhabited it.⁷ Access to the collection was restricted to those invited: peers, friends and acquaintances. Hidden away behind closed doors, the collection was mobilised in particular ways. Bought to be displayed and seen, but only by a chosen few, its contents were both material symbols of, and themselves worked to construct, ideas about, wealth, taste and expertise.⁸ Bernal's collection offers a window into the process of becoming a respected and respectable nineteenth-century gentleman.

Objects from Bernal's collection, dispersed upon his death, are now found in museums across Europe and the United States, including in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Louvre Museum, the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But Bernal was not merely a 'politician and art collector', as he is described in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.⁹ In addition to his extensive collection of *objets d'art* Bernal owned three Jamaican plantations, and enslaved over five hundred people. He was one of over 7,500 absentee slave-owners living in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain who used wealth generated from the enslavement of fellow human beings to shape the world around them.¹⁰ We cannot understand Bernal's collection, reputation and 'the perfection of his taste' without acknowledging the lives of the men, women and children whose labours underpinned their construction.¹¹

This article will explore both the slave-ownership and collecting practices of Ralph Bernal, demonstrating that the different facets of Bernal's identity – politician, collector and 'West Indian' – were not separate or distinct and cannot be properly understood in isolation from one another. I will argue that we cannot and should not uncritically valorise the connoisseur without interrogating the power relations that underpinned the ways their collections, and reputations, were constructed. Approaching these collectors from a standpoint that evaluates their knowledge and expertise as deployed in the acquisition of their collections whilst ignoring the social and economic conditions that enabled their production only serves to reinforce a colonial 'way of seeing'. Evading the source of Bernal's wealth merely reproduces, even unconsciously, the strategies of nineteenth-century slave-owners themselves. In referring to themselves not as slave-owners but as 'planters', 'plantation owners', 'merchants' and 'West Indian proprietors' these men and women elided the reality of the system in which they were embroiled.¹²

There are, inevitably, many gaps, silences and absences in this history. Bernal himself did not articulate the connections between his slave-ownership and his collecting practices and we know little about the lives and experiences of the men, women and children he enslaved. These absences were not coincidental. They were systemic features of slaveholding culture, and of the archival record we have inherited. Marissa Fuentes has highlighted the importance of using archival fragments to 'read *along the bias grain* to eke out [the] extinguished and invisible but no less historically important lives' of enslaved women.¹³ In order to recognise the myriad ways slave-ownership shaped the metropolitan lives of those who engaged in it is also necessary to read 'along the bias grain'. The epistemic erasures mentioned above have framed – indeed, underpinned – the narratives about Bernal that continue to be privileged today. In putting Bernal's slave-ownership

and his collecting practices within the same framework, this article aims to make these histories and connections ‘present in their absence’.¹⁴ We cannot understand Bernal’s collection without acknowledging the violence, material and epistemic, that though not immediately visible is nonetheless embedded within it.

The history of enslavement is, of course, just one of the many violent and exploitative systems and practices enmeshed with the history of nineteenth-century collecting. This is true both when thinking about the origins of the wealth that facilitated the development of these collections, and the racialised – and indeed gendered and classed – ways that ideas about taste, refinement and civilisation were constructed and performed. It is important to recognise the distinctiveness of the transatlantic enslavement of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, both in its codification of the ‘ownership’ of human beings and its systematic racialisation. Nevertheless, many of the issues raised in this article have resonances with broader histories of race, capitalism and colonialism. Looking at decorative arts collections only through specific disciplinary lenses serves to reinforce structures of knowledge that legitimise particular silences and evasions; the history of slavery is undoubtedly one of the most important of these silences, but it is just one.¹⁵ In using Ralph Bernal as a lens through which to examine the ways violence, culture and ‘taste’ were entangled, it is hoped that this article will help more broadly to complicate how we think about the relationship between power, art, and collecting in nineteenth-century Britain

Slavery, collecting and ‘taste’

When he died in 1854 Bernal’s obituary in *The Times* declared that ‘in matters of art and taste Mr Bernal’s judgment was justly esteemed as one of the best in England’.¹⁶ ‘Taste’ is, of course, not a neutral marker of expertise in aesthetic judgment. An ability to discern what is of high quality or ‘good taste’ is socially and culturally conditioned. Having ‘taste’ involves establishing difference as a way of marking social order and meaning, a process that is inherently classed, gendered and racialised.¹⁷ From the eighteenth century onwards ‘taste’ emerged as a particularly important marker of civility and refinement for British elites.¹⁸ Although often associated with a set of social and cultural practices enacted in Europe, the development of ‘taste’ cannot be understood without being situated within a global context, so closely was it entwined with imperial expansion, colonial trade and slavery.¹⁹ This relationship was not purely economic. Intimately bound up with the cultivation and construction of ‘taste’ was the development of racialised ideas about culture and civilisation.²⁰ As Robert C. J. Young has argued:

Culture has always marked cultural difference by producing the other; it has always been comparative, and racism has always been an integral part of it . . . Race has always been culturally constructed. Culture has always been racially constructed.²¹

Evaluating, acquiring and consuming art was one of the ways that slave-owners like Bernal worked to reproduce racialised hierarchies.²² Skill in making aesthetic judgments, they believed, separated the ‘civilised’ from the ‘savage’.²³ We can see this clearly in the words of prominent slave-owner Edward Long. Black Africans, he argued, had ‘little taste for the arts, or . . . genius either inventive or imitative’.²⁴ While few shared Long’s belief in polygenesis, his confluence between skin colour, intellect and the state of

civilisation was hugely influential and became characteristic of many nineteenth-century conceptions of race.²⁵ It certainly underpinned Bernal's insistence that the enslaved were not yet ready for freedom and that emancipation should be effected 'slowly and cautiously'.²⁶ Thus, as Simon Gikandi has demonstrated, slavery and taste were 'intimately connected even when they were construed to be radical opposites'; slavery functioned, both symbolically and materially, as the absent underpinning of the culture of taste.²⁷

Gikandi emphasises that slavery and the culture of taste did not necessarily exist as 'clear and undeniable binary oppositions' but rather were 'non-identical twins', processes that formed as counterpoints in the formation of modern identity.²⁸ Slave-owners like Bernal sought to present themselves as men of culture and taste, and therefore different from, and superior to, those they enslaved. But this process was also part of a wider set of ideas and meanings, affinities and denials. Particularly significant was their desire to demonstrate that slave-ownership itself was not a bar to cultured status. The late eighteenth-century trope of the indolent and extravagant 'West Indian' still held currency in the nineteenth-century British imagination, with abolitionists presenting slave-owners as 'debased and unEnglish'.²⁹ Bernal was just one of many collectors, including Joseph Marryat, William Young Ottley, George Hibbert and John Julius Angerstein, who used wealth rooted in enslavement to fashion themselves men of culture and taste, carving a space for themselves within elite metropolitan society.³⁰ There is obviously no single explanation of why these collectors chose to collect. Certainly, it seems likely that some were explicitly motivated by a desire to express a particular vision of themselves and legitimate their place within society.³¹ Others may have established collections in order to develop specialised knowledge, for the pleasure, excitement and gratification or in an attempt to order and control their lives and surroundings.³² While these objectives could both overlap and change over time, as Susan Pearce has noted, at its broadest collecting can be seen as a means by which individuals attempt to 'understand the world' and their 'places within it'.³³ For British slaveholders, collecting was not necessarily about denying the source of their wealth, but it certainly helped them to draw a veil over it. The process served both to normalise slave-ownership and make it 'less constitutive of a single identity'.³⁴ Cultivating a reputation for connoisseurship helped these men position themselves within a cultured British elite.

Bernal's slave-ownership

As with many British absentees, for Ralph Bernal slave-ownership was just one facet of a much broader identity. He was born in 1783 into a Sephardic Jewish family, although he seems to have had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with his Jewish identity and heritage. At the age of 21 he was baptised, likely motivated by his political ambitions and the restrictions placed on nineteenth-century Jews; it was not until 1858 that Jewish men were able to become Members of Parliament. Bernal did not specifically collect items associated with Jewish religious culture. One of the few objects in his collection with an explicit connection to Jewish religious practices – a thirteenth/fourteenth-century spice box used during the ceremony of Havdalah – was at the time thought to be a Christian reliquary.³⁵ Yet neither did he particularly distance himself from associations with Jewishness. As Thomas Stammers has highlighted, there was an elasticity to how

collectors like Bernal conceived their Jewishness; collecting was not simply a 'self-denying strategy of assimilation'. Like Isaac Merritt Singer, Bernal was buried a Christian but was closely enmeshed within the trans-continental networks of Jewish collectors, dealers and intermediaries who contributed to the development of nineteenth-century European collecting traditions.³⁶ While he did not speak in parliament in support of Jewish emancipation, he did vote in favour of it.³⁷ Indeed, Bernal's public identity as a man of Jewish descent was significant enough that his portrait was included in the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition at the Royal Albert Hall in 1887.³⁸

Bernal's Jewishness undoubtedly informed his connoisseurship, as well as how he and his collection were perceived. But the process of normalising wealth derived from enslavement through investing in property in the metropole, whether in the form of land, buildings or objects, was one common to many absentees.³⁹ In Bernal's case, this process began in 1811 when, upon the death of his father, he received an inheritance that changed the rest of his life. A successful West India merchant, Jacob Israel Bernal left his son, 'all ... my Plantations, Negroes, Mountains, Penns, Woods and Estates in the ... Island of Jamaica'.⁴⁰ This primarily consisted of three estates – Cherry Garden, Richmond and Edinburgh Castle – and the 545 men, women and children enslaved upon them.⁴¹ The absence of a surviving personal archive means that it is difficult to discern much about how Bernal practised his slave-ownership or about the lives of those he enslaved. But with no other discernible income – at least, until he became Chairman of the Committee of the Whole House [of Commons] in 1830 – it is clear that Bernal's slave-ownership fundamentally underpinned and shaped the politician, collector and gentleman he was able to become.

Bernal's inheritance enabled him to enter the world of politics. After being elected an M.P. in 1818, he held a seat in the House of Commons for the next 36 years. As a Whig, Bernal defended the freedom of the press, argued for a reduction in the size of the army and voted in favour of parliamentary reform.⁴² But he also became a prominent member of the parliamentary West India interest: a commercial lobbying group of merchants and slave-owners with multiple concerns, including the defence of slavery. While the West India interest possessed particular influence amongst Tory politicians, the group was composed of those from across the political spectrum.⁴³ Although slavery was eventually abolished under a Whig government, the division between pro- and anti-slavery campaigners did not fall neatly along party lines. Bernal perhaps saw himself as belonging within a colonial Whig tradition, a political descendant of eighteenth-century Whigs like the elder William Beckford, who saw no contradiction between promoting 'liberty' and the ownership of 'property' in people.⁴⁴ Between 1821 and 1840 Bernal regularly defended the interests of plantation- and slave-owners in parliament, speaking in the House of Commons about the reductions of the sugar duties, amelioration and the European slave trade. But there was one subject of particular concern: abolition, and its impact upon those who owned plantations, and enslaved people, in the Caribbean.

By the mid-1820s a number of 'West Indian' M.P.s had begun to accept the inevitability of emancipation and organise themselves accordingly.⁴⁵ The arguments and strategies Bernal deployed in his parliamentary speeches were widely used by anti-abolitionists and their allies as part of 'a political and rhetorical campaign to defend colonial slavery'.⁴⁶ Understanding the fight was lost, they did not necessarily question the principle of abolition, but fought to delay and control its imposition. Bernal used his seat

in the Commons to highlight the damaging consequences of abolition, warn of the risk of rebellion, attack the methods of abolitionists and defend the behaviour of slave-owners.⁴⁷ His most important intervention came on 19 May 1826 in a speech published immediately and circulated widely, one of the many pamphlets that constituted the anti-abolitionists' wider propaganda campaign.⁴⁸ His position, and priorities, were clear. Bernal argued that the public mind had been 'unfairly and unkindly directed against West Indian proprietors'.⁴⁹ The speech was imbued with the racism used by slave-owners who advocated a gradual emancipation process. Abolition, he argued, should not be undertaken with 'indiscrete haste' but rather 'with a due regard to the capability of the negroes for receiving those advantages which it might be proposed to confer on them'.⁵⁰

The denouement of the speech highlighted Bernal's overarching priority; 'the question of property', he declared, 'should never be lost in these discussions'.⁵¹ This emphasis on the defence of property rights was a tactic utilised by numerous slave-owning M.P.s in the 1820s and 1830s.⁵² Long seen as one of the unalienable rights of Englishmen, by placing property rights at the centre of their arguments they aimed to establish unequivocally the legitimacy of the right to financial compensation. That this property was held in people they deemed irrelevant. These men highlighted that the state had endorsed, encouraged and profited from this form of 'property' for generations. Enslavement 'had been long recognised and sanctioned by Great Britain' Bernal argued, demanding he and his counterparts be 'entitled to the strong, determined, and undisguised protection of parliament'.⁵³ Statements like this, and those which aimed to gain sympathy by stressing the vulnerability of the women and children who 'absolutely depended upon the preservation of that property', contain clear, racialised assumptions about who was and, importantly, who was not, deserving of 'protection'.⁵⁴ The sanctity of property was an issue Bernal returned to repeatedly. 'Affected religion and bastard morality had been called in . . . to destroy the sacred and recognised rights of property in the West-Indies', he denounced in November 1830.⁵⁵ These efforts were not undertaken in vain. Slave-owners were collectively awarded £20 million in compensation. Bernal himself received £11,460 for 564 people enslaved on his three Jamaican estates.⁵⁶ The enslaved themselves, of course, received nothing.

Beyond parliament, Bernal was also actively involved in the work of lobby group the Society of West India Planters and Merchants. He first made contact with the Society in 1814, after hearing a speech by William Wilberforce 'respecting the Total Emancipation of Negroes', a subject Bernal recognised was of significance 'to me, & to every other West Indian'.⁵⁷ An active member of the organisation, Bernal attended 115 meetings between 1816 and 1835, more than all but two other members.⁵⁸ When an Acting Committee was established in 1829 he was one of just 20 elected members; these men met weekly when parliament was in session and dealt with all the main business of a Society preparing for action.⁵⁹ Bernal was closely enmeshed within these networks of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary 'West Indians' and committed to defending their interests.

Neither did Bernal's defence of 'West Indian' concerns end with the 1834 abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean, Mauritius and the Cape. In June 1840, he spoke passionately during a Commons debate about the Colonial Passengers bill. Concerned about the supply of labour in the Caribbean, he insisted that 'it was a matter of great consequence to the cultivators of the soil in Jamaica . . . [and] a matter of equal importance to this country that emigration to the West Indies should be allowed'.⁶⁰

His continued involvement in the management of his Jamaican plantations is also evident in an 1844 letter sent to *The Times* in which he discussed his attempt to send a British agriculturalist to his sugar estates, alongside a number of 'further projected attempts at improvement ... in progress or under consideration'.⁶¹ The letter not only demonstrates Bernal's continued interest in the transatlantic management of his Jamaican estates, it also hints at his longstanding and active participation in the practice of plantation-ownership largely hidden by the surviving archive.

Bernal's Jamaican plantations were still in his possession at his death in 1854. These estates, located thousands of miles across the Atlantic, underpinned his wealth and prestige. Bernal made little mention of the men, women and children he enslaved and exploited. Instead, like the majority of both pro- and anti-slavery MPs, his speeches were simply littered with general references to 'negroes', 'slaves', and 'unfortunate beings', terms that only served to dehumanise. The only time that he specifically referred to the people enslaved on his Jamaican estates was on the eve of abolition: 'His negroes, he believed, would have but little advantage in the change. They were now happy and comfortable – nothing proper was refused them – and in sickness they were taken care of.'⁶² This was nothing more than fiction. In an attempt to distance themselves from the violence of the system in which they were embroiled, slave-owners frequently presented themselves as paternalist figures, who cared for those they enslaved.⁶³ This certainty did not reflect the reality of plantation life. In 1837, when Quakers Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey visited Bernal's Richmond estate, they commented on the poor conditions on the plantation. They noted that the formerly enslaved 'apprentices' were being forced to work for 12 hours a day, with breaks only for breakfast and dinner, with 'no half Fridays, no payment for extra labour ... Invalids get no food, nor old people any support from the estate'.⁶⁴

It is important, however, that we remember the lives of these men, women and children who lay at the heart of Bernal's wealth, whether enslaved, apprenticed or 'free'. These people were not 'negroes' or 'slaves', they were living, breathing human beings, as distinct and varied as any others. In 1817, there were 601 people enslaved on Bernal's Jamaican plantations, including Hamlet, 66, Dolly, 18 and Friendship, just four years old.⁶⁵ The nature of the historical record means it is difficult to know much about the individual lives of Hamlet, Dolly and Friendship; even these names are likely to have been imposed on them. Through the process of enslavement people like Bernal reduced fellow human beings to objects to be bought and sold, bequeathed and profited from.⁶⁶ Documents like plantation accounts, slave registers and the records of the Slave Compensation Commission are as vital as auction catalogues or museum handlists to understand Bernal's collecting. They demonstrate that no less care was given to the counting, classification and evaluation of enslaved people. Accounts, lists and records were not only an integral part of the 'web of control' by which slaveholders maintained their power, they show how men – and women – like Bernal treated other human beings as commodities to be acquired.⁶⁷ John Elsner and Roger Cardinal have suggested that 'collecting is classification lived, experienced in three dimensions'; the same could be said of slavery.⁶⁸ This is not for a moment to suggest that there is any sort of equivalency between the lives of the enslaved and the value of Bernal's collection. The archive reproduces an epistemic violence that was itself part of the technology of power that facilitated the very real violence faced by Hamlet, Dolly, Friendship and hundreds of

others. However, it also offers a glimpse of the humanity that men and women like Ralph Bernal tried very hard to, but ultimately could never entirely, deny.⁶⁹ It is important that we, as twenty-first century historians, honour the voices, lives and experiences of the men, women and children enslaved by Bernal. This can only be done by recognising that the foundations of Bernal's collecting rested upon the lives of the hundreds of people who were exploited and denied basic rights of freedom for his economic benefit.

Bernal as collector

Bernal collected a huge range of what he called 'curious objects': the ceramics, glass, metalwork, carvings, furniture, armour, miniatures and portrait paintings that filled Britain's antique and curiosity shops in the early nineteenth century.⁷⁰ In many respects, Bernal's collecting practices were fairly conventionally 'curious'. They echoed those of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century collectors who saw themselves as both connoisseurs, expert judges of aesthetic criteria, and antiquarians, whose objects 'sparked imaginations and became doorways to the past'.⁷¹ Yet as one of the first British collectors to gather *objets d'art* on a large scale, Bernal was, Arthur Macgregor has argued, one of the 'pioneering individuals' who helped to develop a field of connoisseurship specifically concerned with decorative arts.⁷² As Humphry Ward wrote in 1897:

He lived ... at a time when no one either knew or cared about the choice things which nowadays ten thousand collectors seek with frenzy. No one of his contemporaries in England ... knew so much as he about old armour or mediaeval goldsmiths' work, or ... of Sèvres, or about majolica, or ... Chinese porcelain.⁷³

Bernal's vast collection was not universally praised. Some of this criticism was rooted in antisemitism. A *Punch* article that dismissed 'Mr Bernal's crockery' also presented the character of Mr Issachar Aarons 'an exemplary member of the Hebrew persuasion'. The fictional Aarons' collection contained innumerable objects with fanciful historical connections, including 'a set of cupping-glasses, supposed to have been in Shakespeare's mind's eye when he exclaimed "Cup us till the world goes round"'.⁷⁴ The insinuation is clear. Other seemingly less prejudiced commentators regarded Bernal's collection as 'sufficiently interesting but of no peculiar rarity or value'.⁷⁵ Such critiques echoed those of eighteenth-century satirists who portrayed antiquarians as over-enthusiastic accumulators, lacking in critical judgment.⁷⁶ In dismissing curiosities as mere 'crockery' or bric-a-brac, as opposed to *objets d'art*, critics presented such collectors as undiscerning and indiscriminate, both uninterested in, and fundamentally unable to, acquire objects renowned for their beauty, taste or artistic merit.⁷⁷

Yet through his collection Bernal, like Horace Walpole before him, challenged and reconfigured ideas about antiquarianism, connoisseurship and taste, demonstrating that the former and the latter were not mutually exclusive.⁷⁸ While Augustus Franks remarked that Bernal's collection was 'extensive and of a various nature', he praised the quality of Bernal's majolica – 'unrivalled in any museum excepting that of Brunswick' and Limoges enamels – 'second to that of the Louvre alone'.⁷⁹ In his multi-volume *Treasures of Art in Great Britain* Gustav Waagen repeatedly drew attention to objects from the Bernal collection; he praised an engraved disk of rock crystal, for example, for its 'finished and delicate execution'.⁸⁰ The objects in Bernal's collection were variously

assessed according to their design, aesthetic qualities, craftsmanship, and historical association; the criteria used to assess the collection – and by default Bernal himself – were constantly shifting. Yet though the process was one that could be riven with anxiety, and both antisemitic caricatures and longstanding stereotypes about antiquarians shaped how he was perceived, ultimately Bernal was largely successful in his attempt to establish a reputation as a man of culture and taste. Although scholars sometimes obliquely refer to Bernal's 'large property in the West Indies', an expression that conceals far more than it reveals, it is as a collector rather than as a slave-owner that he has predominantly been remembered.⁸¹

These two facets of Bernal's identity, however, cannot be conceived of separately or in isolation. Bernal's obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* noted that he had been collecting for forty years, suggesting that this process began shortly after he inherited his Jamaican plantations and enslaved people.⁸² But Bernal's collecting seems to have escalated in the mid-1830s. He first appeared in the waste book of 'curiosity dealer' John Coleman Isaac on 14 May 1834 while fellow collector, parliamentarian – and slave-owner – Joseph Marryat noted that he began 'forming a most extraordinary and unrivalled collection' of majolica around 1838.⁸³ It is unlikely that this timing is coincidental. In two instalments, in September 1835 and January 1836, Bernal received payments of £11,460 as part of the compensation scheme that accompanied the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean, Mauritius and the Cape.⁸⁴ It is highly likely that it was this compensation money that underpinned Bernal's sudden and marked increased expenditure.⁸⁵

Bernal used this influx of capital to take advantage of a burgeoning trade in antiquities and curiosities. During the social, economic and political turbulence of the Napoleonic wars many European collections had been seized, disposed of or sold.⁸⁶ A significant and wide-ranging proportion of this material ended up in Britain, where those with resolve, a discerning eye and enough money were able to acquire extensive collections of curiosities.⁸⁷ Bernal was embedded within the networks of dealers circulating both goods and knowledge in nineteenth-century London. Collecting did not just involve 'a world of things', but 'a world of people'.⁸⁸ Over the next decade he paid £3,400 to John Coleman Isaac alone, with Isaac acting variously, and often simultaneously, as broker, advisor and friend.⁸⁹ The two corresponded on a number of topics. Bernal asked Isaac to reserve specific items for him, informed him about collections he had seen on the continent and requested his opinion of individual objects. 'In what is it deficient . . .?', he asked of a Lobster tail helmet, admitting, 'I own my ignorance . . . never having seen one of the kind perfect before'.⁹⁰ But while Bernal regularly visited Isaac's shop on Wardour Street, he also bought from a number of other curiosity and antique dealers, including Arnott and Gale, William Chaffers, Dominic Colnaghi, William Forrest, John Boykett Jarman, George Seyffert and Samuel Pratt.⁹¹

The correspondence between Isaac and Bernal also highlights the significance of other collectors. Bernal particularly valued the opinions of Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick, a 'perfect master of all authorities' on arms and armour.⁹² Keen to situate himself within a long-standing collecting tradition, Bernal favoured objects with a distinguished provenance. He owned items previously in the possession of a number of eminent collectors, including Horace Walpole, William Beckford and the Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos.⁹³ This list, however, also perhaps indicates the exchange of knowledge and information in

unexpected arenas. Both Beckford and the Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos were also slave-owners. The records of the Society of West India Planters and Merchants demonstrate that these men attended numerous meetings with Bernal, as did other noted collectors, including George Hibbert and Joseph Marryat.⁹⁴ It does not seem outlandish to suppose that these men worked together both to defend the interests of 'West Indians' and share strategies, knowledge and information related to their collecting. This intermingling between men with shared economic and cultural interests continued after the battle to prevent emancipation had been lost. When Bernal became president of the British Archaeological Association in 1853 one of the vice-presidents was the Kingston-born Sir Fortunatus Dwarris.⁹⁵ The owner of enslaved property in Jamaica, Dwarris had defended slavery in a very similar manner to Bernal and been an awardee of the compensation for 175 people enslaved on the Golden Grove estate.⁹⁶ As members and funders as well as collectors, networks of former slave-owners played an important role in helping to establish and maintain cultural societies and institutions in mid nineteenth-century Britain, reshaping the cultural landscape long after the moment of abolition.⁹⁷

Bernal's collection primarily consisted of decorative arts and antiquities: Sèvres tea sets, ivory carvings, ancient armour, Chippendale furniture and Venetian glass.⁹⁸ Unlike Hans Sloane, a celebrated eighteenth-century naturalist whose collecting was also underpinned by wealth rooted in enslavement, Bernal was not interested in Jamaican botanical specimens, musical instruments used by enslaved people or the whips and chains used upon them: items which evidentially linked his collection with the source of his wealth and the Island on which he owned plantations and enslaved people.⁹⁹ Unless an individual had an interest in botany, natural history or archaeology, Jamaican objects held little appeal for most nineteenth-century collectors, particularly those interested in decorative arts.¹⁰⁰ Bernal's collection was constituted primarily of European objects, along with some 'Oriental' treasures, predominantly porcelain, enamel and arms.¹⁰¹ The collection of such items was undoubtedly enmeshed in power-laden processes of acquisition, their fetishisation itself part of European reproduction and domination of the 'Orient'.¹⁰² But it also worked to reinforce longstanding ideas about antiquity and civilisation as associated with Eurasia and not the Americas or, Egypt excepted, Africa. These objects were considered decorative arts worthy of esteem in a way that those from the American and African continents were not. Caribbean slave-ownership may have enabled Bernal's collecting but it left barely a trace in his collection itself. Slavery was, as Gikandi argued, 'in absentia, on the margins, but still part of a presence . . . both inside and outside the system, a residue of what exists but cannot be acknowledged'.¹⁰³

There is, however, one significant exception to this. Within Bernal's collection there were several dozen objects with depictions of Black figures, from a brass handle with 'a bronze head of a negro' to an item of ruby glass with 'A negro's head', described as '*Very fine*'.¹⁰⁴ Such objects were not rare amongst the domestic spaces of the elite. Since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, 'blackamoor' figures had frequently adorned fashionable decorative arts. These were regularly found in the homes of those who profited from and sustained the system of slavery; the torchieres depicting shackled and subservient Africans at Dyrham Park, home of William Blathwayt, secretary of the Committee on Trade and Foreign Plantations, served as 'heraldic device[s]' and symbols of prosperity and power.¹⁰⁵ But depictions of enslaved Africans were widely embedded within British visual and material culture, in the form of pictures, prints, ceramics, glassware, furniture and

sculpture.¹⁰⁶ These images and ornaments portrayed anonymous African figures in an European image, often nebulously conflating servile conceptions of blackness – an increasingly common trope – and exoticised and orientalist visions of the Arab and Muslim world.¹⁰⁷ The eighteenth-century mount of an intaglio seal from Bernal's collection, for example, depicted 'a bust of a negro, of yellow agate, with white turban, set with coloured stones'.¹⁰⁸ It is impossible to know whether Bernal consciously made any association between these figures and the people he enslaved in Jamaica; these items formed only a small portion of a collection containing thousands of items. But there is no doubt that 'the trope of the ornamental black' encoded and normalised an inherently racialised power dynamic within objects designed to signify luxury, wealth and taste.¹⁰⁹ The objectification and commodification of blackness lay at the heart both of the representation of 'negro' figures in decorative arts and Bernal's enslavement of African Jamaicans.

Significantly, Bernal was successful in establishing a reputation not just as a collector but as a fastidious, discriminating and tasteful one. Since the mid-eighteenth century 'West Indians' had been derided for their decadence and lack of self-control; 'they discharge their affluence without taste or conduct, through every channel of the most absurd extravagance' proclaimed the protagonist of Tobias Smollett's 1771 novel *Humphrey Clinker*.¹¹⁰ With the growth of the abolition movement metropolitan observers looked upon 'West Indians' with an increasingly critical eye. But while chastised broadly for their corrupted and corruptible characters, they continued to be chided for what was deemed un-British extravagance.¹¹¹ William Beckford, the owner of 14 Jamaican plantations and thousands of enslaved people, was one of the wealthiest men in late eighteenth-century Britain and probably the most renowned collector of his day. Fonthill Park, his grand neo-gothic house in Wiltshire, was lavishly adorned with a huge array of Renaissance paintings and *objets d'art*. But Beckford's opulence and extravagance prevented him from infiltrating the highest echelons of British society. Despite his efforts, he was never able to distance himself either from the taint of West Indian commerce or rumours about his sexuality and he ultimately found himself ostracised from polite society. Although British absentees often sought to integrate into metropolitan society by assuming alternative cultural or philanthropic identities, they did not always succeed in doing so.¹¹² Collector George Watson Taylor similarly used the income derived from his wife's Jamaican plantations to indulge in his passion for fine arts, but his spendthrift lifestyle forced him into bankruptcy.¹¹³ Bernal, on the other hand, was perceived to be a 'prudent collector' and 'very "careful" buyer'. According to the *Art Journal* 'Mr. Bernal never believed that *money* could secure so good a collection as judgment'.¹¹⁴ Possibly underpinned by a taint of anti-Semitism, stories circulated that Bernal spotted and obtained masterpieces for very low prices.¹¹⁵ Economic practice and cultural identity were inextricably intertwined.¹¹⁶ By establishing a reputation not just as a knowledgeable collector but a discerning, prudent and judicious one, Bernal was able to successfully distance himself from the more extravagant reputations of others who continued to be tainted by their links to slave-ownership and the murky world of transatlantic commerce.

The Bernal sale

Bernal's posthumous reputation though derives as much from the furore that surrounded the sale of his collection in 1855 than the decades of collecting that preceded it. Never previously catalogued as a whole, the auction catalogue was a material embodiment of the

collection, a 'transportable emissary' of both the collection and Bernal himself.¹¹⁷ Organised by auctioneers Christie, Manson and Woods, over 32 days 4294 lots were sold. Like other auction sales of the period, including those at Strawberry Hill (1842) and Stowe (1848), information about the sale was distributed across the nation; reports from *The Times* offered daily updates to its almost 60,000 readers.¹¹⁸ 'A very numerous attendance of connoisseurs and collectors was brought together by the occasion, and the competition for the various lots was kept up with great spirit throughout the day', noted the report from the first day of the sale.¹¹⁹ Most reports emphasised the magnificence of Bernal's collection and the celebration of the collector merged with the celebration of the collection throughout. 'This remarkable collection of works of art of almost every kind and style takes its name from the man who formed it, and with whom will always be associated the merit of having been the most accomplished collector of his time', wrote George Redford in 1888.¹²⁰ In the process of making 'the Bernal Collection' the sale also remade Bernal himself.

In the hope that their collections would be left to posterity, and their reputations sustained posthumously, some collectors donated to or founded public institutions. Bernal, however, was not particularly interested in preserving his collection as an entirety. His will directed that it be dispersed 'as advantageously as possible' and the profits split between his children.¹²¹ While for some displaying a collection publicly served to affirm cultural distinction and social status, collecting could also be an important economic investment; the objects from Bernal's collection sold for 'enormous prices', with the sale raising almost £71,000.¹²² Yet looking at Bernal's beneficiaries demonstrates how economic and social imperatives cannot necessarily be separated. One of Bernal's sons became a prominent Liberal politician and Secretary of the Admiralty, another a Church of England clergyman. His granddaughter, Grace Bernal-Osborne, married into the highest echelons of the British aristocracy, becoming the Duchess of St Albans. The case of Ralph Bernal perfectly exemplifies how, over lifetimes and even generations, wealth originally rooted in the exploitation of enslaved people became seamlessly integrated into the social, cultural and political landscape of the nineteenth-century elite.¹²³

Bernal may have tried to ensure that at least part of his collection was represented within one burgeoning institution, the 'Museum of Ornamental Art', which had opened as the 'Museum of Manufactures' at Marlborough House in 1852. In 1853, Henry Cole, the museum's director, visited the collection. Less than three months after Bernal's death he returned, recording in his diary that 'the greater part if not all ought to be secured for the Nation'.¹²⁴ Despite lobbying from esteemed figures including Cole, curator John Charles Robinson and even Prince Albert, the government refused to buy the entire collection. They did, however, agree to provide up to £16,000 to the British Museum and the Museum of Ornamental Art to make purchases at the Bernal sale. Joining numerous esteemed collectors including Baron Anselm de Rothschild, Samuel Addington, William, 11th Duke of Hamilton and Albert Denison, 1st Lord Londesborough was John Webb, who acted as agent for both institutions.¹²⁵ Thus, although the 'Bernal collection' was dispersed across the nation, and indeed the continent, parts of it were exhibited publicly. In November 1856, it was displayed at Marlborough House, the home of the Museum of Ornamental Art. As significant was its place within 'the Art Treasures of Great Britain' a five-month exhibition held in

Manchester that brought together fine and decorative arts from both private and public collections.¹²⁶ ‘The magnificent Bernal treasures’ held a particularly exalted place within the exhibition.¹²⁷

The ‘Bernal sale’, and ‘the Bernal collection’, thus quickly came to occupy a pivotal position in histories of nineteenth-century collecting. The sale marked ‘an epoch in the history of such events’ wrote William Roberts in his 1897 chronicle of art sales at Christie’s, while in 1890 Humphry Ward recorded that ‘what was remarkable’ about the objects in the Bernal collection, was ‘the faultless taste that had presided over their acquisition’.¹²⁸ As the turn of the twentieth-century approached, John Charles Robinson looked back at the development of public art museums in Britain, highlighting the pivotal role that Bernal played in the process. He was a ‘pioneer . . . in a new direction’ Robinson insisted, and the sale of his collection ‘an epoch-making occurrence’.¹²⁹ It is thus perhaps unsurprising that Bernal’s distinction as a collector continues to characterise his post-humous reputation. Twenty-first century curators and historians continue to highlight the influence Bernal, and the Bernal collection, played in nineteenth-century cultural life; Alice Minter recently argued that Bernal was a ‘discerning collector’ whose death was a ‘major coup’ for what is now the Victoria and Albert Museum (and was then the Museum of Ornamental Art), while Jon Whiteley has attested to the ‘splendour’ of his collection.¹³⁰ What continues to be elided and minimised is how the collection was bound up with the history of slavery. It is not factually incorrect to state, as the V&A Archive Research Guide does, that Bernal’s fortune ‘derived from estates in the West Indies’.¹³¹ But what such euphemistic evasions reveal are the tensions, gaps and silences that still all too often characterise how twenty-first century museums and galleries engage with the cultural legacies of slavery.

Conclusion

‘Ralph Bernal’, noted ceramics expert Joseph Marryat in 1857, ‘was known to have been a collector of unrivalled taste and judgment’.¹³² Bernal was one of many, including Marryat himself, who normalised his wealth, derived from the labours of enslaved people, by expending it in a manner of a refined and tasteful gentleman. His prodigious collecting was part of the process of self-fashioning, enabling him to construct an identity for himself that was far removed from the distant reaches of the plantation societies of the Caribbean, while nevertheless continuing to defend, and profit from, his Jamaican interests.¹³³ That objects from ‘the Bernal collection’ are now found in eminent museums across the globe is a testament to Bernal’s success in establishing a reputation as a gentleman of culture and taste. Looking closely at his life, however, demonstrates the complete entanglement of Bernal’s Caribbean property-ownership, including in enslaved people, and his metropolitan collecting practices. To focus solely on Bernal’s collecting practices is to highlight just one aspect of a much broader, and more violent, picture. We cannot understand collecting, connoisseurship or the production of taste in nineteenth-century Britain without unpicking the various power-laden and exploitative processes and practices that underpinned their construction.

Ralph Bernal was just one of the many absentee slave-owners who, in cultivating identities associated with religion, philanthropy or culture, created public memories for themselves that concealed and mitigated their role in maintaining and propagating

Caribbean enslavement.¹³⁴ Their success in doing so is directly connected to the way that the history of slavery has – and has not – been remembered in Britain; our understanding of the past is ‘structured and filtered by that which is absent’.¹³⁵ The archival and epistemic absences that underpin Bernal’s narrative are as significant as the auction catalogues, parliamentary speeches and written correspondence we can access. It is important not to see these absences as a void, but as an integral part of the ‘contestations about the representation of the past’.¹³⁶ Reproducing the elisions and evasions adopted by slave-owners themselves is itself a form of ‘disavowal and distantiating’, a way of abrogating responsibility for slavery and the systemic racism that continues to pervade Britain as one of its most pernicious legacies.¹³⁷ Interrogating the politics of absence is a necessary part of confronting and engaging with both the history and afterlives of transatlantic enslavement in twenty-first century Britain.

The objects once found in the collection of Ralph Bernal can still be appreciated for their beauty, art historical significance or aesthetic qualities. However, it is important to recognise that they also embody histories of violence and trauma. The lives of people like Hamlet, Dolly, Friendship and the hundreds of other men, women and children enslaved on Bernal’s Jamaican plantations are ineffably linked to these objects; their meaning cannot be divorced from this history. Now found in public and private collections across the country and the world, they serve as material reminders both of how nineteenth-century Britain was shaped by slave-ownership, and of the unequal legacies of this history. It is only by interrogating how collections like Bernal’s were funded, and how they worked to fortify and remake racial hierarchies, that we can begin to understand the complex ways that slavery, race, culture and taste were intertwined in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain.¹³⁸

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